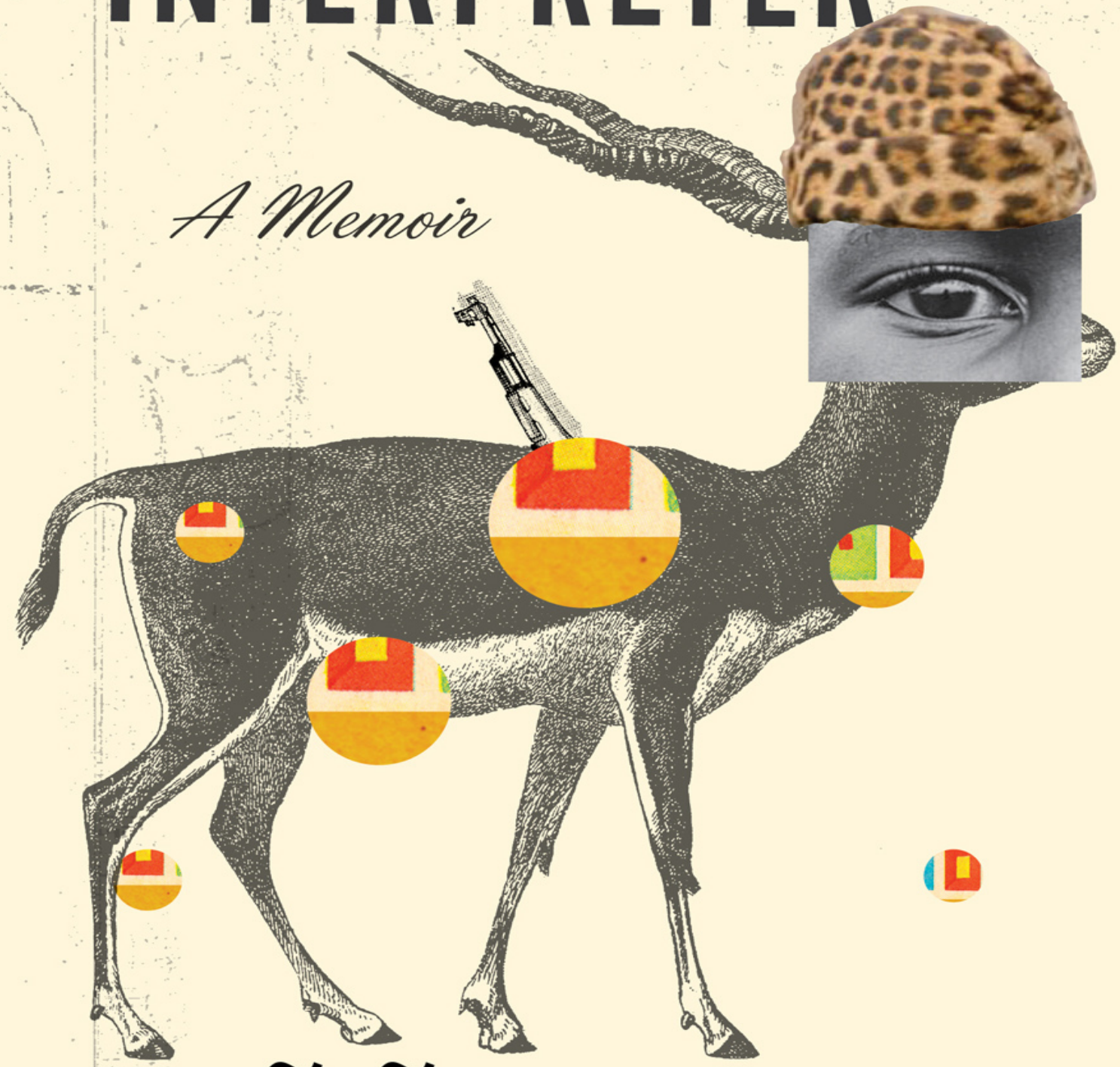
IN THE HOUSE *of the* INTERPRETER

A Memoir



NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O

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About the Book

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a writer who has lived through extraordinary times. *In the House of the Interpreter* tells the story of his schooldays in Kenya against the backdrop of the intensification of the struggle for independence.

