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CATTLE PRAISE SONG

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Illustration by Carson Ellis

I was seven years old and puffed up with pride; I was my father's little cattle herder. Every morning, when my father left the big hut, I woke with a start, reproaching myself bitterly for sleeping so soundly when I should have been up before him, like my older brothers, to tend to the cows in the kraal. I was convinced that my father never slept, that he was always on the alert. He would never let himself be caught out by cattle rustlers. Stealing cows was a serious sport in Rwanda. People feared these bandits and also admired them. They were very cunning. They had medicines that would put all the inhabitants of a kraal to sleep. The rustlers would make an opening in the fence, and the cows, under their spell, would follow them through it

without a moo. The thieves left no trace: they were powerful sorcerers. They knew the secret paths that led through the swamps to Burundi, where they sold the stolen cows and bought new ones. In Rwanda, some herds grew bigger quickly, but you couldn't ask questions—it was too dangerous.

My father, though, knew how to counter the cattle rustlers' spells. He placed talismans in the acacia-thorn fence to protect the herd from attack. So what was I afraid of? My father always kept his staff and his spear within arm's reach near his bed. In those days, all the men carried a spear; they never went out without one. The Belgians hadn't outlawed them yet, as they did later on, to our great humiliation. My father's bow and arrows hung near the entrance of our hut. At my father's side—he armed with his spear and his bow, I with my small herder's staff—I was ready to defy all the thieves and their sorcery. But I was ashamed of the deep sleep I succumbed to every night instead of watching over the cows the way he did.

My father didn't need to count every cow in the large enclosure: he could tell at a glance if they were all there. They lay on the grass bedding that my mother and my sisters had prepared the day before, while the cows were in the pasture. My brothers were busy rousing them. A gentle tap of the stick was enough to prod the leader of the herd, and the rest then followed. My father made sure that, as they jostled, they didn't stab one another with their horns; he went from one to the next, his staff raised, protecting the gentle cows from those who were known to be skittish or feisty (we had carefully burned the tips of the horns of the most aggressive ones). As the master, he had nothing to fear, even from the most irascible cows. He worried about the cows who seemed to balk at standing up on all four legs. He spent a long time checking them, prodding, touching, and tapping them, inspecting their ears, eyes, and tongues. He examined their dung—its color, size, and consistency; he decided what medications to administer and indicated which cows he deemed too weak to go out and graze: they'd stay in the kraal to be fed hay and fresh-cut grass gathered as the herd returned.

"Karekezi," my father said, "look after Intamati."

I went to her immediately: she was one of those cows we call *isine*, with a shiny black hide. My father had likely assigned her to me because she was a heifer known for her strength, who might one day lead the herd. He was probably hoping that Intamati would augur well for me and bring me luck. I knew what to do. I stroked her neck and whispered, "Intamati, Intamati!" With a tuft of fresh, damp grass, I carefully wiped off the mud where cowpats had splashed her; I gently brushed her coat until it was silky and shining. She rewarded me with a generous spray of urine. That was what my father was waiting for. He always worried when a cow took too long to pee. He'd hold her tail high and boldly lean forward—never mind that if the cow finally decided to urinate she might shower him. Nobody dared to laugh. Anyway, isn't cow urine, *amaganga*, considered to be a potent remedy? That first warm morning urine is what we give to children whose swollen bellies indicate that they're harboring worms.

One of my brothers removed the barrier made of thick, cleverly intertwined branches that blocked the entrance to the big kraal, while the others, at my father's orders, corralled and channelled the impatient cattle. To reach the small kraal, they had to be herded between two bamboo poles that framed the entrance. I followed Intamati closely, since I was in charge of her, watching for any horn jabs she might give or receive, but, otherwise, she knew the way as well as I did. I admired her dancer's

gait, her long, perfectly curved horns, her wide, dreamy eyes. She was my pride and joy, Intamati; she was my cow.

