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THE IDEA IS TO BE SEALED IN

By Binyavanga Wainaina

The idea is to be sealed in.

It is not hard. He is a soft, mild dreamy child, content to follow others. His rituals are simple. They exist only to carry himself (always (within) enchantment). He is ten years old, and in his slow, dreamy way, he has marked out all the go-to graph points that awaken his inner joys. He has learnt to open his tap of enchant at will: to save it up for carrying to school, that naked screech of encounters he loves, but which turbulents his soul.

He knows to softly bypass; to avoid trouble; to never demand; to not make claim; to fight for no territory; to never snitch (better to confess first, even if you are innocent); to avoid all confrontation without seeming to. To put on a blank easy face when mum or Auntie Njenga sit eye to eye with him, frowning in concern; determined to solution: to put their curiosity right inside his intestines, shift them around, seeking his secrets. He

is too naked to them. Too opaque. In plain sight. But unseen. When they do, he smiles innocently, cries even, when really pressed, allowing tears.

He has some private contempt for his sisters, his cousin Ochieng. They seem unable to control their impulses to act.

**"But his face and lower arms,
are a dark dark copper, busy
with veins, nerves, tendons and
muscles."**

To try. To trip. To say no! Their faces are often swollen with desire and vulnerability: tears, anger insistence. They confuse him. Why? Surely the world is only a fridge. To open briefly? To take some food out for his soul, and slowly stuff it into the stretchy stomach-giant world inside himself? In car trips, he has learnt to train his ears to remain blocked; to vague out his siblings. His interface is in agreement to be with

them: nodding, approving, agreeing, copying, frowning knowingly. Because he never insists, he is always the one to share: bedrooms, sweets. He prefers to offer first. George Waruiru Odera did conquer one piece of ground for himself. His three sisters hate using the outside toilet. His mum and Auntie Njenga hate it too. He loved it. It was those old long drops with a pull down chain for flushing. At night, it rumbled with the thick sounds of crickets, which to him was the stadium cheer of stars. He had his own

key. It had a crude shower, which was not used. He brought in an old couch. Here under a naked 60 watt bulb, he could sit for hours, and let his insides loose, let the flow of dreaming roll over him. Grow stories, and dreams over days so they created thicker feelings. Many times he arrived agitated, banging the door behind him after walking fast, away from the rest. There was something about the nakedness of tangling

with people: their words and contentiousness. Their hard unselfconscious sunlight brought him often to the edge of panic. He hated crying.

This toilet was always dark, built for African servants in colonial days, with a tiny window so high he had to stand on a chair on the couch with a stick to pull it open. It was full of shadows, light was only soft angles and flutters, sounds were always muffled. There was mould, rust and moods.

It was here he brought his first short novel, aged seven, and his second the next day, and through his childhood, hundreds. It was here that he first masturbated, and soon enough, several times daily. The idea of being sexually vulnerable left him uncomfortable. That somebody would see his availability from sweat on his nose. He liked to leave his toilet into the world refreshed, neutered, and with enough enchant and novels in his bag to carry him through the day.

So, this way, he cruises through to fifteen,

to boarding school in Njoro. One day, a Sunday, after church, free from school to walk into Njoro town, his bag full of novels, he avoids the crowds of friends all going to look for chips, cheap booze, in the popular places where school girls like to go for the same.

He has seen this tree many times before. It reminds him of his toilet. Full of moods and dappled shadows. A huge gnarled old eucalyptus rising high above the middle of an open air nyama choma joint. He walks in, the place is packed with Sunday Lunchtime treats. Most people choose to avoid the tree, to sit under the mabati shades with linoleum covered tables. That is fine. The noise of strangers is the best silence. There is a crude table nailed to the tree, with a bench below it. He sits in the shade of the tree, faces away from the crowd, opens his bag and piles three novels on the table. One remains in his hands. Alistair MacLean. The Golden Rendezvous. He puts his fingers

into the folded page mark and heads for the butchery. He orders a quarter kilo of goat ribs, chips, some slices of mutura, and a bitter-lemon, the short cloudy one. They give him a receipt for the food. He takes the receipt into the kitchen, which is hot with charcoal. There is a huge pot of boiling goat-head soup.

And the wide sweat soaked back of a man. Facing away from him.

Avoid direct eye contact. Narrow your eyes a little. Vague your face and look dreamy. Smile/frown a bit.

He turns.

