

smile 'cross the oceans



writings from WestWords' African Literature Development Program

African Australian Literature Development Program

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Foreword

By Oluwanifemi Temitayo Maxwell

Facilitating the African Australian Literature Development Program has been such an invaluable experience. It has given me the opportunity to meet with some brilliant writers in the African Australian community and share our experiences with each other. The participants of the AALDP are driven to tell their authentic stories in their unique voices, and it has been my absolute pleasure to give feedback that respects their creativity.

In the first few weeks of this literary development program, we discussed “Starting with Your Childhood” because some participants weren’t sure what to write and which stories to tell. I discovered that a lot of them had been taught purposeful silencing. They had been made to believe that their stories did not matter, that what happened to them was inconsequential. Some were convinced that the interesting stories happened outside of their own experience. However, by introducing them to a number of creative writing exercises, alongside selected readings, they were encouraged to look back at their childhoods with a critical eye and write about that time when they were secure in their identities, before the world taught them otherwise.

I am pleased that writing about their childhood spurred many of them to tell the stories that we are now presented with. Through these stories, we follow each of them as they navigate an insecure and sometimes racist world.

This program cannot solve all the problems, but it is definitely a gigantic step in the right direction. Through this creative writing program designed solely for African Australians, participants have been encouraged to write their beautiful, rich stories, and as their facilitator, I am so proud of them.

By Tamsin Janu

I really enjoyed catching up with the group every couple of weeks – hearing their stories, their insights on why they have chosen to write for children, and their perspectives on the joys of writing. The group was brilliant at giving thoughtful feedback on the work of others, and also at receiving it (as a writer myself, I know that receiving quite pointed feedback with a smile on your face can sometimes be a challenge!) It was a real thrill to see how much hard work went into the pieces of writing for this anthology, and to watch the stories grow and develop week after week. The works our group produced show the diversity of writing for children: one is an excerpt from a picture book, aimed at young children, and the other was written for young adults. Both pieces are extremely thoughtful and have unique voices and perspectives that will make young readers contemplate who they are, where they come from and who they want to be.

Introduction

The African Literature Development program is designed to support, develop and promote African Australian writers from Western Sydney. It began when Noël Zihabamwe and the African Australian Advocacy Centre approached WestWords with one clear aim – to provide the means by which members of the African Australian community could tell and celebrate their own stories, in their own voices.

We spent time undertaking consultation with the AAAC and its community leaders and young people which includes representation from Burundi, DR Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, Nigeria, North Sudan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda and others. They expressed:

- a lack of opportunity to express their creative knowledge, languages and culture through the sharing of their stories.
- a danger that the experiences of migration and their homelands would be lost without the skills and opportunity to write them down and share them.
- a need to build articulate voices with agency to raise the profile and (cultural) contributions of African Australians to the broader community/s
- a need to focus the community's young people, giving them a place to come to as the current alternative is "negative situations where they are getting into illegal issues, because a lack of things to do".
- a need to provide the community's young, and older, members "English language skills that will assist them in daily life".
- the desire to "create a bridge of understanding and empathy to enter into their (old people's) world" and to comprehend "the legacy the younger generations carry within them."

We discovered that WestWords could provide the scaffold and expertise that could be responsive to these needs.

In a year of difficulty where acts of community building and skills development have radically changed we moved a comprehensive program of intended workshops, events and writing groups online. This resulted in us facilitating four groups focusing on fiction and non-fiction, graphic novels and comics, writing for children, and poetry. We also held an event for the participants of all programs with the award-winning writer Maxine Beneba Clarke, whose work includes work of fiction, non-fiction, children's fiction and poetry including editing *Growing Up African in Australia*.

This publication marks the culmination of the first of three years for the program. We look forward to these writers developing their confidence, skills and voice whilst welcoming new writers to join, create and share their stories.

African Australian Advocacy Centre

The African Australian Advocacy Centre saw the need to provide opportunities for Australians with an African background to develop their writing skills, and to share their stories with other Australians.

African Australians are among the latest wave of new immigrants to this country. For the most part they are regarded with a mixture of curiosity, suspicion and for some — sadly — fear, aggression and hatred.

Africans throughout the aeons have told stories to their young people about the land, culture, language and customs, and they in turn have passed it on to subsequent generations. This rich cultural vein can be lost if it is not passed on and recorded, especially if people move to other continents, far away from the traditional wisdom and teachings.

This program allows the expression of a rich tradition of storytelling for African Australians, giving them the opportunity to reach out to their communities, their neighbourhoods and their new homelands, and to show other Australians how richly imbued with energy, culture, sensitivity, wisdom, laughter and joy they truly are, as they seek to establish themselves in a new culture.

- Noël Yandamutso Zihabamwe, co-founder and Chair of the African Australian Advocacy Centre

Noël Yandamutso Zihabamwe, with James Roy, was co-writer of the award-winning novel *One Thousand Hills*. Following the infamous Rwandan genocide of 1994, Noël spent much of his youth living as a refugee, moving to Australia in 2006.

African Australian Advocacy Centre (AAAC) represents the African Australian Communities in the area of advocacy, research, and policy outcomes in collaboration with different stakeholders including but not limited to non-profit organisations, state and federal government, business, industry, the civil sector, academia and the philanthropic sector.

AAAC was formed as a result of ongoing consultation with African Australian communities in Australia.

Vision: To see African Australians being recognised as an integral part of Australian Society.

Mission: To advocate on behalf of African Australian communities on issues faced by their communities.

Objectives:

- To strengthen social cohesion, equality, fairness and opportunities for members of African Australian Communities.
- To address social issues facing African Australian communities.
- To build inclusive communities, improve outcomes and create sustainable opportunities for African Australian communities.



WestWords is Western Sydney's Literature Development Organisation. We provide pathways of opportunity for the development of Western Sydney voices through innovative literature and related arts programs.

We believe literacy, self-expression and creativity changes lives and communities. WestWords is committed to providing an environment where the stories of the communities of Western Sydney and the places they come from are celebrated.

The guiding philosophy of WestWords is a belief that the unique perspectives and stories of the Western Sydney area deserve to be celebrated, developed in literature and shared with a wider audience.

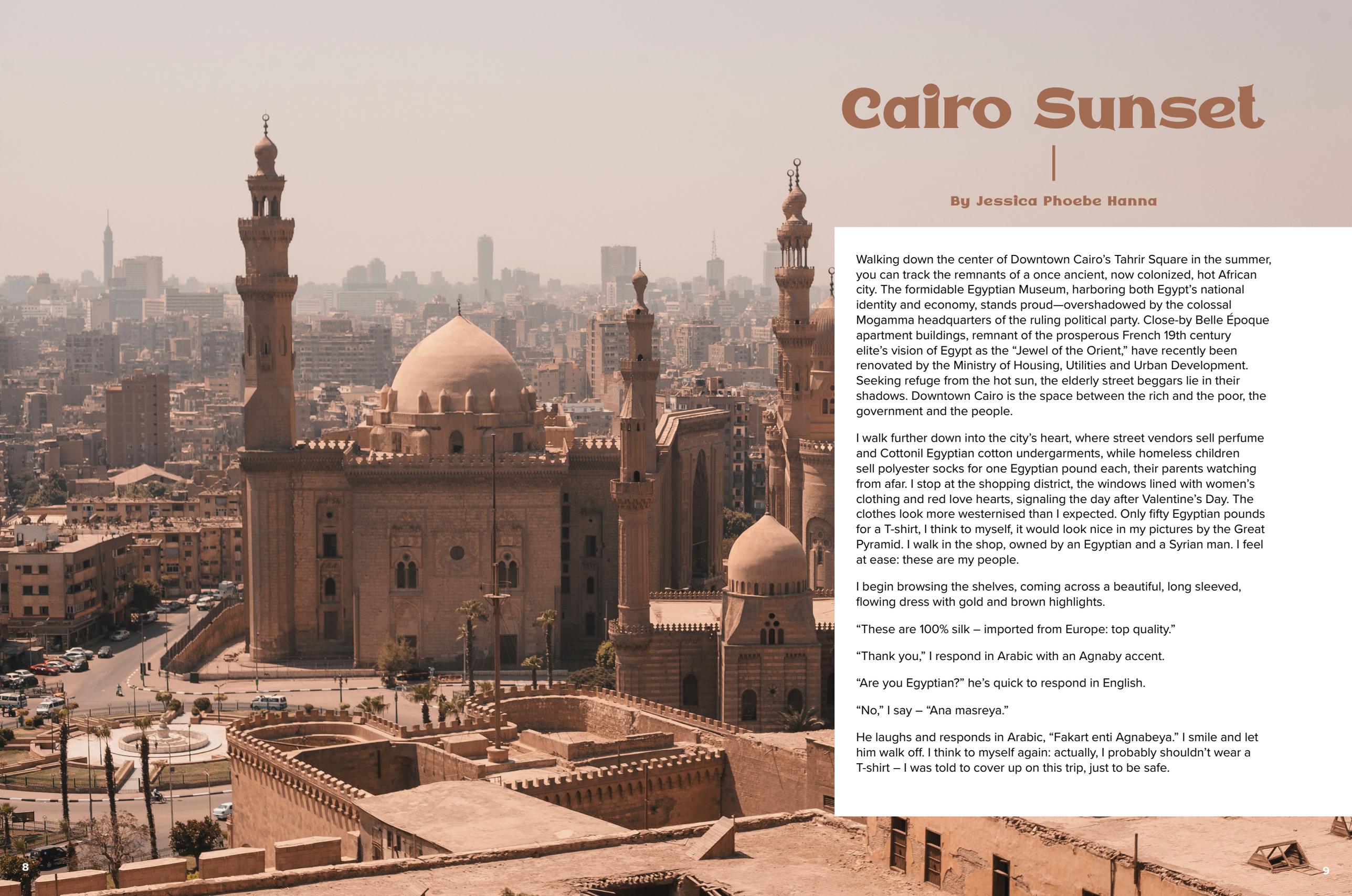
We believe that engagement with reading and writing allows young people in particular to develop their imagination, gives voice to their stories and experiences, hones skills in written expression and illustration, and sets them on a trajectory for life. With a focus on literature, we deliver residencies, fellowships, workshops, performances, presentations and publications. Our partners include teachers, schools, universities, community and arts organisations.

