

From Prologue of *Babilon Falling* by Billy Kahora

August 1978.

Every late afternoon she is watching the men and women in the field through the upstairs window. The sky it is all yellow and blue. It is the end of August 1978 and there are rumours. The old President he is dead. How can she be here in this house – her who is now of the city. And these men and women from her Matuko childhood with their rough hands, dark skin chi and the harsh words they mouth. And their laughing laughing like animals here out in the field, so near. And what makes them so happy? They can't see her, the woman of the house, but of courses she is still learning to be nyina wa Kang'a. The mother of Kang'a, with all the things that belong to them there inside the house. This new life. She is testing her new name all the time with her tongue. A four-bedroom house imagine. Even if it is her sista's house, Hannah, and they are renting it.

The window in the room at the back has a flat closed-off pane on one side. Half an opening on the other. At times the rough men and laughing women working outside stand up just like that and look up at the house. Through the opening she can see in their eyes something she remembers growing up; how everyone in the village used to look at the new houses of the missionaries when they first came. And then Fafa became a man of the Bible and burnt his blankets and wore trousers instead and built a homestead like that of muthungu and everyone looked at them the way those men and women outside there they are looking at the white houses and orange brick roofs. It is with fear, desire, hate and envy wiru all at once. It is because of what Fafa built that the man who is now her husband came to Matuko for her all those years ago. And now look what him and Hannah have done bringing these people here. The men and women outside in the field like animals even if she would not say this out loud.

Every day as the baby comes more and more to life in her there are mud and mabati houses coming up on the other far end where there used to be bush. Everything is growing right in front of her eyes making her head spin. The mabati, the crops, the men and women and it starts to look like a village. But because it does not belong here it is something else. The houses are much closer together. They are made from too many things that cause her eyes pain. And there is a smell. Where do all these people come from every day? Soon they will be everywhere. Their strange tongues coming into the house. She has even heard Hannah saying that they will make sure that the newcomers vote for her husband Ndirangu when he runs for Mayor in a few years.

The rest of the house now it feels like something she does not know. In her own bedroom there is the strange metallic smell of money that ithe wa Kang'a brings to their marriage bed every night that they are making from the field and from renting the shacks. She hears the shudren throwing their schoolbags down. She can see them clearly even though they are downstairs even as she watches the figures below. Beasts of burden. The feeling of being in a strange land comes back for a few seconds. But her shudren shout out for her their voices careless. The TV comes on with its strange tongues. As their voices shouting for her becomes small, the light below is failing and the figures below her they are now tu-litto specks on the land as they move to one end also coming to the end of their day. The sun has now lost its power, but the world is warm, and she can see the men and women they are jumping on a lorry waiting to take them to wherever they came from. She imagines they are returning to a place like Matuko.

When the shaking of the earth starts, it is so quick quick. Has anyone else noticed it? It is not even for a minute but surely it shifts everything. It is as if the world has been flipped upside down and those in the field are now in her house and her family is there out in the bush. She opens her eyes and now the men and women are jumping back out from the lorries, and they are thigiriri ants. But the moving of the earth has done something to her. She has become a ka-small bird kanyoni up here and now the voices downstairs have a strange excitement, and she can hear the kids screaming, 'Mum, the house has moved.' And then the TV takes over but she can't tell whether it is talking with its strange tongues or those are voices of the shudren.