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Stories from *Las almas de Brandon*

by César Brandon Ndjocu Davies

translated by
Raquel Vega-Durán

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Introduction

César Brandon Ndjocu Davies (Equatorial Guinea, 1993), writer and poet, is the author of *Las almas de Brandon* [Brandon's Souls] (2017), *Toda la felicidad del universo* [All the Happiness in the World] (2018), *Akeva: una historia intrascendente por si no vuelves a saber de mí* [Akeva: A Trivial Story in Case You Never Hear From Me Again] (2019), and *Nosotros* [Us] (2020). At the age of seventeen he arrived in Spain on a scholarship and graduated a few years later with a degree in Social Education from the University of Granada. Since his childhood, his passion had always been literature, writing, and storytelling. In pursuit of his calling as a writer, he decided to participate in the television show *Got Talent Spain* in 2018; he won the contest, becoming known nationally as “the poet who moved Spain in three minutes” (my translation)¹ for reciting his work out loud. He is now well-recognized as an artist of the spoken word.

The author defines himself as someone “with a quite complex common sense, who at the same time questions everything that common sense is” (my translation).² This idea is reflected in his four books, whose poems and short stories are journeys through the senses that captivate readers and give them a sense of wonder. In *Las almas de Brandon* [Brandon's Souls],³ from which I have translated the following texts, the author offers us, through 102 chapters called *Almas* [Souls] (including an “Alma” that appears in the back cover), universal and individual stories that transcend time and space, evidencing Muriel

¹ Galafate, Cristina. “César Brandon: ‘Después de ganar Got Talent con un poema a mi madre entré en una depresión.’” *Elmundo.es*, 8 December 2018. Available at (last accessed 8 January 2024): <https://www.elmundo.es/vida-sana/bienestar/2018/12/08/5c0a3e2efc6c8363718b45c9.html>.

² From an interview with César Brandon Ndjocu Davies for the *Huffington Post*, February 19 2019. Available at (last accessed 4 January 2024): https://www.huffingtonpost.es/entry/las-101-almas-de-cesar-brandon_es_5c8a8303e4b0f489d2b38baa.html.

³ Ndjocu, César Brandon. *Las almas de Brandon*. Barcelona: Espasa, 2018.



Rukeyser's lines: "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms."⁴ Every "soul" is like a door, and as we pass through each one of them, we enter a world of narratives that talk about love in a wide variety of ways. All these "souls" enter into a dialogue that shows us the complexity of feelings, delving into encounters and disagreements between truth and fiction, love and heartbreak, youth and old age, memory and oblivion, loneliness and community, life and death. But the author makes sure to go beyond simple dichotomies, drawing opposite poles together through the intertwined narratives of these "souls." The different speakers in *Las almas de Brandon* create a choral narrative that calls for the book to be read aloud, to be shared and felt by many. In *Las almas de Brandon*, César Brandon Ndjocu Davies treats us to a profound and genuine urban storytelling that manages to make universal experiences unique, while at the same time encouraging us to wonder about other possibilities. As he concluded one of his numerous interviews: "I am in love with the universe of creation. The world for me is a maybe" (my translation).⁵

Raquel Vega-Durán

⁴ Rukeyser, Muriel. "The Speed of Darkness." In *The Collected Poems*. McGraw-Hill: New York; St. Louis, 1978: 486.

⁵ From Martí, Joan Carles. "César Brandon Ndjocu: 'La gente se está identificando con la poesía.'" *Diario de Mallorca*, 21 April 2018. Available at (last accessed 8 January 2024): <https://www.diariodemallorca.es/sociedad/2018/04/21/cesar-brandon-ndjocu-gente-identificando-3227369.html>.



About the Translator

Raquel Vega-Durán is Chair of the program Ethnicity, Migration, Rights at Harvard University, where she also teaches in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. Previously, she was Associate Professor of Modern Languages and Literatures at Claremont McKenna College. Her research focuses on Spanish Peninsular Studies, Migration and Borders, Gender and Identity, Social Activism, Visual Culture, and Transatlantic and Mediterranean Literature, Film, and Photography. She is the author of *Emigrant Dreams, Immigrant Borders: Migrants, Transnational Encounters, and Identity in Spain* (Bucknell UP, 2016), and is currently working on a new book-length project entitled *Shrinking Europe: Abandoned Villages and Repopulation in the Twenty-First Century*.

