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Africans Abroad

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Muchugu Kiiru

720 Hours in This Scept'red Isle: A Literary Odyssey

MONDAY, *9 August 1999, 06 45*
The night has been long. I arrive at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. We gave the Nairobi Airport this grandiose name in honour of the departed first "father of the nation" of Kenya: Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. The name is a mouthful, however. So, some people simply call it JKIA.

By the way, is there any connection in the naming of our foremost airport with the naming of an important point of entry into the United States after a departed president, John F. Kennedy? I don't know.

At last the journey is over, the night has been long, and I must remember to adjust my watch to East African Time.

Sunday, 8 August 1999, 17 00

The plane I will travel in to Nairobi was expected to take off from Heathrow at 15 00. It didn't.

I must have dozed off. It is now 17 00. The plane is taking off. My neighbour – by way of explanation – tells me that the luggage section had failed to close. It had to be repaired – hence the delay. Chuckles as he says that he loves his national airline because it does not penalise passengers who carry excess baggage. He tells me that he is an Egyptian vet working in London since the 1970s. The Fayeds and the shopkeeper in York cannot be the only Egyptians working in England, I tell myself.

The plane will make a stopover in Cairo. But I know I will hardly sleep on board, though my body needs sleep. I have asked myself why I cannot sleep while travelling – certainly not in vehicles, hardly ever on trains. And scarcely at all in planes. Two and half years ago, I remained awake during a non-stop flight from Gatwick to Phoenix and then on to San Diego – this just shortly after a sleep-free night flight from JKIA to Gatwick.

I have wondered why I cannot sleep on flying planes. It cannot be a safety measure, for I know that if anything happens when we are thirty thousand feet above

sea level my bodily remains would be unrecognisable.

As the plane takes off, I brace myself for the flight. It is going to be a long night.

Sunday, 8 August 1999, 06 00

It has been a long night. I have travelled from Durham to London. The coach I have been on since 23 30 is like a plane or a train: it has conveniences. Last time I was on a similar beauty was three weeks ago from Durham to Holy Island (or Lindisfarne) near Scotland, four weeks ago from London to Durham, and two and a half years ago in Blythe, California.

I have yet to use the conveniences in any coach, however. But it is comforting to know that they are within reach. I therefore don't have to beg the driver to stop so that I may release the bladder by the road. For I have seen passengers back home beg drivers to stop when bladders press. But the drivers – males without fail – don't always understand the pain of a pressing bladder.

The passenger cries to the driver to stop. The driver fails to hearken to the cry. Droplets of sweat spring up on the passenger's brow. The driver is deaf to the full, burning bladder. Now, fellow passengers pitch in, pleading with the driver to stop. The driver says that the next stop is fifty kilometres away. The bladder is now a raging fire. Trickles of sweat course down the passenger's face. The passenger hollers, cursing the devil that prompted him to down, as if the roll was about to be called up yonder, a number of beers before this journey started. But the driver is still deaf. Now, the passenger swears by his ancestors, dead and alive, that he will not guzzle a couple of half-litre bottles of lager before a five-hundred-kilometre journey. A man invoking the name of ancestors must be in trouble. The driver stops. The passenger darts out, clutching onto the cauldron.

Tells me a lot about the beauty of a coach that is equipped with conveniences – even when I don't have to use them. Just like the coach I rode in from London to Durham on 10 July 1999.

Saturday, 10 July 1999, 15 00

I'm tired. And this is going to be a long, tiring journey.

I'm on a coach, this time bound for Durham from London. I won't be in Durham until after 20 00. But praise be: Durham still will be lit by the summer sun. But the journey is going to be long, and I'm tired. For wasn't it a long yesterday? Woke up at 04 30, arrived at the JKIA at 05 30, took off for Heathrow at 07 30, stopped over in Cairo at 12 30.

A stopover in Cairo. A transit difficult to forget.

Friday, 9 July 1999, 13 00

We are in transit. Passengers in transit are herded into a building.

Hand baggage checked. Body checks.

"Must we go through this again, so soon after Nairobi?" someone near me

mutters.

"Thank God. Cairo is not as hot as it is supposed to be at the height of summer," I say, by way of comfort.

