

## Reflections in Kenya Excerpt | Kevin Dublin



*balcony overlooking University Way in Nairobi*

The Kistrech International Poetry Festival, like sunset-lit fresh air carrying a song in a foreign tongue that sounds familiar to your soul, invites you to be mindful of each moment and expand your capacity to be present and poetic.



*matatu on the road in Nairobi*

Kistrech was founded in 2012 by Dr. Christopher Okemwa, a professor and writer of poetry, prose, and plays at Kisii University. The weeklong festival begins in the matatu, boda boda, and pedestrian friendly streets of Nairobi and brings you across the country about 6 hours to the lush greens of Kisii Town with tree leaves, red clay grounds, and roads still glistening from the previous warm rain.



*Great Rift Valley viewpoint on the road from Nairobi to Kisii*

Between the two, there will be opportunities to see parts of the Great Rift Valley, to share stories with poets from different corners of the globe, to speak and listen in multiple tongues, to learn to look across the jagged-smooth face of escarpment like a lover who you know could kill you if you make the wrong move and neither of you could possibly care less. I had read about gasping at beauty but never done it. Did I do it *the first time ever, I saw your face?* Did you do it?



*writers Peggy Morrison & Bonface Nyamweya on a walk from the National Museum of Kenya*

There's so much to be told about the memories. There's so much still to process. How you can recognize a way the wind blows, how a garden grows greens tended by a grandmother, how a call and response was crafted from an ancient tradition and so encoded that it can transform through another culture and refract back amidst the mist and the smell of oncoming, lightning-in-the-distance rain.





*section of a farm plot of the Omache family*

This was my first time in Kenya, my first time on the continent of Africa, and I noticed it with a single step onto the tarmac from the airstairs of the plane. I had anticipated being emotional, so I would know how to move it out of the way. Sidestep sentimentality like a stumble and quick recovery when passing rows of green. This was a land where my ancestors came. In an unknown, metaphorical kind of way, but also knowing there is a seed of reality which is true from DNA and genealogy: I come from Bantu language descendants, and I know it is a full history I will never be able to spread out like the abundant garden that it is. Still, I can re-contextualize, redefine, and reinvent as is the tradition.



*Kevin Dublin as a young child*

I was born a Black boy in Smithfield, North Carolina on a Friday the 13th, two nights before the full moon. Where I was before, there was the elegance of complete darkness, and then there was light. I have gone back six generations so far in genealogy, two of those generations contain ancestors who were enslaved in the United States. And those ancestors remained close to the land they raised as much as they could. Land which, before the Civil War was over, General Sherman's troops, who were in Johnston County before he got the news the war ended, burned the beds of their quarters and killed the farm animals as the plantation owner watched from the other side of the road. This would become the land where many of my ancestors and my mother are buried, where Green Chapel Baptist church where I belonged stands. Where I inherited "God is good: all the time; and all the time: God is good."





*Bokano Wilfred Ombiro performs in Bogiakumu village; background: writers Winston Farrell and Erlend Wichne dance*

But this land: Kisii. This festival: the Kistrech International Poetry Festival is filled with celebration, filled with song. It's the only large poetry festival on the whole continent of Africa, and perhaps the world, where you spend time not just in a large city or a small city, but you traverse a country, and you spend some time in towns and rural provinces. This is partly due to the wonderful and inspiring spirit of the festival's founder, Dr. Okemwa, who is still deeply invested in helping the community he grew up in. Over several days, he guided us to the local Mosando Secondary School, Kisii University classrooms and library as well as the Dallas Premiere Hotel, and it was inspiring.



*Gusii cultural dance with Bogiakumu Women*

On Day 5 of the festival, we were welcomed into Dr. Okemwa's home village with traditional Gusii song and dance. We visited host families, shared meals, translated stories and conversations with the help of our Kisii university student volunteers. The rhythms were familiar, and it felt more like a homecoming than a first visit, especially when an elder asked me, "whose son are you?" after watching me teach Baron, a third grader who was curious about my mirrorless camera, how to shoot photos and videos while utilizing the rule of thirds.





*photo of me taken by Baron*

Baron started to get the hang of it by the end of the day. His perception was perfectly curious, and he focused the aperture of his own eyes and the aperture of the camera with precision leading to the closing of shutter and the opening like a future foretold of him as a photographer and filmmaker in quantum entanglement's shadow. But that day, we danced.



*Celebrating Ruth Koech's birthday with cake, poems, and songs*

And every day we shared poetry. But we also ate and drank and celebrated: being there, being together, being in words, and the birth of the fantastic young poet Ruth Koech.



*writer Bonface Nyamweya enjoys a bite*

Whether at the Dallas Premiere Hotel, the halls and library of Kisii University, Mosando Secondary school, or the streets, we were present and in the moment: poetry itself. So much so that we were able to open and be vulnerable. I know there are friends in Kenya that I will have for life.





*2023 Kistrech International Poetry Festival poets with Kisii University Deputy Vice Chancellor and students*

Another thing about the trip is that the end of the festival doesn't have to be the end of the festival. In the spirit of showing off Kenya's beautiful nature, people, hospitality, and fellowship, there's another day of travel for those interested and with time permitting: the day trip to Maasai Mara National Reserve. The savannah preserve and its wildlife is one of the largest tourist attractions in Kenya.



*writer Karla Brundage en route to Maasai Mara*

There are some people who have always enjoyed watching the majesty of animals. In the nature of transparency, I am not one of those people. I love seeing birds in the wild, but that's about my limit. Maybe it was shaped by my experience of encountering zoos in North Carolina where the animals looked as miserable as I imagine Rilke's panther or reminiscent of Ted Hughes' jaguar, full of the bravado of a "gorged look, Gangster, / club-tail lumped along behind gracelessly," plotting its escape. But, in Kenya, at the festival, with this wonderful group of poets and hosts, it seemed as though everything I saw was a sign of the inevitable.



I will admit when I am inspired,  
won over. The first giraffe:  
legs and neck as impressive  
as a Sunday on Thursday  
and just as inexplicable





The laziness of lions in the midday reminds me of my son & his best friend on Saturday morning after a late breakfast but with fewer video games



The gleam of zebra  
stripes in the sun  
is an unexpected,  
welcome kiss



A lone African buffalo in October:  
autumn reminder of summer Texas heat—  
maybe the same rains will fall  
against this wind with thunder imminent





Gratitude for our guide:  
identifying Thomson's gazelle—  
her grace, her poise, her gun



Photographs unable to capture  
how tender her eyes are—  
rely on precious imagination



*filmmaker / poet Loice Robi Mwita poses*

Impromptu pose—  
without a second to properly frame,  
we never broke any written rules





Outside of the reserve  
giraffes take their time—  
to browse, to roam



There's always a road  
which leads to where we go  
and where we must return