

TLC Showcase
Fawzia Kane



Introduction

Extract from *La Bonita Cuentista*

About the Writer

Introduction

This work was as an experiment to see if I could write a novel, made up of a group of stories put together like a poetry sequence. Each story is complete in itself, yet when read as a whole, the overall sense would create another, larger, story. The reader should feel that nothing was lost if they chose to read as if dipping into a collection, or if they read the whole from beginning to end.

I tried to explore the way our memories trick us into believing different versions of the same event, and how what we *are* informs how we *see* and *feel*.

The TLC's Mentoring Scheme was perfect for this project, as there is no time for me to complete a creative writing degree. I had heard of the TLC's ability to match aspiring writers with a mentor who was just right for them - Sara Maitland's advice and support gave me the discipline and mental freedom to refine the work over the past year. Your TLC mentor is less an editor, more a tutor and guide, and for me, the mentoring process felt like an exchange of ideas. Only after it finished, did I realize Sara's skill as a tutor in directing me to *think* (and hence *write*) in new ways.

I feel I have accomplished so much, not just in the amount of words produced for each installment, but also in the development of this particular work, my writing in general and my overall confidence in what can be achieved. There is much truth in the cliché- the biggest barriers we face are the ones we set up for ourselves. Your TLC mentor helps you to break these down.

The last bit of the Scheme is a professional read by someone other than your mentor. Jacob Ross, my reader, gave an in-depth and uplifting assessment. He said this was a novel of convergence, where the individual stories converge on a single dominant character (La Bonita Cuentista). He also noticed that it is a story *about* story.

I wanted the voice of each character to treat the reader as, if not exactly a close acquaintance, then at least as a member of their community. Sarah and I discussed whether there is a difference between the mind-sets of the reader of poetry and the prose of novels. I know it is not commercial to expect a reader to work a bit, but I'm hoping there would some readers out there who would enjoy this work without needing to understand every reference or allusion.

This version of the manuscript has taken both Jacob and Sara's comments into account, regarding the structure and ordering of the pieces.

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Help me. I beg you, I beg you to stop them. They have pushed me aside, and have destroyed all that I cherish. My heart is bursting with the pain. The heat sears the skin of my palms and nothing can be saved from the Fire. I can see your hands, I can hear your breath and yet you do not help me. My hair is ablaze. Paper and leather smoulder and mix with the stink of my burning flesh. My wounds bleed but cannot quench the flames. Have pity on my weakness. Will you not help me? See how darkness is spreading around my body. It is billowing from the flames.

Mother, where are you?

Mother, I cannot breathe, I cannot breathe.

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I

EL VIEJO

(the Old Man)

La Bonita came from the country of the Third Voyage, where the seekers of El Dorado stopped off to replenish their supplies. There, they found a land rich in fruit and fowl. There was even a lake of the night, its blackness made both solid and liquid, lying in wait for their ships. The soil holds the scent of burnt sugar. It is a sacred land, both wondrous and terrible.

This country lies at the delta of a great river where three seas meet. It is protected by the mouths of dragons. Each day, when the sun pauses for breath over head, thousands of fire-birds awaken behind the seas. They fly over the water, settling overnight in orchards of perfumed vines. At daybreak, they rise and change the sky to red. Then, all as one, they dive over the waters and head towards their home under the horizon.

There are streams in the orchards of these birds. A type of fish that breathes both water and air live in the mud-banks of these streams. The fishes do not have spines; their skin is leaves of bone. They scream when killed. The flesh is sweet but poisonous to the impure heart.

All the languages of the world are spoken in La Bonita's country, its people are the mestizos of angels. They are immortal if they stay. But if they abandon those

perfect shores, they die. Despite this, La Bonita, the Courageous, heard our cries,
and left.

All this I know to be true.

Thanks be to our Mother Guadalupe who gave us her Blessed Flower.

Thanks be to Guadalupe's benediction that taught us that life is faith.

Thanks for La Bonita Cuentista.

