

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to *I Am a Foreign Land*

The short story *I am a Foreign Land* is part of a collection I am currently working on. This piece evolved from an idea for a novel where, originally, the protagonist was a man. Looking back on those first attempts to write out my ideas, I can see that the work took on what you might call a more traditional format and writing style. I was very influenced by who I was reading at the time – Kafka, Virginia Woolf and Milan Kundera, amongst others – as I believe any writer is. I don't think that being influenced by great writers ever stops as you learn the craft, but rather that the influences mount, and coalesce into a voice that you could say is 'yours'. My influences are a reflection of myself, after all.

I never did get very far into that first novel, but clearly the seed of the story stayed with me, as I felt the urge to return to it while completing my MA in Creative Writing. I then wrote it with the central character as a woman, which was a conscious choice to explore how the story would evolve through fresh eyes. Where I can I try to keep my characters neutral, with little physical description, and I prefer not to give them names. This is a preference that has evolved while I've been writing this collection and has helped me to challenge the assumptions, around gender or race, that I might make about a character as they form in my mind.

I was surprised by how well-rounded the TLC manuscript assessment was. Not only was I given feedback on the text, but also practical advice as to what kind of publisher might best suit my work and also to think about publishing in the USA, which I would never have considered before. I felt that the reader really understood the work and therefore understood that the road to its publication might be a less traditional one.

The suggestions for changes weren't prescriptive. I was encouraged to think more generally about how I end a story; that last paragraph or those few lines at the end of a piece can be just as important as all the text that came before. I like that the critique has challenged me meet the reader halfway, honing my skills as a writer and spurring me to interrogate my text from a different angle. The assessment has added new facets to my capacity as an editor, which is half of being a writer. I'm still immersed in the writing of my book, and I'm sure that the work has benefitted from this experience.

'I Am a Foreign Land', a short story by Vanessa Onwuemezi

Routine was the word.

I liked routine, a route to somewhere in time. A rope with which to pull myself along, by sheer force of will, to the other side of the river one day, and then back again the next day and so on, and so on the next day and so on.

It was all supposed to be routine. A pain in my leg. A GP. A hospital. A scan. And I tried to make the morning like all the rest – two spoons of coffee, hot water, splash of milk, she took a shit, shaved her legs, she showered and moisturised, banana, peanut butter, teeth. She who was always five steps ahead of me.

I sat across from Doctor A, we peered into my flesh, in colour, widescreen.

'There they are,' he said. He was pointing at a scan of my femur with a pen, circling round a blackened section of bone.

'They?' I said.

'I shouldn't say that, I don't want to scare you.' He shifted, squeaking his seat.

'It,' he said, 'there it is.'

'Who's they?' I said.

'Coloni, it's incredibly rare. Only a few new cases have sprung up in the last year.'

'And what kind of 'case' do I have?'

He tapped his pen on his chin, while a breeze rattled thin metal blinds behind us, closed, the room was dark.

'This here, is a mine.' His pen circled the black spot once again. My eyes followed, my mind did not. 'Or it could be a cave, depends how long they've been around.'

'I'm going to need –'

'I'll get you a leaflet.' His chair shot backward, towards a cupboard, rolling on four wheels.

His elbows cocked outward as he prized open a cardboard box and pulled out the stiff paper.

He handed it to me. 'Come back next week, make an appointment at the desk.'

Coping with Coloni it read.

My flat. I lay on the bed leafing through. There wasn't much to leaf. There were only a few pages, plus the covering page, on it a picture of the Trojan Horse.

Coping with Coloni.

Coping.

Two large print pages explained that there was little they could explain about Coloni. On a third page, a list of best things to do.

Number one: Eat well. Suffering with Coloni is akin to pregnancy, you're eating, drinking and breathing for more than just yourself. Maintaining good overall health, it explained, would slow down the mining of my tissues.

Number two: Regular visits to your doctor, to track the progression of the disease. They can keep you informed of research developments in the treatment of Coloni.

Number three: Avoid contact with other sufferers.

Number four: Do not attempt to self-medicate. You risk your own serious injury or even death.

Understood, but unsatisfied.

I didn't even ask the doctor how I'd been infected. I'd put all my faith into the leaflet. Maybe it was at the pool. There are all sorts of floaters suspended in that chlorinated swamp. They must have sailed in through a cut, or my ear or even my private parts.

The internet, I hoped to make a connection with the wider world of those 'coping' with these invaders. 'They' as Doctor A had said, who discovered me, like a foreign land. I wondered, is this to be my life from now on? Me, coping with my body.

