

Kuno Kunena

Kuno kunena kwa nini, kukanikomeya kuno?
Kwani kunena kunani, kukashikwa kani vino?
Kani iso na kiini, na kuninuniya mno
Kanama nako kunena, kwaonekana ni kuwi

Kana na kuku kunena, kunenwa kakutakiwi
Kuna wanakokuona, kunena kwamba si kuwi
Kunena wakikuona, kukuita kawakawi
Kunena kana kwanuka, nikukome kukunena?

— 19 Julai 1970

Speaking Out

Why has speaking out provoked my imprisonment?
What therein compelled my confinement?
Invalid insistence incited anger against me
Apparently speaking out is viewed with contempt

Speaking out may be distasteful to some
Yet others do not regard it negatively
Encountering each other, they hesitate not to embrace
So if speaking out stinks, should I shut up?

Translated by Abdilatif Abdalla and Kelly Askew, 30 October 2014, Ann Arbor, MI

Mamba/ Abdilatif Abdalla

Nami nambe, riwe kama waanbao
Niupambe, upendeze wasomao
Niufumbe, wafumbuwe wawezao

Kuna mamba, mtoni metakabari
Ajigamba, na kujiona hodari
Yuwamba, kwamba 'taishi dahari

Memughuri, ghururi za kipumbavu
Afikiri, hataishiwa na nguvu
Takaburi, hakika ni maangavu

Akumbuke, siku yake ikifika
Roho yake, ajuwe itamtoka
Nguvu zake, kikomoche zitafika

A fahamu, mtu hajuwi la kesho
Hatadumu, angatumiya vitisho
Maadamu, lenye mwanzo lina mwisho

Crocodile

I too have words; I'll join those already speaking;
I'll gild my verse so it pleases those who're reading;
Untwist these words, for their sense may be misleading.

There's a croc gliding smugly down the river,
A boastful sop who believes he's brave and clever.
He loves to talk, tells the world he'll live forever.

With fool's conceit he strings himself along,
Sustains belief that he'll always be this strong,
But self-deceit and pride can only last so long.

He should know, someday he'll breathe his last.
He too will go, once his die's been cast.
Time will show his power finally passed.

What lies ahead none of us can comprehend;
What fate has set, no show of fierceness can transcend.
Don't forget: what has a start must have an end.

Translated by Meg Arenberg

Siwati

Siwati nshishiyelo, siwati; kwani niwate?
Siwati ni lilo hilo, 'talishika kwa vyovyote
Siwati ni mimi nalo, hapano au popote
Hadi kaburini sote, mimi nalo tufukiwe

Siwati ngaadhibiwa, adhabu kila mifano
Siwati ningaambiwa, 'tapawa kila kinono
Siwati lililo sawa, silibandui mkono
Hata ningaumwa meno, mkono siubandui

Siwati si ushindani, mukasema nashindana
Siwati ifahamuni, sababuye waungwana
Siwati ndangu imani, niithaminiyo sana
Na kuiwata naona, itakuwa ni muhali

Siwati nimeradhiwa, kufikwa na kila mawi
Siwati ningaambiwa, niaminiyo hayawi
Siwati kisha nikawa, kama nzi; hivyo siwi
Thamma nakariri siwi, na Mn'gu nisaidiya

Siwati (“Conviction”)

I will not abandon it, that which I hold dear. Why should I abandon it?
I will not abandon it, for conviction makes me face whatever comes
I will not abandon it. Neither here nor anywhere
Til we both lie buried in the grave.

I will not abandon it, even facing torture of every kind
I will not abandon it, even if tempted with all enticements
I will not abandon. that which is just. My hand will not relinquish it
Even were someone to bite my hand, I will not let go

I will not abandon it, this is no contest, whatever you may say
I will not abandon it, that you who command respect may understand
I will not abandon it, the conviction I hold so dear
To abandon it, you see, would be impossible.

I will not abandon it, better I encounter every evil
I will not abandon it, even if told I believe in fantasies
I will not abandon it and become like a fly—that I’ll never be
Indeed I repeat: that I’ll never be. So help me God.

Abdilatif Abdalla

14 March 1970, Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, Nairobi, Kenya
Translated by Kelly Askew, Berlin 2013