II

EL TURISTA

(the Tourist)

The truth is, I didn't see much at all. It was so crowded and things got so crazy. I was just like any other tourist, but I had put my camera away; I didn't want anybody to think I was a police spy, or worse, a reporter.

I went down to the Zocalo because the local brass band was supposed to be playing. But that part of town was cordoned off by police, and after trying to find my way around to get a taxi back to the hotel, I found myself in a crowd of people chanting some slogan and, you get pushed along with everyone else, don't you?

The ones at the front were carrying three coffins, and we were all moving along the main road. A helicopter hovered. It began to rain, heavily, so much so my glasses were covered with droplets. Everything was blurred, all I could do was shuffle forward with the others. Then the noise swelled, the shouts, sirens, the helicopter; we surged ahead. The press of bodies was so stifling and strong I lost my footing, and still got carried along. Then...nothing.

Everything stopped, except for the sound of the helicopter blades. The rain lessened, and the clouds cleared enough for the sun to flash in our faces. People were craning their necks to see what was happening in front, there was no sign of the coffins. A woman started to sing, some Indian tune with unrecognisable words, if they were words at all; it was just a wailing sound, rising and dropping over our

heads. And just when I thought she was about to start another verse, her voice halted with a gulp. A policeman's tinny voice said something over a mic, someone behind me shouted back, people tittered and there was the sudden popping of gunshots.

In the panic, my glasses were knocked off. I bent over to find them and was pushed to the ground. Someone trampled on my leg and my screams mixed with the others. Maybe I fainted, I don't know, all I recall was me lying with my cheek against wet asphalt and seeing a wall with "TURISTA GO HOME", and this girl who was walking slowly towards me. I saw her bare feet first, silhouetted against a burning car, in the distance. She had long black hair that lifted in the wind, her dress fluttered; it had red roses printed on it. She knelt and helped me up. I know she spoke to me but all I can remember is her smile. I glanced down to put my glasses on, looked up, and she was gone.

III

EL GERENTE DEL HOTEL

(the Hotel Manager)

I used to see her walk past the hotel to and from the school every day. In the morning, while I was sweeping out the roof terrace, and later on when I would sit out with Joachim to plan the evening menus.

She was nothing special, a mousy thing, blended with the dust in the road. Hair tied back, glasses, overlong skirt. Looked a bit awkward really. She never looked up at us, I didn't think to call out. I remember her white socks and sandals. Thought for the first few times she passed us that she was a schoolkid, who couldn't afford a uniform. Clutched a pile of books against her chest. Yes, definitely that - she'd be hunched over while carrying the books.

That's all I can tell you: just a small figure scurrying up and down the road, every day, like some grey insect.

IV

El CABRERO

(The Goatberd)

My Chantal is a beauty. Her eyes are almond-shaped and dark as the night sky. She likes to follow Orlando, she begs for his attention and is often ignored. Orlando has the most magnificent head. His horns curve above and around his ears. Sometimes he fights for Chantal when she is approached by some other billygoat. The crack of horns can be heard for miles.

There are many nights when the moon rises, and I sit in my field tending the fire. Tonight, my blanket feels rough against my shoulders, my coffee is good and thick, and I can hear the goats' bells around their necks. A kid is lying with its back against mine for warmth. These young ones depend on me so. Chantal walks towards me and sits on the other side of the fire. Those beautiful eyes reflect the flames and when the moon is at its highest point, the sounds of the night will tell me of all that was seen and heard during the day. There was dew on the grass, perhaps, the branches of a tree were in bud, or a bird sang while it lay dying. Chantal knows the world is made of simple things. She knows that the world either *is* or *isn't*, and that the *is* is good and the *isn't* is a well that holds no water. The *isn't* has an empty belly, and a thin blanket.

The colours of the desert live in Chantal's coat. I would lay my head against her body and listen to her heart beat. Her coat and its warmth reminds me of Mama. The threads of Mama's shawl held the same colours as Chantal's coat. Mama would

wrap me around her while she worked in the Rich Man's kitchen.