In the small kraal, a few feet from the cows, we lit a huge fire with wet grass; its thick smoke chased away the flies, which would otherwise have annoyed the cattle. This was the time to get rid of the ticks and the fleas around their ears and eyes, to lift their tails and hunt down all the parasites, to inspect their hooves and make sure that there were no stones or thorns embedded there. If my father spotted a wound, he rubbed it with some ointment made from the marrow of a banana-tree branch. Oh, how we enjoyed brushing their coats again and whispering proud and tender words.

Afterward, we led the cattle beyond the small kraal to a fallow field, where they could graze on the dew-drenched grass.

Then came the hour when the sun was climbing the sky but the freshness of dawn hadn't yet dissipated: *agasusuruko*, milking time.

By now, my mother and my sisters had joined us. They'd brought wooden milk pails, carved from flame trees, those beautiful trees with red flowers that shade the kraals. The youngest girls sat by the fire with their own pails, specially shaped to fit in their hands.

Milking could begin. This was a solemn moment for everyone, a formal ritual. It was a bit like going to Mass—which I do every morning now that I have no cows—with my father as the high priest, of course. He summoned the cows one by one, calling out their names: "Songa! Songa!" Songa slowly came toward him. He repeated her name, sweet-talked her, called her "my darling, my beloved." We brought her calf out of the stable and led it to the small kraal. Because we'd named him, too, at birth, we greeted him: "Rutamu! Rutamu!" He was hard to keep hold of, and as soon as he was released he ran under his mother and began to feed greedily. My father squatted beside the cow, observing the calf's muzzle. When the muzzle was blotted with creamy froth, we pulled him away from his mother's udder and placed a pail under her teat. It took all my older brother's strength to wrench the poor calf away from his feast. We'd console him with a handful of bulrushes and some bean stock, and, once the milking was over, he would return to his mother and glean whatever milk was left.

My father had hitched up his *pagne* in order to squeeze the wooden pail between his knees. He was a good milker. You can spot a good milker by his smooth, regular rhythm. You can hear a good milker in the *shyushyushyushyu* of the milk spurting from the udder in the milker's hands. How I wish I could hear that sound again here in Nyamata!

We always began the milking with the cow who had just calved, for she produced the most milk—honey-rich, creamy milk. This was the milk we saved for the youngest children. We quickly filled their pails and let them drink right away. But you couldn't receive such precious milk any old way. You had to be sitting—not squatting—with your legs straight in front of you and the rest of your body upright. It was my mother who gave her children this milk, murmuring, "*Akira amata! Nyakugira amata!* Here's your milk! May you always have milk!" The children held the milk pail in their small hands—you must always hold a milk pail with both hands, out of respect and reverence for the cow, so that she may live a long life. It was a bit like the priests with their chalices, but, for us, milk was what truly nourished us. The children drank it in one draught, without taking

a breath. And their mothers felt reassured: they had no reason to fear for their children's health. What joy it was to gaze at my mother as she gazed at her children's cheeks and noses splashed with creamy froth like the calf's. When their pails were empty, the little ones handed them to my mother, their eyes wide with pleasure.

My mother and my sisters would bow their heads respectfully as they carried the milk pails to the big hut. They set them in the place of honor on the *urubimbi*, the dresser that wrapped around the curved wall of the house. A whole array of traps protected the milk from rats, for if a rat fell into a pail, the loss of the milk was less upsetting than the curse that would inevitably befall the family. The *urubimbi* was like an altar to milk, and those big milk pails with pointy lids protected us, like statues of the saints in a church. What was there to fear? Milk, our life source, was abundant.

