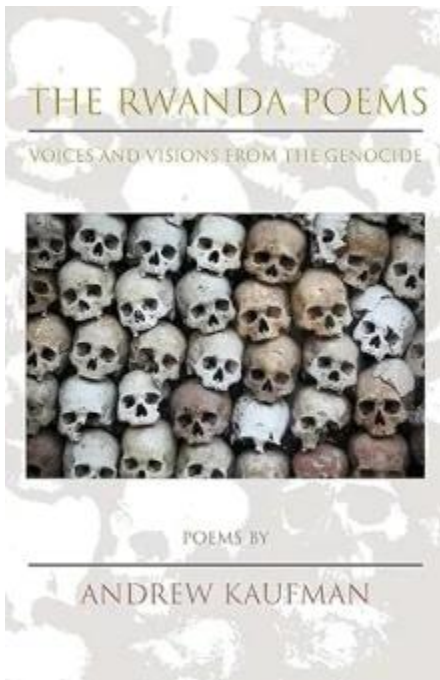


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The Rwanda Poems: Voices and Visions From The Genocide by Andrew Kaufman



By Leigh Harrison

In *Billy Budd*, Melville wrote “truth uncompromisingly told will always have ragged edges.” I was frequently reminded of this as I read – and re-read – Andrew Kaufman’s *Rwanda Poems*. Without sanitizing or sensationalizing the horrors of the Rwanda Genocide of 1994, Kaufman turns what happened in that African nation into a grim sonata of words. His introduction clarifies the complex political and social history of Rwanda so that the convoluted background of the genocide becomes as vivid as the blood that pours from the machete victims. The world’s failure to assist the people of Rwanda led to three months during which 800,000 Rwandans were murdered and countless women and

girls raped and sexually tortured. This ethnic blood-letting pitted neighbors, co-workers, and former friends against one another.

The poem that opens the collection concerns the Kigali Genocide Memorial. Kaufman shows us the enormous mass grave here, where 260,000 people were interred in huge pits that are now planted over with grass and shrubbery. He describes some of the thousands of photos at this memorial, of children who did not survive, accompanied by a brief description that mentions, for each child, a favorite activity, toy, or person, or a description of how the child was killed. In another poem, he depicts the myriad objects and personal effects that were preserved following a church massacre. These include an infant's tiny skull no bigger than a fist. Each town has its own memorial; 250 genocide memorials dot Rwanda. Kaufman writes in "The Kigali Genocide Memorial:

The 260,000 victims buried here
are in four sealed tombs—
no human bones visible, no stench
of bodies. Thousands of undiscovered mass graves
wait to be found by accident
or exposed by erosion
during the rainy seasons...

When the memorial closes for the day
I sit on the front steps.
I cannot think
where to go from here.
The most frequent comment
in the logbook for visitors
is Never Again, in English, French, and German.
But it is always Never, and Never
Again...

If you do not want to be bothered—
ask: *Did you and your family do a good job
with your machete
in the genocide?*
and they will halt
in unison and turn silent
like a sea
a god had calmed
with a word.

The details contained in the introduction's newspaper-style history are so monstrous that when we approach the poems, we are already stunned. But this is where Kaufman's art takes us beyond mere reportage. He gives the victims voices to tell their own stories. These enable us to see the real and grotesque tolls of the genocide. Kaufman likewise allows the convicted mass murderers he interviewed in prisons to tell their stories. These often turn out to be a set of circuitous lies that ultimately reveal their participation in the killings. From "They killed out president. He was like our father.":

*The men we killed? I said, collaborators.
We had only knife, stones, and machetes.*

*I told you, No looting. No torture.
We send for help when we find big families ...*

*Those I help kill at roadblock? Maybe sixty.
I do not want talk to you anymore.
I tell you they send children to help our enemy.
What reason you ask your questions for?*

*I don't want talk to you anymore.
In some houses we have to terminate babies.
I said, What you asking your questions for?
Our groups orders come from the ruling party.*

*I have no thoughts when they terminate babies—
enemies invaded us to take power.
Orders come from ruling party.
I love our president. He was like our father.*

The poems also offer sensitive descriptions of the people whose lives they document in language that is tightly drawn and evocative. Kaufman stands amid his words, revealed as a humane visitor, trying to make sense of the horror whose results he has seen. His words are simple, the poetry uncluttered by effusive language or labored syntax. But it is this very simplicity that allows us to enter the poems with all their subtle, blossoming horrors. Within the spare language there is a discerning and perceptive hand at work, crafting free verse and blank verse, along with villanelles and pantoums that carry us into the minds and experiences of both murderers and victims. As with his other collections, such as *Both Sides of the Niger*, Kaufman's occasional uses of formal verse and iambic pentameter are unforced and natural sounding to the point where we scarcely notice these elements on first reading.

The critic Julia Kristeva posited that literature often involves disjunctions and “thematic loops” such as love / hate, and other opposites. Here, Kaufman's opposing pairs amid the carnage appear as truth versus lies, and murderers and survivors.

There is no disjunction, however, between the frenzied machete dismemberments and rapes, on the one hand, and the way these descriptions implicitly build a case for peace in a world gone mad. It is, in fact, part and parcel of his technique that each poem reveals the atrocities of the genocide and, in ways that are never explicit, urges us to end the madness. Many of these pieces are dedicated to the survivor or murderer whose story the poem tells. One of the book's poems is dedicated to Dr. Denis Mukwege, a Nobel-prize winning doctor Kaufman interviewed, who founded a facility that offers free medical care, counseling, and vocational training to women and girls who had survived sex slavery in the Eastern Congo. In “An Introduction to the Women's Clinic in Bukavu, Eastern Congo,” Dr. Mukwege states the following:

*Rape here is not what we call
'Simple rape.' The girls and women
say nothing when this happens.
Rape here is using a bayonet,
machete, anything like that,
inside a woman. Rape here
is shooting the woman*

*from the inside. Here rape
is making the whole family watch.
It is forcing her brothers
to rape her, then shooting them
anyway ...*

*You—you are a writer—maybe you
know what to call it.*

Yet the wonder of it all is that Kaufman never gives way to easy anger or sermonizing, as enraging and devastating as the events depicted in these poems are. His work is lucid, penetrating, and emotionally sensitive. He manages to use all his skill as a consummate writer to place the stories in the meta-language of poetry and he renders the horror, the brutality, even the screams of the victims, in verses that are at once empathetic to the survivors — and gruesome, even as the writing is powerful, majestic, and, as with other of Kaufman’s work, beautiful in its evocation of human beings trying to deal with horror, beheadings, rapes, and murders. At the same time that we become observers with him of a monstrous evil, he makes us his partners in the desire to end forever such malignant attacks as occurred in Rwanda (where, as Kaufman himself states in his Introduction “rape and sexual torture were ... intrinsic to the genocide”) and have recently occurred in Israel.

You can find the book here: <https://www.amazon.com/Rwanda-Poems-Voices-Visions-Genocide/dp/1630450812> (<https://www.amazon.com/Rwanda-Poems-Voices-Visions-Genocide/dp/1630450812>).

Leigh Harrison is a poet, author, songwriter, musician, artist and photographer. She is the author of four poetry collections (*Tour de Farce*, *Our Harps Upon the Willows*, *Finding Sermons in Stones*, and *From A to Zeus*), and a number of book reviews and short stories. Her work has been published and performed in English, and in translation in Polish, French, Spanish, Korean and Bengali. She taught at CUNY (Queens College & York College), and other colleges, and in the NYC public schools. <http://www.leighharrison.com> (<http://www.leighharrison.com/>).

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