WestWords would like to thank Noël Yandamutso Zihabamwe and Daniel Gobena and everyone from the African Australian Advocacy Centre for their knowledge, guidance and collaboration; Lesley, David and Julia from the Adès Family Foundation without whose ongoing support this program could not exist. We would also like to acknowledge Sailor Studio, who always do such an amazing job for us. Finally, thank you to all the facilitators and importantly the participants who were brave enough to put their work forward to be included in this anthology and to the participants who wanted to spend more time developing their work. This book is a testament to you, your enthusiasm, inspiration, dedication and to the stories within you.

The African Australian Literature Development Program is proudly supported by the Adès Family Foundation

WestWords is proudly supported by





Cairo Sunset

|
By Jessica Phoebe Hanna

Walking down the center of Downtown Cairo's Tahrir Square in the summer, you can track the remnants of a once ancient, now colonized, hot African city. The formidable Egyptian Museum, harboring both Egypt's national identity and economy, stands proud—overshadowed by the colossal Mogamma headquarters of the ruling political party. Close-by Belle Époque apartment buildings, remnant of the prosperous French 19th century elite's vision of Egypt as the "Jewel of the Orient," have recently been renovated by the Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Development. Seeking refuge from the hot sun, the elderly street beggars lie in their shadows. Downtown Cairo is the space between the rich and the poor, the government and the people.

I walk further down into the city's heart, where street vendors sell perfume and Cottonil Egyptian cotton undergarments, while homeless children sell polyester socks for one Egyptian pound each, their parents watching from afar. I stop at the shopping district, the windows lined with women's clothing and red love hearts, signaling the day after Valentine's Day. The clothes look more westernised than I expected. Only fifty Egyptian pounds for a T-shirt, I think to myself, it would look nice in my pictures by the Great Pyramid. I walk in the shop, owned by an Egyptian and a Syrian man. I feel at ease: these are my people.

I begin browsing the shelves, coming across a beautiful, long sleeved, flowing dress with gold and brown highlights.

"These are 100% silk – imported from Europe: top quality."

"Thank you," I respond in Arabic with an Agnaby accent.

"Are you Egyptian?" he's quick to respond in English.

"No," I say – "Ana masreya."

He laughs and responds in Arabic, "Fakart enti Agnabeya." I smile and let him walk off. I think to myself again: actually, I probably shouldn't wear a T-shirt – I was told to cover up on this trip, just to be safe.



It's getting late, so, as any wise young solo-travelling woman would do, I want to get home as soon as possible. With my hands full with a take-away container of koshary from the famous Abu Tarek, I request an Uber to take me to my downtown apartment, about a ten-minute drive away. Hopefully I can catch the sunset views overlooking the Nile Ritz Carlton and KFC.

Your Uber driver, Walid, 4.7 star rating is two minutes away.

I'm glad I bought a phone with an Egyptian sim card and local data with Orange, I think to myself – You know, just in case. Two minutes later, *Truecaller* notifies me: "Walid – Taxi driver," is calling. Yes, Uber Egypt gives out your phone number to its drivers.

"Ahlin," I answer.

"Salam. Enti fein?"

I look around for him. "Hena." I thought it was obvious where I would be.

"Shoftik" – he's spotted me. I get into the Uber. I see Walid. He looks youngish, perhaps in his late thirties. He has smile wrinkles around his eyes, his smile wide and jovial.

"Aywa ya Jessy! Amla eh fel youm il gameela da?" It's like we've grown up together. My people. It was a lovely day indeed. Can't wait to watch that sunset. After a brief second, Walid reaches for his food – he has two kebabs, and now that he's pulled them out, I can smell them. They smell good...

"I'm so hungry – do you mind if I eat in the Uber?" he asks as he pulls back the paper wrapping.

"That's fine," I respond enthusiastically. How can I stop him from eating in his own car? Walid almost instantly offers me some, and after insisting several times, I politely decline for the

third time.

"Mashy," he says as he takes a bite, "Mmmm, gameela! Asef, I don't usually eat in front of my customers. I have to get you something."

"No, it's fine," I say. There is a corner shop in the distance. He swerves the car next to the shop, telling me he'll be a minute. At this point I'm laughing. It's nice to have a larrikin driver rather than a sleaze for once. He returns shortly after with some mints and two bottles of water.

"Et fudali," he says, offering me one.

I tell him, "No, thank you," however this time he insists further. I take the water.

"Merci," I respond. I text my local friend Mariam: *LOL the Uber stopped to get me a drink. Here we go!* as I slide in my live location just in case. We've been driving for a while now and he's finished his kebab. Doesn't look like I'll be catching the sunset after all. He begins to tell me about his Valentine's Day, which was yesterday. He switches to English.

"I met this Saudi woman in the club two weeks ago."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"She was beautiful, but a bit of a nag." I laugh. The way he talks is quite charming.

"Especially the way she did her makeup. Very different from Egyptian girls," he says as he lights up.

"What's the difference?" I want his approval, and perhaps some insight from a man of my own kind.

“You can tell she was from overseas – foreigner; they’re the most attractive women,” he says as he turns around to look at me. “Like you.”

I’m getting uncomfortable now. I look down at my phone – Mariam hasn’t replied yet.

“What’s your name?”

“Mariam.”

I look down at the Uber route. It doesn’t look right.

“Why are you going this way?” I ask.

“This is a short cut,” he responds quickly. I tell him to stick to the Uber route.

“Ok,” he says, as he erratically drives through roads I don’t recognize. I text my friend to call me. She’s not answering.

“I’ve never met a girl like you. You listen to me, you’re funny. Would you like to go out with me sometime?” The initially charming character begins to make my blood boil.

“I’m married,” I say, to shut him down.

“Begad?” he asks.

“Yes. And I’m going home to my husband now. He will be very upset because I’m so late!” I know, I’m not even married. I call Mariam again, she’s not answering.

“He doesn’t have to know,” he whispers. I start to make jokes.

“What about that Saudi girl? I thought she was your girlfriend. You can’t cheat on her!”

“Just tell me a time your husband isn’t home and I will come, no need to tell him,” he insists.

Why isn’t my friend picking up? Walid is silent. There’s a beat.

“No one says no to Walid.”

I don’t think I’m seeing the sunrise tomorrow either. I see red.

“Listen, I have a child and a husband waiting at home for me. Take me home now!”