There are bits of bone on the man's face, and sweat. The man's torn white apron jacket is folded to the elbows. The man's skin above the halfway mark between the wrist and the elbow is shockingly soft and creamy-skinned. Pale tea. But his face and lower arms, are a dark dark copper, busy with veins, nerves, tendons and muscles.

He wants to lock the door to the toilet. A



slow creamy feeling tingles through his belly. The man's voice crackles into him, like fat on fire. There is a sawn off-log and a machete by its side where meat is hacked.

The man turns. And his arm rises. It is most certainly headed for the receipt between George's finger. It is not. Thick work-grimy fingers full of calluses brush his upper arm, for the briefest moment they linger so close they tickle, then they curve into a fist and grab him gently and he turns to find the man's breath flutter past his cheeks. Something wrapped up and muffled shivers, then runs around his solar system. A big glowing full moon groans. The smell of fresh sweat fills him, burning meat.

He turns, smoothly, determined not to allow his screen to freeze, to expose him. Raises an eyebrow ruefully. The man is undeterred. His face moves closer. Large white sooty teeth, a giant open child's smile in that battered matatu of a face full of crinkles, angles and a busy jawbone. George looks at the pipes of life gulping at the man's neck, the open overall ridged with bone and gristle. The hand is so gentle on his upper arm. It strokes down his arm, and pulls the receipt out gently, and a laugh tickles out of the man's belly and climbs up from George's toes, his testicles fist, and the laugh growls like the school tractor, finds the simmering acid of shame pooling in his belly.

The man laughs in his face, so free and open, eyes almost shut, pupils clear, with no shadow. With joy he says, "Umepotea

chews bones. In the late afternoon, people clear the butchery, the drinkers move to the neighboring bar.

The other hand reaches behind his shoulder and smoothly pulls the book from George's hand. All the diners are gone.

wapi?"

The thick hand leaves his fingers tingling, and returns to give George a mild slap on the back. The man turns away and says, "Nuthu Thaa."

The lunchtime sun is overhead and there are no shadows. One foot ahead of the other, fingers working frenziedly inside the

"He reaches into the mood of the novel and is lost."

pages of the novel. He allows himself to enjoy the uncurling of this strange itchy joy. George gathers the moistures of feeling around his neck and earlobes and brings them to the front of his mind near his eyes. He reaches into the mood of the novel and is lost.

The meat comes. He eats. Another waiter. Not the man. The man who now occupies the hairs on the back of his neck. Little flows of feeling trickle down his spine. He reads and reads. Lost in that ship. He

In the cool of seven PM, the hand lands on his shoulder. This time he can hear the smile's sunlight. Already, the mabati roof is crackling like fat, like stars about to burst out from blackness, and bristle sharply out the

back of his neck. The other hand reaches behind his shoulder and smoothly pulls the book from George's hand. All the diners are gone.

"Leave that book. I want to show you something."

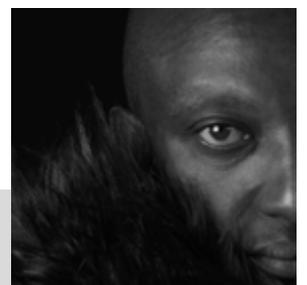
Elbow is gripped, tearing the cobwebs of shy from behind his face. He is naked. They walk past the little wooden kitchen. One arm leans across his shoulders in confident brotherliness. A little corridor. A small golden padlock. A safari bed. A little shocking pink basin. Apron drops, trousers, underwear. Scoops of tea coloured buttocks. A dirty yellow jerrycan fills the shocking pink basin. Soap. Vigorous splashes. Ahh, a stretch. Wipes. Underwear. Jeans. T shirt. The man sits down. George's fingers are thrust into the grey blanket. The hand moves across his shoulders, turns his head to face him. The voice finds his ear, wet with droplets of man, raspy from late night shouts.

"Pass me those cigarettes on the headboard. You can leave when you want."

Listen to the audio version read by Billy Kahora



Binyavanga Wainaina is an African writer. He lives in Nairobi.