But I have not been in Cairo in summer. The two times I was here were February 1993 and January 1995. Here, I spent a week apiece each time. And I fell in love with the city. Not with the glories of pre-Arab civilisation. Not with the pyramids: here, a camel-driver reneged on the camel fare agreed upon with friends on a honeymoon. They had to pay the new fare for they were high up on top of a camel. Not with the Sphinx whose nose Napoleon's people reportedly half-shaved off. The Sphinx that reminds me of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias": "Round the decay . . . boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away." Not with the custodian of some of these glories, the Museum, where tourists mill incessantly. I fell in love with the people, the vibrancy, and the weather.

The people? Yet, a lady in our company in 1995 told us that a shopkeeper had placed a hand, a bit too warmly and suggestively, on her behind. As for the vibrancy, Wangari – who had been in Cairo a number of times in the past – complained about the honking of cars. And people who have been in the land of Pharaohs in summer tell me that the heat is oppressive.

But now: passport control. Passports handed over one by one. Oh, my God: an official is taking them away to I don't know where – though I can see that it is out of this room heavy with heat.

No point in inquiring what is going on: experience taught me in 1993 that the officialdom here sometimes frowns upon English. The English that has usurped the central place that Kiswahili should occupy in my country is not a strong point here in the land of the Pharaohs. And why should it be, I had reflected after the officialdom had shouted itself hoarse calling out something like "Shemeeel" in 1993? "Shemeeel" turned out to be Samuel, the compatriot I had travelled with for the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference. We had been at a loss who "Shemeeel" was because for an "anglicised" lot like us the name was Samuel.

But why should they succumb to our anglicised pronunciation of a name whose origins lay in the Land of the Five Seas, anyway? What is more: several people in the region speak Arabic. In Egypt they are seventy million. Millions inhabit African countries ringing the Mediterranean Sea. Middle Eastern countries bordering the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean harbour millions.

We sit and wait for the passports to come back. Cairo is becoming hotter. The jacket I had thrown on myself – to ward off the customary Nairobi cold of July and August – now traps Cairo heat.

The delay of the passports frays the nerves. I decide to go to the bathrooms to freshen up and cool down. On the way there I notice believers laying down their mats for prayers. I remember: today is Friday.

The passports come back, eventually. Yes, I should have bet on it: names mispronounced. Only that no official needs to shout himself – he is invariably male

– hoarse as the passengers crowd around the officialdom. A chilling thought cuts through me: what if they mislay my passport?

More hand-luggage checks. More body checks. Some more waiting in the adjoining waiting room. Passport checks once again. Board the bus. Into the plane. Take off. Hours of flight. Land at Heathrow. Clearance through immigration and customs. The passport now bears the injunction stamped on in Heathrow: LEAVE TO ENTER FOR SIX MONTHS: EMPLOYMENT AND RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS PROHIBITED.

On the way out of England four weeks to come, I will notice that immigration officials don't stamp my passport. Nairobi and Cairo are different. The passport bears two transit stamps for Cairo and the exit and entry stamps for Nairobi. But I will go through thorough body checks at Heathrow. Hand luggage will be screened. I will move to the departure lounge. And to the duty-free complex. Friendly prices there? I will pick up only bars of Swiss chocolate for friends back home and drink a pint of lager to while away the time.

But all this will be in the future. Now, I must remember to adjust my watch to the Summer Time out here. And look forward to a long night journey to Durham by bus. Should we leave at 21 00, as we are certain to, we should be in Durham close to 03 00 next day. Not too bad. Not bad at all: the sun will be on its way up. We will then have a whole weekend to rest the bodies and explore the surroundings before our classes begin on Monday, 12 July.

The reaction to the news that no bus is booked and that no bus is available tonight is a story best told on its own, another time.

I'm tired after the day's travel. And disappointed because the bus we reckoned would take us to Durham has turned out to be a figment of imagination. Worse news is on the way: no bus is available until the next day.

One of us, perhaps under the influence of movies or fiction that police in London are helpful, splits from the group and makes a beeline for a policeman. I have seen the species of the policeman back home: it sports a potbelly – "a public opinion," we sometimes call it back home. No help from that waddling quarter.