During the early fifties, Kenya was a country in turmoil. While Ngũgĩ enjoys scouting trips, chess tournaments and reading about Biggles at the prestigious Alliance School near Nairobi, things are changing at home. He arrives back for his first visit since starting school to find his house razed to the ground and the entire village moved up the road closer to a guard checkpoint. Later, his brother, Good Wallace, who fights for the rebels, is captured by the British and taken to a concentration camp. Finally, Ngũgĩ himself comes into conflict with the forces of colonialism when he is victimised by a police officer on a bus journey and thrown in prison for six days.

This fascinating memoir charts the development of a significant voice in international literature, as well as standing as a record of the struggles of a nation to free itself.

About the Author

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine, and is director of the university’s International Centre for Writing and Translation. His books include *Petals of Blood*, for which he was imprisoned by the Kenyan government in 1977, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Wizard of the Crow*. He lives in Irvine, California.

Also by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

FICTION

Wizard of the Crow
Petals of Blood
Weep Not, Child
The River Between
A Grain of Wheat
Devil on the Cross
Matigari

SHORT STORIES

Secret Lives

PLAYS

The Black Hermit
This Time Tomorrow
The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (with Micere Mugo)
I Will Marry When I Want (with Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ)

MEMOIRS

Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary
Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir

ESSAYS

Globalectics
Something Torn and New
Decolonising the Mind
Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams
Moving the Centre
Writers in Politics
Homecoming


SOUTH SUDAN
ETHIOPIA
UGANDA
SOMALIA
KENYA
GREAT RIFT VALLEY
Marsabit
Mount Kenya
Meru
Tana R.
Nyeri
Embu
Murang'a (Fort Hall)
Limuru
Hell's Gate
Gatundu
Banana Hills
Kamirithu
Kiambu
Kikuyu
Nairobi
Ngong Hills
Mutonguni
Kitui
Galole (Hola)
TANZANIA
Manyani
INDIAN OCEAN
N
W
E
S
0 50 100 Miles
0 50 100 Kilometers

TO THE CLASS OF 1958:

George Kinoti
Nicodemus Asinjo
John Wainaina
Elijah Nyanjui
Philip Ochieng
Gerald Macharia
Archie Mbogho
Joshua Omange
David Maringa
Samwel Mwanzia
Joab Onyange
Dunstan Ireri
Joseph Mengo
Meshak Oluoch
John Kang’ethe
John Kimanzi
George Ongute
Ishmael Gatuna
Joel Kori
Nelson Auma
Alexander J. Amega
Archibald Githinji
Andrew Kaingu
James Wafula
Samwel Githegi
David Mzigo
Hiram Karani
Daniel Gatangi
Stephen Muna
Henry Chasia
Erastus Ngunya

James Ngugi*
Kennedy Munavi
Elius Irongo
Samuel Mungai
Peter Bambula
Joseph Gatuiria
Livingstone Nkuruna
Stephen Swai
George Njoroge
Ernest Likimani
Johana Mwalwala
Bethuel Kurutu
Moses S. Kiarie
John G. Mgalu
Erastus Kiaritha
Joseph Njau
Gilbert Kaisha
Julius Kitur
Evanson Mwaniki
Kamau Kiarii
Benjamin Mogaka
James Giceru

A formative part of my intellectual and spiritual strivings

* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

And in memory of Kenneth Mbũgwa, who passed on in the middle of my writing this memoir.

In the House of the Interpreter

A MEMOIR

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

SOMETHING startles me where I thought I was safest.

—WALT WHITMAN,
"This Compost," *Leaves of Grass*

1955

A Tale of Home and School

1

IT'S THE END of my first term at boarding school, and I'm going home. It's April. When I first left Limuru for Alliance High School in January, it was in the last car of a goods train into which I had been smuggled, my sole company then being workmen's tools and clothes. Now I travel third class, with schoolmate Kenneth Wanjai. It's very crowded, standing room only, and our school uniform of khaki shirts, shorts, and blue ties marks us as different from the general passengers, all black Africans, their clothes in different stages of wear and tear. Their haggard faces belie the animated voices and occasional laughter. On getting off at Limuru railway station, I linger on the platform and look around me to savor the moment of my return. The goods shed, the tea kiosk, the waiting room, and the outside toilets marked for Europeans only, Asians only, and Africans, minus the qualifying only, still stand, silent weather-beaten witnesses of time that has passed since the station first opened in 1898.

Wanjai and I part company for our different destinations, he in his father's car, and I alone, on foot. Then it hits me: I'm going home to my mother. Soon, very soon, I'll be with my sisters and younger brother. I have news to share with them: I was among the top of my class. No doubt my mother will ask me if that was the best I could have done, or her variation, were you number one, and I will have to confess that another boy, Henry Chasia, was ahead of me. As long as you tried your best, she will surely tell me with pride. I am going to bask in her sunny smile, which always

carries warmth and depth of care. I enjoy her reaction in advance.

