



Tram 83

Fiston Mwanza Mujila

Roland Glasser, Translator

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A frenetic writing style, like that of a jazz musician, gives this Africa-set novel an enthusiastic, adventurous energy.

Fiston Mwanza Mujila may not be a household name in America, but he is quickly earning a following around the globe. His debut novel, *Tram 83*, has already been translated into six languages and has garnered him a handful of honors. The novel, for all its frenetic linguistic energy, anchors itself in an unnamed African city in secession. Two friends with opposite aspirations navigate the bizarre landscape-in-limbo and find refuge in Tram 83, “one of the most popular restaurants and hooker bars.”

Tram 83 attracts all kinds of people, from “inadvertent musicians” to “baby-chicks” (i.e., underage girls) to “druids and shamans and aphrodisiac vendors.” While Requiem and Lucien have opposite appetites—Lucien is a writer and Requiem is a racketeer—everyone within the mining town “share[s] the same aspiration: money and sex.”

The idiosyncratic narrator swerves from summary to stream of consciousness to satiric dialogue, to deliver surprising lines of stunning poetic beauty. One night, while Requiem and Lucien entertain two girls in Requiem’s “Vampiretown” apartment, the narrator suddenly bursts into a history lesson, the lesson itself shot through with occasional bits of their dialogue, as if the lunacy of the present impinges on the truth of the past. “Negotiated the rates, first up then down. Smoked nicotine after nicotine. Manufactured heaven in pasture and cloud.”

Initially, the novel is difficult to navigate, but like Thomas Pynchon or David Foster Wallace—or free jazz, for that matter—Mujila rewards patience. The third-person narrator lurches forward like the train Lucien rides in on from the distant provinces. Eventually he finds his old friend Requiem. The events that follow form less of a plot and more of a series of episodes. Sometimes, Mujila drops the action or quirky dialogue onto the page, dislocating but offering a feeling akin to hanging out with a garrulous friend who can’t wait to show you what misadventure will come next.

Tram 83 isn’t for the faint of heart, but rather, it’s for those that have a sense of humor, an interest in seedy underbellies, and a willingness to, at times, feel a little lost in the haze of biblical imagery, flippant debauchery, free sex, and anarchy. Ezra Pound would be proud; Mujila “made it new.”

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