Ni Wazo la Kufunika

Translation by Elieshi Lema

Siyo vigumu. Yeye ni mnyamazifu na mpole, mwenye kuridhika kufuata wengine. Matendo yake ni mepesi, hayana madoido, nayo huyabeba na kuyatumia yampe furaha, kwani kila mara hupenda awe katika furaha. Ana miaka kumi. Kwa njia yake ya unyamazifu isiyo na haraka, ameviwekea alama vitu vyote vinavyoamsha furaha rohoni mwake. Na amejifunza kufungua, kama bomba, yale yanayofurahisha wengine. Na huviweka awe navyo anapokwenda shule, avitumie katika matukio yanayomchangamsha, lakini ambayo humfanya

kuona kama siri zake zimedhihirika. Yu muwazi sana kwao. Hawawezi kupenya. Anaonekana wazi. Haonekani. Na wanapomuona, anajua kutabasamu kama asiye na hatia, kulia, kama akilazimishwa sana, lakini kulia polepole. Anajua jinsi ya kuruhusu machozi tu, na siyo kububujikwa. Binafsi, anayo dharau ya chinichini kwa dada zake na binamu yake Ochieng. Wanashindwa kabisa kudhibiti mihemko yao. Kutenda. Kujaribu. Kufanya makosa. Kukataa. Mara nyingi nyuso zao huvimba kwa

vitamu. Hupenda kutoa kwanza.

Lakini George Waruiru Odero alipata ushindi kwenye jambo moja. Dada zake walichukia sana kutumia choo cha nje. Mama yake na Shangazi Njenga nao hawakutaka. Yeye alipenda kukitumia. Choo chenyewe kilikuwa ni vile vilivyokuwa na cheni ndefu ya kuvutia maji. Usiku kilipiga kelele nzito kama za nyenje, sauti ambayo kwake ilisikika kama kelele za nyota wanaoshangilia uwanjani. Alikuwa na ufunguo wake. Kulikuwa na bomba la mvua, lilikuwa halitumiki. Aliongeza kochi

"Lakini uso wake na mikono sehemu ya chini ni rangi ya shaba iliyokolea, imetapakaa mishipa, vena, mikano na misuli."

asononeke. Anafahamu vitu vya kukwepa ili asiingie kwenye matatizo, vitu vya kutokudai, vya kutomiliki, kutopigania umaarufu bila sababu, katu kutoiba (ni afadhali kukiri kwanza, hata kama huna hatia), kukwepa ugomvi. Anajua wakati wa kuwa na sura iliyo tupu, isiyosema chochote, hasa wakati mama au Shangazi Njenga anapoketi naye, ana kwa ana, uso amekunja kwa wasiwasi, akiazimia kupata suluhisho kutoka kwake. Anajua jinsi ya kuuweka udadisi wao ndani huko kwenye utumbo na kisha kuupekuapekua

matamano na udhaifu: machozi, hasira, kung'ang'ania. Wanamshangaza. Kwa nini? Hakika dunia ni kama jokofu tu. Si hufunguliwa kwa muda mfupi? Kuchukua chakula cha kulisha roho yake na kisha kuvilundika ndani ya dunia kubwa ya tumbo lake. Katika safari zake kwa gari, amejifunza kuziba masikio yake ili kuffifisha maongezi ya ndugu zake. Amekubali kuwa nao kwa juujuu tu, akitingisha kichwa, akiridhia, akikubali na kuiga. Kwa vile halazimishi chochote, yeye ndiye anatakiwa kushirikiana: vyumba vya kulala, vitu

kuukuu. Na hapa ndipo alipoweza kukaa kwa saa nyingi, akimulikwa na balbu ya wati 60 wakati akiachia tumbo lake lifunguke, akiruhusu ndoto zake ziufunike mwili wake, akirutubisha hadithi zake alizobuni siku nyingi ili zijenge hisia nene. Alitumia saa nyingi akitafuta sehemu zenye utata. Mara nyingi alifika akiwa na mashaka, na kufunga mlango kwa nguvu baada ya kuwakimbia wenzake. Alipobishana na watu alihisi kama anabaki mtupu, maneno yao na ubishi na uwazi uliojitokeza kwenye mwanga ulimfanya afike kwenye ukingo

wa hofu. Hakupenda kulia.

Hiki choo kilikuwa na giza mara zote. Kilijengwa kutumika na Waafrika wakati wa ukoloni. Kilikuwa na dirisha moja, dogo, lililokuwa juu kiasi kwamba ilibidi asimame juu ya kiti, kilichokuwa juu ya kochi, kisha atumie fimbo ili aweze kulifungua. Choo kilijaa vivuli, mwanga wake hafifu ulichezacheza, kila siku sauti zilififishwa. Kulikuwa na kuvu, uchakavu, kutu na sununu.

