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## A Collection of Short Stories

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*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

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A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORES

by

Tryphena L. Yeboah

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

(Creative Writing)

Under the Supervision of Professor Kwame Dawes

Lincoln, Nebraska

July, 2024

## ABSTRACT

The short stories in this collection offer diverse and expansive realities of the human condition, particularly around the lives of women—their identities, bodies, emotions, and how they live and navigate a social order that is often constructed to dominate and undermine them. How can we complicate marginalized portrayals of women shaped by the male gaze and interrogate the patriarchal presumption of the African woman? What different approaches should be employed in capturing different aspects of her domestic and social life, how she defines and expresses autonomy, how she subverts gender norms, and her experiences of emotional and physical violence? These guiding questions have been crucial in thinking about the kinds of female characters present in the collection and what ideas underlie how they navigate conditions of motherhood, widowhood, victimhood, as well as developing their identities as independent, powerful and agentic women. Set in contemporary Ghana, a majority of the stories in the collection are character-driven, with a focus on engaging the psychological and emotional to reveal complicated truths, shattering histories, and the extraordinary stakes in relationships. Whether taking an act of revenge against one's mother or choosing to survive in a violent household, these characters are fierce, nonconformists, and surprisingly complex. As they reckon with the state of their shattering worlds, they are forced to confront the truth about themselves and the people in their lives. With unabashed vulnerability, the stories explore humanity's deepest desires, hidden motives, and the reverberations of trauma through the years. While portraits of grief and brutality are rendered, a world of possibility is offered in hope, love and recovery.

*For Mama*

*A world of tragedies between us. And love, too.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The inevitability of change is an important subject in African literature. There's been a rise of African women writers who have stories with endings that "foreshadow new beginnings," as Obioma Nnaemeka notes when describing works by Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, and Flora Nwapa. She continues, "After they redescend into themselves and the return from their orphic journeys, these female characters are armed with the resolve to use the lessons of the journeys in constructive, self-fulfilling, and empowering ways. The emergence of a new generation of African women writers points to new beginnings/directions" (1994, 154). Much of this change has been influenced by globalization, feminist movements, narratives of resistance and empowerment as well as a wave of writers who do not hold back from interrogating long-held traditions, creating strong and nonconforming female characters.

In thinking about this relatively new development marking the wave of emerging women's voices in African writing, I was curious about what it would look like to write more diverse and expansive realities, especially ones that center women—their identities, bodies, emotions, and how they live and navigate a social order that is often constructed to dominate and undermine them. How can we complicate portrayals shaped by the male gaze and that centralized the masculine and often patriarchal presumption of the African woman and capture different aspects of her domestic and social life, how she defines and expresses autonomy, how she subverts gender norms, and explores different physical and emotional violence she experiences? These guiding questions have been crucial in thinking about the kinds of female characters present in my work and what ideas underlie how they navigate conditions of motherhood, widowhood, victimhood, as well as developing their identities as independent, powerful and agentic women.

In addition to exploring the assertions of the feminine character, I am also interested in the concept of young characters and how their level of innocence brings a fresh perspective to storytelling. While writing these stories, I was particularly drawn to the voices of young narrators and guided by questions like what does it look like for a child to grasp the weight of death and the thought of their life without someone? How do I find the language to capture the sense of unknown and innocence that affects a child's viewpoint and understanding of the realities of the world? One of the common critiques about developing a childlike voice in adult fiction is how it tends to limit the writer's prose in their attempt to present the most authentic child voice. Writing stories where children are the protagonists has challenged how I approach heavy topics like loss, grief and even domestic violence. Not only do I have to capture them in their depth and intensity but also to find the language for how a child would navigate those moments and express these emotions that can be difficult to articulate. Because a child's emotional development is shaped by their social experience and the cultural context they live in, I've also had to consider how the Ghanaian society encourages or neglects the emotional sensitivities of children by developing young characters who acknowledge their fears, desires, and even act out on their impulses. Where a parents' experience of loss and pain may be magnified in a Ghanaian setting (while the child's needs are sidelined), I imagine what it looks like for a child to bear a similar burden and explore their understanding and ways of coping through these experiences. While the child narrator is popular in children's literature, especially in magical and fantastical stories, Adah Makokha, in her analysis of Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (which employs child narrators in representing Zimbabwe's history) notes that adult narrators in literature are often entrusted with stories of profound social significance because their "voice projects a feeling of seriousness and authority of experience" (2019, 5540). However, she posits that "child narrators



are an interesting choice because of the degree of emotions they inject in a story, which gives it an earnest tone and makes the reader want to empathize and sympathize with the narrator.” She also notes that because a child’s identity is still under formation at that stage, it offers the reader an opportunity to understand and assess how a society’s beliefs and practices shapes the lives of people and the worldview at large. Social critique from a child’s perspective is a subject I’ve always been curious about and writing these stories allowed me to not only explore the often hidden, complex and nuanced emotions of children but also to present their unfiltered witnessing of their society and its beliefs.

One of the developments in African societies is the rise in national identities, and the growing emergence of processes of cultural engagement and entertainment that are far more invested in the domestic than the more global political issues. With the rise in popular music, in film, and in television, the writers have also started to find value in exploring subjects that engaged greatly the early women novelists. What is new and exciting in African writing is the increased confidence that the stories of “domestic” experience, in themes I tackle similar themes that assume a freshness in the lived experience of Africans are the subject of exciting and relevant literature. These authors are no longer feeling the constraint of having to explain cultures and difference largely because of the globalization of culture in music, in art, in film and of course in social media. As a writer, I feel a greater permission to write work that is intimately tied to the space I have lived, without the constraints of international expectations. And as a woman, the permission to write about the “domestic” has been affirmed by the success of writers like Adiche who have thrived in this space even as they are writing works of literary fiction.

