Dear Reader,

After our 'pilot' Issue Zero, we are excited to introduce the official Issue One and to present two great new pieces by two Scotland-based authors.
Breve New Stories magazine is a young project that aims to celebrate new, original short fiction in print. It is dedicated to all the enthusiastic writers and readers out there, looking for new stories and waiting for their imaginations to be ignited.
Thank you for being part of Breve's community and for supporting this ambitious little magazine.

The Editor

Inside Issue One:

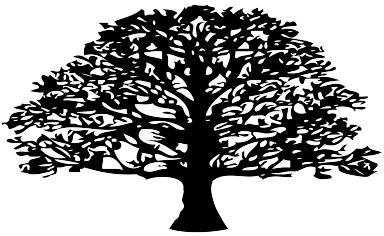
Zuri Mtu– Barbara Stevenson.....…..... 2

The Aberdeen Kayak– Michael Bloor.....13

The Authors.....16

Zuri Mtu

Barbara Stevenson



Kofi closed the door, balancing his fingertips in the joint to prevent a draught slamming it shut. He bowed so that his bony forehead touched his bony knees. His spine cracked as he stood up. His first task was to check the thermostat. He tapped it with his knuckle. On occasions the indicator had been known to jam. He checked the sprinkler timer was set correctly. When any adjustments had been made, he toured the room to make sure no jungle rats had burrowed their way

in overnight to gnaw on the bark with their yellow fangs. Then it was time for the methodical study of the trunk, using a magnifying glass to spot the first powdery signs of fungus or the puncture marks caused by pests. Only when the leaf by leaf inspection of the sacred tree was complete, could Kofi sit down and unwrap his butter sandwich.

Once a week, every Monday afternoon, there was the detailed measuring of the fertiliser – two scoops, flattened with a metal bar, mixed with water to reach the red line and heated to body temperature. Kofi had to drip the liquid over the base of the tree, not too fast or the mixture would spill unevenly and scald the roots. He marked everything down in a battered jotter with the stub end of a pencil. The height and width, the number of new leaves and the number of leaves lost. The presence of buds he marked with a special symbol, like that of a heart. Zuri Mtu, the ancient tree of their people, hadn't flowered for 2,597 days. It hadn't produced fruit for 4,842 days. It was over six hundred years old.

People said it was dying.

The forest surrounding the tree was cut down centuries

before to build the city. Trees across the country were chopped down. Zuri Mtu was the last of its kind. Kofi had tended it for thirty three years. His father, grandfather and great grand uncle tended it before him. The burden on him was heavy. He did not have a son and Zuri Mtu did not produce seeds. In the days before the protective tent was erected, before the heating system, controlled feeding tubes and daily watering regime were started, Zuri Mtu was at the mercy of the sun, droughts and sand storms. In those days it produced good fruit. Birds rested in its branches, taking twigs for their nests. Insects gobbled into the bark, leaving behind a green, flaky dust. Zuri Mtu embraced it all and flourished. It was happy. Now, to Kofi, the tree looked sad. Did it know it was the last of its kind?

Could it feel it was dying?

At eight in the evening, as the sun went down, Kofi once more bowed to the tree and silently closed the door before heading home. He lived alone, since his mother died, in a one-roomed apartment in a block of flats with no foundations - ready to crumble when the land shifted. In the morning when

he stepped outside to cross the street and walk the three miles to the nearest water pump he was met by goats and chickens. His nostrils were assailed by the aromas from pigswill and untended garbage left to rot in the sun. Refuse that even the beggars rejected. Babies wailed in his ears, growing thinner and fouler. Kofi washed at the pump then continued a further two miles to the tree. His sandals had holes in the soles and the thorns on the path scratched his feet. He was saving his wages to buy a new pair. He supped on boiled rice and vegetables grown in a window box, heated on a camp stove fuelled by goats' dung. He coughed his way through prayers before bed.

On Tuesdays Zuri Mtu received guests. Visitors came from the richer parts of the country and from foreign lands to pay their penny and admire the six hundred year old history lesson.

