Transcript: 21 Revolutions Podcast

Podcast: Mangoes by Laura Marney

Artwork by: Craig Shearnon, DJCAD

**Laura Dolan:**

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**Laura Marney**

Hi I'm Laura Marney and I'm a writer novelist mostly I am was inspired to write this piece through a book that I found in the Women's Library which was in Barbara King solver's novel Poisonwood Bible and also a poem that I absolutely love by Kathleen Jamie called Meadow Suite and I've somehow managed to amalgamate both of those ideas into one short story at the time I was put I was really interested I still am really interested in what goes on in the Congo and the fact that so many people have um died in the the continuing conflict that goes on there I mean ever since the Rwandan thing we, we heard about that because it was so shocking but what's happening in the Congo is as nothing or rather what the Rwandan thing is as nothing compared to what's going on in the Congo and continues to go on um and there is some argument as to how many people have died um is it seven million people who have been killed by this war or is it just five million and when I thought is it just five million I was a bit shocked even at that idea um and that reminded me of a quote by Stalin who said the death of one man is a tragedy the death of a million is a statistic so instead of writing about this massive terrible thing that's happened I wanted just to write about one person and because I was writing it for the Women's Library and in Glasgow I wanted it to be a very Glaswegian voice.

Mango by Laura Marney

It's the same palaver every morning I go and stand in the queue for the pump and they all stand back five feet away from me nobody brings a tape measure but it's always about five feet I take a step for it they all take a step for it sometimes a dae it just to wind them up they're all watching me kidding on their no, and I take a step then another one then a do a big loud sigh then another one but this time they're all squashed together round the pump.

Dr Mukendi always shiriks me, "Lulu leave them alone" he says "they'll turn on you and you'll only have yourself to blame"

“I'm nowhere near them” I say, I know what it is they're jealous of me they're out there pummelling fufu all day with three or four weans to feed and oftentimes no man at their back, they see me sitting about in the complex getting my dinner put down to me and they're well jel. They think because I sleep on a nice clean ward instead of on the floor like they do, that I've got the life at Riley

“You know Lulu every living thing smells” Dr Mukendi says.

"Dead things stink too"

"yes you're quite right I should say then that all volatile solids such as you and me give off Esters or organic molecules inside your head here just behind your nose" he puts his pointing finger in the bridge of my nose I close my eyes to enjoy it but he takes away again "there are neurons nerve cells which have cilia tiny hairs to catch smells when we breathe in odour molecules stick to the cilia"

"that's disgusting" I say and Dr Mukendi laughs "molecules from inside my body go up inside their bodies, I'm penetrating them for five feet away? no wonder they hate me"

"they don't hate you Lulu they just don't..."

"The faces they pull, I make them want to puke"

 "they can't help that it's an automatic response our brains are capable of blocking all other Sensations excepting smell for instance if our brain decides it doesn't like a sight or sound it can veto to it but smell is the one sense not vetoed by the thalamus that's why it's so evocative regardless of whether the memory is pleasant or painful it's an excellent tool"

"what's excellent about being forced to smell a rank stench?"

"for survival it's an evolutionary hangover from when smell meant either food or danger having to smell everything is actually in our best interests."

"okay they have to smell me but they can just breathe it back out again."

 "actually they can't" Dr Mukendi says "any molecule that triggers a response in the olfactory nerve has entered us physiologically absorbed through the epithelium or the respiratory tract or it swallowed either way we ingest it and then it's part of us."

 "my molecules become part of them?"

 "exactly but not just yours, mine, everyone's we're all absorbing each other's molecules breathing each other's exhaled air, the human body is being recycled all the time cells are constantly dying and being replaced whole organs completely regenerated every baby is simply a reordering of recycled molecules we're in a Continuum with our environment"

 "is that supposed to make me feel better? I'm not wanting their manky molecules"

Dr Mukendi tuts, he wants everything to be fair and everybody to be nice he's a posh fella from Kinshasa, he doesn't know how things work out here, he does his best to keep the peace for the villagers but it's not easy, when he fills in the Médecins Sans Frontières South forms he always does a sour wee laugh when he writes the 'Democratic Republic of Congo' "There's nothing Democratic about this Republic" he says, he always says it, he's never done bumping his gums about how the DRC is the richest country in the world all the minerals we've got Cobalt, Coltan, diamonds and all what have you, and he gets right steamed up about the looting, especially whenever militia come through. He's not allowed to get involved, MSF rules, but last week a mob of raggedy arsed Interahamwe militia came through and took a couple of men. I say men, but really they were two wee boys maybe 11 and 13, the boys knew not to make a fuss but their mammy was greeting and screaming until her neighbours pulled her back and shoved her into her own hut. Dr Mukendi pushed his glasses up his face and shook his head

"Dr Mukendi" I said, I like saying his name out loud "if a lion comes and takes a zebra what can the other zebras do about it?" He didn't answer. "If she had kept up that balling, they'd have dragged her away as well, she's got two other weans to think about. Her neighbours did her favour."

I see the lassies in the village struggling to look after their weans, I could give them a hand, I was a good wee Auntie in my own village before I got married. But they don't want to know "you don't know me" I say, I don't say it out loud just to myself. "You swallow my molecules but you don't know me."