This creative dissertation includes nine short stories that delve deep into the emotional experiences of characters, and explore the complexities of relationships and how one’s life is

shaped by them. The short stories in this collection were written between 2019 and 2023. Set in Ghana, a majority of the stories in the collection are character-driven, where characters' internal struggles, motivations, and development are the focus and what propels the story forward. The country's culture also plays a defining role in these stories as I write about Ghanaian parenting and marriages, the religious practices of the country, how the female body is perceived, and cultural norms that shape people's motivations and lifestyle. Domestic violence is another significant subject I tackle and forms part of my interest in wanting to understand violence in the home, the silence and endurance of women in Ghana, and what is at stake for them should they choose to walk away from potentially dangerous and life-threatening environments. While motherhood in African culture has been widely written about, particularly pertaining to gender and socialization, practices of nurture and care, social status and empowerment and preservation of tradition, the mother-daughter dynamic is a topic that has not been extensively written about in Ghanaian literature. I'm largely influenced by my own relationship with my mother in approaching this subject and in my writing, it remains important to me to exercise a level of care when writing fictional incidents that have been shaped by real and personal events, many of them painful and triggering. In my portrayal of the mother-daughter bond (and in many cases, the severing of that bond), I wanted to provide a balanced perspective from both mother and daughter. It was important to me to not write a revenge narrative or stories created from a place of bitterness but instead, stories that capture the nuances and difficulties of loving someone and yet, feeling utterly misunderstood and unseen by them. It allowed me to explore subjects like withdrawal, forgiveness, rebellion, the weight of silence, and the experience of losing someone who is still alive and grieving what could have been.

Key elements in this collection include the employment of child figures and exploration of childhood emotions, the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, the treatment of grief as well as a deep exploration of the interiority of female characters. Following similar thematic preoccupations by African writers such as Doris Lessing, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chimamanda Adichie, Peace Medea, and Uche Okonkwo, Tsitsi Dangaremba, these stories present complex women characters, examine women's agency in making independent choices and subverting social norms, as well as include social and cultural criticism of patriarchal structures that oppress and manipulate women. Some stories in the collection redefine the limits of female power by upsetting socially constructed gendered identities and also expose the complications of motherhood, emotional neglect, and child rebellion.

In the short stories "Lemon Dove" and "Close," I employ the first-person point of view to offer an intimate view of the characters and also to give the story credibility to address the unreliability of the child's voice. By rooting the voice in their perspective and experiences, I seek to capture the impetuosity of children as well as the urgency of their emotional needs. In both stories, the relationship between a father and son is explored, but under different circumstances. "Lemon Dove" follows the life of an unnamed young character who embarks on a journey from school to the house having a strong sense that his father is dead. Slowly coming to terms with what this absence would mean for him and its impact on the household, he tries to save a wounded bird. I contrast the uncertainty and helplessness he feels with his need to feel in control of something, to do something, to fix something, and to bring calm to any other situation but his own. Symbolically, the wounded bird could signify an omen, or reflect the child's anxieties about the loss of his father. One may also interpret it as revealing the child's vulnerability and frailty, a reading that begs the question of power and protection. If a child is in a position of

weakness and is susceptible to harm, what do they do when their defense and sense of stability are compromised, when they suddenly have to be strong for themselves? When the narrator reflects on his father's responsibilities and work, most of which involves intense manual labor, he notes, "It is not in me, that kind of strength." In processing the loss, what appears to him first is what is expected of him in his father's absence, and whether or not he can meet that expectation. There is not a moment given to a feeling of sadness or sorrow and perhaps this is because while a child may feel these emotions, they're unable to fully grasp them as an adult can.

I was curious about the act of diversion as a coping mechanism as well as feelings of vulnerability and ineptness—all of which are not strange to a child. Children are often considered the most vulnerable groups of people and they lack the skills, experience, and capacities to carry out tasks they have not been trained for. Employing these childlike traits to access internal and complex emotions allowed me to tell the story by drawing not only on their interiority but also on the child's opinion of death, life after death, and the question of who they must become in light of this unfortunate change.

Although "Close" tackles similar themes of a son's fear and anxieties about his father, the story focuses on the tension between the different kinds of care offered to the sick as well as interrogates the religious and traditional practices in Ghana. The young narrator's father, whose health is rapidly declining, has been brought to a prayer camp by his mother. The woman relies on her faith and unorthodox medicine for her husband's healing. At one point, the woman sprinkles what she calls "holy sand" over the man's porridge, a substance she believes will grant her husband healing when consumed. The narrator observes:

It is not the first time I watch her do this ritual and yet every time she does something strange, like holy oil in a cup of tea or holy sea water, she reminds me. That the miracle is on its way, trudging through the desert of prayers and longing, carrying with it a balm for the wounded, a kindling for the near departed, a hot revival that will burn out the fever, the suffering, the closing touch of death. To speed its arrival, we must do what we must.

