

1998

RWANDA

- Ai

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Recommended Citation

Ai, -, RWANDA, *Kunapipi*, 20(3), 1998.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss3/4>

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RWANDA

Abstract

My neighbor used to come to our hut, bringing melons so sweet I thought I should not eat them, because I would die and haunt my family like a ghost with hard, black seeds for eyes.

Ai

RWANDA

My neighbor used to come to our hut,
bringing melons so sweet
I thought I should not eat them,
because I would die
and haunt my family like a ghost
with hard, black seeds for eyes.
One day, he brought his uncle and two friends
and they asked my father to go outside with them.
I thought he had come to get permission to marry me
and I was glad because I loved him.
even though he wasn't a member of my tribe,
nor as educated as I was..
I wanted to stay,
but my mother gave me a basket of clothes
to wash at the river.
She said, "don't come back,
until they are as clean as the Virgin Mary's soul .
"Mother," I said, "I'll never come back then."
"Shall I take my brother?" I asked,
as he ran to my father's side.
I was laughing. when she hissed, "run"
and I did because she frightened me.
As I rounded the hut,
I heard the "tat," "tat," "tat," from guns
like the ones the soldiers carry.
I ran faster, still holding the basket.
It was frozen to my hands
and I still held it, even as I jumped in the river.
I thought I would die, so I closed my eyes.
When something bumped against me,
I opened them and saw my father's body,
As he floated past me,
his arm hooked around my neck,
almost taking me under
and I released the basket.
I reached for my father, as bullets hit the water
and I dove under him.
His body shielded me, until I couldn't breathe
and had to break the surface for air.
When I crawled onto the riverbank,

I hid in the grass behind the church.
Finally, when I was sure no one was around,
I beat on the rectory door.
until the priest opened it. "Hide me, Father," I begged.
Once inside, I was overjoyed to see my mother.
She told me when my neighbor shot at her,
she pretended to be dead
and while he dumped my father in the river,
she escaped and came here,
hoping I had survived.
She said we needed another place to hide,
but she could only find a small closet sized space
behind the altar, covered by a sheet of tin.
Only one of us could fit, so she made me go in
and covered the hole again.
When I heard screaming, I kicked the tin aside
and saw my mother was on fire.
I tried to help her, using only my hands
but when she was completely covered in flames,
I broke a stained glass window
with a statue of Saint Joseph and climbed out
As I crawled back to the river,
a shiver of wind passed over me
through the grass and trees.
When I stopped to rest,
fear coiled around me like a snake,
but when I told myself I would not let them kill me,
it took the shape of a bird and flew away.
I crawled back to the church,
because I wanted to find my mother's ashes,
so I could bury them,
but my way was blocked by the rebels,
so I waited until dark.
Maybe I slept. I don't know.
When I heard my neighbor's voice,
it was as if I had awakened from a dream.
Relief flooded over me, until I sat up
and saw him standing above me, holding a machete.
"Sister," he said, "I won't hurt you."
I knew he was lying and I tried to get away,
but I was too weak
and he fell on top of me, tearing at my clothes.
When he was finished raping me,
I thought he would kill me
but he only brought the machete close to my head,

then let it fall from his hands.
Dawn had come to the village
with more killing on its mind.
I heard screams and pleas for mercy,
then I realized those sounds were inside me.
They would never leave.
Now I am always talking to the dead.
Their bones are rattling around in my head.
Sometimes I can't hear anything else
and I go to the river with my son and cry.
When he was a few days old,
I took him there for the first time.
I stood looking at the water,
which was still the color of blood,
then I lifted him high above my head,
but my mother's bones said, "killing is a sin,
so I took him home
to raise him as if he really is my son
and not the issue of my neighbor,
who has returned to torment me
with skin that smells like burning flesh,
but in my heart I know
both his mother and father died long ago
and left this orphan to grow like a poisoned flower
beside the open grave that was my country.