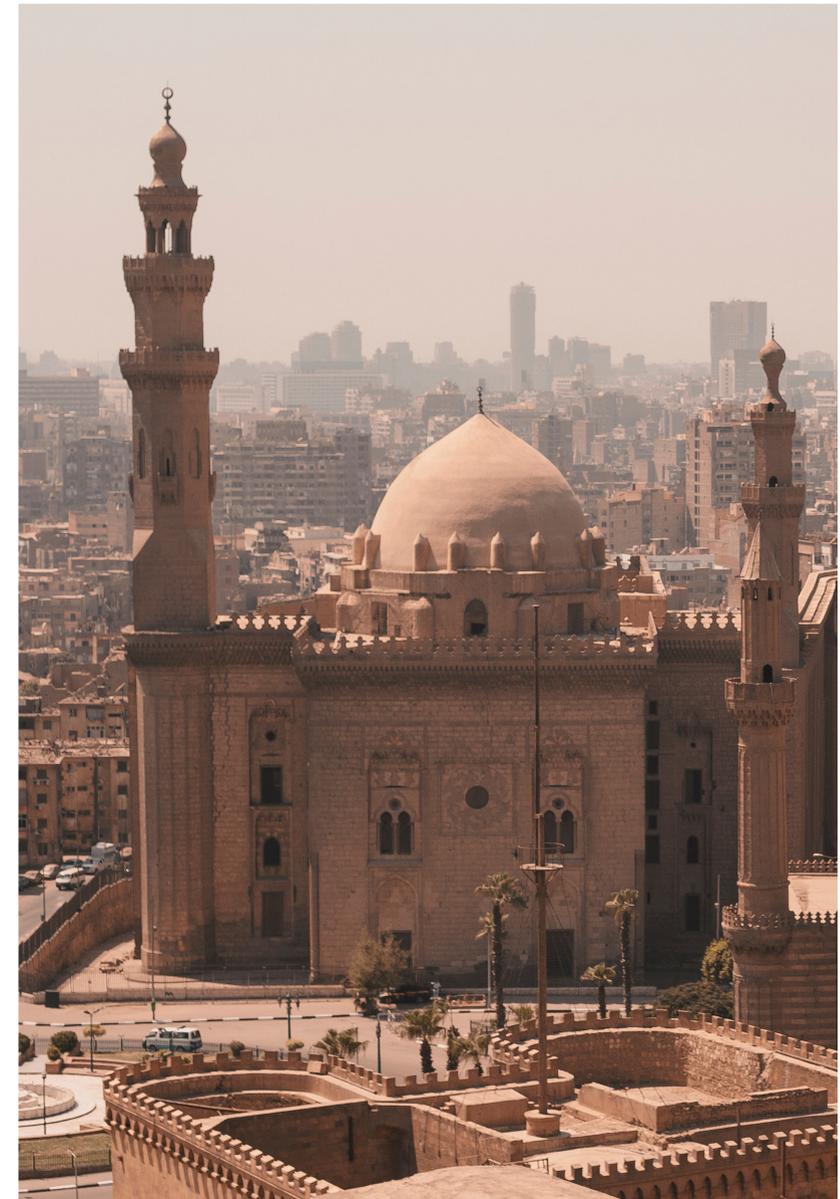
“Ok, gees,” he says.

The rest of the car ride is silent. I finally arrive back at my place. As I exit the car, Walid says, “I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable, that was not my intention.”

“Ok,” I say as I slam the door.

I leave a bad review.

I see the sunrise the next day—as well as Walid’s five missed calls.



Hatshepshut

By Jessica Phoebe Hannah

I know what you're thinking,
I know how it may seem.
"Your hair isn't that curly," you say
"And your skin is the colour of cream!"

My ancestors, you see, never left their home,
They never left their land.
They buried themselves deep down, below
In the golden sand.

The land was named Kemet
The Black Land
Its history, and culture over thousands of years,
Has spanned.

The land was fertile,
Full of rich and fruitful soil,
The pyramids and sphinx were built
Through loyal Kemet toil.

They gave their all to their gods,
Their pharaohs, queens and kings,
They toiled and built their ancient tombs,
Despite deadly scorpion stings;

They toiled despite Other Nations entering
And looting,
And destroying
And shooting.

The Other Nations seized the land,
They inherited its wealth,
And its own people
Were put back on the shelf.

The land is now known as Egypt
A place I do not recognize it to be.
A place where all its ancient people
Were forced to flee

Away from their land, away from their town,
Away from what they've ever known.
Away from every single thing
their ancestors had built and sown.

But, you see, in fleeing there is trauma
In fleeing there is pain.
In fleeing, your identity
in your old, ancient, land, remains.

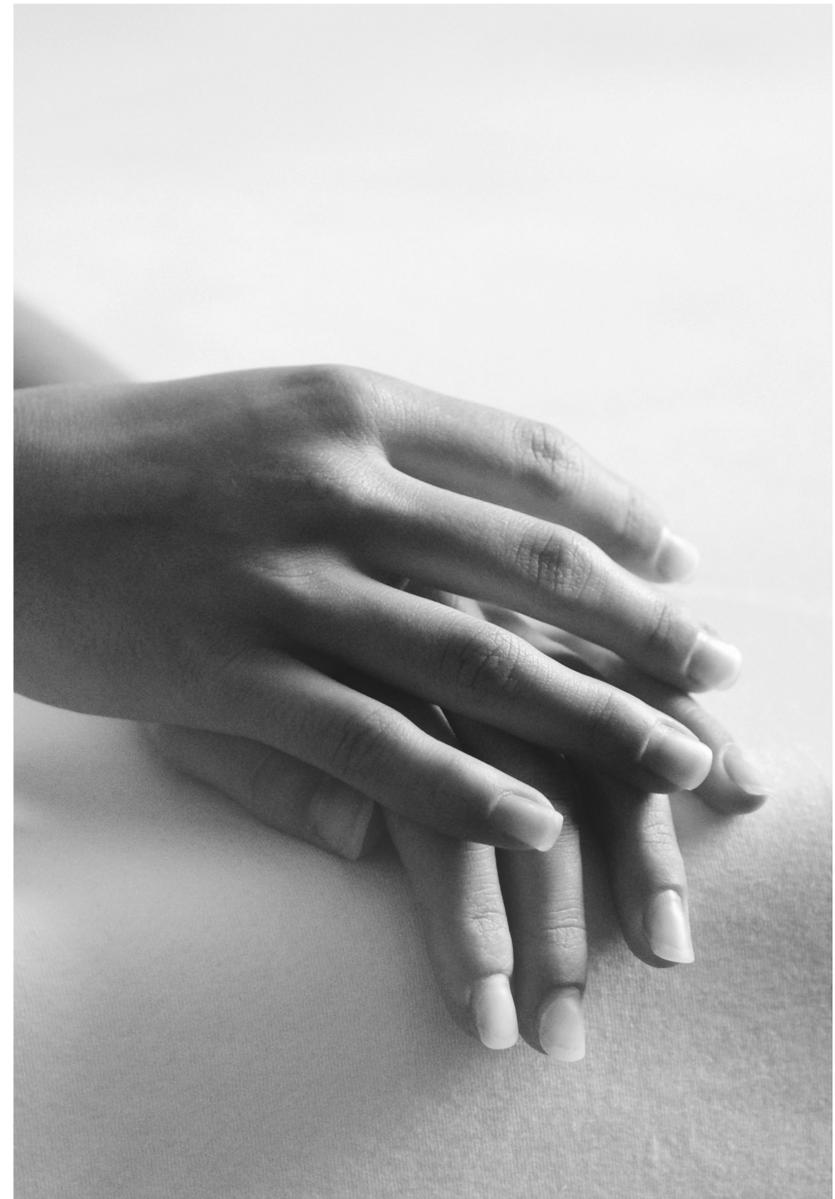
So yes, my skin may be light
And my hair may be thin,
Don't forget why that is
Don't forget that my body and skin

Is a product of colonization
Is a product of invasion
It is not mine
It is part of a now fractured nation –
The nation was once called Kemet,
the land of fertile Black Soil
A land of mystery, and magic
For which its people toiled.

A land where my heart belongs
Where my people thrive,
A land where Hatshepsut was a queen,
Where her memories are still alive.



continues
But still,
their hearts,
they swell.
so
we must
Continue.
Persist. and
Rise.
FaceTime Mom, Dad
Smile 'cross the oceans
Feel the grandchildren's warm words wiggle
round their hearts
mask your words
cover your thoughts
stop that virus
getting in
your
head.



The Prawn from Maine

Picture Book Text by Blossom Anyimba-Cooley

Once upon a time there was a prawn from Maine
Trapped in an underwater fishing tunnel

Far away from Mama, Papa and Jane
Flying through a dark underpass, oh what a puzzle

The prawn from Maine was small and pink
With a bright glossy look and 26 limbs

She wasn't one to kick up a stink
But she was from a proud family of kings

Whose tales of strength and bravery were heard far and wide
So she held her head high and let herself float

Far, far, far away from the ones she loved
Hoping one day she'd find their old sunken ferry boat

The prawn from Maine travelled a long while
Through the tiny dark shaft with debris for mate

She kicked and yelled and screamed for miles
This was no time to be proper or wait

and then it happened...