The child's identification of his mother's acts as 'strange' not only reveals his innocence concerning unorthodox ways of healing but also raises questions about the safety of spiritual rituals and traditional norms. The prayer camp is described as a place that is "like a hospital, but without any doctors or nurses, only the word of God and a lot of herbs." Again, the child's perspective invites the reader to witness the irony of the situation and to also witness the lengths people would go to get what they're looking for. There's an indirect interrogation of his mother's motives and actions and while one may assume a child's powerlessness in this situation, the young narrator chooses an act of defiance that is least expected. After his mother sprinkles the holy sand on his father's porridge, and he notices his father's reluctance to eat the food, he eats it. It is both a rebellious gesture and a tender act of care. On one hand, this is how he chooses to resist conforming to religious practices he does not understand (and appear more harmful than useful) and on the other hand, when he comes to realize that his father does not want to participate in the ritual, and will be forced to do so by the woman, he takes the food in his place. He puts himself through the discomfort and uncertainty of taking the grainy porridge to relieve his father of having to endure this treatment. There is a shift in the power dynamics here; it is as if the man becomes the child (vulnerable and powerless in a situation) while the young narrator becomes the adult working to protect his father from the woman's practices. In the end, there is a positive outcome to this experience of caregiving: the young narrator feels closer to his father.

He feels seen by him, a need that arises from his mother's abandonment and misplaced priorities (she flirts with a church usher while her husband sleeps). The story also explores child neglect and the idea of the child taking on the role of a caregiver when a parent is unwell—an act that can have adverse effects on the child's health and wellbeing by increasing their emotional needs and creating feelings of stress, guilt and isolation (Kallander et al, 2018).

The complex relationship between mothers and daughters is examined in “Lucille’s Song” and “Deadbolt.” Revenge and silence are central in “Lucille’s Song” and the story brings to light the severed relationship between Lucille and her mother. Lucille’s anger towards her mother, Fiona, is because of her mother’s silence and inaction in the face of the domestic abuse she endures. Lucille witnesses her father physically assault her mother who has resolved to accept the condition of her life and home—a stance that infuriates Lucille and sets her on a path to distance herself from her mother as much as possible. Even as a child, while she wishes her father would not treat her mother this way, what she desires more is for her mother to fight back, remove them from the dangerous environment, and put a stop to the violence, and protect them. “She couldn’t shake off the guilt that she had more rage for her mother and her silence, her mindless submissiveness, her trivial jokes than she did her father.” Lucille’s agitation towards her mother likely stems from the reality that her mother’s entrapment extends to her as well. That if Fiona refuses to fight for them, not only does she put herself at risk, but Lucille too. It is a painful reminder of her attachment to her mother as a child, and how the care and defense associated with such a relationship is absent in this context. The story spans years of both mother and daughter avoiding each other, and a silent tension that evades their life as a result of the trauma from the past. Their severed relationship is one that Lucille acknowledges well but feels no need to repair. She observes: “We are a different kind of mother and daughter; we may have

failed each other; we see each other but not fully, and no matter what we do or think, we shall surrender to this manner of relation—this comfortable distance, this bearable silence, this shared grief that moves through us. It may be fraught, but it is ours.”

In her essay about mother-daughter relationships in Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, Verna George posits that when Black mothers in these books are faced with the need to ensure their daughters’ survival, they tend to find themselves stuck between teaching their daughters to submit to oppressive norms that violate who they are or equipping them with strategies to resist and subvert the systems that oppress them. She notes the need to “strike a delicate balance between conformity and resistance.” These two novels, which explore the black mother-daughter relationship allows insight into African motherhood and can be applied to the Ghanaian female characters in the collection who are considered to take on cultural values and gendered expectations. This balance of conformity and resistance is not present in the story as Fiona chooses the side of conformity, without any kind of resistance. While Fiona’s subservience and silence may have been her way of surviving and protecting her child, it cost her a relationship with her daughter, Lucille. The story also reveals the gaps in cultural expectations, particularly concerning marriage. When Fiona opens up to her mother about the abuse, her mother’s response is not one of indignation or care, but a voice of tradition, one that echoes the stereotypical and traditional view of where a woman belongs, and the need for them to toughen up and carry the burden given to them. “You have high standards for yourself, Fiona,” she said. “You’re reacting this way because your disappointment in him, in yourself, is far greater than any physical harm he could bring to you. And that is a dangerous place to be.” Three generations of women are depicted, with the oldest generation committed to maintaining tradition and culture, despite its unfair treatment of women, another is told to accept

it while the daughter questions the maltreatment and insists on change. At the end of “Lucille’s Song,” a big secret is revealed—Lucille hides her child from her mother. It is her way of rebelling against her; the act of withholding Fiona’s grandchild from her is to get back at her for being the kind of mother she chose to be—one that endured assault, refused to fight back, and lived a life of pretense and isolation. She hides her son not only as a way to deprive her mother of the joys of being with her grandchild but also to protect him from what she believes was a “monstrous” and “vile” way of living that had “taken the sanity of her days, the light in her life.”

A similar silence and distance between mother and daughter can be observed in “Deadbolt” when the narrator admits:

We are not friends, have never been. We understood our roles as mother and daughter and what we had to do, we did. It was unspoken, this arrangement, and we soon fell into the pattern of existing with each other, just as I had seen growing up watching she and my father. If it was hurting us, there was no indication. We grew apart easily and comfortably. Silence at the table, the early years we sat to eat together, was never something to be filled and absence of any kind was barely registered.

The real source of this tension between mother and daughter is not from anything the mother has done directly to or against her daughter. The story does not detail a specific conflict or moment of misunderstanding between the two women, but rather an unsafe home, a violent father and a woman’s response to the danger that surrounds her. However, there is the unspoken and silent element of emotional neglect and unacknowledged needs that is evident in the story. A major consequence of domestic violence is how it restricts a woman’s choice and power, and subsequently, significantly affects the mother’s ability to listen and show up for her daughter. The woman is not responsible for this strained relationship with her daughter, and yet, she is a



victim of a household that strips her of her autonomy, dignity, as well as the confidence to express herself, meet the needs of her daughter, and keep her from nurturing a healthy and intimate relationship with her daughter. In these stories, at the root of the silence and distance between mothers and daughters, among other factors, is intimate partner violence which drastically affects women's decision-making power, and their emotional and mental capacities as mothers.