It was a militia that took me I don't know who they were, they weren't wearing uniforms RDC, FDLR, they're all the same. I didn't struggle, never made a sound. I just did what Mammy telt us to do when the soldiers came - shut your eyes, keep breathing and think hard about somewhere safe. While they were doing their grunting and groaning, inside my head I was sitting round the fire with my mammy and my granny and all the other weans and we were all singing:

"Ally Bally

Ally Bally Bee

Sittin' on yer mammy's knee"

They tore a branch off a big mango tree and used that. That's the Mai Mai trademark way of doing it, so they say.

"Waiting for a wee bawbee, to buy some Coulter's Candy"

They probably didn't want to use their bayonet and get it all bloody then they'd have to clean it. When they let me go I walk back to my Village but my husband threw me out. I took the peanuts he was going to sell at the market, I'm no thief but what else could I do? Six days of eating peanuts fair scunners you. I used to pure love peanuts. When I got here they gave me a bed in the ward, and pills three times a day. I thought that would make it heal up but when it didn't, I asked Dr Gustin and he said I need an operation.

I try to make myself useful about the compound I do all the cleaning and they don't let me cook and I do everything I can it helped Dr Mukendi, he says I'm the best assistant he's ever had. Most of the time I'm good. I tell myself to wait, to hold on and to haud ma weesht, but sometimes when I think about all the molecules inside me in my cells I lose the heid, I start screaming and greeting and going mental, I can't stop myself. He comes and sits at the end of my bed, shooshes me tells me I'm frightening the other patients, makes jokes tells me the villagers'll think they're killing me in this hospital and then they'll not bring their children in for treatment. "GOOD!" I say!

Dr Mukendi knows fine well I wouldn't hurt a wean, but one time I was shouting the odds, he lost it and all. His eyes were blazing and he started ranting about the richest country in the world, his face was all twisted and his spit was flying out his mouth. I didn't want to hear it again but he was squeezing my arm and shouting right into my face.

"yes, you want corrective surgery, of course you do, doesn't everybody? But where's the money to come from? There are just too many! You're not the only one; don't you understand there are two million of you? Join the queue Lulu!"

I know he didn't mean it, he said as much afterwards, he was stressed out and my shenanigans didn't help matters any. He said he was very very sorry. No as sorry as I was. I can be awful selfish sometimes.

A couple of days after that he took me into his office and showed me a letter. I've no idea what it said so he explained that he was referring me for surgery to another hospital. "I don't want to go to another hospital" I said "Don't worry Lulu you won't have to go into the bush we'll put you on a supply flight." "But can you not do it Dr Mukendi?" "I'm sorry Lulu, obstetric fistula surgery is rather specialized procedure. The doctors in Shamwana perform this operation all the time, you'll be in very safe hands." "Well what about Dr Gustin? I want to stay here." "I know you do." he sighed "but this is just a field hospital we haven't the facilities here. You do understand though don't you?Nothing is guaranteed, the internal damage they might not be able to fix it." "Will I be able to have children? 23 isn't too old is it doctor?"

 He squashed his lips together, "I don't think we can expect that much Lulu, I'm sorry." I had a wee think about that "will I die?" "There's always risks with surgery but you shouldn't worry." "I wisnae asking because I'm feart." He smiled at that. "You know, there's a famous argument in philosophy about a ship."

"a ship?" I said.

Sometimes he talks in riddles, I don't mind.

"If a ship goes on a long voyage and has to replace worn out planks until eventually every plank in the ship is replaced."

"Are you talking about molecules again?"

 "Exactly! You are the only person in this Village that takes the trouble to understand me, Lulu."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"It's still the same ship. The ship's identity doesn't reside in individual planks."

"Aye" I said "I was wondering about that, I was thinking that if if every molecule in my body ends up replaced, then how come I still look the same?"

"You're right our bodies can't grow new neurons the central nervous system cannot regrow that's why we can't fix spinal cord injuries. The one thing that remains inalienably unaltered on a cellular level is our brains and therefore our minds."

"So even if all my molecules change I'm still me?"

"Yes. You'll always be you, Lulu."

We both smiled.

I stayed awake all that night thinking about it. It was the best he's ever said to me.

I didn't ask him about dying because I was feart. I was just thinking about my last wishes. When I first came to the compound I telt Doctor Mukendi how I wanted to be buried and he promised me. He said he'd make sure they'd follow my instructions to the letter and I believed him. I've asked to be buried head first, lengthways. If they plant me upside down my body can give the seed nourishment, it can grow out my body and up towards the Sun.

When I first telt him, Dr Mukendi went, "The seed?"

"Fae the mango tree!" I said. He just nodded, never said any more about it.

"A young woman with your spirit, there's no reason why you wouldn't make a full recovery. We're going to miss you Lulu."

"Miss me? You'll no miss my pishy smell!"

"It's only a smell. We're used to it by now. We'll miss you."

Sometimes when I can't sleep in a ward I can make myself dream. In the dream there's something growing inside me. It grows, and grows till it bursts right out me. It's a mango; a mango that big I need to hold it in the crook of my arm. I peel the skin back a wee bit, and there she is peeking out. A wee baby.

When I have that dream, I wake up with the smell of mango in my nose.

I felt incredibly privileged to be invited to be involved in this project, mostly because it is going to become part of history and it's going to be a wonderful archive and secondly because of the amount of inspiration I've had from just seeing other people's work, the ideas that other people come up with, some of the other writers I'm amazed by the work they've come up with, and some of the artwork's fantastic as well. I think we punch way above our weight for talent in this city and I think it's time that you know we got together more and told the world that.

**Laura Dolan**

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