Where does one spend the night – though short because of summer – in a strange city?

The airport appears to offer the best resting-place for the night. But loudspeakers keep on repeating throughout the night and into the following morning, even as we leave Heathrow for London: all luggage must be attended. Unattended luggage will be collected and destroyed. More concerned about luggage being stolen, a few of us keep an overnight vigil over it and over sleeping colleagues.

Morning grudgingly comes. A policeman, slinging a rifle across his chest, walks by. I remember the announcements on unattended luggage.

But every cloud has a silver lining, I console myself: the experience should teach us to temper harsh judgements on hapless people condemned to sleep out in the open. Count blessings: we were not exposed to the elements.

I freshen up.

A decision has to be made on when to travel, now that we have failed to get a vehicle for hire to Durham.

We have to take a 15 00 bus from London. Great! The journey will be during the day. I can watch the countryside pass by.

Saturday, 7 August 1999, 23 30

The journey this time is at night. We leave Durham at 23 30.

Soon it is midnight and Sunday. The night draws a dark curtain on the country. The feel of the smooth road under the luxurious coach. The conveniences in the coach. The coach driven, not flown. I'm leaving this country that has adopted me for 720 hours for the country that gave birth to me scores of years ago.

As usual, I can't sleep.

A nagging regret snakes its way into my head: had you taken a Nairobi–Amsterdam–Newcastle return flight, it chides me, you would not have made this long night journey to London.

Why? I inquire.

Unlike Durham that is five hours away from London, it chuckles, Newcastle is a few minutes away from Durham by bus.

Get thee behind me regret. Get behind me regret. Who knows, this might be the last time that I will travel on this road. But yes, if there is a next time. Yes, if there is a next time, the Nairobi–Amsterdam–Newcastle or the Nairobi–Gatwick–Newcastle return flight it will be. But not this time. I could have missed the wonders of the English countryside had I landed at Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

I see?

But now I have seen a bit of William Blake's "England's green and pleasant land" and of the country that Cliff Richard praised in song in the 1960s.

The regret is persistent: except for the towns and the hamlets you drive through or the lighted road you travel on, you cannot see this countryside because darkness envelops all.

I'm triumphant: ooh, but in this darkness, in imagination, I can relive the beauty of the countryside I saw on 10 July.

Saturday, 10 July, 1990, 15 00

I leave London, northbound for Durham. Names familiar to me through the arts or reading pass by. Park Lane: the Beatles must have sung a song on this. No, no: not on this but on Penny Lane. Barclays: the same colours as those in Kenya. But Dickens's foggy, wet London? I know I will not see it: the sun bathes the city in bright light this summer afternoon.

Now London lies far behind us. Yesterday's exhaustion creeps into legs immobilised by sitting down for long. How far is it to Durham? I reprimand myself: I should have bought a road map in Heathrow. At least I would know where I'm and where Durham is. The sleepless night yesterday did me no good. How far is it to

Durham? I'm tired. I wish I knew where Durham is. A road map would have relaxed the mind and made the journey shorter. No. This is not true. Not a road map: I should have studied maps of England when I was in Kenya. Had I done so, I would know where Durham lies relative to the towns whose names appear on the road signs we drive past. And not knowing where I'm makes the journey long, especially because I'm travelling into twilight, literally and figuratively. Literally, because it is evening. Figuratively, because I don't know Durham. No. That is not true. Not quite true, for I know a little about Durham.

The little I know about Durham is garnered from George Carey's *Church in the Market Place* that Wangari gave me in 1998. This was long before I knew that in a year's time I would be selected into the M.A. (Ed.) degree programme in Counselling Studies at the University of Durham. And that the programme required us to attend a four-week Summer School at the University in July and August 1999. But little as it was, the knowledge from Carey familiarised me with St. Nicholas Church and the Durham Market Place. This intellectual acclimatisation was to become evident less than fifteen hours after our arrival in Durham when a colleague and I visited St. Nicholas. You should have been there. Me telling the vicar that I knew about St. Nicholas from Carey's book. And imagine: Carey is the Archbishop of Canterbury now!

