

TLC Showcase

Philip Makatrewicz



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Introduction

As a writer I'm quite lucky. Although my work is done in solitude, the usual sense of isolation is mitigated by having an excellent group of writer-friends. We met on the Birkbeck MA Creative Writing, and carried on gathering weekly when the course finished, giving each other a vital source of feedback and, perhaps more importantly, moral support. I write this having learned earlier today that one of our members is to have a five-way auction between major publishing houses for her novel – this group is a serious bunch.

However, good as they are, friends are still friends. There are times in life when a writer needs totally objective, expert eyes that would have no qualms about sticking the knife in, and eviscerating if necessary. This is why I sought out TLC, and my good luck continued. A common thread in TLC testimonies is how the client 'lucked out' with the reader they had. I too can say this, and think it no coincidence - clearly, a great deal of care is given to pairing each manuscript with the most suitable reader. I was assigned the wonderful Sara Maitland, who got behind my potentially difficult concept and the stories I was telling, and also how to build on them, making it clear how much there was to be done before the novel was ready. She even went beyond her remit and line edited a few key sections. Once I had done the necessary work, she had no hesitation in recommending it to the Agent Liaison arm of TLC, where the next chapter of our relationship began.

It is no secret that times are tight in publishing, and for a first time novelist entering the market with an unconventional book on his hands, it can be very daunting. To have the good folk at TLC on your side in that particular battle is like fighting it on steroids, but without the damage to your health and integrity. That I have always felt there is a space on the bookshelf for this novel goes without saying, but it is immensely encouraging to know a band of professionals who, whatever the industry climate, agree with this sentiment. That's really lucky.

The Song of Saint Cecilia is about lost songs, the ones of which there is neither record nor living memory. They sail aboard a ghost ship whose figurehead, Saint Cecilia, has lost the ability to sing. To recover her voice, she must learn what first drove her to sing. The progress of this quest is reflected in eight stories spanning two millennia, set anywhere from Ancient Rome to modern America, the Spain of Cervantes to Stalin's Moscow. At the heart of each story, pivotal to the fate of its protagonist, is one of the songs that now finds its home on the ship – they are the novel's true heroes, the ones it wishes to honour. The following extract comes from one of these stories.

Ibimina

By Philip Makatrewicz

“I saw Ibimina today.”

Enuma has returned from the market. She knows not to talk to me when I am eating, but for this news I forgive her. “Yes?”

“She had twins again. Last night.”

The curse she carries runs so deep that it sours the very fruit she bears. This is the third set of these abominations to have emerged from her. “She has taken them to the Evil Forest?”

“This morning.”

“Did you speak with her?”

“She did not speak to anyone.”

I nod and return my attention to the foo-foo my first wife prepared. Enuma understands quickly enough and leaves me in peace. She is learning, though it has taken her many years. Maybe I spared her too many beatings. My first wife thinks that some women need beating more than others. But Enuma has done well in befriending Ibimina as I asked. Though Ibimina does not welcome her friendship, she knows the debt that her husband owes me, and recognises the wisdom of being cordial. Enuma says that her *chi* is weak, and this explains why Ibimina’s life consists of one disaster after another. She also says that there are roots for this kind of thing, but Ibimina is foolish and refuses to see the medicine man. But she does not understand how strong Ibimina’s *chi* is. The problem is Ibimina’s heart, not her *chi*. A long time ago she was beautiful. A long time ago she would sing. She was in fact famous for her song. Today, I would not be surprised to see her shadow walking around the village without a body, although perhaps nobody would notice the difference.

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Nchekwube had not seemed himself since he left our father's *obi* that morning, many years ago, shaking his head. But he was not sullen for long, and took instead to exercising himself. He was taller than I by three whole heads, his body wide and strong. I am not as strong now as he was then. By the time he was ten, he could already lift one of the great clay pots of water, heavy enough for a man like I am now.

He saw me watching him, and a broad smile broke across his lips. He waved me forward, but I would not leave the shadow of my mother's hut. Again he waved, calling me out, hopping from lightly from foot to foot, but I shook my head and stayed where I was. My mother stuck her head out of the hut, and when she saw me cowering she kissed her teeth, grabbed me by the neck and hurled me towards my brother. He threw me, of course, but in such a way that his body broke the worst of my fall. Back on his feet as if he had simply bounced off the floor, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me up. Then he turned me around and brushed the dust from my back, just as his mother called us to eat.