Domestic violence is also examined in "Deadbolt" and the mother takes a different approach to protect her child, Kay. Unlike Fiona who allows her child to look on while she is being beaten by her husband, the mother in "Deadbolt" locks her daughter in the room to keep her from seeing the violence. How the mother in "Deadbolt" chooses to resist is by shielding the innocence of her daughter, protecting her child from the trauma of witnessing her mother being assaulted. In both, however, the women do not address the matter, nor report to the authorities. Their silence may be read as a sign of fear and weakness. In their essay on the influence of culture-specific in Ghana, Dickson Adom et al (2020) note that "culturally, a woman's virtue, respect, and dignity are judged by her silence in most Ghanaian societies. An outspoken woman is culturally labelled as arrogant, disrespectful, or even a witch." They argue that women do not speak or condemn unjust treatment because they view themselves as powerless and helpless to bring about change in their situation. The sense of urgency to conform to societal expectations as a way to escape critique and marginalization is a common motivation for the silence of these women. In his essay "Women's Autonomy and Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana", Eric Tenkorang identifies the complex relationship between women's autonomy and intimate partner violence in Ghana, stating "Women who have experienced intimate partner violence lack the autonomy to make independent decisions related to their socioeconomic and sexual wellbeing."

He argues that gender-based power inequalities account for this problem, adding that many of these inequalities derive from patriarchal and cultural privileges that men have had for many decades. Beyond their fears, there also exist sociocultural and gender norms that perpetuate gender inequalities and create setbacks for women's empowerment. These mothers, emotionally and physically scarred by the abusive men around them, learn to survive in a patriarchal society where they are assaulted and subjugated. While the stories are largely character-driven, I do try to offer some social critique embedded in the treatment of gender relations and violence. By depicting a Ghanaian society in which women are battered and victimized while men are not held accountable for their actions, these stories reveal the pervasive social problem that is gender violence, expose discriminatory cultural norms, and call for an improvement of women's autonomy as well as a correction of power imbalance.

When traditions and cultural customs are examined in "If You Could See Me Now" and "If the Body Makes a Sound," it is through the lens of womanhood and agency. "If You Could See Me Now" begins with the lines "The truth is, the world wants me to invent a cry for help, wants me all shattered and dejected, so folks can tell me Eddie wouldn't want you this way or that." From the very beginning, the reader encounters a narrator who acknowledges the unspoken pressures and societal expectations placed on a widow and quickly denounces them as "nonsense." The story focuses on the life of a woman who has just lost her husband, and how she deliberately chooses to grieve him. She refuses to undergo any rituals to mourn her late husband precisely because it is what he would have wanted. Eddie, her late husband, believed that "all of love is grief" and often encouraged his wife to be vulnerable and open up, to let down her guard even if it meant risking getting hurt. The narrator is portrayed as a woman who does not easily express her emotions and is driven to act by what she feels or what is expected of her. The

gendered emotion of sorrow is not evoked here, at least not in a conventional way. In their study on Ghanaian women's experiences of widowhood and property rights violations, Rose Korang-Okrah and Wendy Haight note that Ghanaian widows, particularly those belonging to the Akan tribe, experience home evictions and lose their possessions. In addition to the loss of economic security, they also experience subordination and discrimination through the rites of passage (*kunadie*) where women are required to partake in a number of rituals including being confined to a room, made to eat once a day, walking barefoot around the house in the middle of the night, etc. These practices are an infringement on the rights of women and tend to humiliate and dehumanize them when no consideration is given to how they feel, what they're comfortable with doing, and how they wish to mourn and remember their husbands. While there is no evident threat of the external pressures of widowhood rites, the narrator is fully aware of what would have been expected of her (which also goes to show how deeply entrenched women are socialized to experience and express their grief). There is a performative aspect to it and it is expedient for a woman to show the depths of her sorrow and agony, to make a case in convincing any onlookers of how distraught she is. A quiet sorrow from a well-put-together woman is barely acceptable. The image of the unstable, frantic and agitated woman is deemed socially appropriate in the face of loss and this is precisely the posture the narrator refuses to assume. When she sits down to eat, the description of the setup hints at her disposition and how hard she attempts not to give in to the emotions she feels:

Today, the dining room is quiet, and with all the light pouring through the window, it still feels like a dark cloud hangs over my head. When I stick my fork into a cube of roasted potato, it crumbles on the plate. I have overcooked it. When I lift it to my mouth, the whiff of garlic and rosemary makes me nauseous. The food on my tongue is tasteless. My mouth

is heavy and numb with its stony weight; it shouldn't be, but I feel deep sores riding up my gums. It is as if every part of me holds out against the ordinary task of swallowing, but I push down the meal with water. I am aware of what is happening, and yet, I will not confront this wordless and invasive affliction. I ignore the tightness in my throat. I shut my eyes to ease their sting. My legs, because they won't stop trembling, I lift them and sit cross-legged. That should do.

While she feels the onset of an emotional outburst, she does not succumb to it. It is almost as if she is so bent on proving everyone wrong about expressions of grief that she loses a bit of herself too. Without the pressures and expectations of how one is socialized to grieve, how would she be in this moment? Would she spend more time thinking about her late husband and reflecting on moments they spent together or would she be so distracted by how this moment ought to be, and whether or not she is doing it right or wrong? In suppressing how she feels, she is attempting to control her body and emotions as a way to subvert these social expectations, but this is not without some difficulty. "Our bodies," as Eli Clare (1999) notes, "are not merely blank slates upon which the powers-that-be write their lessons. We cannot ignore the body itself: the sensory, mostly non-verbal experience of our hearts and lungs, muscles and tendons, telling us and the world who we are" (129). Even within this internal wrestle, there still exists an exercise of autonomy in which the narrator freely chooses how she wishes to conduct herself following the demise her husband.

