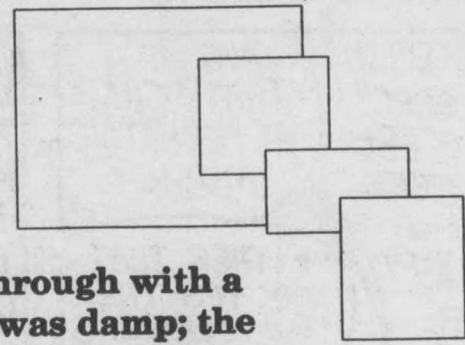


# Adrift

A short story by Kwame Dawes



**T**he fog moved around the leafless trees, blue street lamp light seeping through with a muted glow forming pools of visibility along the puddled walk way. The air was damp; the tick of dripping water filled the darkness but there was no rain. People appeared out of the mist like sudden apparitions and then vanished - swallowed by the mist, their voices lingering in the air like those of disembodied spirits. It was cold.

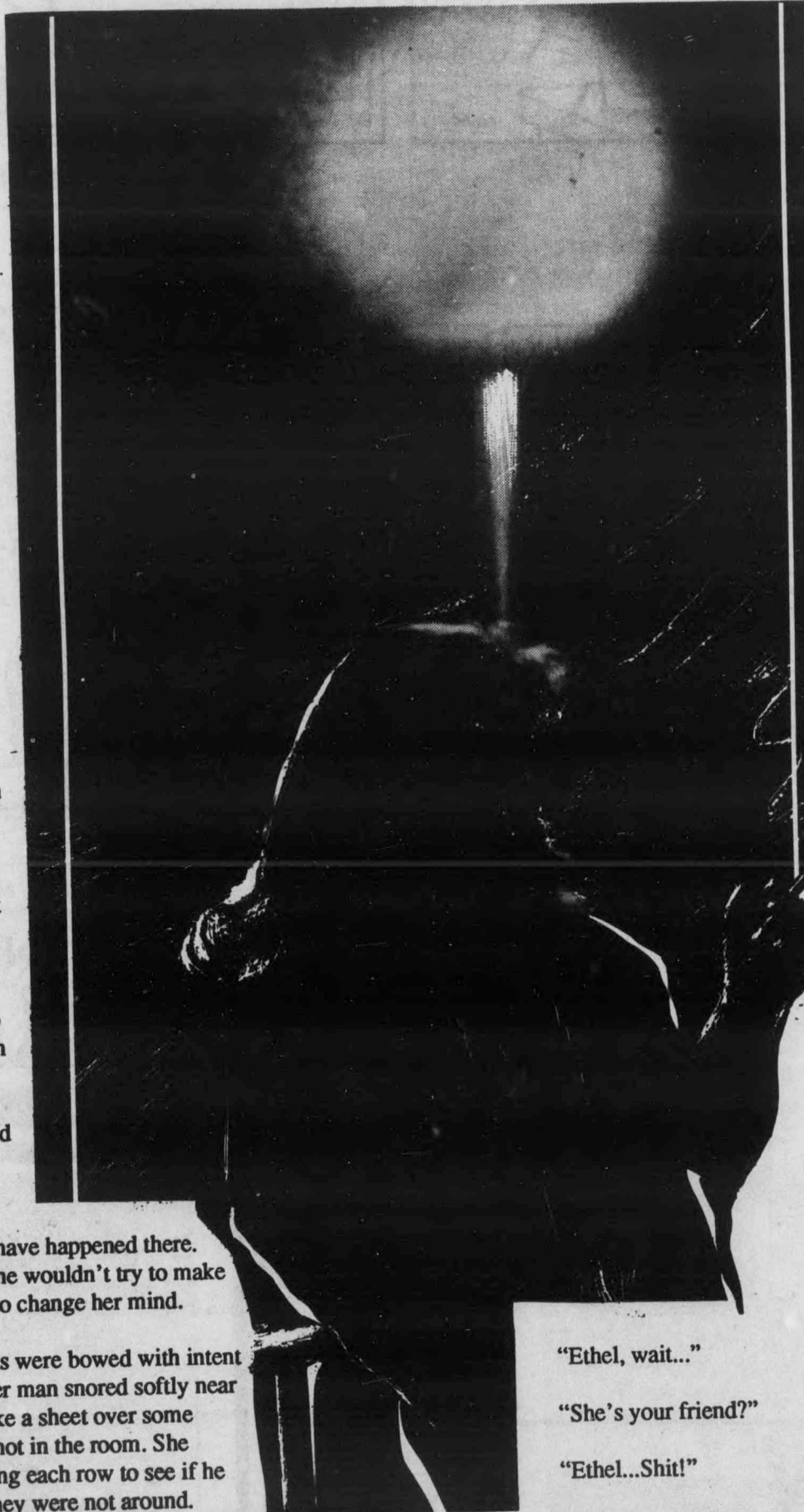
On the concrete landing outside the building, Ethel continued to suck on her cigarette while staring into the smokey night. Music from the office behind her seeped under the half open window and out into the dark; slow country music, one song after the other like a single marathon song about lost love. Ethel hummed the tunes without knowing them, trying to concentrate on something other than the thought of waiting.