But now: the coach bears us northwards, at an average speed of forty miles an hour, past beautiful country and well-tended farmlands. Just like the farmlands I saw along the Garden Route in South Africa. But: the longer I remained in South Africa some farmlands brought to mind the lands that were once the preserve of the colonial settler in Kenya. Such was the pineapple plantation that I saw not far away from Grahamstown. But I can already see that I don't have to remain in England for long to see what the farmlands on the way to Durham remind me of. No wonder, I tell myself, as I recall the two posters that I collected from the Railway Museum in Nairobi in 1981 and, later, pinned on my office wall back in Nairobi. The posters date to the beginning of the twentieth century when Kenya was British East Africa.

No wonder, I keep on telling myself, they settled in Kenya. THE HIGHLANDS OF BRITISH EAST AFRICA AS A WINTER HOME FOR ARISTOCRATS, the first poster sings praises to the land of my birth. UGANDA RAILWAY, proclaims the second poster, THE GATEWAY TO BRITISH EAST AFRICA, THE BRIGHTEST GEM IN BRITAIN'S CLUSTER OF COLONIES. No wonder, I conclude, they called our farmlands "White Highlands" and christened our solid earth the "White Man's Country."

SHERWOOD FOREST, a sign on the left indicates, the abode of the legendary Robin Hood. I enjoyed his adventures when I was a small boy, I recollect. Robin Hood living in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries robs the rich and helps the poor. The small boy who enjoyed Robin Hood still lives in the adult me who loves Blake, who living in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries writes "Jerusalem":

I will not cease from mental flight,

> Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
> Till we have built Jerusalem
> In England's green and pleasant land.

While Jerusalem may have yet to be built in England, the English countryside is beautiful in summer. The beauty leads me to appreciate why the persona in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 compares a loved one to a summer's day.

But let me not be deceived by the summer sun and the fair weather, I remind myself, for I'm aware that England is not this good throughout the year. Didn't foggy, wintry England greet me at Gatwick on my way to San Diego in February 1997? And what was the weather that I had just left behind in Kenya like? Bright sunshine. WINTER HOME FOR ARISTOCRATS: how apt. No wonder they settled in and colonised the land that gave birth to me.

Yet, and yet, how lovingly have they tended this their land here.

The rich farmlands. The good, smooth roads. The clean coaches run on time and are not overloaded. Everything seems to say: this is our land. We are not on the wing. We are not foreigners who will be decamping from this land anon. And little do I know today that the Durham campus will be teeming with rich colours of flowers and the luxuriant green of plants and lawn grass. And I will not see unsightly mounds of strewn garbage in Durham, Holy Island, or York. Nor will I feel unsafe on night walks along the River Wear. No: they don't abuse their country.

As I lose myself in the admiration of the beauty of the countryside, and as the summer bliss lulls me into another world, John Keats gently, softly, whispers to me: "Still, still . . . live ever" in this summer bliss, "or else. . . ." Chinua Achebe arouses me from the reverie:

> I don't consider that I have a right to seek out a more comfortable corner of the world which someone else's intelligence and labour have tidied up. I know enough history to realise that civilization does not fall down from the sky; it has always been the result of people's toil and sweat, the fruit of their long search for order and justice under brave and enlightened leaders.

These words from *Trouble with Nigeria* will ring in my ears during my sojourn in England. Not once. Not twice.

Durham cannot be far. I'm exhausted. We have passed Darlington whose architecture reminds me of Grahamstown where I was happy. I'm exhausted. I long to go to sleep. To go to sleep. Not to go into the "good night" that Dylan Thomas talks about. I'm tired. I wonder whether this land will be kind to me. "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger. . . ." Grahamstown was good to me for 165 days in 1995 and 1996. I have to complete that travelogue: "165 Days in RSA: A Kenyan's Impressions of the New South Africa."

But now, at last, we are in Durham.

Monday, 9 August 1999, 02 00

I'm now flying through the African airspace. Long behind me is the Mediterranean and the European airspace. A screen in the aircraft shows me the position and the speed of the aircraft. The screen does this only when in-flight entertainment or safety instructions are not on.