Her approach to expressing her grief is in sharp contrast to her mother during her season of loss:

When I lost my father in 2014, my mother cut her hair. Shaved her shiny black hair right off her scalp. At first, she only pulled them out, grabbing fistfuls and tugging at them as she wept. And then one day, out of nowhere (I say this knowing too well that hardly

anything begins *out of nowhere*. While it might seem surprisingly sudden, it breaks through the crust of our sickened living and springs up, rearing its ugly head), she grabbed a pair of scissors and started snipping at the ends. There was no mirror. Just her lean fingers working and threading carefully. Her small world was on fire, and she was a woman glowing inside it. She was inconsolable. She did not eat, did not sleep. Many days, it felt as if she was waiting for her life to begin again.

Much like the three generations of women in “Lucille’s Song” who respond differently to domestic violence—with the oldest generation seeing nothing wrong with enduring abuse to save the marriage and the newest generation condemning the act—the two women in “If You Could See Me Now” choose different ways of responding to the loss of their husbands. The mother shaves her own head and plays the part of an inconsolable widow whose life is falling apart and who refuses to eat. The narrator does everything she can to remain calm and collected, sit at a table, and eat. Neither of these ought to be measures of their love, faithfulness, and duty to the deceased husbands, and yet cultural norms make them so, until the narrator breaks free of those norms, detaching herself from these rituals and unfair parameters and creating her own ways of experiencing loss and expressing grief.

While putting the collection together, I thought carefully about the female body and its numerous presentations over the years, especially how it is viewed under the male gaze. I struggled with writing about popular stereotypes of the objectification of the body and how it is violated and policed, without also reproducing these narratives. The short stories “Any Good Child,” “If the Body Makes a Sound,” and “When They Ask About the Darkness” all center on the bodies of the lead characters and unfold around issues of parental neglect, child rebellion, childbirth, and human trafficking. Despite being confronted with various challenging

circumstances, the female characters all have one thing in common: a sense of agency within a society that often undermines their power and robs them of the ability to make decisions. In her study on centering female agency in South Africa, Cara Margherio notes that “Agency may take the form of accommodation and/or resistance to existing rules, norms, and structures; to be an agent involves exerting some level of control over the social environment in which one is enmeshed...Structure does not determine behavior, but rather influences it; structure and agency are dynamically interconnected.” While social and cultural norms establish parameters on what makes a good or acceptable woman, these stories push against the notion that women are the best versions of themselves when they fully embrace and center traditional expectations or values. Rather, these female characters can redefine and affirm their own identities as well as view their agency and empowerment outside of these patriarchal and discriminatory structures. Much value is given to their subjectivity, their knowledge, and capacity to think, their sense of self-respect and worth. Refocusing and identifying the value of the woman’s body and agency will contribute to the discourse of the woman as an autonomous and empowered subject and interrogate the myths employed to create female powerlessness and to objectify women.

Many of these stories are imbued with feminist consciousness and challenge the myth that African women do not regard the value of feminism nor seek change for the conditions of their lives as well as the social and cultural structures that sustain female subjugation. There is a depiction of the different realities of women’s lives, the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, and portraying empowered and nonconforming female characters, while revealing the depths of their sensibilities and emotionality. Regardless of the shortcomings of these characters or the life-threatening circumstances they find themselves in, they can exercise power in resisting dominating forces and oppressive practices.

Pacing and the length of the stories were crucial in thinking about the organization of the collection. There are four flash fiction pieces (stories less than 1,000 words) and five long pieces (stories exceeding a 2,000 wordcount). I begin the collection with “Any Good Child,” a flash fiction piece that serves to introduce my voice as a writer, and also encapsulates the themes of childhood and the complexities of mother-daughter relationships—two subjects that I remain curious about. It is then followed by “Lucille’s Song,” a longer piece that continues to engage with the mother-daughter dynamic, creating a sense of unity among the stories as the reader progresses. The collection ends with “The Dishwashing Women,” possibly the strongest story in collection. Its themes of friendship, womanhood, social class and privilege, and particularly race relations demonstrate my growth as a writer in expanding the themes I write about and challenging myself to explore subjects I’ve shied away from. I am most proud of my clear depiction of a lifelong friendship between two older women, and spanning a number of years, I portray the growth and changes in both their private and domestic lives while revealing their complex interiority to the reader.

In thinking about revisions and changes, I hope to expand the flash fiction piece “If You Could See Now” to include the widowhood rite passage observed in some parts of Ghana and as discussed earlier in this essay. I am confident that the cultural context would enrich the story and also provide a more realistic motivation for the widow’s resistance. It would also provide an opportunity to critique and delve deeper into the cultural practice in Ghana that often dehumanizes widows. While “Deadbolt” is a longer piece, I would like to flesh out the nature of the conflict between Kasey’s parents and the tension between Kasey and her mother. This would further develop their characters and provide the reader more understanding of why they act the way they do. When the characters and their relationships are fully explored, it brings to the story

a level of depth that transforms the reading experience into a wholesome one. I also realize that the three stories that feature child narrators are all flash fiction pieces and in the future, it would be great to attempt writing a longer piece that centers a young narrator. With a longer piece, I can explore the changes that take place within them as they grow and learn, and I can also complicate their characters as they face different kinds of challenges and have to respond in one way or the other.