If man is the master of the cows, woman is the mistress of the milk. Until I was old enough to join my brothers in tending the herd, I followed my mother around in her daily chores, especially those to do with milk. The morning's fresh milk, what we hadn't drunk, she poured into a large, wide-rimmed pot. On the *urubimbi*, in several identical vessels, milk had sat for several days. With a small wooden spoon, Maman skimmed the cream and slowly filled the *akabya*, a little black pot, with it. When there was enough cream, it was time to get out the milk churn: with as much caution as respect, my mother retrieved it from the net that was strung like a hammock over the *urubimbi*. I saw the sun pass before me, the churn shining far more brightly than the monstrance that the priests carry on procession day. Well, not every gourd is destined to become a milk churn. Very few possess the requisite qualities: a young girl's hips, my mother said, and the neck of a crowned crane. Its curves must be as soft to the touch as a baby's dimpled thigh. Untarnished by water, it was wiped dry, like a cow, with a tuft of *ishinge*, the soft, fine grass that girls offered as a tribute to distinguished guests, and varnished with a layer of the butter that was mysteriously created inside it. My mother sat with her back against the partition that screened off my parents' big bed, her legs stretched out in front of her, her chest high, and the churn resting on her thighs, as she rocked it from side to side, like a baby. Fascinated, my little sisters and I would watch the swaying belly of the churn and wonder whether, as well as the anticipated butter, we would see emerge from it the poor orphan girl who, according to my mother's tales, had been locked up inside it by her evil stepmother.

After milking, we led the cows to pasture. In those days, the land hadn't yet been overrun by huts and crop fields: there was still room for the cows to graze. Sometimes my father came with us, but most of the time he trusted my older brother to lead the herd. He had many other tasks to do. My father was a wise man. For the families from our hills and the surrounding areas, he was a kind of living memory. He knew who their ancestors were, their lineage and genealogy, the alliances and the rivalries. People came to him for advice. He could defuse a conflict with a well-chosen proverb. The men would gather in the shade of a tall ficus tree, on the meadow grass known as *agacaca*, and discuss the news from Nyanza and the royal palace, or the whites' latest tactic for adding to the misfortunes of Rwandans and their cattle. But, most important, they met to establish the borders of each man's grazing ground (this led to endless arguments, negotiations, and recriminations) and the order in which each herd would go to drink at the watering holes, to avoid any jostling or fighting among either the beasts or their herders.

It's not good for the head of a family to stay in his kraal with his wife. In any case, she wouldn't put up with it. In no time, her neighbors would be mocking her and whispering behind her back, "Her husband's like a dog, he's always hanging around at home, *sumugabo n'imbwana*." A man's role is to defend his family's interests outside the home, almost like a minister of foreign affairs. And a notable like my father had to put in an appearance with the chief, spend time with him, join his evening gatherings, and listen to what was being said over jugs of beer, and he had to offer cows and accept cows in exchange. But as soon as he could he returned to his herd.

The pastures stretched along the steep hillside, where it was hard to build a kraal. Grassy fields in the valley were rare, and reserved for the privileged few. During the rainy season—and you know how long the rains last in Rwanda—herders sought shelter under an *isinde*: this was a sort of individual shelter that you could carry with you, like a hood. It looked a bit like the sentry box for the soldier on guard at the Gako military camp. But this *isinde*, woven from dried banana-tree leaves, was much lighter: it was stored in a hole under a heavy rock. This was our hiding spot for staffs, bows and arrows, flutes. We also kept our day's meagre provisions there.

On the hill opposite us, above the swamp, there were other herds, other herders. It was the custom for the herdsmen to insult one another; I won't repeat what they said—it was always about your mother. . . . They also praised their cows, which were always one of a kind, and mocked their neighbors' cows. Some played the flute. They positioned themselves so that their insults, their boasts, and their melodies would echo and carry as far as possible. But they never took their eyes off their cattle. They made sure that the cows didn't wander too close to the steep slopes or graze on poisonous plants. Me, I always followed Intamati. My mother had given me a small pouch made from black-and-yellow banana leaves. I was meant to gather my cow's dung in it. My mother had noticed how beautifully bright green Intamati's cowpats were. "That's just what I need to coat the bottom of the big baskets with," she told me. "The ones I keep at the foot of the bed to store sorghum and goosegrass." I diligently filled my pouch and stored it in the shady hiding spot.

