[REVIEW]: Writing Rejection in *This Little Light of Mine*

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún
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My encounter with Troy Onyango's story in *Origami* was love at first sight. Struck by the story's opening sentence: *First, he plucks a small part of himself and folds it in half*; I surrendered to the intimacy of those words that pronounced Onyango as a writer that cares about the efficiency of a sentence. But most of all, this story's emotional politics thrums in my head when I think of good writing. Published in *Doek!*, *This Little Light of Mine* is one of the shortlisted stories for the 2021 Caine Prize. It continues that tradition established in Onyango's earlier works – writing explorations of contemporary rejection, isolation and conflict. In *This Little Light of Mine*, Onyango calls attention to the ignored and the afterthought in the society. He arouses our interest in those whose bodies spell rejection and stigma for them in social space.

Most of Onyango's work thumps with a potency of the interior that he relates empathetically in *This Little Light of Mine*. The story is about Evans and his foray into dating after a ghastly accident leaves him disabled. We see him in conversation on an 'app' with someone, who sounds like a potential romantic interest. The intention, it seems, is for them to eventually meet in person but both are insincere in parts during this performativity of courtship. As the story progresses, trauma of his disability has spilled over his life is palpable, evident in his choice to avoid public places or refusing his brother's suggestion to move in with him – the thick loneliness that he is desperate to scrape off becomes his only friend.

There is a strong sense of reckoning that Evans undergoes as he adjusts to his new corporeal circumstance but it's this lingering anticipatory rejection in which the character seems to live under now since the accident. His partner of three years leaving him because they *"don't want to be, uhmm, whats the phrase, held back by all of this"* further entrenches a rejection he is already feeling. This is understandable because he feels different now but the self-inflicted suffocation becomes the demon he is battling most and not the rejection of others – he rejects himself before anyone can. As Evans communicates with his potential romantic interest via the 'app', his

interactions are a conflicted assortment of desperation and not-doing-too-much to seem desperate. One cannot deny how relatable this conflict is, it is fairly common when in the beginning throws with someone you like – Onyango captures this millennial angst neatly. Even though it is not completely clear if he actually likes this person or they only present an opportunity to not be alone for the first time in a while, these elements are weaved together with endearing maturity. Another crucial moment is when he confronts this potential love interest after they lie to him. His direct approach at addressing this hurt, seems unlike the character we have come to know until that point in the story. It's a glaringly out of character moment that gives me a strange hope – that humans always have the propensity to surprise and transform.

This Little Light of Mine is also a work of the body. Yes, it's in the obvious occurrence of Evans losing his mobility after the accident. It's also about how Onyango writes about this body. In the beginning, there is heaviness about the body, its isolation and its fixedness. But towards the end, there is a lightness, "*his body feels awake*" he even says. Again, this dark and light gleams in the story, how the essence of humanity is a duelling conflict and how we exist in a balancing act of heaviness and lightness, like the body, like the spirit, like love. It is Cartesian. Through Evan's struggle, it is clear that there is a strong interconnection that exists between body and spirit. If your body is hampered, your spirit will be too and vice versa. Evan also feels trapped in his body, he is learning his body anew after the accident but the inadequacy he feels about his body, seeps into how he thinks about himself and the perception he thinks people have of him. He feels unwhole and it triggers his desperation to have this person come over but also not. Onyango continues to imagine formations of the body by introducing a smidgeon of eroticism, albeit briefly. I appreciate the inclusion of such moments that map sexuality and sensuality onto disabled bodies. I think as a society, we tend to view people living with disabilities within their bodily limits and diminish their multiplicity. When Evans expresses that he is horny or when he masturbates, it is a significant reminder that normative definitions of sexuality omit disabled people and I had to confront my own learned ableist blind spots. To tether Evans and his body to pleasure, births him into a bigger sense of wholeness too, that whatever inadequacy he feels, there is still a full spectrum of living available to him and as Sonali Shah says, 'disabled people are sexual citizens too'.

A space in the story that may be overlooked as such is the internet. Onyango constructs the internet as a constant but quiet presence throughout the story. The internet is how he maintains a connection with the world, how he initiates romantic pursuits and it's his companion as he works (via Youtube). The internet is also how he remains tethered to his past, by using images from before the accident. This feels like a lie but the internet is a space in which the impossibility of being anything you desire suddenly becomes very possible. Evan, with his images of his able-bodied past self, can be confident and graze bits of intimacy but in reality, he hasn't felt that in a long time. Evan's relationship with the internet is one oscillating between friend and foe. *This Little Light of Mine* deserves this accolade, for its immersive spirit and stirring resonance. Here, Onyango shows with much skill and staggered tension why he is on this shortlist.

Zanta Nkumane is a writer, journalist and ex-scientist.