Ndani humu, akiwa na miaka saba, ndipo alipoleta kitabu chake cha kwanza cha fasihi.

Na kingine siku iliyofuata, na katika maisha yake ya utoto, alileta na kusoma mamia ya vitabu vya fasihi humu. Ni humu ndani ndipo alipojichua kwa mara ya kwanza, na kisha kufanya hivyo mara kadhaa kwa siku. Alichukia kuonyesha udhaifu wa ujinsia wake. Kwamba mtu angeweza kuona jasho kwenye pua yake na kutambua tamaa yake. Alipenda kuondoka chooni na kuingia katika dunia akiwa safi na mwenye furaha ya kutosha, fasihi zake kwenye begi zilizomtosha kwa siku nzima.

Kwa njia hii, ndivyo alivyoishi na kutimiza

miaka kumi na tano na kuingia shule ya bweni huko Njoro. Kwa siku moja, Jumapili baada ya kusali, alikuwa huru kwenda mjini Njoro. Begi lake likiwa limejaa vitabu vya fasihi, aliwakwepa makundi ya rafiki zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika baa pendwa zilizojaa watu.

Ameshauona mti huu mara nyingi siku zilizopita. Unamkumbusha choo chake kwa jinsi ulivyojaa sununu na vivuli vyake hafifu vinachezacheza. Mkaratusi mkubwa sana, wa miaka mingi, wenye makovu, ulionyooka



hadi juu, katikati ya baa ya wazi ya nyama choma. Anaingia ndani na kukuta pamejaa. Watu waliokwepa mti walikaa chini ya kivuli cha mabati kilichokuwa na meza zilizotandikwa vitambaa vya plastiki. Sawa tu. Kelele za watu asiowajua ndizo huwa na ukimya. Anaona meza ya ovyo iliyopigiliwa kwenye mti ikiwa na benchi.

Anakaa chini ya kivuli cha mti akiwa amewapa watu mgongo, kisha anafungua begi na kutoa vitabu na kuweka vitatu juu ya meza. Kimoja kinabaki mkononi, mwandishi, Alistair MacLean, jina, The

Golden Rendezvous. Anafungua ukurasa uliowekwa alama ya kukunjwa na kuweka kidole chake pale na akiwa nacho, anaelekea kwenye kibanda cha nyama. Anatoa oda, nyama ya mbuzi, robo kilo ya mbavu, chips, vipande vya mutura na soda, bitter lemon, ile ndogo ambayo siyo angavu. Wanampa risiti. Anachukua risiti na kueleka jikoni. Kuna joto kali la moto wa mkaa, supu ya kichwa cha mbuzi inachemka kwenye sufuria kubwa.

Kuna mgongo wa mwanamume uliofunikwa na jasho. Ameangalia mbele.

Anajiambia, usimtazame machoni, finya macho kidogo, ficha uso na urembue. Tabasamu au nuna kidogo.

Mwanamume anageuka.

Kuna vipande vidogo vya mifupa usoni mwake, na jasho. Aproni yake nyeupe iliyoraruka imekunjwa hadi kwenye kiwiko. Ngozi yake, kati ya kiwiko na kifundo cha mkono ni laini ajabu, ni rangi ya krimu kama chai nyepesi. Lakini uso wake na mikono sehemu ya chini ni rangi ya shaba iliyokolea, imetapakaa mishipa, vena, mikano na misuli.

Anataka kufunga mlango uendao chooni. Msisimko wa hisia laini unampita mwilini. Sauti ya mwanamume inapasukia ndani mwake, kama mafuta yanayoungua. Wanapokatia nyama kuna gogo dogo na panga kando yake.

Mwanamume anageuka, mkono wake unainuka. Bila shaka kuchukua risiti George aliyoiweka katikati ya vidole vyake. La hashi. Vidole vyake vichafu, vyenye sugu kutokana na kazi, vinapangusa mkono wa George, vinasita hapo kwa muda kidogo tu, karibu mno, hadi vinasisimua. Halafu vidole vinajifunga kama vile ngumi na kumshika kwa utulivu, na mara George anapoinua uso, pumzi ya mwanamume inampita mashavuni. Mtetemo wa kitu kilichofungwa na kuffishwa kinazunguka katika mfumo wake wa jua. Mwezi pevu unaguna. Harufu ya jasho changa inamjaa, ya nyama inayoiva. Hali ya afya fulani, uhalisia fulani.

