

PRAISE FOR HALF PORTRAITS UNDER WATER

“With gentle yet assured prose, Dennis casts an unflinching gaze into the lives of his well-crafted characters in such a strong debut. The short stories here explore the politics of being and allow us a glimpse of lives so vast yet so relatable—a mirror held to our faces. Dennis Mugaa is a talent and this debut is a brilliant addition to the Kenyan and African literary landscape!”

—**Troy Onyango**, author of *For What are Butterflies Without their Wings*

“*Half Portraits Under Water* is a pleasant surprise. This is an entertaining collection of ten loosely interlinked stories which are all distinctively unique and delightfully unpredictable. Dennis Mugaa is a fresh voice, who has matched his obvious talent with the boldness to successfully experiment with form and style in his storytelling. He is one to watch, and it is hoped that the stars align for him and this skilful collection.”

—**Chimeka Garricks**, author of *A Broken People's Playlist*

“Poignant, lyrical, sensitive. Mosaics of a people, a restless continent in coming-of-age cycles. Reflective and beautiful, right from the first sentence. Timelines of Kenya's contemporary history are projected in tender

story vignettes etched into the lives of a composite of young people who are multi-local, multi-vocal, and pluralistic. They are casually and restlessly intra- and Pan-African in the way that Mũgaa's generation has become. Still, we find here enduring and familiar ghosts—Tom Mboya, the distinct political discontents that undergird the contemporary African experience. We meet memorable characters of and from the complex and many streams of Kenya, and Africa, who will haunt our imagination long after we put the book down. In this collection, you will glimpse something of the soul and shadows of a powerfully emergent generation. Such a treasure! Such a delight!"

—**Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor**, author of *The Dragonfly Sea*

HALF
PORTRAITS
UNDER

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

WATER

Stories

Dennis Mũgaa



MASOBE

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Cover Design by Anderson Ofuzim Oriahi

For my mother & my sisters, Perpetual & Matilda.

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ECHOES
OF
HISTORY

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The Distance In-Between

1963

And so, as they sat at Rockefeller Center's sunken plaza beside the shimmering gold Statue of Prometheus, Wangari said to Michael, "You know Kenya's flag will be up there soon." She pointed to the different flags fluttering in the breeze around the plaza. "I saw it on the news. The flag has stripes of black, white, red and green, and a shield and spears in the middle. Can you imagine the colonial government has the nerve to say they are giving us independence? We fought for it!"

The waiter served them their food and Michael sunk into his plate. Wangari barely touched hers but rather proceeded to talk about Timau, where she had grown up. She didn't talk about it much and he did not ask often either.

As she talked, Michael looked up from his plate and saw her, really saw her. She had on a velvet dress with a grey brooch on. Her mouth formed lines—excited lines—the kind he had seen when they first met. She talked about the rivers where she used to play with

her half-brothers and sisters, the rolling hills where they used to run and hide, and how she had once nursed a freedom fighter back to health after he had been wounded. He didn't believe her on the latter, but there was an honest way her eyes lit up that made him inclined to accept it as absolute truth. And he wanted to know more; he wanted to know everything, to meet her where her words were, to live in them, in a past he felt distanced from.

“Wangari,” he said in a whisper. His legs shuffled beneath the table, and he wondered whether he was going to do it. Sunlight dripped down her skin like brown chocolate melting on the tongue. As she spoke, he realised she had never changed her accent like other immigrants he met, even when waiters said they couldn't understand her when she asked for water. She was different. She was self-contained in a way no other girl he knew was. Now, the moment was perfect. The second-hand ring he had obtained from a dilapidated antique store suddenly felt heavy in his pocket—burning and drifting around as though it had acquired a life of its own. For two weeks, he had carried it and yet whenever he saw her, he faltered. Hadn't they been together for the last three years? Hadn't she said that he—not Columbia University, not the Mboya Airlift programme—was the best thing to have happened to her? And she had met his mother, and his mother had loved her. Why then had he hesitated for so long?