I believe what I have managed to put together is a collection that holds and balances the extremities of the human condition—beauty and terror, love and loss, pleasure and violence and in many characters, a strong sense of sensibility, identity and motivation. Not only is it important to me to propel the story forward with tension and growing stakes, but also to have characters be shaped and deeply transformed by what happens to them as well as the culture and society within which they find themselves in. At the heart of these stories is change—radical and subtle—and an understanding that much can and will happen to a person and the real test of who they are, what lies at the core of their characters, is how they respond or not respond, whether they open themselves to be transformed and in what ways they fail or persist, and emerge.



## Any Good Child

1.

The problem with my mother is that she thinks everyone a fool, even me. Especially me. Perhaps I too am part of the problem. I know my role, and I play it well, even when I don't want to. Take last Friday, when we were at the market, and she wouldn't stop bargaining with the man about the price of some used sandals I was sure had only a few more wears in them before their straps fell off and gave up. She knew it too but somehow was insistent on getting them, which made her determination all the more frustrating. She was going to get what she wanted, at any cost, because, well, the stuff is worthless as it is, and the seller could just as well hand it to her for free, because who else would waste fifty cedis on some loose and battered leather? She said this, even as she crouched to try on the pair, her hand holding on to me for balance.

Before we walked away with the sandals tucked into her bag, she had painted a picture of a family I didn't recognize: my father had been arrested many times, and he wouldn't stop drinking; I had been down with malaria and admitted to the hospital for weeks, and that day in the market was the first time I was able to stand without any help; she, mother, had no money on her except for fifty cedis, and if the man took all of it, how we would we get home? Can a sick child walk all the way in this depressing heat, and what if I collapsed? The man, who by then wasn't sure what to believe, looked at me, and then at my mother, and at last settled his curious eyes on me again. There was no need to say it; whatever was going to happen next was all up to me. I could either protest and call the woman a liar or be my mother's daughter. Without giving it any further thought, I felt the crumpling of my face and some new desperation stinging my eyes. I was suddenly weak in the knees; my shoulder began to twitch, and the quiver in my lips followed. Right before the shoe vendor, I was becoming the sick child my mother had made up,

and I knew I would have started to cry had he not distrusted his own senses and given us the sandals, had he not believed this act to free me from this shamelessly orchestrated moment, from my self-pity, from this shadow of a mother and what was slowly starting to feel like bitterness against her. Rage too.

I have always wanted to wrench myself free from whatever hold my mother has on me. But she is in my head, and under my skin, and sometimes, even tugging at my heart as one would a puppet. It is how it has always been: I do what I am told and what is expected of me—I do not think; I do not ask. Some days I am invisible too; she can't strike me when she can't see me. I stay small and compliant. After all, to rebel would mean to know better than my mother, and how can I when I barely know myself?

2.

My mother doesn't go to the man alone; she takes me along. We go most Saturdays after we've sold all our mangoes at the market. There's always a bag she saves for him. Today I am the one carrying the bag, and so when we walk into his house, I don't know whether to place it on the table in the kitchen, or give it to him like a gift, or simply stand there holding it, becoming one with the offering. When he sees us, he rises from his desk and heads straight for me. I imagine my mother standing behind me, nodding, smiling, egging him on. I feel their gaze on me, and it is its own kind of coldness. The man makes as if to squat, reaches for my chin, tilts my face to meet his eyes, and says, "Now, how did I get so lucky? Thank you, princess." When he takes the bag from me, I notice his eyes are still on me, and before I can catch the lopsided smile that I know is breaking across his face, he steps back and it becomes only my mother in the space again. I am not there. Or they forget that I am. Sometimes even I forget that I am here, in this

body. They leave me in the kitchen and head for the room, and I see the man's hand already wrapping around my mother's waist, tickling her. I am supposed to believe they are working together. Ma said he writes for the newspaper and, well, she likes to read. I tell myself maybe they are going over his lines; maybe he's interviewing Ma about the last flood that swept so much of the sellers' fresh produce away. I stand there and watch the clock. The house is quiet, and I can hear them move. I hear Ma's laughter and all the other sounds she makes. I sit and stare at my hands, which are still heavy from the weight of mangoes that have long been taken away from me.

Any good child would say something, but I don't. My father, who spends all day at his mechanic shop, comes home to a bucket of cold water filled to the brim for his bath, his dinner set on the table, and my mother, all sweet and chirpy—she sits next to him, she watches him while he eats, and although it is under the table and out of my view, I know she traces her hand along his thigh, and grips him. Sometimes she looks right at me while my father stiffens in the chair and avoids my eyes; I wonder if she knows that I know. I want to ask if she sees me, if she's threatened by me, and if she cares.

If anyone wonders, this is why I show up at the man's place after school: because I already know the answers to all these questions that I never dare ask her. It is a Wednesday, and I don't expect to find him there, but that doesn't stop me. I must see him. I do not understand the urgency, or maybe I do and I'm too afraid to admit it. When he finds me at the door, he doesn't look surprised and doesn't ask why I'm there. It is as if he's expecting me. *My princess*. He stretches his hand and I take it as he leads me inside.

What the townspeople have said about my mother is that she was a wild child, whatever that means. It's not something they try to hide from me. While other eleven-year-olds are teased

for who they like, I'm mocked because my mother "was something wild." I don't think the people at school even know what that means, and neither did I until I heard her friends at the market talking about Ma: She couldn't stay in one place for too long, and there was no stopping her; there are stories about her from the brothel in the next town; it is so good how her life's turned around now that a man's pinned her down.