All I can see through the aircraft window is the darkness of today's night. The nothingness makes me drowsy. What is more, I'm tired. I lay myself down on my seat and the unoccupied two seats to the right. But sleep won't come, though I'm tired. And I have not lain down since Friday night in Durham. Friday? Why Friday? Where was I on Saturday night?

Saturday, 7 August 1999, 19 00

Oh. Yes. In Durham. Packing. Cursing why I had to buy a collection of John le Carré's books in York. At fifty pence a copy. Must be because I failed to attend a talk that le Carré gave in Nairobi at the British Council Auditorium two weeks before I left for Durham. The talk was on the man's life and works. But the only of his works that I had read was *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* a generation ago. As I picked up the low-cost secondhand collection I was telling myself: I want to know what he was talking about.

Packing done. Respite from the irritation. Interval as we wait for a taxi to take us to the coach station. Standing outside what has been home for four weeks, is a boy whose people have been our next-door neighbours here. Must be five or so years old. He is huddling, not a boy's ball, but the real thing.

He loves soccer, he says in response to a question from me.

Favourite team?

I should have guessed it – several acquaintances, relatives, and friends in Nairobi are its fans: Manchester United, comes the passionate, proud reply.

Favourite player?

More pride, more passion: David Beckham.

I like Newcastle United, I say, and Alan Shearer.

He likes Alan, he says and, in that honesty that we associate with the young, adds that he would love him if he played for Manchester United.

The passion, the pride, brings to mind the lighthearted banter I had with the karaoke maestro in the students' centre in Durham. The karaoke maestro. "Glory, glory, hallelujah" boomed his rich, velvety voice as he gave a rendering of Elvis Presley's "An American Trilogy." He loved Sunderland fervently, he had said. We would be good friends, he had added, when I forgot Newcastle United and remembered that the team was Sunderland.

I tell the lad to wait as I fetch a memento from my room. Wangari had given me a miniature Kenyan flag. This is a good souvenir to give to a friend in Durham, she had said. What better keepsake for the Manchester United-David Beckham fan? At the back of it I write that it is our flag and that I have given it to a young man who

loves Manchester United. I write down my name and address.

The taxi eventually comes. We are on the way to the coach station for the overnight journey to London.

Monday, 9 August 1999, 06 00

Oh, yes. Time flies and distances and we with it. We are now in the Kenyan airspace. And I know I will have eaten barbecued, sizzling golden goat ribs before the day is out. The golden barbecued pork ribs that I saw in York a week ago must have triggered the need for goat ribs now. For in York the choice was between the coach leaving me and me eating pork ribs. I chose the former and swore that once I arrive in Nairobi I will do something about goat ribs.

Saturday, 10 July 1999, 15 00

How much the farmlands on the way to Durham remind me of farmlands in the country of my birth goes beyond the physical likeness. They pay tribute to the man and the woman determined to make the earth produce for our nourishment. I may not have seen herds of horses feeding in farmlands by the road back home. But flocks of healthy sheep cropping grass have I seen. And the greenery of rows of well-tended, flourishing crops. And – oh, yes – herds of dairy cattle, lying down, oblivious to the heavy traffic on the road, calmly chewing cud in the afternoon sun.

I would see similar scenes in the course of my thirty-day sojourn in England when our group visits Holy Island and York.

Saturday, 31 July 1999, 9 00

Next Saturday we will be on our way from Durham for London and Nairobi. Via Cairo. But now we are on the way to York.

"This bus looks more like what we have back home," a colleague says of the coach. This is said because the coach lacks conveniences evident in the transport from London to Durham and Durham to Holy Island.

We are on our way. This is cattle country, if the presence of the cattle I see on farms is the evidence. Gusts of air, heavy with organic smell, steal into the coach. Later, the smell, blown into the bus by the wind, envelops us. What can it be? Puzzled, I put it down to the heavy smell of manure. But I'm not quite sure what it is. Whatever it is, the smell is overpowering and unforgettable.

We are in York now. We agree to meet at the Minster, a few minutes before we leave for Durham at 16 30. Those who cannot be at the Minster should be in the coach at 16 30, we further agree.

