

# TLC Showcase

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## AKEEM BALOGUN

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## Introduction to 'Expressions'

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I began working on the stories that would appear in *Expressions* long before I knew I was going to create a short story collection. Besides myself, The Literary Consultancy (TLC) were the first to see the beginnings of this collection. This occurred through me submitting a story to Wasifiri's New Writing Prize, where I was met with a response from the magazine offering me an opportunity to have my writing looked at by TLC through its Free Reads Scheme.

The stories I have written for *Expressions* are a mixture of older pieces that I have continued to improve as well as more recent ones that I am writing now. The story in this showcase, *In-Between Curtains*, is one I thought of a few years ago, although I didn't write it at the time as I wasn't able to make it take shape on paper the way I imagined it, and I refrained from writing it until I had become better versed in writing fiction.

*In-between Curtains* can be described as a story about desire, habit and loneliness. I wanted to take interest and attraction and turn them into something that would be uncomfortable for the reader but still enjoyable due to a writing style that is economic and almost detached, meaning that the reader can have a clear understanding of the character and her life. This style of writing, as well as similar themes, runs throughout much of my fiction, but *In-between Curtains* is a distinctive piece for me due to its lack of dialogue and its touch on the erotic, which I don't explore often.

After submitting my manuscript to TLC, which included *In-between Curtains*, the report I received from my reader, the author Ray Robinson, gave me not only constructive feedback that made me more aware of what I can do to improve my writing, but it was also encouraging. Encouragement isn't something every writer needs, wants or is looking for, but it's something that is immensely motivating when it's received. The showcase you're reading now is a result of that encouragement, and it is a result of the combination of efforts made by myself, the writer, Wasifiri, the publication, The Literary Consultancy, in the form of the great work done by Aki Schilz, and the reader, Ray Robinson.

Ultimately, *In-between Curtains* is from a collection that has yet to be completed, and it is only a small part of what will be *Expressions*, but I have chosen this story in particular as I have discarded countless ideas throughout the years, but *In-between Curtains* is one I have held onto.

When I was finally able to make *In-between Curtains* come together the way I envisioned it, it confirmed something a lecturer of mine from Edge Hill University, Carys Bray, said when I asked her at the Off the Shelf Festival, "How do you know when your writing is good enough?" Her answer was, "When you can make your writing appear on paper exactly as you imagined it."

## 'In-between Curtains'

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A short story from *Expressions* by Akeem Balogun

Tanika's curtains were held apart by their holdbacks as she watched him through her window. He looked small from the distance she was at, but she could see him well enough to make out the check on his shirt when he took his jacket off. She held onto one of the curtains smiling. He sat down facing his window, and, thinking he was going to glance through it, Tanika pretended she was adjusting her curtains for a moment before watching him again. He was on his phone. "C'mon," Tanika whispered. He put his phone down and began to lift his shirt over his head. Tanika stared with her mouth slightly agape as he stood up and took his trousers off. She could see his blue and white dotted trunks and leaned forward to better see the grooves in his body that separated the muscles of his back, arms and thighs. She watched him move about his room and pulled her curtains together until they made a gap that left just enough space for her to see him. She held both curtains at the sides of her face for a few more moments before shutting them once he had started to put his casual clothing on. She let out a deep breath then sat down and looked around at her untidy room.

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The following morning, a ring loud enough to make her wince as it woke her made Tanika dig her face into her pillow. She swore and felt around for the alarm clock. When she found it she turned it off and lifted it. It was Saturday. She set it so it wouldn't go off for the rest of the weekend then wiped the dribble from her mouth and rolled over to see the light waiting behind the curtains.

She made herself breakfast and took glances at his window as she ate while watching TV. His curtains were shut.

Once Tanika had finished, she began to tidy her room, which took her into the afternoon. Afterwards, she sat in her bed reading. When the sunlight began to reduce she turned her light on and was about to half close her curtains when she saw his open. Condensation was on his window. Tanika pulled her curtains back and watched as his body moved up and down over someone, but she couldn't see

much more from her room due to the liquid spreading on his window. She moved her chair so that it was directly facing her window and sat down. Now, she could see his large shoulders tense as he held himself up. She watched with her hands holding onto her knees and her legs tightly closed. As the minutes passed her lips dried, and she started to feel uncomfortable in her chair, but she stayed seated despite only being able to see part of his toffee-coloured skin. She licked her lips and swallowed as she continued to watch. The figure beneath him made a gesture towards the window, and Tanika saw him stand up. She was about to move but realised how stiff she was from sitting for so long, and as he approached his window she saw him look at her. He stood still holding both curtains with his front bare. Tanika's mouth fell open, and she got up. She stared back at him and watched as the woman in his bed climbed out while holding the quilt over her body. Tanika saw the woman's mouth drop when she saw her. The woman shouted something at him before yanking the curtains together. Tanika remained still and looked at the ripples in the material of his dark blue curtains before shutting her own.

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It was mid-afternoon when Tanika woke up the next day. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and walked into the kitchen. Her cupboards were empty, and in the fridge she found only things she would have to prepare. She went back to her room and changed into baggy jogging bottoms stained with food before tying her hair back with an elastic band and putting on a large coat. She carried her purse and left her apartment.

After she had bought what she needed, she made her way home. She watched the floor while she walked, and as she neared her apartment she looked up when she thought someone was walking directly towards her. She saw him approaching. He was staring at her. Tanika thought about how untidy she looked and tried not to look at him. As he passed he leaned towards her, and Tanika felt his warm breath in her ear, "Pervert," he whispered. She turned to see him walking away and heard him laughing to himself in a low voice.

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Tanika opened the door to her flat and separated her shopping into the fridge and cupboards. She hung her coat up and went into her bedroom before taking off her

shoes, bottoms and coat. Her curtains were shut, but she didn't open them and instead lay in her bed staring in the darkness until she fell asleep.

She woke up in the evening a few hours later and looked on her phone to see how much of the day was left. She got up and went to her window before separating her curtains by a fraction to see the tired sunlight lingering. She opened them wider allowing the little light left of the day to come in then turned her lights on. His light was on, but Tanika didn't see him in his room. She turned away and switched on the television. After a while she looked through her window again and thought she saw him looking into her room. Tanika stood up and walked over to her window while trying to not look through the glass. She started bringing her curtains together but couldn't help looking forward. He was staring at her. She stared back, and he brought his hands to the neck of his shirt. Tanika stopped pulling her curtains apart and began squeezing the fabric in her hand as she watched him take his clothes off.

## About the Writer

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Akeem Balogun writes in order to capture and share the most entertaining events of his imagination. He was born in Brixton, London, and began writing fiction as a teenager before studying creative Writing at Edge Hill University, where he was taught by the likes of Ailsa Cox and Carys Bray.



In 2013 he created the website Inkposts (<https://inkposts.com/>), a place where writers can share their work online with guaranteed readership. He has had his fiction appear in Notes from the Underground, In The red, Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine, Shedloads of Work, as well as in Now Then Magazine, which he is now a regular contributor of, and elsewhere. He was also one of the winners of the Off the Shelf Retail Tales competition.

His own website, Written Gallery (<http://www.writtengallery.com/>), will be home to selected stories of his and more. He is currently working on the stories that will make up his collection *Expressions*.

He lives and works in Sheffield, UK, where he spends most of his time writing, enjoying music and allowing himself to be distracted by day-to-day life.

You can keep up with Akeem on Twitter @AkeemWrites and on Facebook.

You can read more of Akeem's writing on Written Gallery.