When the sun was burning hot, one of the herders took the calves back to the stable. The poor things hadn't been able to drink, because their mothers' teats were coated in white clay. This stretch, in the heat of the day, was when you had to be vigilant. Thirst could send the cows sliding down the hill to the swamp without waiting for the herders to take them to the watering holes.

For the families from our hills, it was out of the question to let our cows drink the muddy swamp water. We fetched fresh spring water in wooden buckets and poured it into the baked-clay water troughs, and then salted it with marsh-grass ashes.

This water was an object of envy. We had to keep a constant eye on the spring and the troughs. Luckily, the water supply was visible from most of the kraals on our hillside, and, as soon as any intruders came near it, we sounded the alarm. Herders would reach for their spears and staffs to chase away the invaders. This spring water was known for its miraculous properties. We were forbidden to boil it or use it for cooking. This water protected us from sickness and bad spells. I don't think the small bottle of water from Lourdes that the priests gave me is as effective.

After quenching their thirst, the cows rested and ruminated peacefully in a shady copse or on the slope, out of the sun. What happier moment is there for a herder than when, resting his staff on his neck and folding his right leg over his left thigh, he can relax and admire his herd?

At nightfall, the cows returned to the kraal, and every evening was a party. The herdsmen danced and improvised poems in the cows' honor, and the leader of the herd was celebrated. I selected the most tender tufts of grass for Intamati. Sometimes we assembled the cattle from all the kraals on the hill into a long procession; it was like a parade for the king. Children clapped as the cattle passed, and women cried out with joy. Then each herder reclaimed his cows. This could take a long time, but what a beautiful spectacle that forest of horns made! The men of our hill never tired of it.

The men were starving when they got back to the kraal, but the cows needed to be milked according to the same ritual as in the morning. Afterward, we'd enter the big kraal, which was smoky from the burning wet grass. The cows would lie down on their fresh bedding while we treated each one to a nice green tuft, as a final tribute. The herders stood at the threshold of the hut. I hoped that my mother would bring me my wooden plate with some *ibirunge*, beans soaked in rancid butter, one of my favorite dishes, but we didn't eat *ibirunge* every day. Still, for the herders, we always saved a pail of buttermilk, *ikivuguto*, which was a tonic for tiredness and replenished their energy. By this point, I was falling asleep. I lay on my mat in the entryway of our hut, beside the newborn calf, promising myself that the next morning I'd be the first one—before my brothers or my father—to tend to the cows.

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On days when I didn't go to school, when Kalisa, my father, returned from Mass, which he attended every morning, he would say, "Karekezi, you're a man now. Come, it is high time for you to learn how to look after the cows." Of course, there were no cows in Nyamata—not among the Tutsi who had been resettled there, at least—but my father spent his days steering his ghost cows through meadows of memory and regret.

"Look," he'd say, as we passed the tall banana trees that Maman grew with such care in the back kraal, whose bananas were a real treat for us children. "Look, your poor mother tends those banana trees as if they were our calves. Oh, Lord! I've seen her watering them with bean stock, and look at this green grass that is rotting—she picks it as if she still had cows, but all she can do with it now is feed the banana trees!"

My father had rested his long herder's staff across his shoulders, and now he propped his hands on it. I could see his straight, skinny, calf-less legs below his immaculately white pagne. He exchanged the pagne for some old shorts and a tattered top only if he was doing heavy work, like clearing roots or planting a field. But when the agronomists came to inspect the plots of coffee trees we Tutsi were forced to cultivate he knotted his whitest pagne and leaned majestically on his staff. Scanning the horizon and smoking his pipe, he let the young technicians proffer their ceaseless directives, until he finally said, "So, you're not veterinarians, then?"