The Minster. A landmark in York, the Minster is a cathedral. Scaffolding covers parts of it, as the cathedral is being renovated. But crowds are rolling on into it. I enter the building. In many respects it is like the Durham Cathedral that I visited soon after my arrival in Durham. It is an architectural marvel, a huge, cavernous building with gigantic columns. Similar thoughts to those that assailed me when I visited the

Durham Cathedral now take hold of me. I leave the building. Crowds are still flowing into the Minster.

I sit down, looking at the cathedral and enjoying the warmth of the morning sun. I watch the people standing outside, admiring this marvel of architecture, built in an earlier, less technological age. I recall the ancient places of worship in Durham and Holy Island. Now, looking at the Minster, I tell myself that an ancient place of worship in Durham, in Holy Island, or in York is novel the first time one sets eyes on it. Having seen one of them, one has seen them all – so to speak.

As I bask in the morning sun, I ask myself: for what were these cathedrals built? For the glory of God, or for the vanity of humankind? Vanity? Vanity for things seen while imploring us to lay our treasures in "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"? How much sweat, how much blood, went into these architectural monuments? My blood runs cold at the thought. How can I surrender my destiny, I ask myself, to "the evidence of things not seen" that crusaders, whose spiritual ancestors as far as one can see believed in evidence of things seen, urge me to have faith in?

I look at the Minster again, and I shudder.

Who laid the stones to the cathedrals I have seen? The princes of the church? Huh. Come to think of it: doesn't Bertolt Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" cast a lot of doubt on insipid views on heroes and makers of civilization?

> Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
> In the books you will find the names of kings.
> Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock? . . .
> Great Rome
> Is full of triumphal arches? Who erected them? . . .
> The young Alexander conquered India.
> Was he alone?
> Caesar beat the Gauls.
> Did he not have even a cook with him?

No sooner does the warmth begin to soak into my body than a colleague with whom I had visited the Durham Cathedral comes out of the Minster. We join two colleagues who used another exit to get out of the cathedral. We step out into the town.

At one time, we sit down to eat the packed lunch provided to us by the University of Durham. At one time, we watch the boats on the river that intersects the city. At one time, we laze in the park next to the Minster. In between, we drift to the shops. It is in one of them that I buy the collection of le Carré's books. Another sells Egyptian ware – papyrus, perfume bottles, drums, belly dancers' costumes. . . . The Egyptian shopkeeper is polite, young, and pleasant. Any Egyptian perfume?

"No. Not until in two months' times," he says, smiling. "But I will be pleased

to offer you Egyptian tea." Just like Cairo. We are grateful.

We move on. Outside a church a photo-session for newly-weds is in progress. We stop to watch. The lady colleagues marvel loudly at how beautiful the bride looks in the bridal dress. I decide not to ask what colour it is. Cream? Olive yellow? We talk about how small the party outside the place of worship is – unlike home where crowds of well wishers, ill wishers, and the plain curious throng churches for weddings and receptions.

A bit of shopping here and there. I pick up a few things for people back home. And pick up a CD: Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. You cannot beat his *Ode to Joy*, or can you now?

Time flies. In less than twenty minutes the coach will be leaving for Durham. And we are deep in the city away from it. We are now in a hurry. Through a shop's glass window, I see a man carving a huge slice (or is it a slab?) off a juicy, golden (isn't it sizzling!) loin of barbecued pork (or is it mutton?). I curse myself. Where was I all day, I who have not eaten barbecued meat for the three weeks that I have been in England? But I would curse myself more, I tell myself, if I were stranded in York in pursuit of meat. I hurry to the coach station.

We are soon on our way to Durham. We are chatting, exchanging views on the areas visited. And explaining one or two things that hit our fancies, for unlike the trip to Holy Island we don't have a tour guide. But my thoughts wander once in a while. If only I had enough time in York. "Enough time" – rings a bell now, doesn't it? Yes – "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell: "Had we but world enough, and time, / This coyness, lady, were no crime." Had I had time enough I would have eaten barbecued meat in York.

Saturday, 17 July 1999, 9 00

And had I time enough I would visit the Scottish glens, I tell myself as we travel to Holy Island on our first official trip from Durham. The well-tended farmlands. The rolling green beauty reminiscent of some of our highlands back home.