With a whoosh and a push and a tumbling down
The prawn from Maine opened her tiny black eyes



What she saw next you wouldn't believe
Do you know? Can you guess?

In a mighty big pond there lay...

Crabs and lobsters, crayfish and barnacles,
Prawns and squids, mackerel and shellfish

From far and near, taken away
From the arms that mourned, oh how selfish

The prawn from Maine gasped
at the sight, smell and colours abound

Turning to the strange looking creature nearest to her she asked
With a rather snooty look and a high pitched sound

"What are you?
Where am I?
And where is Jane my sister?"
Frankie the squid looked on bemused
At the barrage of questions and the unwavering glare

This prawn wasn't the first crustacean to arrive confused
So it straightened its shell and said with a flair

"My name is Frankie the squid from Australia, and these are my friends, Tobe the crayfish from Lagos, Ahyan the lobster from Indonesia and Barnabas the barnacle from Belgium."

"We've been trapped a long while," Frankie said as it slid
around its friends, sometimes almost invisible

"We will destroy the tunnels and set ourselves free!"
Frankie said pumping 8 arms into the air

"So, what are you called?" said Frankie with glee.
The prawn from Maine smiled, and looked at the friends with care

"My name is Penelope; my friends call me Penny the prawn
I was trapped in an underwater fishing tunnel while playing with my sister, Jane."

"It's nice to meet you Penny the Prawn," said Tobe the crayfish.
"Together we will make our way out of this underwater pond and be home with our families."

The new friends cheered, clapped and danced.
But Penny the prawn from Maine, looked up at the light from the rising sun, and the beautiful colours from the different creatures in the pond.
Although she was forced here, it was without doubt, the most beautiful place she'd ever been.

"Come on Penny, let's do this," said Frankie, pulling Penny in with the rest of his friends.



Searching for Home

By Mimi Mirka

When I got to Melbourne I had no idea what was going to happen to me. I had flown to Australia on a warm October night in search of freedom. I had fled my home for safety. I had come to the country to seek asylum. I was confused and did not know what life had in store for me. All I know is that I started missing home from the night I landed at Tullamarine Airport that Wednesday night.

Home, my little Burundi. My sweet country in the eastern part of Africa, once called a country of milk and honey. The land of my ancestors, where I had buried my maternal grandfather, my father and two of my siblings. A land that was now hosting my mother and siblings left behind me.

Was home not the place where you were supposed to be born and die? Was home not the place to be, no matter what happened to you, regardless of the circumstances of life? Whether you had a voice or not? *Nta wuheba aho yataye uruzogi* in my mother tongue, Kirundi, a saying translated to mean that no one abandons the place where they lost their umbilical cord.

What other home was I looking for? Burundi was that sacred place that carried a part of me. I had shamefully left it because it had hurt me so much to stay. Here I was, left with no other choice and considering starting a new life in a country that I did not know. What was the point of living far away from my family anyway? Just for the sake of safety, freedom, and life – what was the cost of those three words?

My family had always made most of the important decisions in life for me. Here I was, dishonouring them and making a personal decision without consulting them. Being a firstborn, I had been raised to understand the responsibility that comes with that privilege – a heavy weight to lift.

I had to grow up fast and care for my siblings and extended family members. I worked part-time while studying for my degree, and started contributing at an early age. My money was never mine, it was my family's money, and then some portion could be mine after everything else – if any was left. And now, I was shying away from my own words. I was choosing to be away from them.

How disappointed would my father be if he could see me? After he passed away I promised to support my mother and continue to care for my family. How dare I leave Burundi? Isn't family the only people who've got your back? Especially when I had been lucky enough to grow up and be educated. I had to be the one strong for my family. What example was I setting for my siblings? Shame on me.

Was it a good decision to seek asylum? Staying away from those I love the most? I was hoping for protection by becoming a refugee and living in a strange land, far from my culture and values. I decided I would hand it to God. I asked God to guide me in finding what was the best way to survive and live in peace. For the first time I reclaimed my independence as a grown up woman, and chose freedom and safety.

With all those questions I started my new life in Melbourne in 2015. Those questions never ceased. They followed me everywhere, in my dreams, in the shower, when I went out for a run, and sometimes at night, they rained over me like ice pellets. My whole life was changing.

Somehow, I felt welcomed in the first days. I had managed to find a kind family that agreed to host me for a month, in the small north-east suburb of Craigieburn. A friend of a friend who had heard that I was arriving in Melbourne had put me in touch with them. I still managed to find a few things to be grateful for. I had a place to live for a month. I had food and shelter.

This family was so good to me, not only did they kindly offer a roof over my head and internet access but they also gave me a family for the time being. They had a modern lifestyle where everything was very organised in advance, planned earlier with no room for adventure. There

was little room for the unexpected or spontaneous events. Maybe a bit too planned for my liking? But they seemed to have chosen that lifestyle and quite enjoyed it. I did not.

They worked until threeish in the afternoon and came home tired. They looked exhausted and still managed to make their evenings busy. Kids divided their time between basketball and dance classes on the weekend. They went for an early run on Saturday, took children to extracurricular activities, prepared dinners, shared an ice-cream for dessert and watched TV before bed. It felt monotonous to my state. My life in Burundi was so different. Was this what I was going to become soon?

Oh Burundi and its fun life. People had the ability to have way too much fun regardless of the many problems and challenges they faced. Evenings were spent with friends, colleagues, having a drink, or hanging out with family members. Although people were so poor, had so many debts and hardly paid their rent, weekends were special days. Everyone was so social, attending the endless weddings ceremonies, welcoming newborns, enjoying cultural events or simply celebrating life, going to the beach, eating street-barbecued meat.

There was something about life being lived to the fullest. Here in my new life in Melbourne, that seemed surreal. I would go to bed at the same time as them. Then I would chat on WhatsApp with friends and family back home. That would keep me awake until very late at night. I always slept in the following day. Then I woke up, prayed, read (very slowly), did some yoga from YouTube here and there or simply stared at the beautiful "art" that decorated the walls of the empty living room. I found a way to make it work for a month. I eventually ended up moving out of the cocoon. I lodged my application for asylum to the Department for Home



Affairs. Thanks to Lentara Uniting Care I found other accommodation. I was still jobless but kept my head up. I was depending on welfare. I shrunk whenever I thought my family back home would hear that.

I had been born blessed and was destined to an amazing life as per my grandmother's dream. Here, I was a no one. I cried when I imagined my grandma's eyes looking at me. Her "so special" granddaughter, living in a free accommodation, depending on social support to survive. And alone on the top of it. How did I end here? All I could do was weep.

Three years later, here I was still waiting to see if Australia would accept me and offer me protection. I waited in vain to be invited for an interview by the Department of Immigration. I'd prayed on my knees many days and nights for a permanent residency (a refugee status), a hope for a new life, a dream to build a stable life in Australia. I had toughened up: I had moved five homes, worked as a cleaner, then moved into administration work. I had dated men from Europe, Africa and in the Americas but still felt alone and lonely.

At least I had been healthy and never got sick. My family was still as alive and complete as I had left them. I finally found the job of my dream working within a not-for-profit. This has been my background, working to help my community, and finally I got employment to help younger people from a refugee and migrant background look for a job. I made a few friends and even started a relationship.

But, how patient would I be? How many more years was I going to go without hugging my mother? How long would it take to erase the sorrow that I had been swimming in all those years? How much longer could the human brain live in illusion? Hoping for a response that did not come? I was decomposing slowly, dying inside at a slow pace every day.

Four years had passed. It was one of the weirdest anniversaries to celebrate, but that's exactly what I did. I treated myself to a good dinner, a glass of white wine – a pinot gris, wine that I had learned to appreciate here. I even received a card with beautiful words from a friend I had met at church. A dear friend told me she had me in her prayers. God, how incomplete was I feeling. As if I was a living skull, that delicious meal going through my mouth and evaporating in my pores, leaving me exhausted and wanting to die.

Dear Department of Immigration, could you please take this burden away from me? For the first time in my life, I started worrying about my mental health. I realised it would be easy to have a mental breakdown if I was not careful. My work itself, the news from back home, violent movie scenes, everything frightened me so much and made me sad and angry and in rage... Had I become too soft? I had transformed into this fragile flower that was scared of everything. Pathetic. I hated myself for letting me down. I disgusted myself.