We'd take the track that ran through our village for the displaced. My father seemed to see nothing, neither the row of identical huts nor the coffee plots in front of each one. I could barely keep up with him. It was as if he'd been summoned for some urgent business and he didn't have a second to lose. If I bumped into a classmate, there was just enough time to greet him and toss a banana-leaf ball back and forth. "Come on, hurry up," my father would say quickly. "You'll have plenty of time to chat with Juvénal in the playground at school tomorrow. I want to show you something."

If we passed some young girls on their way back from fetching water from Lake Cyohoha, my father would thunder, "Look at what they've done to us! Did you see the calabashes those girls were carrying on their heads? At home in Rwanda, those calabashes were our milk churns. We would never have dared to fill them with water! Shame on us! Yes, I know what your mother gets up to, but it makes no difference—even the water from Ruganzu Ndori can't replace the milk from our cows."

Indeed, Maman gave us water from the Rwakibirizi spring, which, according to ancient myth, had gushed from the ground under King Ruganzu Ndori's spear. She hoped that this water from an ancestral source would have the same powers as milk. Thus, we had to follow the same ritual: sit straight, with our legs stretched out in front of us, and drink it in a single draught, without stopping to breathe. This, for my father, was a sacrilege. "It's as if the priests were to fill their chalices with beer," said my father, who had never drunk wine. Yet, powerless as he was, he let Maman perform this desecration. What milk could he find for us now, after all? He was grateful, though, for her respectful way of handling the churns. If a gourd had attained the plumpness that would have won it the quasi-sacred status of a milk churn in Rwanda, she did not allow it to be used to fetch water from Lake Cyohoha. Instead, she placed it on what, in this rectangular hut, was as close as we could get to our *uruhimbi* shelf, and only after innumerable recommendations did she entrust it to the person who was going to gather holy water at Rwakibirizi. Woe befall the water carrier who broke the gourd that had been anointed in this way: such clumsiness might set off the worst calamities. That bad luck had to be immediately exorcised. My mother would intone the appropriate incantations to drive out the evil spirits, and sprinkle our family, our home, and its surroundings with her lustral libations.

A single road ran through the village and past the row of huts, and that made it difficult to avoid the hut that belonged to Nicodème—Nicodème, the village pariah! My father conspicuously turned away so as not to risk seeing Nicodème degrading himself, as they said he did, morning and evening. Having mourned his cows, Nicodème now kept goats, which he had procured from the Bagesera people. Crafty Nicodème, in order to get the goats, had befriended a Mugesera man, a certain Sekaganda; he'd even managed to convince him that they were of the same lineage. So proud of this family tie was Sekaganda that he solemnly offered Nicodème his two most beautiful goats. Every morning and evening, Nicodème milked his two goats. Is there anything more shameful for a Tutsi than milking goats? Misfortune had led Nicodème to these dishonorable depths. From then on, we referred to him only, in low voices, as *Sehene*, Father Goat. And then there was the calabash that Nicodème used for his goats' milk: it became, for everyone, an object of loathing and disgust. We named the calabash *Igikorwa*, the Untouchable. We were sure that this cursed calabash would bring bad luck to all the cows—those we no longer had, as well as those we might one day own. Some of us thought about going over there one night to smash that sinister calabash. But no one could persuade himself to commit the crime. For the calabash could seek revenge and curse him. And who dared to touch *Igikorwa*, the Untouchable? Anyway, some women, including Maman, stood up for Nicodème. He had a

child who was always ill: the boy was why Nicodème had gone to get goats from the Bagesera and why he didn't hesitate to milk them, despite the shame this brought him. At the Nyamata clinic, they said that goat's milk was good for children. This made the men anxious: were their wives also going to seek out goats if their children fell ill? They left Nicodème and his goats alone, but they let him know that on no account could his goats roam freely in the fields, and then no one spoke to him again.