I thought the kitchen was my home then, we slept in the corner. Our blankets were laid out on the stone floor near the window. When Mama had to fetch water, her scarf hung from her belly and I could see over the edge of the well. The pail hit the blackness with a splash and Mama would say soft *oofs* while she pulled up the full pail. Mama walked slowly when I was strapped to her. But when she scrubbed the floors, she would untie me and put me to sit on our blankets in the corner. In the mornings, before the others were awake, she would be on her hands and knees, scrubbing the stones with a brush of hog's hair. During the day, I would listen to Cook and her helper Dolly talk about the world outside.

Once, Cook came in carrying a large joint of meat. She said there would be no leftovers tonight for us to taste, this was true quality, those upstairs would surely eat every last morsel. This animal must have been specially chosen. She said there were men who were Inspectors of Killing who had to check the slaughterhouses to make sure the animals were properly slaughtered. She knew of one Inspector of Killing who had to visit a slaughterhouse that stood on the edge of a river. The animals would be brought in by boat, and afterwards the meat would be piled onto waiting barges to be sold in the markets further up river. The river water would be used to wash the blood off the floors. Fish thrived around these red-stained jetties.

While the Inspector was there, a certain bull was led into the tin-roofed hall. The slaughterers gathered round in admiration, for the animal was magnificent. It was large and strong, though without horns, and its black skin shone in the humid air.

This was no water-buffalo mixture, that would have been bred for heavy work in the moist heat. The men murmured the breed's name with awe: *aber de enangus*

Aber de Enangus. They had heard tales of the name's origin; some said it was the name of the huntsman who fought and tamed the ancestors of the breed. This animal was a pure example of a breed from a land that was far away and strange. There, the lowlands were filled with mist as thick and icy as in the mountains. Cook knew the taste of the meat was legendary. No one knew how or why this bull ended up being bought by the owner of one of those river-fed farms. This animal did not need a ring through its nose to dampen its spirit. It stood silent and still, said Cook, so proud, among men who were amazed by this beast.

So, Cook went on, the Inspector was standing in front of the bull. The men surrounded it, tied a rope around its neck and led it to the pen. The Inspector knew of other slaughterhouses, larger, with more money, where these pens were of metal frames to hold the cattle's head steady. The animals in those plants were stunned with electricity. But here there were only ropes tied to wooden frames with a pneumatic bolt gun. And here, Cook spat the words out slowly: *New Ma Tick Bolt*. The chief slaughterman held the bolt gun to the centre of the animal's forehead. The animal looked straight at the Inspector. The gun went off and the bull's head dropped and its front legs buckled. Cook grimaced, slapped her palm against her forehead, and did a funny little stumble for us.

There were a few spasms, Cook went on, after all this was expected. The men began their preparations to hang the animal by one of its hind legs, ready for the

finish of slicing through the big vein in the neck. But then the animal opened its eyes and blinked. Cook mimicked the animal throwing its head up, and with a breathy roar, it slowly came to its feet again. It looked straight at the Inspector, when the bolt was shot again. Cook slapped her palm against her forehead. Again, it went down, and again it struggled to stand. The Inspector cursed the men, shouting *do it! do it now!* and Cook swore he could feel the animal's eyes begging him to stop them. It looked at no one else but him. The gun went off again and this time the animal stayed down with a low moan. But he knew it was still breathing. The Inspector turned away while the men hooked the tendons of its leg and slit its throat. Cook made the chief slaughterman's voice sound so serious: *when the carcass stops twitching, cut it down!*

I used to think the kitchen and the yard were the world. I used to think that Mama and Cook and Dolly were all the people of my world, until one day a man came while Mama was scrubbing the floors and took me. Mama tried to pull me out of the man's arms but he pushed her away and said he would bring me back.

