

## **Natal**

Courtia Newland

Those days, the spectral wanderings of Dad's aftershave were first warning – sharp and cloying Denim, or his favourite, Brut. I'd be sleepy, long dressed and fed, maybe watching videos or reading, though it's tough to remember the truth. The odour of B&H combined with aftershave, and he'd be there. Fresh white shirt, crisp slacks, a glint of lightweight gold. Shoes gleaming cowhide or bright imitation, combing his hair with a black fist Afropick while he studied himself in the mirror. Making crouched poses, grinning, saying 'Wah.' We'd wake my younger brother and Dad would lift him from the bed, outdoors and into the Capri, careful and slow. Winter air crisp, every surface diamond frost.

The ride, a safe haven of thrumming 3-litre engine, and the green Magic Tree that swung from the rear-view, a sweet-smelling victim. The snores of my brother and stepsister buckled between us. Up front, my step-Mum and Dad talked, though I only caught vague snatches as speakers vibrated with a bass I felt in my ribcage and thighs. I'd lean over the bucket seat to see twin booster amp lights bounce and fall, green into red, then dark. The consistent hiss of worn tape filling the car, the music soothing. Sometimes Dad would listen the pirates, Horizon, or LWR, though on blues nights he favoured his own selections, and it would be Sugar or Dennis, Yellowman or Eek-A-Mouse.

Two-wheel parked on an estate kerb, us kids walking sideways, bumping each other and rubbing at burning red eyes, letting adults guide our way. Even the block walls of the estate were star-lit with nocturnal magic; sometimes a cardboard box splayed open, a brick-shithouse boom-box

playing early rap, an older kid on his back like a spinning fan, hands on his crotch while his friends watched us pass, lead-gazing.

Bass, vibrating from an open door, louder as we approached. The scuff of group footsteps on bare, cold floor.

And Dad eased through the gentle knot of people holding white plastic cups, backs against passage walls as we trailed inside. Music like elemental force, heard and felt throughout the body, steaming clouds of curry goat, ganja, the barely heard cries of running children, our age and younger. My siblings joined their friends, but with me being older, I followed my Dad and step-Mum into the darkness of blues, the squeeze of pressing bodies, into shuffles and the pulsing drums of the dance, cocooned in black. Nothing to see, feeling. Nothing to touch, listening. Repeating echoes of voice and song, undeterred by anything, not even Dad's future absence, in wait amongst the unseen tableau of raised homemade speakers and turntables, the glow of the sound system's red light, the heat of our lifeblood, melancholy invitation.

Sweat trickling, pupils wide, my heart succumbed to amplified oscillations, I felt the call of rubicund earth beneath tough soles, where the flesh of land and living beings connected, whole, and we would travel into night without dread, invigorated by the wealth of encounters to come.

## **Courtia Newland**

Courtia Newland has published eight works of fiction including his debut, *The Scholar*. His latest novel, *A River Called Time*, was published by Canongate in 2021. A forthcoming collection of speculative fiction stories, *Cosmogramma*, will also be published this year. Newland's short stories have appeared in many anthologies, and have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and included in *Best of British Short Stories 2017*. He has been awarded the Tayner Barbers Award for science fiction writing and the Roland Rees Bursary for playwriting. He was previously associate lecturer in creative writing at the University of Westminster and is completing a PhD in creative writing. As a screenwriter he has co-written two feature length films for the Steve McQueen BBC series *Small Axe*, of which *Lovers Rock* was jury selected for Cannes, and opened New York Film Fest 2020. *Small Axe* won the LA Critics Circle award 2020 for Best Picture. *Impact*, an original feature, and *The Future Isn't What It Used to Be*, a science fiction short, are currently in development with Film Four.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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