And had I time enough I would love to visit Ireland, I ruminate. Ireland: the Potato Famine. Charles Parnell and Gerry Adams. W. B. Yeats: "Easter 1916" – "A terrible beauty is born." James Joyce. John Synge. Samuel Beckett. The land of Sean O'Casey whose *Juno and the Paycock* I studied for my A-Level examinations a generation ago. Ireland: the land that gave birth to some of my tutors in Durham.

Idle dreams: I don't have time, for the four-week Summer School engages my time from Monday to Friday. Lectures to attend, library to browse, and a three-thousand-word paper to hand in before I go back to Nairobi. But all this is behind me now as we travel to Holy Island.

The tour guide is a retired teacher. His wealth of information is stupendous. His well of humour spills over. There he is pointing out at an immense structure. The Angel of the North. The cost of erecting it? He chuckles as he mentions a fabulous figure. As to its aesthetics, well, well, well. This is not the last I'm to hear of the

Angel of the North. Two weeks after I return to Nairobi I'm to see the Angel in South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*. The caption will say something about the solar eclipse that took place in the Northern Hemisphere in the second half of August after our leaving England.

The tour guide now points out at a castle. He is to point out a number of them in the course of the journey. But he is not talking about them as mere edifices. He links some to the history of England. Gaunt. Gaunt did he say? My mind goes back to a generation ago.

I'm a schoolboy in a khaki shirt and khaki shorts preparing for his O-Level examinations. William Shakespeare's *Richard II* is a set-book. As the tour guide talks about York, wars, and Gaunt, the adult studying Counselling in Durham snatches the young schoolboy's snippets of John of Gaunt's praise of England to his brother, Duke of York: "This royal throne of kings, this scept'red isle." "This fortress built by Nature for herself." Presently, Gaunt is to accuse Richard II, branding him "Landlord of England art thou now, not King," for having defiled what Blake would call "England's green and pleasant land" two centuries after Shakespeare.

Now the tour guide mentions Northumberland. Like the Earl of Northumberland in Shakespeare's plays on Richard II and Henry IV, I tell myself. At this moment, I'm unaware that this Shakespeare will be with me to end of my stay: as we wait to board the plane out of England, a colleague and I take a pint of lager in a pub carrying the bard's name. Or is this another Shakespeare? The tour guide now says something about York, the War of Roses, Gaunt. And castles. A land of ancient castles and internecine wars. Did the foot soldiers who fought in these wars live in the castles, I wonder? If they didn't, where are the monuments to their chivalry and death?

We cross a causeway. We are in Holy Island now. We have to re-cross the causeway before high tide – else, I muse, we will have to spend the night in Holy Island. Not a bad idea. Not a bad idea at all, I tell myself. It will be better than spending the night in Heathrow, what with the coach as our sleeping quarters and the mead to keep us company. But I'm deceiving myself, for the idea shall not bear fruit today, for we shall go back to Durham today, but I will sip some mead today.

Mead? Mead connects me to home. Mead? A drink the tour guide says is more potent than wine. More potent? Perhaps I didn't hear well. But sweeter than wine it is when I have a taste of it in a glass the size of a giant thimble. And there is literature in the shop, saying that the Kikuyu of Kenya brew a drink similar to the mead. I have sampled the Kikuyu brew whose one central ingredient is honey. "A taste of honey sweeter than wine." I pick up a half-bottle of something to remind me and confirm that despite our lives in different climes, we human beings have a lot in common. Thank you, Holy Island, for the connection.

Holy Island's connection with the land of my birth comes more directly when a colleague, with whom I'm in the Summer School, and I take a walk in the island. I'm busy admiring the beautiful flowers planted all over when we stop at a café for a cup of coffee. The man behind the counter greets us with *"Jambo?"* – Kiswahili

for "Is there any news?" which has now been corrupted for "Hi" or "Hello." Before we can respond, he is on *"Hakuna Matata"* – Kiswahili for "There is no problem or trouble or chaos," usually emblazoned on tee shirts and stickers in – and on – Kenya. As we respond, he owns up that his Kiswahili has run dry. I tell myself: like the causeway to Holy Island has done in order to allow visitors' vehicles across it.