The search engine threw up all sorts of strangeness. A man who had developed his own language using only colons and semi-colons. A Swedish gardening company selling volcanic soil and 'organic' human manure. Then various pages related to colonialism – *The control of one nation by "transplanted" people of another nation.*

Coloni disease.

Fake was the buzzword. As well as some ruder assertions of sufferers' poor mental health. I found images of body parts: a woman pulling out her bottom lip, showing a bore hole where one of 'them' had dug through. A man holding a copy of an x-ray, a small cathedral ornately carved into his pelvis, 'so advanced' read the caption. A foot, swollen with fluid, where they had restricted the blood flow to extract iron. A collapsed inner thigh, where they'd harvested the fat. Then there were the cures: Diazepam colonic irrigations, blood letting and amputation.

It all sent my head spinning. I thought to call the hospital to ask whether I was actually there this morning. I tapped my head a couple of times, which seemed like the appropriate test for reality. There was no way to tell, though it felt real enough.

I resolved that I was going to do more than 'cope'. Nothing was going to change. The mornings stayed the same – coffee, hot water, milk. I added painkillers to help smooth things along. The pain was still there. But when I left my flat, I walked without a limp.

I told nobody about my coloni. But continued scrolling through the images and accounts hidden in pockets of the internet.

I looked at getting away. To the hot forests of Matang or the Namibian desert.

In my dreams I was Gulliver, wrecked, washed up on a beach, tied down with ropes from my forehead to my toes. There were tiny people surrounding me with swords and axes, cutting off my leg hair to stuff their pillows. I watched my body being hollowed out from the inside, my legs, arms and torso melting like snow. I would wake up clasping my headboard. It was my mind that became ill, tired, as I cycled through the days.

A week after diagnosis, sitting opposite Doctor B. 'How was I infected?'

'Do you swim?' she said.

'I do. Was I infected at the pool?'

'It could have been there. It could have been anywhere.'

'Why did you ask if I swam?'

'You look like a swimmer,' she said.

It was clear that Doctor B's knowledge of Coloni didn't go much further than the leaflet, but she told me about a clinical trial.

'The trial is helping us learn huge amounts every day,' she said. Clearly buoyed by this thought, she stood up and paced the room. 'We know that it doesn't behave like a normal disease.' Stopping by the window. 'They're individuals. Colonites, as we call them, are not restricted to the automatic invasive tactics of viruses or bacteria. They might just be reasonable.'

'You can talk them out of it?'

'We call it a negotiation, will you be part of it?'

'Yes,' I said. No hesitation. I wanted rid of it. I wanted to be normal. I wanted the pain gone, the days like other days: coffee, shower, shit to do.

'OK then, let's get going.' She opened the door, letting hospital sounds wash in and around the room.

'Right now?'

'Do you have somewhere else to be?'

She lead me down a corridor, then another, and another into the depths of the hospital. The corridor opened out onto a ward, beds lining the walls, some occupied, toes poking out from behind blue curtains. A generous sprinkling of white coats. Nurses wheeling people in and out via a door at the far end.

'I'm going to ask you to sign this.' Doctor B waved a piece of paper, gave me a pen. 'Nothing to worry about, we just don't want this trial in the public eye.'

'Is the government running the trial?'

'Oh God no,' she said, 'we don't want the government having control of this.'

I'd waited on the bed for about thirty minutes, I guessed. There wasn't a clock. My belongings stored in another room. The bed opposite me was empty. I passed the time listening to the faint echo of rolling wheels outside the door and the murmuring of conversation.

Eventually, a pair of doctors appeared at the foot of my bed, pouring over a flip chart. They slid up either side of me, introduced themselves as Doctor C and Doctor D, smiling cold concern. They said that this trial could help me take control of my illness. They had already made some progress with their research into 'Coloni Negotiation.'

They measured my height, weight, blood pressure, asked me questions about my lifestyle, family history. Then they gripped either side of my bed and wheeled me toward the far end doors. I was pushed down a corridor and into a room, lined on every wall with some heavy looking machinery. I recognised a big white rocket pod as an MRI machine.

They helped me onto the table and retreated into an adjoining room. I slid into the scanner. It was a blinding white, which seemed to swallow me up.

'Hold still.' Through an intercom.

The machine clicked and banged. When it was over, I was moved into the room with them. They scrutinised the scans.

'How's your leg?'

I understood that the scan had shown them something. So I took a mental trip down my thigh to my toes.

'There is a...numbness, in my toes.'

'There's a structure around one of your veins. Looks like it's pressing on a nerve,' said Doctor D.