I lift my wooden box by the handle with my right hand. It's not very heavy, but it dangles and keeps on hitting against my legs. After a time, I change hands; it's worse on the left side, so I lift it onto my shoulder. I keep up the pattern: right hand, left hand, right shoulder, left shoulder, and back to the right hand. My progress is slow. I walk past the African marketplace, which looks deserted, a ghostly place, except for a pack of stray dogs, chasing and fighting over a female in heat. But the memory of my childhood interactions with the place floods back: my brother's workshop; people massing outside the Green Hotel to hear news; my falling off Patrick Mũrage's bike. I stagger up the slope toward the Indian shopping center. Almost two years back, my brother, Good Wallace, ran down this very slope, barely escaping a hail of police bullets, but I refuse to let memories of pain interfere with my first homecoming as an Alliance student. Instead, I conjure up images from my Limuru youth that are more in tune with my triumphant mood.

Onesmus Kĩhara Warũirũ immediately comes to my mind. Kĩhara, an incredible cyclist and showman to boot, loved climbing this slope. People used to stand aside and cheer him in wonder and admiration as he cycled up the hill to take mail and parcels to the Indian shopping center. No other cyclist had ever managed to climb the hill all the way without once getting off his bike and pushing it. Kĩhara was our bike hero, possessor of superhuman endurance.

I'm so engrossed in these thoughts that I forget to take note of the landscape around me. But instinct suddenly tells me that I have gotten home … or where home should be. I stop, put down the box, and look around me. The hedge of ashy leaves that we planted looks the same, but beyond it our homestead is a rubble of burnt dry mud, splinters of wood, and grass. My mother's hut and my

brother's house on stilts have been razed to the ground. My home, from where I set out for Alliance only three months ago, is no more. Our pear tree is still standing, but like the ashy hedge, it's a silent witness. Casting my eyes beyond, I suddenly realize the whole village of homesteads has disappeared. The paths that had crisscrossed the landscape, linking the scattered dwellings into a community, now lead from one mound of rubble to another, tombs of what has been. There is not a soul in sight. Even the birds flying above or chirping in the hedges emphasize the emptiness. Bewildered, I sit on my box under the pear tree, as if hoping it will share with me what it knows. The tree, at least, has defied the desolation, and I pick a few ripe pears to eat in baffled silence. How could a whole village, its people, history, everything, vanish, just like that?

The sight of two rats chasing each other amid the rubble shakes me out of my reverie. I think of going toward the only houses still standing, the Kahahus', despite their ghostly aura, for an answer. Once again I stagger along with the box. At the hedge, I see a man and recognize Mwangi, part of a group of workers who have always rendered loyal services to the Kahahu family. As children, we called him Mwangi wa Kahahu, although he was not blood related. He always had gossip about the goings-on in the big house on the hill. Now he and I are the only humans in a desolate landscape.

You mean you don't know that all the people have been moved to near the home guard post? Oh, but of course you have come home on school break. Go up, and you will see for yourself, he says, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the ridge.

His delivery is matter-of-fact. I stare at him, waiting for more, but he walks away. Normally he would have taken the time to tell tales of the Kahahu family, his favorite subject, but today he does not have the words. Slowly I work my way up the ridge, past more piles of rubble,

charred funeral pyres of a rural community. From the top of the ridge, now bereft of all memories, I put the box down and look at the valley below. A completely new vista of grass-thatched roofs lies before me.

Away with images of the past, I tell myself. Distractions will not help. Take your box and walk down the same path you used to take to school. Go down the slope. Walk across the dirt road in the valley below, past the permanent pool of muddy waters. Force feet to move. Yes, move. Move. Move. Move on. Drag the box along.

I come to the first line of houses. With some men in the mountains and others in prison, women have willed themselves into old and new roles: feed and clothe the kids; fetch water; work in the fields; stretch out your hands for meager wages; and build. Build new houses. Set up new homes. You don't even have time to survey the work of your hands. You need a stranger, like me, to view what you have no time to see. The huts are in different stages of completion. Armed home guards patrol the paths of the new grass village. No respite for you, our mothers and sisters and children.