Once upon a time, I had held a higher vision of the woman I was and wanted to become. Always holding myself to higher standards, I was only allowed to see a strong and invincible woman, able to face challenges and get her "shit" together when needed.

Then came more solitude. At times, it was enjoyable, and it offered an opportunity to think, reflect, and meditate. On the other hand, I felt like falling into a deep silence, a sort of remote inhabited world where there was nothing and only inhabited by the worst thoughts a human brain can have. I was confused and did not know if I was awake as I had so many confusing conversations with myself. Some were quiet and others were often loud and took place out





when I was walking in the street. They would not cease. It was a vicious spiralling circle. Was I becoming mad?

Suddenly I realised how much bigger the world was getting every day and as a result I was getting tinier. It felt as if the earth was swallowing me alive. And the internal voices became noisier. Sounds become louder in my small head. I heard everyone say something to me, my family shouting at me. Strangers questioned what I was doing in their country, pointing fingers at me, asking me to leave because I looked different and did not belong. At night, I covered my body with my blanket, using it as a shield so I could not hear any more voices.

When I thought about death and dying, I spent more time on the logistics of what would follow my death. Would my family know if something happened to me? Who would inform them? Where would I be buried? What would be my funerals? Who would say goodbye to me? I quickly decided I would not die so easily and left those questions answered.

Then back to the usual emotions, would I see them before my head exploded? How was I going to survive this? Was this common? Was everyone seeking asylum feeling this heavy? Who could I talk to? Where was God? I had been a good child. I had prayed many times and deserved mercy. I had even donated from my humble salary to the less fortunate, many the homeless people that I met in the street I lived. Wasn't I going to receive anything from God in exchange at least? I needed God to send me light as I was sinking in a deep hole. It gave me hope that to others, I looked normal. Many times I had been told I did not have the profile of an asylum seeker. You are educated, have a professional job, speak decent English and can take part in normal casual conversations. They said I did not look desperate. They commonly commented on how hard it must have been to be on my own here in Melbourne, saying things like "I don't have any idea what Christmas would be without my family" or "Oh my God, a birthday on your own? When are you travelling home?" I hated them. I despised the thoughts they had about me. They had no idea of what hell I was living in. They had a wrong perception of the person I was. They approached me with fear blanketed in many other stereotypes about being a poor, useless woman of colour coming from Africa who was begging their country for a new life. They had already put me in a box without giving me

a chance to know me. They had decided for me without consulting me. They crushed me. Everything crushed me.

I was happy to talk about my country and its beauty. I was more than happy to share about my curly afro hair as long as I had allowed permission for those curious fingers pulling and analysing my hair. The minimum respect would be to first ask me if you could touch my hair and not assume you have access to it because it looks different. I was not to be an experiment of those thinking I looked exotic. I was a full person and you put me down and I felt objectified. I was mortified by the idea of them knowing my reality. So when asked about my story, I started lying. I would respond: I came here as a student. Which in reality was true, as I first came on a student visa. But later returned seeking protection. I felt humiliated and ashamed for my inability to embrace my reality. Seeking asylum made me ugly and illegal. I belonged to a species of unwanted and unwelcome people. It always hurt. I felt more and more ashamed of myself. Disgusted to occupy this place and carry the name: asylum seeker.

It took years to understand there was nothing bad or illegal. I was just a human being looking for safety. Mental health was common. My place was here. Everything passes. I accepted my journey as a gift.

Australia one day you will listen to me, give me an interview, assess my asylum claims and end this journey. I have prepared for that day for way too long and I am ready for it. Meanwhile, I have embraced my life as a gift. So, my soul embraced it as a rebirth. I finally quit existing and started living years ago.

I am alive and free.

A woman is seen from behind, walking on a dirt road. She is carrying a large, light-colored sack on her head, secured with a pink cloth. She is wearing a blue and white top and a colorful, patterned skirt. The background shows a dirt road leading into a lush, green landscape with trees and a small building in the distance.

The Henna Tree Legacy

By Hawanatu Bangura

When you departed, numbness took over. I did not cry a tear. I let myself move on and occasionally recalled faded memories of you. I wondered why I did not grieve your death. Maybe it was the physical distance of living oceans and lands apart. Maybe it was the fact that we could only speak to each other over the phone once in a blue moon.

...

I am back today visiting your place in Kambia, Sierra Leone. The landscape is still the same. The red country roads still leave dust traces on the roofs of houses. I can hear the sparkling laughter of children playing tag on the street. The branches of wild mango trees extend out to protect their juicy fruits from snatchers passing by. Coconut trees avoid the chaos by reaching for the heavenly sky. The dry season gets the better of me, as sweat flows down my face, eventually dripping off my chin to the thirsty ground.

Stepping on your land after two decades, it feels empty without you. I can see your house that was destroyed by the rebels. It is unrecognisable; even the foundations are crumbling. You built many houses which were meant to be your physical legacy, but they were all burnt to ashes by the rebels. I know what your houses meant to you. Even though you could not live in all of them, they were your pride, a reminder of your days as an affluent young man who thrived as women sought your attention.

...

You ended up marrying my Grandma Kadiatu from Rokupr, in a faraway town. In a not-so-fairy tale fashion, you visited Rokupr for work, you saw my grandma drawing water at the well. You said she stood out amongst the crowd with her printed Ankara sarong exposing her sunkissed caramel shoulder. Without speaking to her, you found her uncle and asked him for her hand in marriage. Although my twenty-first-century view does question why you did not speak to her, who am I to judge? Her family did not disapprove of you, possibly due to your money, status and charm. You

created a spark on your first meeting with her. Your wedding ceremony would not have been complete without the ritual of you both eating a kola nut. It left a bitter taste for both of you, symbolic of the hardship you would need to overcome in marriage.

...

Here I am in 2018, staring at what used to be your house. All I can see are shattered memories from the ruins. As I walk closer, the henna tree appears in my periphery. It is a soothing surprise to see that it has survived. The closer I get to it, the more I feel your presence in the hot, dry air. Standing next to it, I can see where your bedroom once existed. Long buried memories of you flood my mind and spring to life.

...

I remember visiting you during the school holidays when I was little. I would knock on your bedroom door and after a little while you would say, "Come in." You would slowly rise from the edge of your bed as I ran to you. You would lift my tiny six-year-old frame to rest on your lap. Once the door was open, the other grandchildren would follow behind. There was only enough room on your lap for your favourite – me. Being the youngest, I was entitled to that special throne. The others either stood or sat next to you. Everything you said appeared funny to us – your room was always filled with laughter. You would tell us exactly what you thought of each of your three wives and your many children. You had so many funny stories about everyone, and you told them like a comedian would. Our bellies hurt from laughter.

From your room I could see the ageless henna tree. It was always bursting with bright green leaves. You wanted it near your window because you liked the delicate fragrance. I appreciated the leaves for a different reason—to use as a manicure for my fingers. It produced the best henna ink in the entire town, leaving our fingers scarlet red for days on end. Despite girls regularly plucking the leaves, it never ran out. You told us the secret: the more leaves you remove the more it bears. It sounded magical to my young mind.

...

I am now standing next to the old henna tree. I know that this tree means more than a smell to you. You took care of the tree, just as you took care of yourself and the rest of us. You were a man of great calibre. A man who in Kambia town is still famously known as Bangala – a nickname hand-picked by your friends. It reflected your birth name Bangali and the Temne word *bangkala*, meaning someone with wealth and charisma, woven together like a beautiful tapestry.

The numbness that invaded me in the past is now replaced with the sweet strokes of the henna branches on my face. Slowly waving vivid memories of us.



Borrowed Languages

By Aline-Mwezi Niyonsenga

Français

During a six-week Japanese language course I took in Akita, my class discussed how our personalities change when speaking a different language. Snowflakes swirled outside the classroom's massive windows, stark white to offset the warm wood of the room. I felt poetic so I scribbled the words 借りた言語.

When it became my turn to share, I explained that I felt freer when I spoke French, in that I wasn't afraid to curse in nasal Québécois; I was more hesitant to curse in English because I felt like I should treat it with care, like a house you rent from a landlord. English was a 借りた言語, a language I borrowed.

Ironic that these days I hesitate to declare that English is my second language on job applications. Is the question asking if I'm more fluent in French rather than in English, or which language I learned first?