I had barely learnt to walk in sandals then, but I remember. I remember that time almost more than any other, apart from the last time. The man took me upstairs and there was another little boy, like me, but he had strange clothes. Everything about this other boy was shiny clean, his clothes, his skin, and his hair, which stood straight up with little spikes, like mine. The man's hair was divided into two, and flattened with grease. The boy stood with his hands behind his back, his head was down, but his eyes were peeping at me. Everything was dark wood, even the ceiling and walls. The room had shelves and a big table like the kitchen, but there was no

flour dust or smell of herbs and cooking oil in the air. There was no smell at all. On the shelves and table were blocks of paper. I know now they were books but I had never seen those things before. There were so many and I stood in wonder at these new things. There was a tall window with curtains that fluttered slowly; white cloth against white light from outside.

But the man was saying, stand up straight. He was looking at the boy. He opened a drawer and pulled out a black stick and hit the table. Both the boy and I jumped. You know you did wrong, the man said to the boy, you failed to learn so you must be punished. The boy nodded and looked at the floor. I tried not to breathe. Who were these people? Then the man held the top of my head and hit my leg with the stick. I screamed. The boy began to sob. Stop crying, shouted the man, or he'll get more. The boy whimpered, and the man picked me up and took me back to the kitchen. Cook, Dolly and Mama were sitting around the table, rubbing herbs into pieces of meat. Mama jumped up, wiped her hands on her apron, and took me without a word as the man said, we're finished with him, for now. Cook put ointment on my leg and Mama rocked me to sleep.

And that's how things went. There was nothing but the kitchen, the back yard and room with the books. And the black stick. After a while, I knew to go with the man as soon as he walked into the kitchen. He began to be ignored by the kitchen folk, Mama most of all. In time, Cook would leave the ointment out for me to apply, although Mama would be needed if my back had been hit. The boy cried more than I did. He must have been a stupid boy, I had scars on my legs, arms, back, buttocks although the man never hit my face. My palms stopped stinging, the skin became

hard. I learned to think of other things when the man punished the boy. I would wonder what the world outside the curtained window was like. I could see a tree in a garden of flowers. Its branches spread out evenly, the leaves were so small, they became a cloud of green over the flowers below. There was a glimpse of a gravel path. Everything was neat and bright outside that window, not dirty and raw with lumps of chicken shit like the back yard behind the kitchen.

I never knew the boy's name. We grew up together and apart. We did not look each other in the eyes, but I knew he was the same height as me. I would look at his shoes, they had buckles that shone as bright as the kitchen knives after Mama polished them. His legs were thin, like mine. He would twitch his fingers like me. The pain of his punishments never lessened. The man would think of new ways to make me scream. Once, the boy bit his lip until blood trickled down his chin, and he was punished with a double dose of the black stick on my knuckles.

Mama stopped smiling. Then she stopped speaking. She looked at no one, even at me while she held me close after a punishment. I would stand and lean against her while she pulled the full pail up from the well, and breathe in the sound of her *oofs*. Mama walked more slowly now, bent over, even though I was no longer a bundle to be carried.

Then one day, I left the kitchen. Cook and Dolly were chopping vegetables and peeling corn cobs. Mama had her backed turned to me, gathering up the husks from the floor.

I can give no reason why I chose to go upstairs on my own. To step out of the kitchen into the hallway meant going into another world, one that didn't belong to me. This other world was filled with rules that had no meaning. Mealtimes, clothing, lessons, words, thoughts, everything had its special place. The clock in the kitchen fell off its shelf once. Its case was smashed open, a metal spring and tiny gears spilt out like intestines. Cook gathered up the pieces and gave it to the man. One day I noticed a new clock on the shelf. Or was it the old one, just repaired and repainted?

So I walked up the stairs, past a handrail that looked like a snake and went into the room of the books. There was no one there. The curtains were unmoving against the window. There was a large book on the table. It was spread open and there were shapes with bright colours scattered over the pages. I turned page after page and there were more colours, painted as pieces of ground floating in water. And sometimes there was more water inside this ground. There were marks on these shapes, I knew they were words, but they made no sense.

