

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

DUST

369pp. Granta Books. Paperback, £8.99.

978 1 78378 131 7

Melanie White

In *Dust*, Kenyan-born author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor weaves her characters' personal anguish over the death of a family member into Kenya's recent history of political upheaval, corruption and colonial tension. Owuor's debut novel (shortlisted for this year's Folio Prize) connects the story of the bruised Oganda family in 2007 with that of the original owners of their house, a British couple who settled there in the 1960s. In sympathy with its inhabitants, the coral-pink house is now falling apart: leaking, splintering, eaten by termites, returning to dust. Amid this disintegration, almost every character in the novel is either lost or searching for someone who is lost.

After the promising Oganda son is gunned down amid Nairobi's chaotic streets, his death draws home his sister Ajany from Brazil and drives away his grief-stricken mother, who is so distraught that she tears out her hair in bloody chunks. Nyipir, the Oganda patriarch, struggles between the death of his son and disappearance of his wife to maintain the family homestead against threats from within and without: his home is crumbling, cattle rustlers threaten his livestock, and an English stranger appears seeking clues to a family mystery that Nyipir is desperate to conceal.

The power of *Dust* derives less from its narrative substance – which is as elusive and shifting as desert sands, in keeping with the title – and more from its jewel-toned prose, which glitters with emotional and visual colour. “Bloody Kenya,” Owuor writes. “Blood had seemed to seep from too many holes there. A cut bled. Sunset bled. Red mud roads bled. Sunset-sunrise bleeding. Oozing life, seeping death. The full moon bled on water.” Sentences are often fragmentary, and the story builds in the same way. Flashes of memory and the feelings of a moment give rise to recollections of other times and places. The portrait that this fragmented style builds of Kenya rings true in its contradictions, the quotidian mingling regularly with the dramatic: birds chirp while machine guns fire, warm winds blow while brothers are buried. Owuor's eye catches an abundance of rich detail, and the heightened suffering of the characters is leavened by the beauty of the prose. Mourning his son, “Meaninglessness is ash in Nyipir's mouth. Swallowing saliva. Failing, falling, clutching at nothing. The compartments into which he parcels his life are broken and leaking.”

Despite their suffering, Owuor's characters exude strength. As Nyipir's wife is first introduced, "She flows like magma ... as if it had come from the root of the world". The enigma of this woman, who quickly becomes one of the book's central missing figures, underlies a narrative jigsaw that has more players than pieces. Just as she absconds, the English stranger, Isaiah, turns up searching for his father. His intrusion exhumes – and embodies – the violence, confusion and hypocrisy of colonial times, and long-hidden secrets soak and weight the fabric of the novel. As Owuor writes of Ajany, an artist, "She knows how to paint with darkness." So too does Owuor.