The last time I confidently called myself Québécoise was summer in Florida, 2007, when some family friends came down to visit us from Quebec City. The kids our age were like cousins, the kind we tolerated. My siblings and I quickly became annoyed at how many times they insisted on re-watching our DVD of *High School Musical 2*. I still had some control of French, but I noticed it was falling apart. The cousins noticed too and poked fun at it. We were jumping around the dining room, bare feet slapping on the brown Mexican tile. In response to a question or a statement, something the parents said maybe, I proudly declared that I was Quebecoise.

The cousins laughed in my face. "You're not a *real* Québécoise," they said.

I've been hesitant to claim that ever since.

...



English

In May 2019, I went to my cousin's long-awaited wedding in France. To the aunties in attendance, I was my mother's daughter, a relative from Australia. Some were surprised that I could speak French, and they sometimes gave me time to explain that I was born in Canada and moved to Australia much later. Others didn't listen. One such person was a cousin-by-association who made sure I wasn't lonely in a sea of strangers. In the middle of our conversation, he joked about how Québécois can't speak French, and I took offense. He didn't listen when I explained that I was one such Québécois. If Québécois couldn't speak French, how was it that we were having this French conversation?

For the wedding, the aunties and uncles packed up supplies in Lyon and drove us to a rustic venue in the countryside. I was so jet-lagged that I woke up at 4am to help my mom wash and dry soil-encrusted fruit imported from Rwanda as part of the gifts for the bride's family. That morning, I didn't have time to go through my printed copies of Kinyarwanda lessons.

The wedding was beautiful, but the reception wore me down. I walked in a sleep-deprived fog, surrounded by strangers in drizzling rain. At one point, I befriended some Americans in god-awful suits. Their accent was familiar, and it was a relief to speak in English. The kinship stopped there. I couldn't believe that they were the worst-dressed at the reception: turquoise blazers over polka-dotted shirts, navy over maroon, and tie patterns so hectic as to induce clown-infested nightmares. I don't know if I felt disgusted or embarrassed. A large portion of

my childhood was spent in the US.

I wound up on a couch, nodding off and on. My cousin-by-association came to sit next to me, chatting with other friends while I dozed. An auntie came, asking a question in Kinyarwanda. An exchange ensued, ending with her pointing out that I didn't know how to speak it.

My cousin gasped.

...

Kinyarwanda

On my first trip to Rwanda, I told my cousins I came from Australia. Depending on who I spoke to, I switched from English to French to halting attempts at Kinyarwanda. There were cousins who understood French but couldn't speak it, cousins who spoke only English, cousins who spoke only French, cousins who were comfortable in neither. In one tabletop conversation, I code switched between French and English so often that I sounded uncomfortable in both. One of my cousins frowned in confusion, thinking that maybe English was my second language, and then maybe it was French. I was reluctant to answer. It felt like I'd borrowed both. I should have been speaking in Kinyarwanda.

“If only you were staying for three months,” my cousins said.

I don't think it would have made a difference. I still relied on my printed lessons and hated trying to converse with cousins and aunts. Their attempt at conversation would go from simple to complicated to giving up on me in a matter of seconds. Or worse, laughing.

“Kinyarwanda is hard,” they would say.

It's true that the language is challenging. Prefixes and suffixes modify root verbs for tense, direct and indirect objects, and even pronouns, so that it's impossible to translate a verb unless you unravel the affixes modifying the root.

“Just use Google Translate,” my cousins would say.

Google Translate added Kinyarwanda three months after I returned to Australia. It can't translate abbreviations, slang or misspelled words. My cousins ignore my frustration.

...

日本語

Walking through Tokyo, I realised I was thinking in Japanese. My legs floated over the icy streets. I could accomplish anything now, even learn Kinyarwanda.

I haven't practiced lately. If English is a 借りた言語, then Kinyarwanda is candy on a high shelf. I have to stand on a wobbly chair to reach it. When I fall, the adults in the room laugh at me. When I wobble, they still laugh.





Home

By Adjoa Assan

Fourteen years of age, Multicultural Day. I found myself on the stage of my high school, not performing Azonto but performing a Pacific Islander dance with my Pacific Islander friends. I wanted what they had – big extended families and a strong sense of belonging. I had a round afro and was often mistaken for a Pacific Islander and so I tried to be. I had no extended Ghanaian family living in Australia and I felt disconnected from who I really was.

“My name is Adjoa.” That is how the conversations would start with fellow Ghanaians. Adjoa means Monday-born. The person would then assume that I had been to Ghana and I would tell them no. I could see the disappointment.

“But you speak the language?”

“No.”

“Okay, but you understand Twi?”

“No.” Everything then became invalid and before I knew it, I had answered no numerous times.

The night before the flight. My family and I chatted away, the sounds of bags rustling and suitcases zipping. The house was alive with our high spirits and nervousness for the long journey ahead. We would be taking the road less travelled: first a flight from Sydney to Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi to Cairo and then finally Accra, Ghana. A place known for its rhythms, cocoa and its monumental independence on the 6th of March 1957.

In the months leading up to our departure, I had been communicating with my cousin Grace who was to meet us at the exit from Kotoka International Airport. “The weather is very dry so bring along a hand cream and lip balm ...” she said over text. “I am sooo excited too that I’ll be seeing you guys



soon, I have been counting down the days eagerly.” Grace is an only child and so me, my sister and Grace would soon call ourselves “The Triplets”.

On the plane I remember looking at the digital flight map when there were about two hours left until we touched down. The anticipation of being so close only increased when I heard the pilot’s voiceover announcing our descent. I looked out of the small window and saw the aerial view of Ghana’s capital. The lower our plane flew, the palms, *tro tros* with which I was yet to be acquainted and my family drew closer. My heart started beating faster.

We exited the airport, suitcases in tow, and spotted Grace waving us over. Also waiting for us was our youngest aunt and her son. A flurry of introductions and hugs ensued, and I couldn’t stop smiling. I could see my joy reflected in Grace’s spectacles as she told me all the exciting activities she had planned for us all.

The ride to where we would be staying was the beginning of Ghana revealing to me its allure and beauty. My first taste of Ghana was a creamy vanilla *Fanlce* that sweetly cooled my lips. My cousin had bought us all ice-creams by hailing over one of the hawkers who was carrying a cooler of the icy treats above his head as the traffic stood still under the hot sun. My attention was captured by the bright-coloured wraps around the waists of beautiful women; children engrossed in the stories of a circle of friends and the taxi drivers honking their horns impatiently. I looked across at my younger sister whose almond eyes conveyed the message, *Wow! We’re here! Is this real?* Grace was sitting in the front seat and we all giggled as the

bass of afrobeat hits rattled the car at full volume. We knew that so much fun and the making up of lost time lay ahead.

The day we journeyed to my Grandma’s village was a long one and when we were getting close, my uncle parked our 4WD to the side of the road. My aunty had prepared us takeaway lunches of her delicious jollof rice and chicken which we ate under the shade of huge trees. The village road was quiet and as I looked ahead, I thought about how I was going to finally achieve a dream of mine, meeting my grandma. I had long thought about her and wondered what she was like and whether she thought about us too.

Driving into the village, our vehicle bumped up and down along the uneven road. I silently read the words of my grandfather’s name, Nana Kojo Abesse, on a banner hanging from a large house; that made me smile because I saw the letters of my second name proudly printed. Grandma was not expecting us as my family did not want to worry her and it would be a grand surprise.