I ask people, anybody that comes into view, whether they have seen my mother. Some look puzzled and say they don't know who I'm talking about; others shrug their shoulders or simply shake their heads and continue with the task at hand. But some ask me details about my family, the location of their old homestead, and then point to where I might get more information.

The old independent households from different ridges have been gathered into one concentration village, called Kamĩrĩthũ, without regard to the old neighborhoods. Somehow, eventually, I find my family. My mother and my brother's wife are on the rooftop thatching, with my sister handing them bundles of grass from below. My younger brother and some young men I don't know are filling up the walls with mud. A shout of recognition from my younger

brother Njinjũ makes the neighbors stop to look. My sister Njoki wipes her hands on her dress and shakes my hand. My mother calls out, *Tuge mĩ woka*, so you have come back, as if she would rather I had stayed away. My younger brother says, *Karibu*. It is less a welcome to the comfort of the family hearth than an invitation to join them in work. I find a corner, take off my Alliance uniform, and change into old clothes, and within a few seconds, I'm all mud. This is not how I had imagined my return.

And Alliance, where I have now lived eighty-nine days longer than I have lived here? What is it to me, now that this village confronts me as a stranger?

2

WHEN I FIRST stepped onto the grounds of Alliance High School on Thursday, January 20, 1955, I felt as if I had narrowly eluded pursuing bloodhounds in what had seemed a never-ending nightmare. Up to that moment, my life had been spent looking nervously over my shoulder. Since the declaration of the state of emergency in 1952, I lived in constant fear of falling victim to the gun-toting British forces that were everywhere, hunting down anticolonial Mau Mau guerrillas, real or imagined. Now I was inside a sanctuary, but the hounds remained outside the gates, crouching, panting, waiting, biding their time.

The stone buildings, so many in one place and all for us, seemed a veritable fortress, quite a change from the mud and grass-thatched huts I had lived in all my life. Our hosts, who I would later learn were prefects, took us on a tour of the grounds, eventually leading us to our different houses and dorms. Even the word *dorm* sounded splendidly safe and cozy. The beds were in two rows facing each other. Between them were drawers whose flat tops served as tables. My luggage, one box, fit under the bed. The dorm reminded me of the ward in King George Hospital, where I was once admitted because of my eyes, except that it smelled not of hospital but of lavender. I had a real bed, my own, for the first time in my life. The following morning I felt like pinching my skin to convince myself that I was awake.

On Friday, my second day, we registered and sorted out tuition at the bursar’s office; on Saturday, we were each

issued the school uniform of a pair of khaki shorts and shirts, two cotton T-shirts—white for pajamas, red for work—and a blue tie. With more boys continually arriving on the scene, that first weekend passed quickly as in a soft dream, everything swiftly losing its outline in a mist. The howl of the hounds hovered over the horizon, a distant echo.

3

FOUNDED ON MARCH 1, 1926, Alliance High School was the result of a short-lived alliance of Protestant missions of the Church of Scotland, the Church Missionary Society, the Methodist Church, and the African Inland Mission.[1] It was the first secondary school for Africans in the country and the only reminder of the missions' feel-good moment of togetherness. African graduates of the elementary schools now had an alternative to vocational institutes.

The high school followed the recommendations of the 1924 Phelps-Stokes Commission for Education in East Africa, bankrolled by the New York–based Phelps-Stokes Fund and modeled on the nineteenth-century system for educating Native Americans and African Americans in the South. In 1924–25, just before his formal appointment as the first principal of Alliance, G. A. Grieves had gone to America on a Phelps-Stokes grant to study that system, which meant an almost mandatory pilgrimage to Tuskegee and Hampton. Virginia Hampton Institute, founded in 1868 by General Samuel C. Armstrong, the son of a missionary in Hawaii, and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington, a graduate of Hampton and protégé of Armstrong, were the models. These schools inspired two almost contradictory educational visions: the notion of self-reliance and the aim of producing civic-minded blacks who would work within the parameters of the existing racial state.[2] Alliance was set up with this animating spirit. The school motto, Strong to serve, and its anthem, celebrating strength of body, mind, and character,

were a rewrite of Armstrong's vision of integrating body, heart, and hands. The theme was repeated in the school's prayer: *Have in thy keeping, O Lord, our God, this school; that its work may be thorough, and its life joyful. That from it may go out, strong in body, mind, and character, men who in thy name and with thy power will serve their fellows faithfully*.