She swivelled the screen.

'I don't want to look,' I said, turning onto my side. I felt cold air slink into the back of my gown, down my spine, all the way to my numb toes. I was numb. I wanted the body to work, to forget it, to keep that veil of normality between me and everything that's under my skin.

'It looks like a dam, restricting blood flow.'

'What'll happen to my leg?' I said.

'There's a risk of permanent loss of sensation. We can try to stop that,' said Doctor C. 'Lie flat please.'

I turned onto my back. While Doctor D wheeled over a trolley loaded with radio equipment.

'They've responded well to Morse Code.'

She picked up a long needle, attached at one end to a wire, which was plugged into a monitor and keyboard. 'This is a small microphone.'

'That's going into me?'

'Yes, this will both emit the sound and pick up any response.'

She must have noticed the sweat pop from my brow. 'Just a scratch,' she said, and placed a hand on my arm.

They gave me some earplugs, because of the high pitched sounds emitted. Both wore headphones. Doctor D typed a message, it must have been twenty minutes before something came through.

I took out an earplug. 'What are you saying?'

'We're asking if they understand.'

The thought of colonites rapping morse code onto my thigh bone rattled me. Then, as Doctor D began typing again, the high pitched noise from the machine shot through my eardrum. I felt nausea.

'I'm going to be sick,' I said. The other ear plug popped out as I sat up. Doctor C rushed towards me with a bowl.

They wheeled me back onto the ward, although I would have preferred to walk.

'They haven't moved further than the leg.' Doctor C handed me a book, a diary, with a diagram of a body on each page, on which I was to mark out any strange sensations. 'Start with your toes.'

I took the book. My bags were given back to me and I was led through the maze to the exit, they gave me an appointment for a few days time.

'Listen to your body,' she said.

'How?' I said.

Leaving the hospital, a man approached me — dark skin, and young lines at the corners of his brown eyes. He saw me being wheeled into the negotiation room earlier and wanted me to join his group. 'We support each other, online,' he said. We went for a drink, so he could hear my story.

He was at the bar, I glanced around at the other punters. At the bored faces, hands under chins, the jovial ones with pints in their hands, eyes fixed on the TV screen or their friends. I listened to the muffled music crackling gently from the speaker above my head. It had been a long time since I'd killed time like that.

He returned with wine.

'What's your group called?' I said.

'The Anti-coloni,' he said.

'That's intense.'

'This is intense,' he said. His eyes fixed on mine, he took a sip of his wine.

'I write a small bio for everyone joining the group, to introduce you.'

'Ok, ask away.'

'Your name? You can give a false name, most do.' He took out his phone.

'Hedda.'

'Your job?'

'Important.'

'Your greatest fear?'

'Being a prisoner in my body. Or...losing control of it.'

Showing me his phone, we scrolled through pages of The Anti-Colony. Some were part of the same clinical trial — 'Long negotiation today, blood pooling receding!' There were condolences at lack of progress, and advice, 'There's no quick

fix, don't be tempted by the miracle cures.' He said that I would receive an invite to the group via email. Then I could post whenever I wanted, there were people to help me through.

That night, I looked at the diary. Traced my finger over the black lines of the diagram.

I slid my hand down to my left foot. The sensation dissolving as my fingers touched my heel, then toes.

'You're clever,' I said to the room, and glanced over at my kitchen. It was full of vegetables of the highest quality, fruit that was bright, bursting with vitamin and mineral brilliance. The fridge was full of soup and salads and stews and other things that I'd hoped would fill my blood with iron, my bones with so much mineral that they would always be satisfied. What good was it?

I traced a finger over my own lines. From my hairline, over the faint lines in my forehead, to my collar bones. I mapped them onto the diagram, like newly chartered territory. I mapped each mole, birthmark, each stray hair that had evaded the razor's edge, spots and imperfections I'd tried to ignore, or to cover, scars, markers of past pain. My crooked nose, my bunion, my sleepy eyes.

I touched it all to catch up with her. She who was always five steps ahead of me, she that does and me that is.

'Did you have intercourse?' said Doctor E. I blushed up to my eyelids.

'Excuse me?' I said.

'I'm sorry, I spoke out of turn.' She paused, then raised her eyebrows. 'Well?'

I regretted saying anything about my meeting with Mr. Anti-Coloni.

'I've read on the internet that the disease is fake, non-existent.' I said.

'It's incredibly rare, unstudied, unrecognised.' She removed her glasses. 'We prefer it that way. We can analyse it in peace, without any interference.'