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THAT TREND

Soul No. 9

Many things are not pretty until you think about how pretty they are.

That was the last thing my grandmother wrote in her poemjournal, just before I showed up to bother her with my question: “Grandma, what is the secret of happiness?”

She smiles. It makes me happy to see her smile. She smiles as if in her youth she had asked happiness on a date, and happiness, just to make her happy, had accepted.

“I have lived long enough to see a thousand Coca-Cola advertisements selling us happiness in a bottle,” she answers, “a hundred thousand motivational phrases on car stickers, and now we see those mugs with super positive messages. There is always someone telling us how we should live our lives or what we should do to be happy. You know what? I used to have faith in that... fashionable trend of studying, studying, and studying, and then, working, working, and working hard. Work very hard in pursuit of my dreams so that they came true. And I did.”

“Did your dreams come true?” I ask my grandmother.

“No,” she answers with a smile that is difficult to define. “I’m still in the ‘work hard’ phase. No one knows the formula for happiness, not even the Coca-Cola people, no matter how hard it is to believe.”

“I love Coca-Cola,” I intervene with the intention of cheering her up a little.

“Me too,” she answers, co-conspiring with my smile. “I’m not going to tell you what to do. I’m just going to give you a slogan: You may not have to chase your dreams or work like crazy to achieve them.”

“I don’t have to chase my dreams?” I ask. “Aren’t you supposed to be telling me otherwise?”



“People always talk about dreams as if they were the only thing we have when we sleep. Sometimes we think we are following our dreams, when we are really just following our nightmares. And ‘chasing’ dreams? Tell me: what would you do if someone chased you like a possessed person?”

“I don’t know, run?”

“Exactly! Maybe dreams flee because we don’t stop chasing them.”

“Since when are you so profound, grandma?”

“At the end of the day, chasing or not, running or not, working like crazy or not... we don’t choose dreams. Dreams choose us.”

And then there was silence, as between two musical notes, as between the thumb and the little finger, as between one paragraph and the next.

“By the way,” says my grandmother, her gaze fixed on the sky. “The secret of happiness... is that happiness does not know how to keep a secret. Ask it.”

I did – I asked happiness its secret. And from that day on, my grandmother began to call me “The Woman Who Whispered to Happiness.”

But...



A CRAZY IDEA

Soul No. 16

After almost six years, I returned to what used to be my home. And as soon as I had the chance, I ran upstairs to lock myself up in what used to be, no, in what still is my room—because a room never stops belonging to its original owner.

I walked over to the small window that was hidden behind the curtains. I remember, yes, I remember: a tiny smile, one of those that I only dedicate to myself, appearing on my lips the moment I saw the moon. It was my first night in Malabo after almost five years.

I stayed for a while looking at the moon, remembering that when I was little, I used to tell myself that it was possible the moon and the sun didn't quite like their jobs. And that, from time to time, they felt the desire to take turns so the sun could enjoy the night and its secrets, and the moon could feel the morning and the awakening of the flowers. An impossible idea perhaps, but absurdly beautiful, right?

HOURS

Soul No. 21

It's never too late to live. Life does not follow schedules.

The old man, tired of seeing them pass by one and a thousand times without a second thought, stopped them, took a breath and...

“Where are you going?” the old man asked the hours.

“We don't understand,” they replied, puzzled.

“Nothing, I am just curious,” said the old man, “because you never stop passing by here, and one never knows where you are going.”



A DAUGHTER'S EYES

Soul No. 55

Knowing how to wait is like putting up traffic lights for the universe.

I have always liked waiting rooms. I don't know why, it's something about me, and probably about someone else I haven't yet met. And don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean I'm not a busy girl. Like everyone else, except for a few people I haven't met yet, I don't like waiting. I cut into the line at Lidl when an elderly woman is distracted; into the lines for rides in amusement parks; in nightclubs, if I know the doorman; and even in front of myself while I dream. But still, with waiting rooms, it's a whole other story. I like them. They are like the traffic lights of the universe, or at least that is how I experience them. No matter how much of a hurry I am in, they always manage to pause everything, as if they stopped time.