This is precisely what the journalist does after he guides me through his kitchen and ushers us into the same room my mother walked into—pins me down. I know what is about to happen. I've seen it in films. I have seen my mother too, with my father, when they forget I'm home and leave the door open a crack. Although I don't want to be caught, it's never felt intrusive either. Probably because sometimes I'm convinced that Ma *wants* me to see, needs me to step into her world and learn its songs but never actually dance to its tune until it's time.

I decide today that it is time.

3.

The journalist is careful and tender. He doesn't rip off my skirt or fumble with the buttons of my blouse in haste, like I expect. He takes his time and for some reason, doesn't feel the need to look away. He holds me in his glance while his hands work, and I can't tell if the look in his eyes is curiosity or wonder, or both. *My princess*. His voice in my ear is the sweetest song, and I want him to keep calling me his. To make clear the kind of possession that ties me to something sturdy and capable. I'm surprised by his strength and at the same time startled by my own smallness, this meek frame against the weight of a man, the weight of a world that persists in its acts of quiet violence. I don't care. All I know is I don't want him to stop seeing me. I don't want him to stop doing what he's doing to my body. It is strangely painful, and yet I open myself up

for more. I'm ashamed because I forget all I had rehearsed to tell him. *I want you to do to me what you do to my mother. I want to laugh and make the sounds she makes with you. And I want to be more than she is, more than she will ever be.*

When it's done, he takes me to the shower and moves a wet sponge down my back. My legs are sore, and I rest my head against the tile. I am in this body, but also away from it. It's after he makes me a sandwich and watches me eat that I find my voice.

"I don't know your name," I say very matter-of-factly. He smiles. He doesn't look as old as my father and he's not young either. I stare at his thick eyebrows, the dimple in his cheek when he smiles, his rough hands that have been in soft places. I turn to look at the door to the room, which holds the unspeakable weight of what I've done, and quickly look away. Something is lodged in my chest—I don't know what to call it, or how to rip it out.

"But I know yours." He reaches for my hand from across the table. "You're Rose, like the flower."

"Like the flower," I repeat, taking a big bite of the sandwich. I'm famished and tired. I want to be scooped up and tucked into bed. I'm waiting for him to tell me not to say a word about this, but instead he says my parents are going to be looking for me, aren't they? The thought scares me too, although I quickly realize that I do want them to come looking for me, I do want them to feel dread at the thought of losing me. If I'm being honest, what I really want is for my mother to know what I've done, and how I, her little thing, am capable of taking what she hides in the dark and making it mine. Before I leave, he plants a kiss on my head and says, "Will you come again? Please come again." I sense it right away, his wanting, and I feel it twisting me something furious. It's not at all what I imagined.

As I head for the door, I catch a glimpse of the mangoes we brought to him. He's placed them in a bowl in the kitchen, and because they were all so ripe, they're starting to bruise, moldy dark spots forming on their skin. He will throw them all out, and the next time he sees me, I'll be with my mother, who comes bearing more gifts than any man has need for.

## Lemon Dove

Liars. All of them. Even the Reverend, with his clerical collar resting below his Adam's apple like a throat belt, is not telling the truth. They should know by now that we know.

Whenever any of the boys are called into their office this way, to sit and look at their solemn faces and clasped hands, to listen as they speak, sounding nothing like themselves—their loud voices suddenly overcome with suspicious tenderness—we know. Sometimes it is, “Your family called. They would like you to be sent home as soon as possible.” Or “Something has happened at home, but you'll know more when you arrive. Pack a few of your belongings and take as much time as you need.” The latter is the closest they'll come to admitting that your life is about to change and they're sorry, there's nothing they can do. It is the only time an exeat is approved, given freely without hesitation; certainly not when we are down with malaria and fevers that leave our noses running, our throats sore from all we've coughed up, and up our arms a spreading rash we scratch and scratch, bruising ourselves, praying we would be sent home. But no, that kind of misfortune they can handle at the sick bay, and so they keep us—trapped and ill and missing the warm remedy of our mothers' soups, wishing to wake up to a cold towel folded on the head, a gentle touch on your cheek.

The moment they cannot trust themselves as messengers of loss, as caretakers of grief—and so send us away—is precisely the moment we would rather stay at the boarding house and never be asked to leave.

I've seen it happen many times, only this time it is me doing the walk—shuffling my feet out of their office hoping the Reverend or Ms. Smith or my Hall Master, Sir Kay, will call me back and say they got the wrong student. But all three of them stand back, watching me, I'm

sure, as I head out into the world. “Your mother called. We’re sorry we have to send you home now,” a brief pause from the Reverend before he adds, “It is well.” And now I know, I am more convinced than I’ve ever been that it is not well, and it is not going to be well and I, for a long time, shall not and cannot possibly be well.

I see the boys. Gathered by the doors, peering through windows, stopping mid conversation and I remember all the times I’ve been on the other side of the fence. What I wouldn’t do to get over, to switch places, but I’m ashamed by the thought, the cruelty of my intentions. I walk quickly to my dormitory, grab a few things, and leave the boys behind, their pitiful eyes, their questions, their sad curling lips. Even rowdy and careless boys, often pumped with meanness and jokes, are subdued and numb on days like this, somber on my behalf. It makes me sad, and very angry.

On the bus, I replay the conversation in my head. The Reverend had said mother called. So, it is my father then. The last time I saw him was at the back of the house where he was hunched over a log, striking its center with an axe he’s owned for as long as I can remember. I’ve seen him wrestle with a piece of wood much more than I’ve seen him sit on any of the stools he’s built. If an axe got stuck, he took it as an invitation to teach me how to get it unstuck, even if it meant I had to see it at least twice a week. But I was, and still am, an obliging student and so I would watch him.