On the way to Lake Cyohoha, at the edge of the village, the track ran past Rukorera's abandoned plot. There were no coffee shrubs by this ruin of a hut, but behind it a ramshackle fence of woven branches hid a large kraal. Rukorera! A Tutsi in exile who still kept cows! He who, for a time, had brought joie de vivre to our village! Of course, these cows didn't belong to us: they were Rukorera's cows, but, because we knew they were nearby, and the smell of them and even of their milk floated in the air, and their fresh dung was scattered around the track, it was as if a small piece of Rwanda had come to console us in our exile.

No one could forget the day that Rukorera arrived. The sun wasn't yet up. We were woken by a familiar noise that we hadn't heard for such a long time, but we hesitated before rushing out. Had an evil spirit imprisoned us in a dream we could not escape from? we wondered. Was it the ghosts of our cows, whom we'd left to be slaughtered, coming back to haunt us? Or was it soldiers coming to taunt us poor, cow-less Tutsi? "Don't go," my mother told Kalisa. "It's probably just buffalo or soldiers' boots."

At last we ventured outside, cautiously making our way beneath the coffee shrubs to the edge of the track. We were sure of it now: the sound was that of lowing cows, trampling hooves, and herders calling out names that are given only to cows. The cows had returned!

Men, soon followed by women and children, headed to where these wonderful sounds seemed to be coming from. A few unclaimed plots of land still skirted the village. All that remained of the sheet-metal roofs and wattle walls with which the displaced Tutsi had built their new homes was a few stakes. But that morning, in the golden dawn light, there were real cows grazing on the sparse grass, four youths were collecting dry wood, a man draped in a dusty pagne was leaning on his herder's staff, a woman was unrolling the grass mat in which she'd probably carried all her family's treasures, and next to her, on a bed of woven grass, slept a little girl.

The stunned villagers gathered along the track. The man who appeared to be the head of the family approached us: "I'm Rukorera. I come from Kibirizi, like you. We've travelled far. My cows are thirsty. Do you have water for them?"

Water for his cows! Of course we'd find water for his cows. Rukorera had won everyone's respect. Here was a true Tutsi: he thought of his cows first.

To welcome his cows as befitted the occasion and to provide them with an auspicious drink, all the children of the village, clutching every available container, were dispatched to Rwakibirizi, for there was no question of offering the cows the

rainwater we kept in reserve.

So Rukorera decided to settle in our village with his cows. "After all, we understand one another here," Rukorera said. "We all love cows."

During the massacres, he explained to us—in 1962, that was—his kraal had been spared. No one knew why, but it was obviously an oversight that would soon be rectified. So Rukorera had thought it most prudent to disappear with his family and his cows before the killers came to finish off the job. He hid in the great swamps that stretch along the Burundi-Rwanda border. Rukorera and his family survived by hunting and by drinking their cows' milk. When the rains came, they fled the swamp. He'd heard that many Tutsi had been relocated to Nyamata, and he told himself that there, among them, he would find refuge for his family and his cows.

The entire village accepted Rukorera, and especially his cows, with enthusiasm. We helped him build a hut for his wife and young daughter, another for his four sons, and a stable for his calves. All the men wanted to help weave the fence. When we realized that he had no Christian name and that, therefore, he must not have been baptized, no one was offended, not even my pious father. On the contrary, we admired the heroic names that Rukorera had given to his big, strapping sons—the names of famous ancient warriors in epic poems: Impangazamurego, he who is armed with a powerful bow; Rugeramibungo, he who has perfect aim; Rutiru-kayimpunzi, he who never flees; and Rwasabahizi, conqueror of conquerors.