"You can come in now," the nurse tells me. And she treats me with a smile as a reward for my patience and my strength. I'm only seventeen years old, and less than four hours ago we had a traffic accident. That's all the information the nurse needs in order to reward me with a comforting smile, because she is surely used to much more hysterical, dramatic, loud, or aggressive people. But what she doesn't know is that I love waiting rooms.

"Thank you," I reply, and I smile back.

"Come with me."

We walk together for a hundred floor tiles, a couple of corners, and a few fluorescent lamps until we reach our destination.

"This is it," she says, and again offers me a smile.

"Thank you," I answer. The last time someone other than my parents took me somewhere in such a loving way was five years ago. I will never forget that Iberia flight attendant. As I will never forget this nurse. They are examples of those people who only share a thousandth of your life but stay in it forever. And I call them *people of waiting*.



I open the door and I see my mother. She also sees me and, unaware of the pain that the gesture will cause her, she smiles at me, and then tries not to grimace in pain.

“Hello,” I say before she does. Having noticed that the simple gesture of smiling caused her pain, I do not want her to talk anymore.

“Hello my love,” she replies.

It doesn’t hurt, or maybe she hides it very well.

“How are you?” she asks me. She hastens to ask before I can. Even lying on the bed, she is still a mother.

“I’m fine.”

She remains silent and scrutinizes my body with her gaze. I am still wearing the same clothes from the accident. I am dirty and my clothes are torn.

“You should change. You can’t go through life that dirty. You are a princess.”

My eyes fill with tears. It’s her. The person who is lying on that bed, covered in braces and bandages... is my mother. Only my mother would worry about how dirty I am after everything that has happened.

I lose control, that *patience* and serenity for which the nurse, with a smile, complemented me... and I throw myself on my mother.

And I cry.

I cry, I cry, and I don’t hold back a single tear.

I cry, I cry because I am the happiest girl in the world in the most difficult moment of my life.

“Do you want me to tell you a story?” she whispers.

I nod, I still can’t speak. No one would understand me with so much wailing.

“The doctor told me this story a few minutes ago,” she begins to recount. “Apparently, just before he operated on me, they were removing the eye patches from a man who had undergone surgery because he was born blind.”

I sit up, wipe my tears, and make room on my mother’s bed.



“The first person he saw was the girl he had married. And his first words to her were: *you were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen... and now, I can say that you are the most beautiful woman I will ever see... literally!*”

“That’s not a true story,” I tell my mother as a smile appears on my lips.

“Well, you’ll have to ask the doctor about that. I like to think that it is.”

Then there is silence, well, it is more like a hospital noise. My mother fixes her eyes on mine, that look that tells me everything will be fine.

“I love you. Mom, I love you,” I burst into tears again.

“I love you too, my girl.”

“And... I have seen thousands of women... but you are still the most beautiful of all.”

My mother smiles and it hurts.

“That’s because you look at me with a daughter’s eyes,” she tells me.

“Don’t people say ‘seeing through a mother’s eyes?’” I ask her, joking.

“You already know that I am a faithful defender of the theory of evolution. That’s why I know... that a mother’s eyes are an evolution of a daughter’s eyes,” she proposes from out of the blue.

Yes, it’s my mother. The one with the crazy theories. The one who doesn’t stop proposing *silly things that make a lot of sense*.

“Can you bring me a glass of water?” my mother asks me.

I walk to the door and turn to look at her because I know she is looking at me. We smile at each other. We give ourselves time. We treat each other to the moment of being alive.

“Caty,” she calls me, just as I turn my back on her again.

“Tell me.”

“Has your father woken up yet?”

I walk the same distance as I did earlier to reach my mother’s room, and I pass by the waiting room.

I’ve always loved waiting rooms... but only when there was something to wait for.

Goodbye, dad.



