

Publisher & Creative Director: Nick Wells
Senior Project Editor: Gillian Whitaker

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Foreword

by Eugen Bacon



Once upon a time, we were governed by the moon. Our bodies, water poured into skin, swirling around bone and sinew, were as drawn to her as the tides. After all, what were we but little oceans, waves cresting and falling against the coast of history?

‘Wild’

EXISTENCES AGO when I started scribbling fiction in earnest, someone told me the short form is a dying art. Despite its looming demise and imprecise placement and definition, I found soaring captivation in the short story – it’s one of the most elusive literary forms.

There are no cast-iron rules about short-story writing, even on word count. Author A.L. Kennedy in her essay ‘Small in a Way that a Bullet Is Small’, published in *The*

Short Story (2008) edited by Ailsa Cox, asks, 'Where do you draw the line formally between a novella and a long short story and a short-short story and a literary letter?' The enduring blurring of boundaries of the short form exhibit themselves in ranging award rules on word count on what posits as sudden fiction, shorter fiction or a novelette.

I am exhilarated today to see the short story, perhaps more so in speculative fiction, pulsing with vigour and accessibility, and with no mind to perish any time soon. In its capacity to allow extraordinary storytelling in the literal sense of the word – odd, unexpected – speculative fiction insists on an investment in worldbuilding. Remember the richly invented worlds and made-up languages of J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, the visionary topography and ingenious perspective that teleport you to infinite possibilities inside the fictional realm of the author's originality.

Such inventiveness stands out in Cheryl S. Ntuny's disquieting collection *Black Friday* and its futuristic worlds and their hosting of rules, gatekeepers and possibilities. There's much to adore about these Afrocentric stories that showcase the ecstasies and dreads of community, as you question, together with the protagonists, what it means to be connected or 'unplugged'.

The miscellany engages with difference and reminds you of the power of storytelling, the measure of knowledge and the significance of belonging. Reading each narrative, you get a sense that this is an author who, like her characters, lives and loves deeply, who, in almost auto-ethnographical fictions, feels intensely and, in so doing, empowers herself and the reader to 'reach the impossible'. Ntummy paints a vivid world that's terrifying for the ominous cautions into the near future it casts. Characters find themselves inhabiting spaces that eradicate choice between coping and living, tradition and indoctrination, and those who insist on staying different get to fully realise consequences.

The writing is simulative – decentralised and offering new centres of meaning. It does this in the titular dystopian story, 'Black Friday', with its Protectorate and the Wretched, tanks and riot squads, placards and slogans in parallel protagonists – one obsessed with carnage, the other driven by stats, video footage and 'the experience'. The writing is clean, personal and inventive. It allows the reader to uncover meaning, as in 'Click Bait', a circular story on what it means to encounter knowledge in a near future new-new South Africa.

'The Way of Ba'agh' speaks to itself as an elegant dark horror in a ritualistic cannibalism that is also a cycle of living.

In this finalist story in the Nommo Awards for speculative fiction by Africans, Ntumy spotlights the uniqueness of the Sauúiverse, an Afrocentric world, and its use of song and sound magic. The poignant story, again, resounding in first person and this time from the perspective of a nonhumanoid, offers up themes of incarceration and sacrifice.

Hugging her Ghanian roots and reinventing the shades and silhouettes of new and old Asante cities, Ntumy plunges you into philosophical, yet stark, dystopian worlds, petrifying in their insistence of intolerable embodiment. *Black Friday* entices you with yams, cassava and okra, ushers you to meet characters named Edem, Fafa, Sese, Sebele, Yoliswa, Nene, Kodzo, Kweka, Misa, Aten, Zanele, Lindiwe... and buries you into an immersive experience of literary fragments that are not short-short stories but mostly long short stories at between 5,000 to 6,000 words, like 'Godmother' – with its Department of Authentication and an all-seeing AI.

Shorter tales arrive at about 2,000 to 3,000 words, and are just as cunning in their simulations, convictions, manipulations and fellowships, how they line you up to face ideals, trust, betrayal and a hunger to believe. You encounter 'Empathy' – that opens with a suicide, and

‘Easing In’ – with its tech, labs and ‘organorugs’, and they both leave you pondering how to guard those you love from conditioning worlds.

But there is no fear, only resolve and a glimmer of excitement. What we have is a half-life. There is nothing to lose. – ‘Sikami’ is a call to transformation magic for the greater good, as ‘Silverfish’ lusters a devouring light straight into your unblinking eye, and insists up close that you reconnoiter the arteries of human existence. ‘Dream State’ grinds you with existential questions, like what is the future, what does it mean to dream, who is family, what, why, where, when is belief?

Listen.

‘The Storymage’ yarns you to a water world where stories are truth serums, before ‘The Ghost of Dzablui Estate’ nudges you to plug into the Volta-Mind, and network into a connection with the self and other and the entombing world around you, to shore up a new allegiance to Ashanti-Mind as you honour the Meld.

Summer brings a sick, sweet beat, sticky and inescapable. – ‘The Mother’ arrives tiny and just as impactful in a story of tragedy and hope. Meet body walking and cocooned babies in ‘Lest We Forget’ that stretches your imagination. More radical dystopias and enforced contracts materialise

in 'The Feeding Ground'. Ntuny buoys her protagonists with humanity, and you cannot help but root for them as they exhibit the type of curiosity that doesn't kill a cat.

'Lady Abra's Butterflies' opens with a readerly address in a metafictional story-within-a-story that is also an odyssey into the village of butterflies. There's more to a dress than meets the eye in 'Armour' that explores belief. Confront another luminous gown in 'The Wedding Dress', a benevolent tale that births itself from the sweat and blood of devotion.

Riveting stories like the titular 'Black Friday' accomplish – seemingly without effort – what one writer, Paul Ariss, says good short stories do: they 'come to visit for a while, take you somewhere you didn't expect and then put you back where you started before you'd even realised you were gone' (2015).

Amen to literary letters and the short form in all its palimpsests.

Black Friday shuttles you in transportive fiction from your chair to infinite possibilities inside this author's resourcefulness from unwanted occupation, birthright, to what is the colour of pain? In 18 stirring stories that are complete in their incompleteness, a perfect half of them original, Cheryl S. Ntuny gifts you with artistic

constructions that are totalities. She magiks in mages, gods, hybrids, soldiers and ordinary people – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, aunties, cousins – reminding you how very much alive is the beating heart of the short form.

Yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Eugen Bacon

*British Fantasy Award-winner and Philip K. Dick
Award finalist*