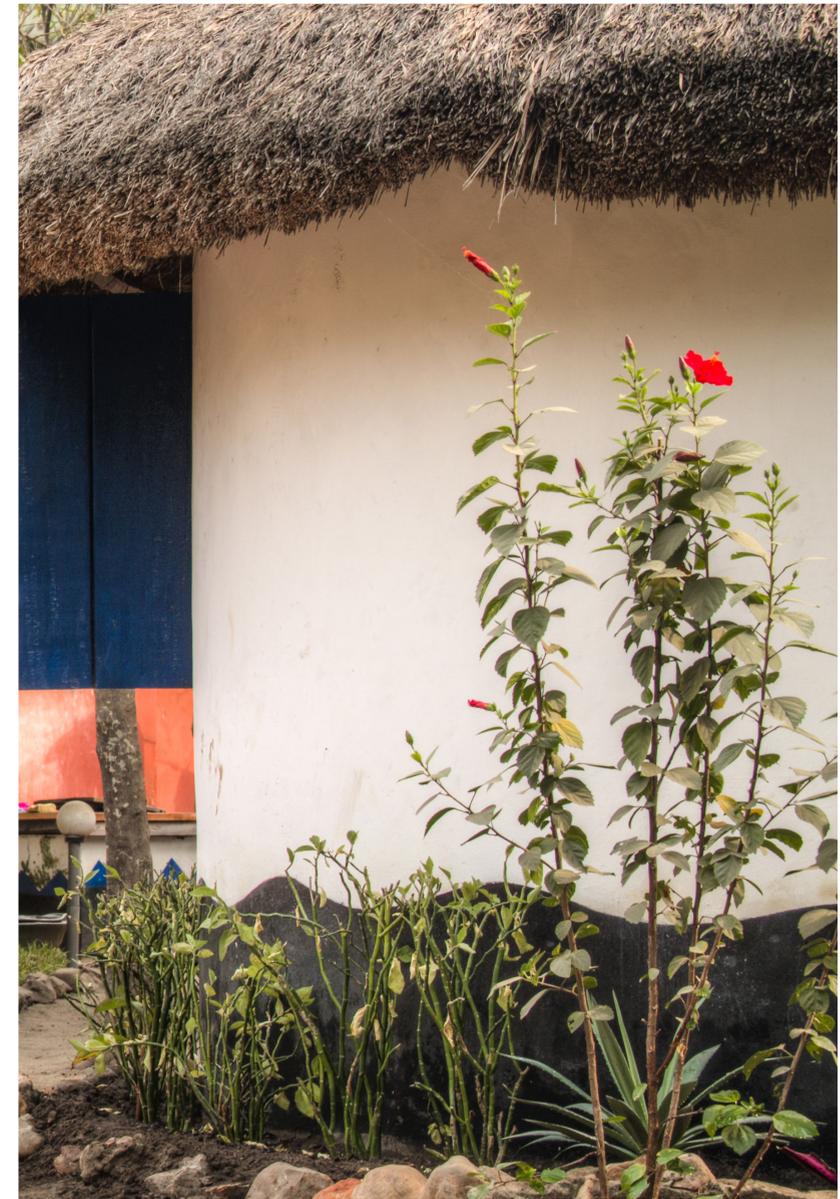
We were led to my grandma’s compound and when we turned the corner into her courtyard there she was. She was hunched over, petite but very much alert and in good health, a gold cross hung gracefully around her neck. My eldest aunty assumed the role of translator of my grandmother’s Fante.

“Are these my grandchildren?” my grandmother was saying. She turned to us, her face inviting

and cheerful, and said one of the few English phrases she knew: “How are yooo?”

“I have never stopped praying for them,” she was saying. “Thank you for bringing them home.” Grandma insisted on giving us some cedis before we left. Her hand felt warm and comforting as she pressed the note into my hand. I thanked her for her sweet gesture.

Surrounded by my own extended family and connected to my own culture, I found profound peace. A peace I had not known on that stage at fourteen. Even though I lived far away from Ghana, I could now transport myself there through the tangible memories I had made. We soon travelled to Ghana again and for longer. In Ghana, I can be an individual, but an individual within a broader community and an extended family. With every journey, I reclaim more of who I am, and the prayers of my grandmother will continue to lead me home.



I am the Sun

By Guido Melo

I mastered several of your languages,
I learned from your courses,
I studied your thinkers.
I entered your institutions;
All of it so I can tell my story the way I want to tell it.
With my own voice.
In my own way.
In my story, there is nothing of you.
In my history, I am the sun.
In my story, I shine.

TIME CAPSULE

This is our insurance.
This is my gift for you... from here to all eternity.
If life chooses to get in the way.
If, unfortunately, all that was solid melts into air.
If one day, there is nothing left.
May these words remind us that for once;
Even if for a few moments;
There it was.
And it was worth it.



Where The Street and Bar Collide

By Pamela Asare

I felt the warmth as soon as I stepped into the bar, the bass from the guitar caressed my shoulders and I relaxed. My black braids brushed my hips as I walked to a seat in the back corner near the bar. Dim red lights lit the room, many bodies shifted and squeezed passed each other to get around. I walked a few steps to the bar behind me to get a drink; orange juice with a black straw, in a short stubby glass. It vibrated with the beating of the drums coming through the speakers. Lips danced in the bliss, flashing teeth, tongues and gums. Drinks were lost with the tossing of heads going back and forth through performances.

I caught my reflection in the mirror on the pillar at the back of the bar. My lip gloss was still intact. My head was aching from the braids I'd had done the day prior in a house in Lewisham, by a Portuguese lady with caramel skin.

The slow saxophone lead melodies caressed the sharp edges and corners of the building. There was something sexy in the air, the subtle sultriness of young people gathered in a room with jazz. I saw it in the security man with his dreadlocks tied and dripping all the way down his back. The bartender with a clean burgundy dyed TWA. So, when the drummer looked in my direction for the second time, I just blushed the kind of blush that left tiny pearls of sweat on my nose.

The cries and moans of the instruments soon shifted to a funky soul medley with backing vocalists hand-picked from the crowd. People began to gather in front of the stage dancing, all limbs in the game. I watched as they twirled, bopped and sang the words to the songs. Everyone seemed so open and approachable. They didn't look like the people I would see on my way to work on the streets of London. The ones that would rush past, brush you on the shoulder and just keep walking, the ones who kept to themselves and avoided eye contact, the people who didn't like to talk to strangers.

"Hi there! Why aren't you dancing? You should be dancing," a new face said

with a smile.

“I’m alright thanks, I’m just finishing off my drink.”

“Your drink is finished... Come on, let’s dance.” He was a handsome young white man with a seductive accent I openly relished since watching *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging*. He waited for my hand to accept his and then we were on the dance floor. He was an investment banker. He had green eyes and honey golden hair. He looked like someone who ate well and went to the gym.

“So, what’s your name?” His breath carried with the strong stench of beer, his body glistening with sweat.

“It’s Adjoa, my name is Adjoa.”

“Nice to meet you A-djoa, my name’s Tim. Did you come here by yourself?” he asked with a near-drunken smile. He was screaming in my ear then, as the space closed in on us, the music continued to throb through the speakers.

“Yeah I did.” I was questioning why I had decided to come alone after my roommate bailed, but I figured it wouldn’t be that bad. And here I was with my underarms drenched, talking to a total hot stranger.

“Oh really?” He sounded surprised, as if he hadn’t seen me sitting alone throughout the night.

His mate tapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m going now but it was nice meeting you, you enjoy the rest of your night!” As he walked away his back revealed his thick frame and broad shoulders. He had danced with almost half the women in the bar. He was charming. I wondered what would happen if we crossed paths on the street.

The music faded out with the faces in the room and voices trickled from behind the bar. As I walked out, the cold grabbed me by the face, my nose suddenly froze. The snow snuck into my hoodie and melted around my neck. The lights were wild and awake in the night. People manned the weather like a summer festival and gathered around pubs and clubs. My hands lay in my pockets as I walked down the street to Old Street Station.





Life As a Black African Teenager (Unapologetically Black)

By Suzan Mulesi

1.

As my Mum drops me off, I catch my reflection in my mother's car's rear-view mirror. I think to myself, *Girl, you slay!* I am wearing a yellow bomber jacket inspired by Queen 'B' (Beyonce's) homecoming video. I have matched it to my tight blue jeans to accentuate my *Ugandan African assets*, my butt and hips. My round hoop earrings and baseball cap are a perfect fit for my outfit. It is casual-Friday, and I am deep in my feels!

I walk down the hallway to my locker to pick my books. The imagery of Eddy and I kissing behind his locker flash through my mind. I remember what my mum tells me – that “teenage memories often remain for a long time, and I should be careful of my choices.” On the contrary, I am a contemporary teenager. I do not think deeply before making choices. I make some of my choices based on fleeting emotions and then regret them afterwards. I disregard my African parents' caution, thinking they just do not want me to enjoy life to the fullest. Anyways, I want to enjoy life to the fullest because I am not in Africa, I am in Australia. I am a teenager, and it's time for experimentation.

Cara interrupts my thoughts.

“Tabs, give me a smile. My mum just bought me the latest iPhone, and I need your picture on my Instagram page.”

I open my mouth in amazement.

“Wow. Is it your birthday or something?” Cara gives me a bewildered look.

“No, stupid. My Mum's love language is giving gifts.” In Uganda, parents show how much they love us when they smack us with wooden sticks.... “SAVAGE LOVE.” Cara brandishes her new iPhone, and I check my pocket for my Mum's Nokia.

Cara comes closer to me and asks that we take some selfies for her

gram. She takes some pictures and screams: "Say cheese! Change pose, Tabs. Okay, I need to show off my cleavage, it will get us more likes. One more." She shows me the different pictures and asks for the one to post. I check the pictures, and I am about to pick one...