FEARS TO THE LEFT: I BEFORE YOU

Soul No. 86

One didn't want to count on anyone. And One⁶ did not understand why he was odd when there was someone before him. One didn't want to count on anyone. And One felt that after him came infinity, and the eternal frightened One. So One, terrified, noticed Zero. And when One saw Zero, he thought Zero was the most beautiful number he had ever seen and that, even coming before him, she was... whole. One thought that this was true love, that he had found a partner in Zero. And One felt he could never live without Zero again, so he decided to be honest with Zero and tell her that, although she had zero power, she was the Zero that gave value and meaning to his life. Being the first was no longer a priority for him, and he gave Zero a great welcome. Together they were pure joy. They completed each other. One had zero tolerance for alcohol, but with Zero, One could have a zero-alcohol beer for his anniversary, even though they had to create a day zero in their calendar. Zero was somewhat reserved and had a hard time representing texts, but together they made the perfect binary code. They were the best fucking digits in the neighborhood, and they expressed their love for each other daily. But One doesn't know what one has until one loses it. Well, One lost Zero. And by the time One realized it, Zero was already holding hands with Minus One, who, despite being somewhat negative, treated her like a queen. Zero loved the fact that Minus One was original, that she had a hole and he had a small hyphen with which they could play. Zero liked that Minus One was not merely one more, that Minus One was not... ordinal; that he was fairly competitive and that when they played UNO,⁷ Minus One would not let her win. Zero felt that Minus One did treat her like a real number.

⁶ [Translator's note: "one," "zero," and "minus one" appear both as names and nouns in the Spanish original (as "uno," "cero" and "menos uno"), since this allows the author to play with the meaning and usage of these words. Since some of those puns do not work in English, for reasons of clarity I have capitalized One, Zero, and Minus One when they are used as names.]

⁷ [Translator's note: This is one of the many puns the author includes in the short story. The word "UNO" means "One" in Spanish, but it also refers to the popular card game.]



And Minus One... well. He never raised objections; nor did he intend to give a value to Zero by putting commas between them. Minus One had no complexes. And when they made love, Minus One loved being under Zero. So One, once again, was left alone, separated, as a unit. Without Zero, his life burned down like a candle. Without Zero, time took its toll on him. He realized that becoming used to life was another way to die, that he had gotten used to living with Zero, and he apologized to life for all the times he had gotten used to... things. And One began to count, but without Zero. He forgot about Zero's kisses; about Zero's brain; about sex with Zero; about Zero's jealousy, and even about Zero's "I love you's." He forgot about her and said goodbye. One forgot Zero and perhaps even love. And he began to count towards what scared him the most: to infinity, or – maybe to two?⁸

⁸ [Translator's note: This story is one of the three texts César Brandon Ndjocu Davies read aloud in the television contest *Got Talent*. His performance can be found at <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7tiw1q>. This translation is based on a modified version of the narrative that the author published for its printed version.]



Rincón de Traductores/Translators' Corner

Disponibles en/available at: <http://cervantesobservatorio.fas.harvard.edu/en/translation-corner>

1. RT/TC 001 (2019). "A Letter of Federico García Lorca to his Parents, 1935". Author: Federico García Lorca (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Letter.
2. RT/TC 002 (2019). "Like a Night with Legs Wide Open". Author: José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic); Translator: Luis Guzmán Valerio; Genre: Short Story.
3. RT/TC 003 (2019). "In the Parks, at Dusk" and "I Only Think of You". Author: Marina Mayoral (Spain); Translator: María Socorro Suárez Lafuente; Genre: Short Story.
4. RT/TC 004 (2020). "The Guide through Death" and "The Fat Lady". Author: Guadalupe Dueñas (Mexico); Translator: Josie Hough; Genre: Short Story.
5. RT/TC 005 (2020). "The Case of the Unfaithful Translator". Author: José María Merino (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.
6. RT/TC 006 (2020). "The Guerrilla Fighter" and "May as Well Call it Quits". Author: Albalucía Ángel Marulanda (Colombia); Translator: Daniel Steele Rodríguez; Genre: Short Story.
7. RT/TC 007 (2020). "Miguel Hernández' Speech to His Companions in the Ocaña Jail". Author: Miguel Hernández (Spain); Translator: Constance Marina; Genre: Speech.
8. RT/TC 008 (2020). "On the Road to Houmt Souk". Author: Soledad Puértolas (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
9. RT/TC 009 (2020). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 1: Compilation 2019-2020*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
10. RT/TC 010 (2020). *Waiting for the Revolution: Cuba, the Unfinished Journey* (excerpt). Author: Gustavo Gac-Artigas (Chile); Translator: Andrea G. Labinger; Genre: Chronicle.