After the yams and the vegetable soup she made for us, Nchekwube asked his mother for another bowl. "And put some dried fish in it. I need my strength at this time."

His mother did not say no. I do not think anybody said no to Nchekwube. She brought out the soup and fish, even bringing a second, smaller portion for me, and I asked Nchekwube why he needed his strength so much.

"Because I am a man, and I must show everyone that I am a man." After this pronouncement he shovelled more food into his mouth, nodding towards my bowl, indicating that I should do the same. Chewing on a piece of fish, he spoke again. "After we have eaten, I am going to practice throwing my spear."

My eyes must have asked the question my mouth would not.

"If you would like, I can show you how it is done."

I wanted to answer so quickly that I almost choked on my food, and my spluttering nod made Nchekwube laugh. The soup did not interest me anymore, and

it felt like I sat there forever waiting for my brother to finish eating. But finish he did, and his word was good. We went to a breadfruit tree near our compound, he carrying one spear, I his spare, this enough in itself to make my day. It was taller than me by half, and felt like a living thing against the gentle breeze. Nchekwube broke off one of the low-hanging green fruit, big enough so that he used both his hands to hold it, and set it at rest in a crook between one of the tree's three woven trunks. Then he measured out fifteen paces, equal to at least twenty of mine. "Don't worry," he said. "I will let you throw from closer. But first I must show you how it is done."

The sun was sinking low and was in my eyes, and I ran around the other side of him to better see. He tapped the base of his spear twice on the ground, and then flipped it horizontal so that it rocked to rest across the flat of his outstretched hand like a man who has taken too much palm wine. "The most important thing is balance. You must hold the spear in the place where it will not fall from your hand." Closing his fingers around the spear, he planted his feet firmly on the ground and bends his knees. "Your body must be balanced too. If your body does not have balance, you will miss your target." He faked to throw standing on one leg, but did not let go of the spear. "Do you see where it is pointing?" It was not pointing at the fruit, but far to the left of the tree. "You only have one spear, and you only have one chance to throw it. You must not waste it, or you might end up dead." He steadies himself again "Now, when you throw..."

A voice behind us interrupts him with a song:

*Oh save us! Mighty Warrior!
Whatever will we do?
Without your mighty spear
Against the fearsome fruit!*

We turned to see the laughing face of Ibimina, hand to her brow to shield her eyes from the sun. Nchekwube was not insulted by her joke. He started laughing with her,

so I did too. Ibimina was one of those on whom the dust never seemed to settle, with her white teeth, bright eyes, and soft, round breasts.

“Does the great warrior mind if I watch his battle with the terrible breadfruit?”

Nchekwube did not reply, but spread his lips into a grin. He told me to step back and give him room, and then steadied himself just as he had shown me. Pointing towards the fruit with his free hand, he drew the spear back past his ear, and with a mighty twist of his whole body whipped his arm through and flung the spear at the fruit. I did not even have to look at the result. I knew in my bones that Nchekwube would not miss.

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Ibimina’s husband has come once again to call. He must want something - a toad does not run in the daytime for nothing. My first wife was about to bring us a kola nut to share but I waved her away. I will not treat a man who is once again about to beg for another loan in the same way as a welcomed guest. I gesture to the reed mat opposite the lion skin on which I sit.

“Uchenna, your second barn is nearly completed. You must be expecting a big harvest this year.”

“The rains have been good and I have made my sacrifices to *Ala*.”

Here is a man sitting across from me, a man like any other. What makes him weak? Emecheta has two good hands, with five fingers on each. A head on his shoulders. Strong chest, two legs, two eyes, working ears. To hear him speak, it is clear that his head is in good working order. There is nothing wrong with this man, yet he is a failure. He scratches at his head, his eyes looking somewhere down and to the left. “I too have made my sacrifices. You can ask anyone.”

“I am sure you have.”

“I think it is my *chi*. So the oracle tells me. I went to see her, and she says that my *chi* is weak. That is why my burden is so great. You have heard about my latest trouble?”

I nod, knowing what is to come next.

“Three times! Three times this wife of mine has produced these... These...”

“I understand.”

“So I have no sons, no children at all. I think it is the work of evil spirits.”

“This might be so.” Emecheta’s presence is tiresome to me. I want to call for some palm wine, but I would rather go thirsty than have to offer him any.

“You are lucky with your wives. One reliable and wise, the other younger and full of energy. I thought I was lucky when I married Ibimina. There were many men who would have given much to be in my position. But it was not so.”