“You kick the handle sideways,” he would say between puffs as he demonstrated, his giant foot diving through the air with a weak kick at first, followed by a sturdier one, “until you feel it come loose.” I have wondered many times what would happen should he lose his balance and fall or break his leg. Would it be something we laugh about? Would he be so injured he’d



never carry an axe again, or worse? I think about him—his curved spine and weakened back, his calloused hands and dirt-ridden nails, his oversized clothes and all the wood chips he carries with him everywhere. Was he ever going to ask me to try it? Did he, at any point, trust the strength of his fourteen-year-old son to snap something in two? Was he preparing me for this hacking and splitting and sawing and all the violence of breaking apart? It is not in me, that kind of strength.

In the bus, I sit next to a man who clutches his briefcase in his lap a little too tightly. I have heard stories of people who are no more but show up in disguise one last time to say goodbye or leave a bag of money to their favorite child. A parting gift. I am an only child and I want to believe it. He looks nothing like my father. His hair is nicely trimmed, his shirt, neatly pressed. “How are you, son?” I am startled by his voice, by his intrusion of my staring even as I intrude on his space. He calls me son, but so does every man in town who deems himself old enough to be your father. Even then, I still want to believe. “Is it you?” I whisper, leaning in with hope, imagining that I am touching him, feeling his hands, assuring myself that yes, my father has crossed over an unspeakable realm just to see me one more time.

“Hm?”

His forehead creases with confusion and maybe it is not so but I see him pull back a little, as if afraid he will offend me but also wishing to move past the barrier of the car’s window. He pulls his briefcase even closer to him now, the edge of the hard leather digging into the small folds of his stomach. I make to try again, but at the same time, I hear a scream, followed by the screeching of tires. There is a bird flat on the windshield, its beak the starting point of a crack which slowly spreads into a circled web. In a quick instant, a murmur of voices rises about me—*Must be a blind bird, must be the driver’s speed, must be cheap windshield, must be somewhere*

*at this time, must not run late...* I hear their words close in on me, but I cannot keep my eyes off the bird. I am only distracted when the driver, frustrated with everyone's thoughts and that of his own, worried about the cost of repair, starts the engine. The bird is still there. Stuck. Splayed at the center. And we are about to continue on this journey. Just like that. Unless—

“Hey!” It doesn't sound like me at all, but my mouth is open, and the words are flying out. “Stop! Stop the car!” Something, or someone shifts. I think I hear a sigh, or perhaps it is my own breath. A neck turns at an uncomfortable angle to look. “Please!” I add, almost whimpering. He kills the engine, and I am so relieved I could cry. I move between the passengers, I feel my legs rub against their impatient knees and I whisper, “Sorry, sorry, excuse me please, sorry.”

The bus is much bigger than I am, so I tip toe at its side and then I jump a few times until I reach a soft brown feather. A lemon dove. I slide it across the shield, the wings are wide open; it must look to the passengers like a bird gliding on a pane. I cup it in my hands and hold my breath as I get back on the bus. Surely, someone will yell at me to throw it out. Surely, they won't have me carry it the whole way. But no one says a word as I settle quietly into my seat, hunched, trying to make myself as small as possible. The briefcase man is stiff, and he looks straight ahead at nothing in particular. I am stranger to him than I was when we embarked on the trip, and to me, he appears now so fearful, so ordinary, so human. I squeeze myself in my seat, pressing my shoulders together, sucking my belly in. If I fold into myself this way, keep my head bowed until my neck hurts, the bird a crooked thing in my palm, no one will see me nor the stinging welling of my eyes.

And so I stay that way the whole ride, past the bus stops, past my favorite park, past my house, which is by now filling and filling with people weeping, and maybe my mother, already

in a black dress, distracted and nodding as people advise her on the best way to tell me what I already know. Let him eat first, they might say, the belly shuts down after such shock. Wait until everyone leaves, and then wait for him to ask, they might say, that way he has registered the absence and is therefore halfway to accepting the loss. And my poor mother, I imagine, nods and wipes a tear and prays they will indeed leave her alone. She will do what she must, but she will not lie to me.

It is the last stop. The station is littered with buses and taxis dusty from the day's work. The driver slams his door shut. Finally, it is deserted, quiet, and the dark fabric of the night wraps my fear, keeps it in place. I meditate on the bird nestled in the pocket of my sweaty palm, a head resting on my thumb, a beak protruding, sticking out like a small arrow. The corners of its grey tail, like a shy friend, are tucked away. My tears land on its face, which is much paler than its body and the cinnamon brown breast opens up to me. I place my finger on the soft space. The heart is in there somewhere, coming to a halt, or at last, in its condition of ending. I feel a longing; it is like a hook pulling me, drawing me out. I turn in its direction. My eyes move over the feathered thing—puffy and delicate and gone. I want desperately to know what will happen to me, to us, to all the stack of logs at the back of the house. I want the bird, or my father, or this narrow exit of the fleeting world to tell me something. Anything.

I look until everywhere is blurry, or my eyes are water-logged, or there's a quick flooding in my chest that spills over.

It is here I see him, walking away or coming towards me. But then he sits. No tree stump in sight, no axe in hand. It is almost as if I see him for the very first time. My eyes hold on to him and I know. Now there is no denying that he is gone. It hits me like a wave; no, like a mighty

smack from a hand in the middle of the night. What I feel is a shock that strikes me and stays rooted—a deep terror, too—and I am shaking, causing the bus to shake, the earth to shake. Small quakes all around me. All this pressure, all this grief, surges in the hand clutching the lemon bird. I feel the raging need to crush something, but the quivering roof of my fingers never closes in.

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