Bodies continued to float under the street lamp. Nobody climbed the steps to use the entrance from the landing. A huge pool of melted snow lay at the foot of the stairs and people walked wide to avoid it. Ethel watched the parade of bodies drifting through the night muted sounds: voices in deep conversation, the occasional giggle and the cluttered self important air of the business or law students going to supper. She searched for Colette in the darkness but she did not appear.

Ethel decided to check the library in case she had forgotten. She thought of going in to get her coat but decided against it. She had told the others that should would be a while. She didn't want to explain why she hadn't left as yet. She climbed down the steps and jumped over the huge pool landing on a banking of soft dirty snow. The cold wet seeped into her sneakers. She walked quickly through the fog, crossed the slick main-road and picked her way through the ice sheets in the library's parking lot. Cold air clutched at her through the fabric of her tight jeans. She walked into the brightly lit library and made her way towards the periodicals section. The meeting was to have happened there. That way, with so many people around, he wouldn't try to make a scene and use his tricks to get Colette to change her mind.

She looked around the room. Heads were bowed with intent into magazines and newspapers. An older man snored softly near the window, his long grey hair spread like a sheet over some papers he had been reading. They were not in the room. She made her way through the stacks checking each row to see if he had convinced her to go there to talk. They were not around. Ethel grew increasingly anxious. She knew where they were. She didn't want to think it, but she was sure of where they way.

She should have walked out of the library and forgotten about the whole thing at that point. In fact, a part of her did that. A part of her being walked calmly through the glass doors of the library and stepped into the cold outside. It virtually floated along the wooden walk way towards the Student Union Building full of wisdom and control. It slipped through walls, avoided steps and the stares of her friends and then settled in a warm dark corner of the Social Club where it could watch the young bodies twist and gyrate to heavy thumping music under dull red light. It drank beer quickly and easily until all the pain was like a dream. And it rose and danced and danced until it was lifted and taken to some small room where it slept as bodies rubbed against it - male bodies reeking of stale beer and sweat. That part of her woke the next day feeling restored as a normal woman, no longer vulnerable, no longer trying to find a soul mate, trying to change people so they could understand her. That part of her silenced the deviant instinct, closeting it in a distant room where it would stay like a dream forever. And it suffered the ritual of being a woman until it grew to like it.



She took the elevator instead. On the fifth floor she stopped to think about what she was doing. She stared through a window over the city, the lights winking in the swirling mist. She could not think. She turned from the window and walked through the large room full of carrels and busy graduate students. She made her way towards the stairwell, pushed open the door opposite the men's room and stood on the fifth floor landing where it was dark except for the small line of light coming through the square window on the door. She listened. She could hear their breathing. Colette's voice played lightly around his deeper voice. She was not giggling but there was something frivolous about the way she spoke. They were whispering in quick spurts and then there was silence. The breathing became intense and heavy. Ethel stood there feeling nothing; she was floating through the haze of cigarette smoke in the club laughing at her own stupidity.

She climbed into the darkness quickly and without hesitation. After the first flight she could see their shadows. They were clutching each other. When the woman pulled away, Ethel could see that her blouse and her jeans were unbuttoned. The man was still fully dressed, his hand held the back of the woman's neck.

"Ethel?"

"What the?.."

"Ethel, I...look, Paul..."

"Just checking to see if you were alright. Sorry to interrupt...Sorry you changed your mind."

"Ethel, wait..."

"She's your friend?"

"Ethel...Shit!"

Ethel lit a cigarette and walked through puddles and clumps of snow in the mist. She walked so lightly, not seeing anything before her, just the path she wanted to take without knowing exactly what it was. She welcomed the blanket of fog about her and ignored the chill in the air. At the corner of Regent and George she noticed that she was flying. She could see the tiny city from the air, the slick wet taxis dancing along the roads, the people walking, heads bent, bodies braced against the growing wind and rain; the pattern of street lamps through the city clearly visible through the leafless trees. She saw her body strolling along Regent until it came to King. She saw the confidence with which it turned left on King and walked towards the Cosmo. She saw her abandoned body enter the club straightening her hair and tucking her blouse into the tight jeans. It unbuttoned the two top buttons of the blouse and smiled at the game. It entered the green door into the darkness. That was the last thing she saw. Ethel herself drifted through the night, flying high over the province until she came to a door in the sky. She walked through the door and the room was full of sheets, millions of sheets and she played on the sheets, rolled her naked body through the soft warm cotton sheets until she multiplied into many. And they stared at each other, this world of Ethels; and they embraced each other and caressed each other to sleep.

finis

