

BENSON TJ

Alone in the Trees

On an errand as a little boy, I stumbled upon a yellow five-petaled flower beside the street, which my seven-year-old mind believed to be the remnants of a shooting star. I picked it up, and it was soft to touch. But it felt out of this world somehow. And I felt marked, chosen for something special. That would be the beginning of my warped way of perceiving life, which I would later encounter in my prose as “Magical Realism.”

There are other encounters with “nature” in my life that would be viewed as supernatural, like my mother believing the half dozen wild cats that climbed my bedroom window to keep vigilance over me through the night to be witches, but one lasting impact magical nature has had on me has been the mysterious sensation of being protected by it, being in carried in it. Growing up in the nineties, I was somewhat shielded from the horrors of the military regimes and coups even though I was raised in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria because my father would rather switch off the news and take me outside to the garden. That, of course, did not mean he didn’t have hushed conversations with friends in the evenings like civil servants across the country did back then. This time spent in nature wasn’t a denial of reality.

When I lost my parents, the first place I was taken—was my father’s village. During the months I spent there, I would follow my relatives away from human settlements and markets, into the forests to farms. What I had felt earlier as a child gardening with my father was suddenly magnified into acres and acres as far as my eyes could see, and it kept wanting to come back. It wasn’t like the horrors I had faced post my parents’ death disappeared in the forest, but it ceased to matter so much when I was surrounded by the whistles of birds, the cicada of insects, the sweet croaking of brooks, the almost perpetual petrichor mixed with the scent of strange flowers and leaves, the communion of trees... How could I feel alone? It was too easy to leave my grief in the city.

This feeling is the most supernatural experience I have had that I have continued to have. I now prescribe spending time in nature, in all its forms, for whatever ailments I have, not because it can cure or make the pain disappear, but it can use it—it can transform that emptiness I feel into something. And this healing is more real to me than any miracle. The closest I have come to experiencing God. My tribespeople used to spend so much of their time in the forest. And scientists are beginning to catch up with the importance of this. Forest bathing, it is now called. Other forms of nature have also been made available to me. I have made it a practice to always look for the nearest body of water so I can empty the grief and longing bottled in my body for so long into the sea. When I would wake frantic into those long insomnia nights of the 2020 lockdown, I would be immediately soothed by the cawing of night birds, the rustle of the palm leaves swaying outside my window, and the meowing of a wild cat (sorry, mom).

The miracle of nature, its secret, is the promise of abundance, the real physical emphasis that we are not alone. We are never empty. It’s a perfect antidote to the Writer’s Block for me because when I surrender my empty mind or atrophied thoughts to it, I immediately reconnect. I thought I was a shy person who failed a lot until I started reconnecting to nature in my adulthood. Animals in the first neighborhood I lived alone in liked me for some reason, not just cats, but the bat that somehow found its way in and the duck that somehow sneaked into my bedroom to lay eggs in my wardrobe and squawked violently each time I tried to pick an outfit or the scorpion that crawled into my bedroom while I was having a video call with a girl I liked on valentine’s day.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, April 22, 2022

Khadija Bajaber (Kenya) / Abdelaziz Errachidi (Morocco) / TJ Benson (Nigeria) / Silvia Hosseini (Finland)

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Being in nature reminds us that if a plot or a life doesn't go the way we intend, it doesn't mean there is no order in the world. We are never alone. Forests have gone beyond what Darwinists assumed. Newer scientists have found trees don't out-compete each other for survival—rather they grow in harmony and surrender themselves to nurture the development of younger trees. I used to be shy when presenting my work in class or sharing my ideas with people because I was seeking validation and submitting myself to be measured. These days I work till I reach a level of quality then share with people instead of asking for their measure. Today I stand in the abundance of all the nature I have connected with and will connect to—to share what I have learned with you.

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