Anageuka polepole, akiwa amezimbia kuwa sura yake ile isigande na kuonyesha ukweli wake. Anainua jicho kwa huzuni. Hilo halimzuii mwanamume. Uso wake unazidi kusogea. Meno, rangi ya moshi mweupe, tabasamu kubwa la kitoto kwenye uso uliojaa makunyanzi, kama matatu chakavu. Taya linatafuna. George anatazama koromeo linavyogugumia shingoni mwa mwanamume, tuta wazi la mfupa na gegedu. Kiganja cha mwanamume kimetulia sehemu ya juu ya mkono wake, karibu na bega. Anapapasa mkono kuelekea chini na kuivuta risiti polepole. Kicheko

cha mwanamume kinatokea tumboni, na kumtekenya George kuanzia vidole vya miguu na kupanda kuelekea juu, korodani linajikunja na kukaza. Kicheko kinanguruma kama trekta la shule na kukuta aibu chachu, kali, inayochemka polepole na kukusanyika tumboni.

Mwanamume anacheka waziwazi mbele yangu, kicheko huru, kisicho na kificho. Macho amefunga nusu, mboni zake ni ang'avu, hazina kivuli. Akiwa amejawa na furaha, anasema, "Umepotea wapi?"

Kiganja chake kinene kinaacha vidole vyake vikisisimka. Anampiga George kibao kwa utani mgongoni. Anapoondoka anasema, "Nuthu Thaa."

Jua lamchana liko utosini na hakuna vivuli. Mguu mmoja mbele ya mwingine, vidole vyake vinahangaika ndani ya kurasa za hadithi. Anajiruhusu kukumbatia furaha hii, kuona inavyofunguka, ni ngeni, inatekenya. George anakusanya hisia nyevunyevu iliyo shingoni na kwenye ndewe la sikio na kuivuta mbele akilini mwake, karibu na macho. Anazama katika sununu ya hadithi na kupotea.

Nyama inakuja. Anakula. Ni mhudumu mwingine. Siyo yule mwanamume. Mwanamume ambaye sasa ameteka hisia zake. Anahisi michirizi myembamba ya hisia ikitiririka kwenye uti wa mgongo. Anasoma kwa bidii. Amepotea katika jahazi hili. Anatafuna mifupa. Baadaye, mchana, watu wanasafisha kibanda cha nyama na wanywaji wanahamia

baa nyingine jirani.

Katika ubaridi wa jua la magharibi, mkono unatua begani. Wakati huu anasikia mwanga wa tabasamu lake. Tayari mabati yanalia kama mafuta yanayoungua, kama nyota zilizo karibu kulipuka kutoka kwenye giza tororo na kufanya nywele zimsimame shingoni. Mkono wa pili unapita nyuma ya bega na kwa utulivu, unachukua kitabu kilicho mkononi mwa George. Wateja wote wameondoka.

"Acha hicho kitabu. Nataka kukuonyesha kitu."

Anamshika kwenye kiwiko cha mkono, akipangusa buibui la aibu usoni mwake. Wanaonekana wazi. Wanatembea na kupita jiko dogo la mbao. Mkono mmoja umeegemea bega lake katika undugu imara. Wanapita kwenye kibaraza kidogo, kofuli ndogo ya dhahabu, kitanda kidogo cha safari, beseni ndogo sana ya rangi ya waridi, matone, matako rangi ya chai, dumu chafu la manjano linajaza beseni ndogo sana ya waridi. Sabuni. Rushia maji kwa nguvu. Aaah. Jinyooshe. Jikaushe. Chupi. Jeans. T-Shirt. Mwanamume anaketi. George anapitishapitisha vidole kwenye blanketi. Mkono unazunguka bega na kugeuza kichwa. Sauti inapata sikio lake, imeloa vitone vya mwanamume, inakwaruza kutokana na kelele za usiku.

"Nipe hizo sigara juu ya kitanda. Unaweza kuondoka wakati wowote unapotaka."

Listen to the audio version read in Kiswahili by Mukoma wa Ngugi



Elieshi Lema, author and publisher, has authored two novels - *Parched Earth* and *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* - and a good number of children's books. She is co-founder of E & D Vision Publishing, which publishes textbooks, children's books and general fiction. She actively promotes reading through various projects initiated to support readership in indigenous languages. In her writing, Lema has an explicit gender perspective. She addresses topics such as patriarchy, gender and children's rights, and HIV/Aids. She writes in Kiswahili and English.