Then shadows fell over the pages and I froze. It was the boy and the man. The boy looked afraid, but the man said nothing. He turned and left the room.

Now, Chantal, help me to remember to forget. Chantal, make me not see the man coming back into the room with Mama. Make him not put the black stick in Mama's hand. The boy is there too, he is standing with his chin on his chest and there is another man next to him. This new man has spiky hair. Tell Mama to hold me in her shawl, tell her not to stand there for so long, just looking at the man with

the spiky hair. Ask Mama why she was still looking at him when she raised the black stick, so sudden, and hit me. Ask her why she just hit and hit me so hard, over my body, my hands and face, so hard and for so long my blood began to soak through my clothes, while the others just watched.

Chantal, you know the sounds I hear every night under this sky. You too can hear the sounds of Mama's *oofs* while the black stick whistles towards me. Close my eyes and ears, help me sleep. Do you see Cook and the man pulling Mama away from me? Do you hear Mama howling like a wolf? I lie on my side, my knees are under my chin and I can feel the white curtains lifting me off the floor. I am floating now, Chantal, down to the kitchen and onto the blankets in the corner. I can hear the new-old clock ticking over the sound of Cook's voice and then I wake in the morning and Dolly is screaming *she's dead she's dead* and the man's voice is saying *cut her down!* and I cannot move, because my body aches, and the blood has dried and the blanket sticks to my skin.

I lie on my side and see a loaf of bread on the kitchen table. It has just been unwrapped from its brown paper. Someone had begun to cut it, the slices were falling over themselves and there is no Mama to sweep up the crumbs from the floor. Pages of bread in covers of brown paper. Chantal and I, we know that books are cursed things. And reading is a magic of evil.

We know that the lovers of books are the wicked. They hold themselves apart. Their hands are soft, their bodies are delicate because their food is the scent of food. They breathe a kind of mist that rises from the crackling of paper. Do not

mistake their tears for pity, for their eyes are hidden behind circles of window glass. Books teach deceit and despair. Books are made of blood and skin.

Once, during the Three Holy Days, I was offered a book as a blessed gift. But I sensed the dangers under the beauty of its cover, and I refused. The giver held her gift out for a few seconds more, I looked away. I can still smell her scent of roses.

But there was no such sweet scent the next time I saw her. I was in Calidad fields with the goats, sitting in the shade of the umbrella tree. I heard voices, a woman was sobbing. So I hid behind some scrub and there was the girl and the People Who Sell. They were taking books from the cart and throwing them onto the ground in a heap. The girl ran towards them and the Seller pushed the girl away without a sound. He kept on throwing more books on the pile. The girl fell on her hands and knees, and stayed there for a moment, like a goat...

...and help me to remember to forget. I lie on my side and cover my ears because there is the sound of paper ripping and she is crying *no no no*, and I can hear her weeping and the soft *oofs* of the books hitting the earth, hitting each other, hitting her, and now she is screaming, there is the smell of burning and though the wind spins sparks and little curls of soot over my head, I cannot look, cannot move in case I am seen. I can only hear the sound of her wailing *Mama where are you?* and inside of me the man's voice is saying *cut her down!* and when I close my eyes I can see Cook slicing bread and slapping her palm against her forehead. Chantal, your face is changing. It is turning into a black bull, with eyes that beg the world to stop.

About the Writer

Fawzia Muradali Kane was born in San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago at the cusp of the country's changeover from being a colony to independence. Kane came to the UK on a scholarship to study architecture. She practiced as an architect in Trinidad for some years, and now lives in London. Along with Mike Kane she is co-director of KMK Architects.



Kane's poetry has been published in several journals including *Agenda*, *Brittle Star*, *Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Wales*, and *Rialto*.

Her debut poetry collection "*Tantie Diabliesse*" (Waterloo Press) was launched in autumn 2011.

A long sequence of poems *Houses of the Dead* is due out in 2012 by Sylph Editions as part of their Ellipsis Series.