The villagers felt alive again to the rhythm of the cows. In the morning, we'd rush to Rukorera's kraal to watch him rouse and milk them. Oh, the joy of breathing in the smoke from the fire that kept the flies away. The women would ask him for some precious warm urine, the deworming potion that was so hard to come by in Nyamata, which they'd immediately administer to their children. We'd follow the herd through the village and argue over who could gather the fresh cowpats. Children shoved and jostled one another so that they could at last touch the cows that their parents talked about all the time but they had never seen. Naturally, everyone went to Rukorera to barter for milk. And he was happy to trade milk for sweet potatoes, beans, or bananas. But his ten cows couldn't satisfy the needs of the whole village. We tried to regulate access to Rukorera's milk. The elders decided that pregnant women, small children, and old people would get priority. But, of course, we knew that, despite this strict rule, with a few jugs of beer we could secure extra milk. We also came up with a rota for the cows to graze our fallow fields—every man invited Rukorera to bring the cows to his patch, not just in order to fertilize the land and receive milk in return but because having cows again made us happy. We were sure that this would bring our families good fortune.

The evening milking drew the largest crowd, especially among the women and children. The young people longed to come close and touch the cows' teats, but, since they weren't invited, out of pride they kept their distance. Rukorera and his sons reserved the noble task of milking for themselves. And they were good milkers: you could tell from the smooth, regular *shyushyu* rhythm. Rukorera's wife handed them the milk pails—these were the treasures they'd rescued and carried in their grass mats—and once a milk pail was full she handed it to the women, who sat side by side, their backs straight and their legs

stretched out in front of them, as custom dictated. Each woman in turn carefully passed the pail to her neighbor, while blessing this life source and wishing the family and the whole village health and prosperity. The last woman in the row handed the pail to Rukorera's little daughter, who carried it inside the hut. After that, it was hard to go home, where there was no sour-milk smell to greet us.

The mirage of Rwanda that Rukorera and his cows had conjured up among us during our exile was soon to evaporate. One morning, the small crowd that assembled to watch the milking found Rukorera's kraal deserted. He and his family and his cows had moved on, silently, during the night. A great sorrow descended upon us exiled Tutsi, but Rukorera's flight hardly surprised us. We knew that he felt threatened, that soldiers had vowed to come and slaughter his cattle. Later, we learned that he had crossed the border and found refuge with his herd in Burundi. He had always been a lucky man, Rukorera, and he managed to save his cows!

Once you passed Rukorera's plot, the path disappeared and you had to walk through prickly scrub. Kalisa would run his rosary beads through his fingers, muttering and repeating his Ave Marias, but his attention was elsewhere: with his staff, he pointed out the plants and herbs he wanted me to pick. He studied them at length, nodding as he chewed on a leaf or the end of a stalk: "You see, it's hard to find good plants for the cows here. It's not like at home in Rwanda. I will have to ask the Bagesera. This is their land, but, to a Tutsi, they really don't know how to take care of their cows."

My father was indignant at the way the Bagesera treated their cattle. "Poor cows," he'd lament. "They're just bags of bones that attract every kind of disease. That's the curse that hangs over this Bugesera region. Now I know why the king banished rebels and cowards here: all you can do in Bugesera is wither away, and that's what they probably hoped would happen to us. Those Bagesera have no respect for their cows: they lump them in with goats, they use their staffs to control them, and they can't even tell them apart. You have to call a cow by her name, flatter her, whisper in her ear, sing her praises. And when you take her to the chief, decorate her with a garland of flowers, a string of beads. But when they herd cattle, what a shameful sight to behold: they dress like the white man's boys, in short trousers and tattered tops, *isengeri*. They don't even know how to knot a herder's pagne. It's no wonder their cows give so little milk. And this saying is unknown to them: *Shaka inka aryama nkazo*—a good herder sleeps to the rhythm of his cattle."

Kalisa did acknowledge one good trait of the Bagesera: in this parched land, they knew how to build troughs. He had noted where the troughs were, and always arranged things so that we could make a stop at one of them. He'd dip his rosary beads into the cows' water and mumble a prayer in praise both of his cows and of the Virgin Mary.

By this point we would have almost reached our destination. We were heading for a marshy patch, pushing our way downhill through the thickets. The ground here was always wet, even at the height of the dry season. Leaning on his staff, Kalisa would survey the stagnant ponds for a long time. He was staring at what I was incapable of seeing. "This is a beautiful spot for cows," he said. "There's always plenty of thick green grass. And there's water—we can build drinking troughs. Don't tell anyone. Especially not your mother—she'd come here and plant beans and sweet potatoes. This spot is for our cattle."