Look, don't touch.

Kofi took their money and tore off receipts from his book. He was happy to recount stories from past generations.

'Six hundred years old, you say?'

'Nearer seven.' Kofi would swell, choking with pride.

'The only tree of its kind in the country?'

'In the world.'

The tourists were impressed. They gave Kofi an extra penny. Today the group was smaller, but the lingering whiff of aftershave and body perfumes promised hefty tips. Kofi smiled round at them.

'All this must cost a fortune to maintain.'

The voice was nasal. Kofi wasn't sure whether to agree or deny it. He rubbed his fingers together.

'Zuri Mtu is a gift beyond cost.' He had heard his father say that and rub his hands together. It sounded clever.

'What does it do?'

'It is a tree.'

'All this heating, lighting and goodness knows how much water for a half dead lump of wood. Outside of this tent people are starving and dying of thirst. They are forced to walk miles for a few bucket of untreated water.' The female voice was loud and high pitched.

Kofi cowered, listening to the growing mumbles of

discontent.

'It is immoral.'

'Something should be done.'

'They could build hospitals with the money. Get decent plumbing in the schools. Provide meals for the elderly.'

'Zuri Mtu is a national treasure.' Kofi wiped his neck with his handkerchief. He would give these people their pennies back if they weren't happy.

The group wouldn't hear of this, but they left disgruntled. Some people were only happy when they were moaning, Kofi thought.

'Don't listen to them.' He wiped the lower leaves with his stained handkerchief. 'You are Zuri Mtu grown from the seed of the great tree of wisdom and knowledge, where birds of paradise frolic in the branches.'

The following Monday a group gathered outside the tent. Men with too much money to work and women who liked excitement. They carried banners. Kofi had never learned to read.

'Visiting is on a Tuesday.' Kofi said.

'We are not here to pay our pennies and stare at a tree.'

They told Kofi what their banners said.

Water for people, not trees.

Money for wards, not wood.

Kofi recognised one of the men from the previous week, but not the others. They didn't belong to the neighbourhood. Their clothes weren't the hand-me-down shreds of generations and they could write the words on their placards. Kofi squeezed past them with a toothless smile, ruffled by the elbows of two women as he opened the door.

'Blackleg. Scab.'

Kofi shut the door with less care than was due. He locked it behind him, bending over to regain his breath. 'Do not worry, Zuri Mtu. All this will be forgotten in a few days. You must have seen much of this in your long life.'

By the time Kofi left for home the protestors were gone, but their banners were left at the side of the road. They provided a surprise supper for a goat that was munching its way through 'books not bark'.

The next day the protestors were back; angrier and

complaining about their chewed up banners. They blamed Kofi for the damage.

'It is not my goat.' Kofi said.

They were joined by people from the shanty huts on the outskirts of the city - people with no jobs, no legs, missing eyes, pox scars and time on their missing hands. The group had a leader, a man no older than Kofi's cousin's son, with golden hair bleached by the sun. An Adonis in jeans and a well-ironed polo shirt.

'It is time, friends, to be free of meaningless traditions. It is time to put people first. What use is a barren tree? Step into that tent and you will be charged a penny to see water sprinkled into the air to keep a tree moist. There is enough water inside that tent to quench the city's thirst, but ask the old lady by the roadside why she falters. She has not drunk for two days. She is too weak to walk to the well. Ask the infant dying of diarrhoea why. The water is unclean. The money spent mollycoddling a piece of wood as if it were a premature baby should be spent on real children.'

The girl at the front cheered and the others joined in. They

moved to block the door of the tent.

'Excuse me please.' Kofi tried to get through. He had listened to what the young man said. He spoke well. Kofi didn't disagree with the fact that more should be done for the needy. More help should be given; more money spent, but why pick on Zuri Mtu? The tree was the last of its kind. Once it was gone, it would be no more.

'Forget the tree, old man. Get a proper job.'