And I'm not quite sure, I'm telling myself as I pick up my cup of coffee, that he does not use his smattering of Kiswahili to butter up Africans who visit the café. To create a little good will for his business. He should speak or learn more Kiswahili, I self-righteously think. But where does that leave me, who boasts of a certificate of basic isiXhosa from Rhodes University, yet, to my shame, a tutor, a native of Ireland, in Durham was to sing the whole of "Nkosi Sikelel iAfrica," three weeks later, with hardly any help from me? Why? Not because I usually sing out of tune, but because I could not remember the words of a South African anthem that I knew by heart in 1995. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones, I reproach myself.

But Holy Island is not the only connection with home: the countryside, Durham, and York are. Farmers tend crops and rear animals in the England I have seen and have yet to see – just as farmers do in the Kenya I have left behind. And poverty too, for poverty, though not on the same scale as in Nairobi, exists in Durham and York. I have seen poorly clad people as I sit in the Market Place in Durham. And what about the lone singer at a street-corner in Durham, playing Scottish pipes, a plastic bowl containing some coins at his feet? And the singers, men and women, with similar plastic bowls at their feet, playing music by a bridge in Durham as wild ducks swam below them in the Wear? Then there are the four young men poorly rendering the Beatles' "Hard Day's Night" outside a famous chain store in Durham. The painter outside the Minster in York, a bowl at his feet, endlessly and unnecessarily retouching a complete picture on a giant canvas, evidently plays in this league. Blake's dream is not fulfilled, I reflect, but it cannot be dead, not dead yet, for has Jerusalem been built in "England's green and pleasant land"?

Sunday, 8 August 1999, 06 00

The flight out of Heathrow is nine hours away. Little, of course, do we know that the plane will not take off until eleven hours later. We might curse the delay now but it will ensure that the stopover in Cairo, in the dead of a hot night, will be brief. The officials will take away the passports and keep them for a while, however. We will then board the night flight to Nairobi. But all this is in the future. Now is the journey to and, finally, arrival in Heathrow.

Looks like Heathrow on l0 July all over again. The same announcements over the loudspeakers that luggage must be attended to. That one should not look after luggage that does not belong to one. That unattended luggage will be destroyed. I'm waiting to see the heavily armed policeman, trim and fit, holding an assault rifle and striding across the lounge. But this is not the same Heathrow. I don't see Rambo. I didn't spend last night here. I'm not bound for the unfamiliar Durham of four weeks

ago: I'm now travelling to familiar Nairobi. And the rain is falling heavily outside.

But, I have hours to kill and memories to relish.

And "sweet silent thought" summons remembrances of castles on the way to and from Holy Island. And the cathedrals seen. And Carey. My mind goes to his *Church in the Market Place*. It first acquainted me with Durham to the extent that, in some vanity, I could knowledgeably talk about the Market Place on the first day in Durham. I now carry, for Wangari, a copy of his *Letters from Canterbury to the Future* that I bought at St. Nicholas. I attended two memorable morning services there. There, I joined Sunday morning worshippers in the singing – to the accompaniment of an organ – of a hymn that I liked when I was a schoolboy, "O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

University of Durham. My tutors have been sensitive, understanding, and kind. And who can forget those sweet, warm ladies preparing and serving our meals in the dining hall? And what about the karaoke maestro – the fan of Sunderland – who joined two lady colleagues in singing "Endless Love"? The same man who, at my request, sang Presley's "You'll Never Walk Alone" and "An American Trilogy" in the students' centre.

"Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

This strange land has treated me exceedingly well during my thirty-day sojourn in it. I'm now leaving behind its ancient cathedrals and castles. Someday, I will say something more about this land. Someday, I should write something on the people I have interacted with in it. Someday: for now I must complete the travelogue "165 Days in RSA: A Kenyan's Impressions of the New South Africa." For now ahead of me lies the land of the pyramids and the Sphinx where "sands stretch far away" and where I must stop over before I get home.

The check-in counter opens. Time to check in and fly home.