Although Alliance, initially a two-year institution, had literary education at its core, the vocational character of its American South model was maintained through classes in carpentry and agriculture. And like its models, it produced mostly teachers, some later employed in mission and government schools and the independent African schools, before their ban. This model was to remain fairly intact until 1940, when Edward Carey Francis took over as principal and grafted a four-year English grammar onto its vocational American stem.

Carey Francis saw Alliance as a grand opportunity to morally and intellectually mold a future leadership that could navigate among contending extremes, a view he articulated in a letter on April 24, 1944, to Reverend H. M. Grace, Edinburgh House, Eaton Gate:

> Racial feeling in Kenya is bad. There are faults on both sides. Among many Europeans there is suspicion of missions and of education ("spoiling the native") though this is far better than it was; among Africans there is inborn suspicion of the white man. A man who tries to do his job is pretty certain of criticism from both sides, not made easier by the fact that he is bound to make mistakes. But it is a grand opportunity, too. Most of the future leaders of the country pass through our hands.

In another write-up, Carey Francis tells how, on arrival in Mombasa in October 1928, a well-meaning acquaintance

from the voyage took him aside and advised him to be careful not to do any work himself, not even straightening out his mixed-up luggage, for that would mean "losing all prestige with the natives."[3] Yet the African boys he met at his first post, as principal at Maseno High School, exhibited a natural friendliness and innate gentlemanliness, raw material that could be shaped in the right way.

Edward Carey Francis; taken from *Alliance High School: 75th Anniversary, 1926 to 2001* (110)

He must have carried that attitude with him to Alliance, and the school had indeed produced its fair share of an essentially cooperative leadership. But contrary to the conscious intentions of its founders, Alliance had also birthed a radical anticolonial nationalist fever. Ironically, in its very structure, Alliance actually subverted the colonial system it was meant to serve, and Carey Francis, an OBE, would turn out to be the most consistently subversive of the colonial order. The presence of Africans on the staff as equals with the white teachers undermined, in our eyes at least, colonial apartheid and the depiction of the African as inferior. Indeed, some of them were more effective in the

classroom than their white counterparts. But no matter what or how they taught, the African teachers were role models of what we could become. By insisting on high performance on the playing field and in the classroom, Carey Francis produced self-confident, college-prepared, intellectual minds. By the time I left Alliance, I felt that academically I could go toe to toe with the best that any European or Asian schools could produce.

But when I first arrived, in January 1955, I was not aware of the history behind the school nor of the confidence it would eventually inspire in me. Not that it would have mattered. It was enough for me to know that the hounds could not enter the grounds to disturb my sleep in Dorm Two of Livingstone House.

[1] The Church of Scotland Mission was renamed the Presbyterian Church of East Africa in 1946 after a merger with the Gospel Missionary Society. The Anglican CMS became the Church Province of Kenya.

[2] Even within America, this system did not always produce the intended results, as shown by the activities of Simbini Mamba Nkomo, founder and executive secretary of the Pan-African Drive by the African Student Union of America, and by the antidiscrimination unrest in African American colleges, including Hampton (1924–27). Kenneth King, *African Students in Negro Colleges: Notes on the Good African* (Phylon, 1960), vol. 31, no. 1970, p. 29.

[3] L. B. Greaves, *Carey Francis of Kenya* (London: Rex Collins, 1969), p. 6.

4

HAD I BUT died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant, there's nothing serious in mortality. It was about five, on Monday, my fourth morning in Dorm Two. Why this talk of death? I thought as I sat up, looking apprehensively around me. The morning crier stood in the common yard, outside. The rest of us were in varying degrees of wakefulness. Arap Soi, second year, next to my bed, calmed me down: It's Moses Gathere, the house prefect, his way of welcoming a new day. Or rather, his way of telling the prefects of the four Livingstone dorms to get us moving.

Had I but died, Moses started again. Another boy snorted loudly to nobody in particular, Nincompoop. That's Stanley Njagi, Soi said. He doesn't like to wake up, and he doesn't like being woken up. He covers himself completely with a blanket and reads with a flashlight late into the night. He loves the word *nincompoop*.

By the time Moses was set to crow a third time, like the biblical rooster, everybody had jumped out of their beds, gone out to the bathroom outside, and come back to change from their pajamas into their work clothes, the garments we were given on Saturday. Some boys said they looked like those worn by prisoners, but I didn't mind them. It's clean-up time, Moses was saying again loudly, adding, Cleanliness is second to godliness. This generated laughter that relaxed the morning tension, except in the case of one boy who mimicked the crier: *Had I but a dagger in my hands*, he mumbled, *I would* ...