11. RT/TC 011 (2020). "A Bad Girl". Author: Montserrat Ordóñez (Colombia); Translator: Clara Eugenia Ronderos; Genre: Short Story.
12. RT/TC 012 (2020). "Claudia and the Cats". Author: Ivanna Chapeta (Guatemala); Translator: Lindsay Romanoff Bartlett; Genre: Short Story.
13. RT/TC 013 (2021). *Song of Being and Nonbeing*. Author: Santiago Alba Rico (Spain); Translator: Carolina Finley Hampson; Genre: Poetry.
14. RT/TC 014 (2021). "Christmas Eve in the Hills of Jaruco". Author: Robert F. Lima Rovira and Robert Lima (Cuba/USA); Translator: Robert lima; Genre: Chronicle.
15. RT/TC 015 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: José Luis García Martín (Spain); Translator: Claudia Quevedo-Webb; Genre: Poetry.
16. RT/TC 016 (2021). *A Manifesto for reading* (excerpt). Author: Irene Vallejo (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Essay.
17. RT/TC 017 (2021). *Parallel 35* (three excerpts) and "The Dead Woman". Author: Carmen Laforet (Spain); Translator: Roberta Johnson; Genre: Chronicle/Short Story.
18. RT/TC 018 (2021). "Torn Lace" and "Native Plant". Author: Emilia Pardo Bazán (Spain); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
19. RT/TC 019 (2021). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 2: Compilation 2020-2021*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
20. RT/TC 020 (2021). *Three Poems*. Author: Julia Barella (Spain); Translator: Sarah Glenski; Genre: Poetry.
21. RT/TC 021 (2021). *Five Galician Songs*. Author: Emilio Cao (Spain); Translator: Robert Lima; Genre: Poetry.
22. RT/TC 022 (2022). *The KIO Towers*. Author: José Luis Castillo Puche (Spain); Translator: Douglas Edward LaPrade; Genre: Poetry.
23. RT/TC 023 (2022). "One Hundred Cornfields of Solitude". Author: Melanie Márquez Adams (Ecuador); Translator: Emily Hunsberger; Genre: Chronicle.
24. RT/TC 024 (2022). *Eight Poems*. Author: Luis Alberto de Cuenca (Spain); Translator: Gustavo Pérez Firmat; Genre: Poetry.
25. RT/TC 025 (2022). *Pilgrimage to Santiago (1610)*. Author: Diego de Guzmán (Spain); Translator: George D. Greenia; Genre: Chronicle.



26. RT/TC 026 (2022). Short stories from *Ábrete sésamo*. Author: Clara Eugenia Ronderos (Colombia); Translator: Mary G. Berg; Genre: Short Story.
27. RT/TC 027 (2022). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 3: Compilation 2021-2022*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
28. RT/TC 028 (2022). "Carabanchel Blues". Author: Lorenzo Silva (Spain); Translator: Kevin Gerry Dunn; Genre: Short Story.
29. RT/TC 029 (2022). Poems from *Under Leonardo's Wing*. Author: Clara Janés (Spain); Translator: Ana M. Osan; Genre: Poetry.
30. RT/TC 030 (2023). Poems from *Hasta que no baya luna*. Author: Alan Smith Soto (Costa Rica/USA); Translator: Katherine Hannula Hill; Genre: Poetry.
31. RT/TC 031 (2023). *Quixote*. Author: Lorenzo Silva (Spain); Translator: Christopher Maurer; Genre: Essay.
32. RT/TC 032 (2023). Two Stories from *Amantes y enemigos: cuentos de parejas*. Author: Rosa Montero (Spain); Translator: Erin Goodman; Genre: Short Story.
33. RT/TC 033 (2023). "Running with Luck" and "His Profile". Author: Cristina Rivera Garza (Mexico); Translator: Francisca González Arias; Genre: Short Story.
34. RT/TC 034 (2023). *Rincón de Traductores / Translators' Corner – Volume 4: Compilation 2022-2023*. Various Authors; Various Translators.
35. RT/TC 035 (2023). Excerpts from *Amigo*. Author: Ana Merino (Spain); Translator: Lynn M. Shirey; Genre: Short Story.
36. RT/TC 036 (2023). "At the Precise Moment". Author: Emiliano Monge (Mexico); Translator: Josh Dunn; Genre: Short Story.