“You do not think you were lucky to marry her?”

“How can a man be lucky when he does not have seeds for his own crop, or sons to help him farm it?”

“Tell me this, Emecheta. How is it that I have two wives, almost two barns, two sons and a good crop? I, whose shoulders are not as broad as yours, have cleared more brush to grow my yams, and more brush still so that my wives may grow their womanly vegetables.”

Emecheta snorts and straightens his back. “You have a powerful *chi*, this is clear to me. I think many people do not notice your progress, but I have seen. Let us not forget your two titles also, you who has two of everything.”

Emecheta is older than me, yet his ankle is bare of title bracelets. “And this is because of my *chi*?”

“I have not come here to argue about who has what because of what. Things are as they are. I am here to ask you as a neighbour and a clansman to give me some of your seeds to plant.”

“No. You have come to ask me to throw away good yams. Why should I give you seeds to plant when I gave you three hundred seeds last year and saw nothing for it? A man does not lead a goat into his barn unless he wants it to eat his crop.”

Emecheta narrows his eyes. “I did not think you were a man to insult one who has come to ask his help.”

“My answer stays the same. Any favours I have done were not for you, but for your wife. Now my generosity is finished.”

This is too much for Emecheta. He snorts and gathers himself up and leaves my *obi* without another word. There is anger in his walk, and I begin to wonder if I have done the right thing. He looked thirsty for palm wine and revenge, and when has had his fill of the first, he will go looking for the second. Though I am beyond the reach of his anger, his wife is another matter altogether. Perhaps I should not pity her. Perhaps her suffering is the fruit of a seed that she planted herself many years ago. Or perhaps she was never the seed, just the rain that made it grow.

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All morning everyone had been wondering where Nchekwube was. No one had seen him leave the compound, so he must have departed well before dawn. It was strange, but not strange enough to distract anyone from what they had to do. Father was out clearing brush for planting season, complaining of his back, as had become his habit. He lost most by Nchekwube’s absence, because he would have been helping. But he did not say a word against his son, making it silently clear that wherever he was, it was where he needed to be. Or maybe it was I who lost out by his absence, because I was the one who had to take his place, hacking at the scrub with a machete. But we had not been working for long when my youngest sister came running towards us.

“Nchekwube is back! Come and see!”

Father straightened slowly, placing both hands on the base of spine and stretching backwards until he was looking up at the sky. I did the same, because it seemed like the thing to do. I also copied father’s weary trudge towards the compound, although really I was excited and in a hurry to get back, because I could tell from my sister’s demeanour that something extraordinary had happened. We

were only working a short walk away from home, but though we pressed her for answers my sister just said that we had to come and see, because that was what Nchekwube had told her to say. There was quite a crowd gathered outside the compound – perhaps twenty people – but they parted before my father, and I followed in the gap left for him. There he was. Nchekwube, smiling broadly, standing bare-chested with the sun on his back, a bloodied spear in his hand. At his feet the skin of a lion, pink and ragged with flesh inside, but the great mane was intact, and the beast’s golden eyes still seemed fierce with life. Ibimina was there also, laughing and clapping and singing with her friend, Ezelagboma. They had made up a song where Ibimina called a line and Ezelagboma responded:

Who is the greatest hunter in his clan?

Nchekwube the lion man!

Who slays the wild beasts of this land?

Nchekwube the lion man!

Who does Chukwu bless from high?

Nchekwube the lion man!

Who makes our song and spirit fly?

Nchekwube the lion man!

Nchekwube’s eyes were fixed on them, Ibimina in particular, and hers were locked on him, as if no one else was there. It was only when our father was standing in front of him that he looked away from her. I do not think father knew what to say, but Nchekwube had his words prepared. “Well, father? Do you think I am man enough to marry now?”

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About the Writer

Philip is a thirty one year old graduate of the MACW at Birkbeck whose short fiction has appeared in *The Mechanics' Institute Review*. He wrote and presented *Heaven, Hell and Other Places*, a documentary about the eighteenth century scientist and savant, Emanuel Swedenborg, which is available on DVD at



www.swedenborg.org.uk. When not writing fiction, his work consists of freelance editing, manuscript consultancy and the occasional review for the *TLS*. He is also the singer-songwriter in his four-piece folk band, *Vronsky*, with an album currently being mixed for release in early 2013. He hopes to have the first draft of his next novel completed shortly thereafter.