Karekezi, you are my son, this is a man's business, and this must be our secret. When the cows come back, this is where I will bring our herd. There is enough grass here, and they'll strengthen themselves for the return to Rwanda. Yes, it will be a long and difficult journey, but we'll get there, we Tutsi and our cows. I can see them all here, I know their names: Kirezi, Kagaju, Gatare, Mihigo, Rugina, Ndori, Rutamu. . . . When the cows come back, that will be the sign that it's time to head home to Rwanda."

My father would reluctantly pull himself away from this secret pasture where his ghost cows were already grazing. As we walked, he cut branches that would make good staffs. "You always need some spares," he advised me. "A staff can easily break." At home, he stripped the bark, smoothed the wood, and sharpened the tip. My mother would ceaselessly, mechanically weave *intumwa*, the lids for the churns. She chose banana leaves with the finest bronze and copper hues. The *intumwa* piled up, useless, in a basket on the *uruhimbi*. No one was allowed to touch them.

In the heat of the day, we'd return to the village—it was the hour when, in Rwanda, we would bring the calves in. "Go and fetch firewood," my mother said. "It will soon be time to cook the beans." And, while I gathered sticks in the bush, I'd repeat out loud the lessons I'd learned from the schoolmaster. Before long, my father would be off again; there was always something for him to attend to in Nyamata, at the mission, or at a neighbor's, he said, but I knew that often he was just wandering, guiding his missing cows with his staff.

When night fell, the men gathered in a circle under a tall ficus tree. They exchanged news, weighed up any imminent dangers the community might be facing, and sought ways to address them, but, when they had exhausted all these topics, they always came back to their cows. Every man had something to say about the cows he'd once owned and those he would perhaps, one day, own again. The men reminisced about the cow that had been offered as a gift by this or that chief, or even by the king himself, why not! They described her coat, her horns, her temperament, and the calves she'd birthed; they recited the poems they'd composed in her honor. And their glorious and familiar praise song for our beloved lost cows mingled with the French words the schoolmaster had given me to learn—a strange litany that I recited out loud.

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Like so many other Rwandan Tutsi, I followed the path of exile. I extended my studies for as long as I could, because my stateless status, conferred by the travel documents the High Commission distributed to refugees, gave me little hope of finding work. Overqualified with useless degrees, I finally got a teaching job in the Republic of Djibouti, in a remote village surrounded by jagged black rocks, where they raised a few camels, and three stray cows grazed on cardboard. I cried at this desolate scene. I hadn't understood that the path of exile led to the gates of Hell. Through various convolutions, I managed to have my first paycheck sent to my father. When a letter from him finally reached me, he told me that—as I'd suspected he would—he had put most of the money toward the purchase of a cow.

My father, my mother, and the rest of my family were not spared by the genocide; nor were the other Nyamata Tutsi. I will never know what Kalisa named his only cow. I don't want to know whether she served as a feast for the killers.

I returned to Rwanda without a single cow. I hope that my father was not angered by this in the land of the dead. I live in Kigali, in the Nyamirambo neighborhood, and I teach at a private university. I married a widow, who lost her husband in the genocide. Our first son already has a sister and a brother—her two children who survived. I drink beer with my Hutu neighbor: he is my neighbor and that's all I want to know about him. I often dream about King Gihanga: according to legend, he was our first king, and he introduced cows to Rwanda. And in my dreams King Gihanga always asks the same question: "So it was you, the Tutsi, who chose to herd cows?" But I turn my head and pretend not to hear him. ♦

(Translated, from the French, by Melanie Mauthner.)

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Scholastique Mukasonga will publish her fourth book in English, the story collection "Igifu," in September. The movie adaptation of her novel, "Our Lady of the Nile," was released in 2020.

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