Perhaps it was because she had told him a month ago that she was leaving for Nairobi. She announced to him that she had been hired in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At first, he didn't understand; he thought after their graduation, she would look for a job in New York. After all, she had told him her scholarship money would cease at the end of summer. Once he understood, he was angry at her, and they argued violently. He feared losing her, but he didn't want to seem desperate or insecure. So, he said he was happy for her although he felt deeply wounded. She said they would still be together, a long distance relationship could work; she trusted him, did he trust her? She would save and visit him when she could. They would write letters. But he knew that no number of words could express his passion, his desire, his longing for her. And even if she scented her letters as she said she would, they would arrive with the scent faded. But what if they were married?

"I'm glad you asked me to come for The March tomorrow. I'm so excited!" Wangari said.

He felt she was sincere. She understood African-American history deeply. She knew about the civil rights movement: the student sit-ins, the bus boycotts, and the protests ongoing in the country. She could explain how Jim Crow laws in the South led to the Great Northward Migration. She was the first person to tell him that slaves committed suicide by jumping

overboard from ships in the Middle Passage. It was a history that explained his identity, his sensibility, and his politics: it greatly mattered to him. However, the truth was, he had only asked her to The March because he couldn't endure spending an entire day without her.

“Wangari—”

He ran his fingers across his forehead, hoping he had imagined the drip of sweat. She picked up her fork and dug into her plate. He stared at her. It felt like he had been waiting forever for her to finish speaking.

“What?” she asked, in between a mouthful of food. And still he lingered, unsure of what to do, gazing at her as her cheeks flushed and she put a hand across her face. He fumbled in his pocket and felt for the ring, flaming as he was.

“I want to show you something,” Wangari cried, and his heart dropped.

She fished out a letter folded at irregular angles from her bag. The top part was crumpled, and it was clear that she had read it several times. She smoothed it out.

“It's from my mother. She must have asked the priest to write it for her.”

“Dear Wangari,” the letter began, “I hope that you are doing well. Why don't you write more? We are all glad that you have finished school, and you are coming back. Mwenda is

much older now, he asks about you all the time. I have told him that you will come back with the plane from America. We are all waiting for you, and I pray that God blesses you on your way back. You have been away for far too long.”

The letter went on and on. He heard her voice tremble as she read it. He imagined the words crossing the Atlantic in a slow methodical way and lighting up in flames when they reached her, pulling her away from him.

He couldn't hold back any longer.

“Wangari, I want you to marry me. Please say yes.”

He had planned the proposal for so long, but when the question tumbled out of him, it felt hurried, disordered, and more out of jealousy than anything else. The only comfort he felt was that at least his voice sounded sincere. She became silent, her eyes bulged, and she leaned back slightly.

“I wanna be with you forever.”

He held out the ring, and when it didn't glimmer in the sun, he wished he had sold everything he owned for a Tiffany.

“Oh, Michael.” She paused. “I don't know what to say. I don't know what to say.”

Time froze as though everything was happening beyond him, without control.

“I have to think about this Michael. It’s too much. You know I’m leaving in two days. It’s too much.”

His composure wavered: she hadn’t said yes or no.

“No, it’s okay. We can get married when you get back.”

“Michael, I’ve told you I don’t know when I’ll come back. I haven’t seen my mum, my family, and my friends in four years. Then there’s my new job. I’m needed at home. I want to be home for some time.” She averted her eyes from him, and he felt as if something irrevocable had happened. “I’ll save up and come,” she said finally, without conviction.

“When people leave, they forget,” he said, his voice crackling through to fill the resulting silence.

“How can I forget you? Things will be the same.”

“They won’t be the same.” His hands held onto the table in desperation as if he were also holding onto her words. “It’s your fault they ain’t gonna be. You are leaving.”

“No Michael, it’s not that simple. If you truly want to be my husband, why don’t you come with me?”

He always found himself unprepared for arguments with her, which was why he said the first thing that came to his mind: “I can’t leave New York, but we can live here, together. Ma is all on her own after Dad died, and our friends are here—”

“Your friends Michael! Your mother! Your life!” She