'Will they kill me?' I said.

'Did you read the leaflet?'

'Yes but it didn't explain anything. I've never been pregnant.'

'Not everything needs to be explained. Just do as it says.'

'You can't just scrape them out?' I said.

'No, we can't.'

She rolled up her sleeves and pursed her lips. 'We don't know what they are.' Tapping her nail on the desk. 'They're possibly even human.' Tap, tap, tap. 'Something like us.'

'Can you stop tapping, please?'

She put a hand on my knee.

'Depending on how well they're doing, with regards to population size, technology and all that, another army of colonites coming into contact with yours could be, bloody. In not too long you could have bodies festering in your veins, your arteries.'

My mind couldn't grasp it.

'I've had to stop working for a while.' I said.

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'I only get six months to be sick. Do you think I'll get better in six months?'

'We hope so.'

The next negotiation. I let them get on with it. I lay back, stared at the ceiling and pushed in the earplugs as far as they would go. Doctor D's soundless typing seemed so remote. The pinch in my leg as the needle-microphone went in, seemed to be happening to someone else reporting the feeling to me. The Morse Code, a series of clicks, vibrated along my thigh like the stretched cow skin of a drum. I could feel my body pulsing with my heart beat. I'd never felt my blood pump with such force.

Doctor C leaned over me and spoke. I read the word 'sorry' on her lips, between the other words, the slow opening and closing of her mouth.

Home. I sat on the bed, then flopped backwards. The numbness was creeping up my left side. It had spread far from my toes, past my hip and was encroaching on my arm. I felt myself exhale, then inhale. I felt my back warm on the sheets and stretched my arms above my head. My breasts shifted softly under my t-shirt, falling to either side.

How long before they have my lungs? Have monopoly on the air inside, so that I have to bargain for each breath of oxygen. How long before it was they who would tell my head to turn left, or right? They could already decide whether the blood in my leg would flow, or not flow. Should I surrender, and hope that they take care of me, or should I fight and kill and maybe die?

I ran a bath.

I raised a leg.

Getting in was difficult. I had always taken for granted the ease of standing on one leg, without having to cling, white-knuckled, to the side of the bath.

I miss the pinch of hot water on my toes.

The next leg was easier. I lowered myself, skin submerged, dewy and hot. I put my ears under water, hearing my body as if from the inside. The churn of my stomach, like water gushing down a stream and my blood, sounded nothing like liquid, but a stampede. I heard a thousand hoofed feet. I swallowed, the squelch of mud underfoot. I let out a breath, a crowd cheering in the distance. My heart, a soft knock at the door. Every creak and crack of bone like thunder, my neck groaned as I raised my head.

I looked down at my stomach rising out of the water, like an island in the sea. I'm marooned here. A line of hair sprouted from my belly, to between my legs, wet and thick, a mangrove forest. I listened hard for the sound of birds, and falling fruit.

About the Writer

Vanessa Onwuemezi is a writer and poet living in London. She is working on a collection of short stories which she plans to publish, as well as compiling a collection of poetry. She received a commendation for her flash fiction *The Crossing*, from Bare Fiction magazine (2017), and her short story *Swim* has been published in the *Mechanics Institute Review Online* (2018).



Vanessa recently graduated from the MA Creative Writing Course at Birkbeck, University of London. She has a BA in Biological Sciences, which at first glance might seem worlds away from her current occupation as a writer, but she feels that what motivated her to study biology – a great curiosity about the world, nature and humanity – is also what motivates her to write.

Her approach is very philosophical, her writing and poetry explores what it is to be human and how our experiences can teach us to understand ourselves. She learned to speak French while living in Paris for a few years, and feels that learning another language awakened her to new possibilities for the literary form. She enjoys writing short stories as they allow her to experiment with the form, taking risks in order to express her sense of the world with immediacy. She believes that language needs to be used in new, unexpected ways to bring freshness to the text.

She is very interested in artist collaborations, having worked recently with the writer Martin Dufield in producing the accompanying text for the photography exhibition by Alex Stone, *INTERVENTION I* (2018). Her writing and poetry is very visual in its approach and she enjoys artistic exchange to help her to find and share new ways of seeing. She is currently working on an illustrated book in collaboration with artist Lauren Keeley to be published next year, an excerpt of which will be shown at Frieze 2018.

Links to Vanessa's work can be found here:

Swim, (The MIR Online, 2018) <http://mironline.org/swim-by-vanessa-onwuemezi/>

INTERVENTION I, (Alex Stone, 2018) <https://www.alexmstone.com/865004006353/>