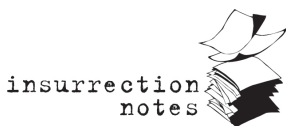


Olumide Popoola

**this is not about sadness**



Nigerian-German author, poet and performer Olumide Popoola lives in London where she studied ayurvedic medicine (BSc) and creative writing (MA). The scope of her work concerns critical investigations into the 'in-between' of culture, language and public space, where an uncomfortable look at complexity is needed. As an artist she is especially interested in cross-genre literary productions which draw on theory in their conception as well as execution, and vernacular and hybrid languages as literary opportunity for social/ cultural spaces. She is continuing her explorations as a PhD student in creative writing at the University of East London. She is the co-editor (and contributor) of *Talking Home* (bluemoonpress 1999) and winner of the *May Ayim Award* for poetry in 2004 and presents internationally as author, performer, guest lecturer and speaker.

In this is not about sadness, an unlikely friendship between two complex and traumatized London-based women, one an older Jamaican, the other a young South African, is explored through each character's use of specific language to relate to space, memory and silence. The lyrical plural-narration, allows vernacular language to shape the structure and flow, echoing call-and-response modes familiar to international storytelling traditions.

The novel follows the pensioner Mrs. Thompson's and the young activist Tebo's developing friendship and the problems that arise due to their different views on political issues. Their conflictive personalities make for an unusual pair and both carry unspoken trauma. When Tebo cries one day to offer empathy for Mrs. Thompson's pain the silence is broken. Their bond is sealed through the acknowledgment of the other's pain, the personal histories arrive in a space where understanding difference creates possibility for healing and alliance.



## two

It is when dust enters, through lips, pushing itself through gaps in-between teeth, brushing the tongue as it travels downward. Scraping, scraping first the exhausted rug inside the mouth, then the throat. Quick, dirty, roadside dust. And if you bite your lips or lock your jaw, it is there, there that you meet the earth. Your arms twisted, your eyes rolling in their sockets. Rolling backwards because your neck is down and you wouldn't be able to see the sky unless you defeat the order the bones and muscles, the body, the direction it now dictates. Unless you become a master defying gravity and the pressure that now keeps you. The pitch black canvas above and you yourself just a speck of dust. On the ground.

Tebo. Tebo. Tebogo. My name.

She die. One day Lucky come tell me him looking for de girl. In me bones me feel it. She dead.

They sink into a rhythm. The girl and the woman. No one understands what made it stick, but it does. Corbyn Street is animated with chatter around Number 18. She spends lunch there, the girl. She helps, gets the groceries when directed, from the supermarket. Down the grey road to the street with the shops. The 24 hour supermarket run by Turkish people. The charity shop, which looks as miserable as its musty smell inside; the

odour which penetrates the thin layers in the nostrils and lodges there. The wannabe trendy cafés and bars with cheap plastic chandeliers from Ikea or uniform hardwearing furniture, equally low cost and almost stylish. Here it goes past the supermarket to where Indians sell Nigerian food stuff and bits of Caribbean cooking essentials in little shops wedged between other little shops.

There she finds what the woman wrote and she holds out the torn off paper to the shopkeeper. He disappears behind small aisles. The red, orange and yellow hot peppers sit outside in a basket, of which there are many, stacked up neatly in order, displaying all the fresh things available. The grocer cuts the yam. The woman made sure the girl wrote down exactly what she wants, how much of it and how it should look too. He gets the tinned ackee, that the woman had said she'll make do with, and the other things that were on the list. The girl stands aside. Her first question engaged the grocer, his colleague serving at the till, while he gathers the woman's necessities that the girl will bring. On her way back she notices the busyness and the people. She's been here before, many times, with Lucky, getting their groceries from Tesco's, but this is the first time she looks around without him.

The place is familiar now. Small and faint marks have found their way onto the tar like snail trails. They fit her gait. They attract her shoes, her step, her walk, magnetise and through this, direct her. She almost skips and smiles when she bumps into the young woman with her two year old girl with puffs held together by colourful ribbons in the pram, singing a children's song she doesn't know. Another faint trail appears. This one is hanging halfway across the street, which both started crossing from opposite sides. The space emanates. It's thicker here, warmed up by their collision.

"Hi." A broad smile.

"Hi." A shy laugh.

"Sorry, I wasn't looking."

"Hey, not your fault. Neither was I!"

They stare at each other. The daughter tugs on her mother's top, trying to revive their moment of singing the song together.

"I've seen you before. You always do groceries with the cute guy."

The girl laughs.

“You’re on my case or something?”

“No, just noticed you. You’re new here?”

“Is it obvious?”

“No, not really. If you ignore that you’re head keeps turning. You look at everything girl, really hard.” They both laugh.

“Lots to see, you know.”

“I bet! You’re almost at Finsbury Park. You should keep your eyes open.”

They giggle although the girl doesn’t really know what that means. The little daughter is getting impatient.

“Mami, I want pee pee.”

“Oh oh, I’m running out of time here. The princess has spoken. Hey, nice meeting you. See you again some time.”

“Sharp, I mean, cool, yes. Nice meeting you too!”

They both turn to continue their journey, the girl returning back down the street, past the drunks and the other second hand store, past the beauty salon and the Chinese herbalist, the unisex barber and Afro Caribbean hairdresser, the small pizza take away, the Indian restaurant, the pubs. Past the tiny grocery store that carries Polish items solely, including all the writing outside, and the nail studio that has crept up into the smallest shop available. Past the neighbourhood that could be somewhere else but like all others needs to be somewhere, so when it expanded, it placed itself here.

Her face exuberant. The blue plastic bag with food swinging as her feet lightly tap the ground. Her eyes grazing, absorbing like a sponge, then expelling the new details into fresh encounters. Here’s a sign above the pizza place where one of the numbers is hanging loose, unsecured on one corner. There is a glass door, the entrance to the barber that is open but usually shut. She giggles remembering what the young mother said to her. How her eyes scan everything and she herself doesn’t even know why. The woman is waiting for her on her old spot, arms on the window sill. The wood so soft to her skin, holding her in position, her torso swaying against the weather, although of course today is not a windy day and the other windows of the flat are

shut, as usually all of them would be, and she can't be moving as she's bent over and therefore too heavy, but it is as if. Normally the curtains would be drawn too, at least often but not now, not as frequently anymore as they used to be.

This is a spring-turn-summer that enters her front room through the whole of the opening and not just a split under the bay window that creaks when pushed upwards. When she hears the steps approaching, she rushes. Away from the window, that remains unlatched for now, towards the front door that is double locked and inside her all is buttery, creamy and light, like a fluffy cupcake. And she too would skip, if the bend in her back would allow. The locks open without much effort, the key dangling from the inside, all that is left is meeting the girl at the door. She scrutinises every item. Her approval is visible and the smaller thread, not the one that holds their friendship now but the one which helps her feel, tugs the corners of her lips again, upwards. It's a broad smile, unguarded and generous.

I stood at the corner. It could have been any corner. When the sky meets the earth and you no longer care for air that's when you sing to the dust. You sing without your voice. Please. Please

She neva say why she ah come. Just tell me things bout her country. Bout her grandmother, her friends and that she waan work in ah de theatre. She talk bout her country like she herself can move things. Always ah chat bout some woman that play football and how, well how *chups* ... me no politician. Me no busy meself with everything whey gwaan. I just sit here, like me sey, mind me own business. But she? Calm she is, fragile as her heart mek her, quiet as she is, her ideas big. Bout change. That's it. She sey things must change. Always!