The crowd surged round him, hands waving in the air, fingers prodding and pushing towards his face. He wanted to vanish into the air. For the first time in thirty three years Kofi didn't go to work. He turned round and trudged home wondering what he would do with the day. The following morning he set off early, hoping to avoid the demonstrators. The area was clear, but thick red tape was stuck across the door to the tent, barring his way.

No Entry.

'We've won.'

Kofi recognised the ringleader, standing alone with a whitened smile. 'No more money is to be wasted on a tree.'

'What about my job?' Kofi's knees shook.

'There are plenty of other jobs.'

Other jobs maybe, but nobody wanted a fifty year old, unskilled labourer. The jobs were taken by sober faced teenagers and family men in smart suits. Kofi walked the streets, waiting for the new schools and hospitals to be built with the money, hoping to apply for a job as a janitor. Nothing came. Three months after the tent surrounding Zuri Mtu was pulled down, the top branches snapped and fell to the ground with a crack like dry firewood. Another month and the leaves turned black and dropped onto the arid earth. In December the tree was declared a danger to the public and the chain saws moved in to demolish all that was left of the six hundred year old tree. The city was no better off. In fact it was poorer, because the visitors with their foreign accents and shiny pennies no longer came. Why should they? The demonstrators moved on to another city, another cause, freeing thousands from the shackles of ancient traditions.

Kofi stood in the sun, shielding his eyes, on the spot where Zuri Mtu had viewed the world. He was a simple man and his

simple thought was that there should be room in the world for simple people with simple ideas. Perhaps Zuri Mtu wasn't a descendent of the tree of wisdom and knowledge, carried from paradise on a cherry blossom breeze. Perhaps the great tree of wisdom and knowledge did not exist. Zuri Mtu was six hundred years old. It was the last of its kind. It had a spirit and that spirit had a voice and that voice had to be preserved. Kofi removed his hat to run his hands through what was left of his hair. Before putting it back on he paused to wipe the red sand that had gathered on the rim. He'd worn the hat to work every day for the past thirty three years. His father gave it to him the day he took over the role of keeper. A rite of passage. A simple gift. As Kofi rubbed the worn fabric he spotted something stuck in the fold. His knotted fingers freed the small, brown oval. Crinkled, but solid, it was a seed. A seed from Zuri Mtu. A gift to its loyal servant. Kofi held the seed between his forefinger and thumb, felt the life pulse within it and smiled.

The Aberdeen Kayak

Michael Bloor

Sometime between 1700 and 1720 (accounts vary) an Inuit man landed in a kayak near the mouth of the Rover Don in Aberdeenshire. The fishermen who found him put him in a cart and took him to a nearby cottage, where he was cared for, but he nevertheless died three days later. His kayak, of an antique Greenlandic design, can be seen in the Aberdeen University Anthropological Museum.

I saw the nauja wheeling overhead and then I saw the breaking line of the waves. The strange men found me, their words made no sense. I was weary and I slept.

This igloo is built of great stones, shaped like cut ice. Lumps of earth glow with terrible heat in the centre of the igloo, even though there is neither snow nor ice outside. I do no lie on warm, friendly skins, but on a structure made of very fine driftwood and filled with dried tussocks. The entrance is blocked by a huge slab of driftwood. Outside the entrance there are abominations.

The men and the women are kind, but they are ugly, with huge noses. The men have hair all over their faces; one of them is an anik, when he enters the igloo, he stands over me, clasps his hands together and chants. He shows me many small, thin pieces of skin, bound together and covered with tiny marks. He smiles; I think he has taken my kayak.

The food they give me is fearsomely hot. It burns my mouth.

These people crave heat: some of the men draw heat into their mouths by sucking on hollow bones. All I can eat are the eggs of the nauja.

I cannot return. I do not have my kayak and I do not know the way.

The Authors

Barbara Stevenson *is a veterinary surgeon, based in Orkney. She has a cat who likes to edit her work by and enjoys writing short stories and humorous sketches Barbara has written a novel.*

Michael Bloor *is a sociologist, living in Scotland. Since his retirement in 2013 he has published essays on Bulgakov and Checov.*

Read Breve New Stories authors' blogs at www.brevenewstories.com/authors/