"I look so cute in this photo. We will use this." Cara cuts me off with great excitement in her voice: "Okay, filter, crop, adjust. Good! It is now perfect for Instagram."

I don't even understand what Cara is saying, so I turn and bring out a book from my locker.

"Oops. I want to tag you, Tabs, but it seems you are not on Instagram."

"Cara," I turn to answer, "I don't have an Instagram account yet. My mother thinks it is the devil's playground."

Cara smirks. "Girl, if you don't have a Tiktok, Snapchat, or Instagram account, you have no life. You should check out pictures from Tom's birthday party held last night, and guess who went? Eddy. Girl, we need to get on those invitation lists! See you in class." It seems teenage life is for assessment, partying hard, sleepovers, hangovers, alcohol tasting, and McDonald's runs.

Mentally, I draw up a teenager's checklist. I have had my first kiss and gotten involved in stupid fights, but I am yet to get on Snapchat and TikTok. I should get an Instagram account first, maybe with a pseudonym: "Monic". I will add a profile picture and upload some selfies. I remember what my Mum often says – that I will be embarrassed when I remember all the pranks that I am playing now in ten years. Well, I will disregard that advice for now and enjoy my teenage years.

About four rows from my locker, I hear two friends greet each other loudly. As I turn to look

at them, I catch a glimpse of someone with toasted almond skin colour and blonde hair just like the sunset. I pretend not to see him and concentrate on getting my textbook instead. Suddenly, his strong masculine hands grab my butt.

"Hey Tabs," Eddy says. I wonder why Eddy is doing that.

"Is my butt too big? Wait, do I have something on my butt?" I ask him.

"Your butt is as fine as you are, Tabs. I like it as it is," Eddy replies and winks at me.

I feel embarrassed, but I hide my feelings. "Dang. It is in my African genes."

"It doesn't change anything. You are still my African queen. Perfect for my blue eyes," Eddy says.

2.

My last class for the day is Drama and our teacher, Mr Black, is a free-spirited true-blue Aussie. He is quite dazzling, funny, and very full of Australian sarcasm. Many students love him. Mr Black can also be partial and racist, and for that some students do not like him.

Mr Black enters the class and announces the lesson. "Today, we will talk about Black history." Everyone in my class loves Hip Hop and the Black culture, so we scream in excitement. Mr Black turns to me, "Hey, Nigga, can you tell us what you know about the Black culture?"

I take a deep breath. Why did he call me Nigga? I know a lot about Black culture, but they are



mostly stories of horror. I remember the stories I had been told about how Africans endured untold hardships; some were forcefully evacuated from their countries and sold as trade items. The women were raped and kidnapped while the men were battered and exploited. Some of them were displaced from their homelands and separated from loved ones forever. Their human rights were abused, and they were forced to become slaves and creators of wealth for Europeans. They were told that they were cursed, and that was the best they could be. For a very long time, the Blacks were confounded and did not know the way out. The mental and physical torture was unimaginable.

As I think about these stories, I cringe in horror. My white classmates start to leave the class, one after the other. Noticing the apparent change in my countenance, Mr Black asks me if anything is wrong.

I try to compose myself properly and ask as politely as I can, “How can you use the ‘N’ word so loudly and proudly in front of the class? This behaviour needs to be reported to the principal.” I think Mr Black can see the pain in my eyes because I can see him getting emotional.

“Please don’t tell the principal. I will change my attitude. I will never use that word again.” Mr Black leaves the class, and I do the same.

I call my unapologetically Black aunt and tell her everything. She tells me not to take offence and promises to be in my school next Monday to address the issue. I tell my aunt that I am okay, but I am not sure that I am okay. Cara and Lily find me sobbing in the hallway.

“What’s wrong, sis?” Cara asks.

I open my mouth to talk, but Lily cuts me short.

“You dropped something, Tabs.” I look at the floor to see what I dropped; Lily gives a loud laugh: “You dropped your smile.”

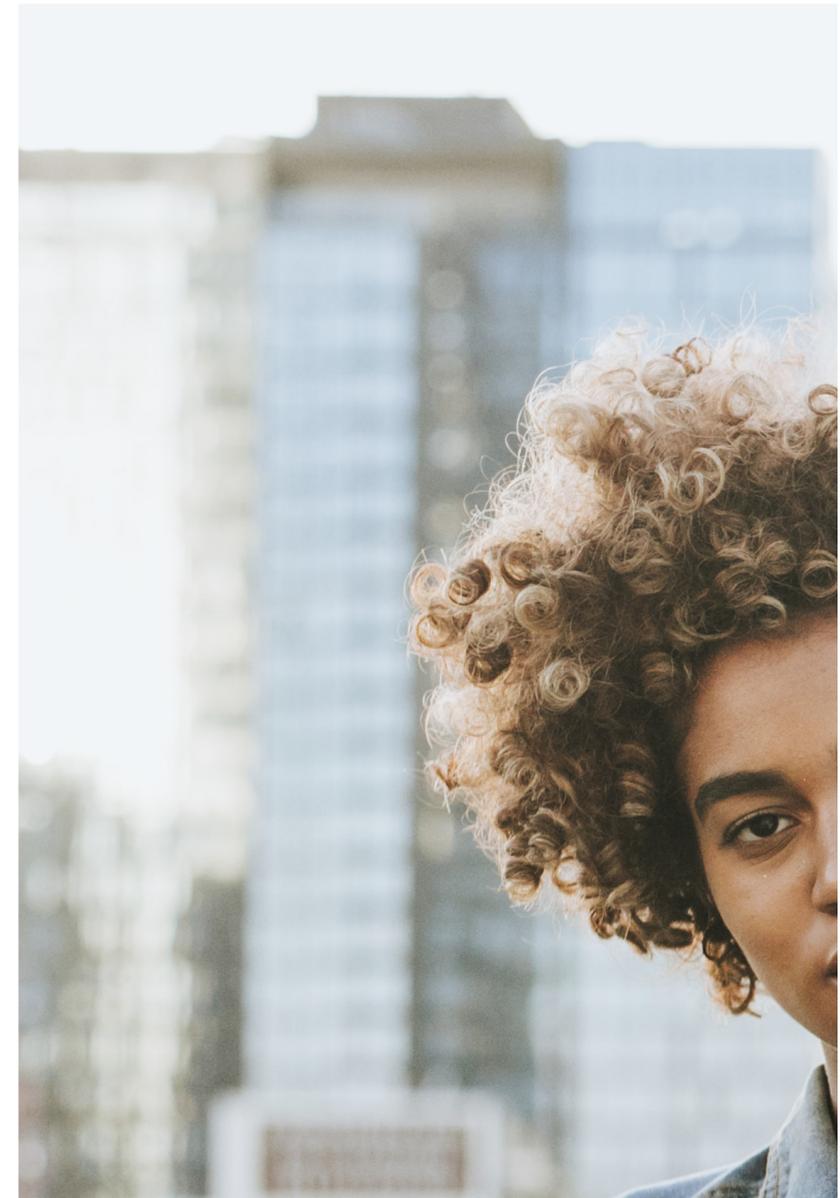
I tell my friends about my experience in class.

“Mr Black The BIATCH! Sorry, excuse my French,” Cara says. We laugh.

3.

Monday morning, my aunt comes to the house to drive me down to school. I can see her unapologetic persona manifest before my eyes. We get to school and go straight to the principal’s office.

My aunt fumes at the principal, Ms Kate. “He needs to apologise to her in front of the class. He should also tell the class that it is bad to make implicit or explicit racial comments. If he doesn’t do that, he should be expelled.”





Ms Kate is surprised that one of her teachers could do that. She apologises to my aunt and promises to call Mr Black to order.

“It’s okay, Tabs. You can go to your class,” Ms Kate says, and I leave her office immediately.

On Tuesday, my mum drives me to school, and we see my aunt and some of her Black friends at the gate of the school premises chanting,

“Black Students Matter!” My aunt is leading a peaceful protest because of me, and I am so proud of her! Mum and I get out of the car, and we approach the protesters.

“Mrs Fatimah, what is happening?” Mum asks.

Mrs Fatimah answers, “We heard about a racist comment that was made in your daughter’s class, and nothing has been done about it. The other day, Aisha came home crying because a student in her class had called her a terrorist. My family and I left Iran for a better future, and I don’t think that is what we are getting now.”

Mrs Chan from Vietnam speaks up. “You are right. My daughter refuses to pack her favorite meal, chicken legs, when she is coming to school because she doesn’t want to be booted. Should I be compelled to feed my children sandwiches, and sausages? No, this is unfair.”

Mum answers, “This must stop. I will join you right away. Tabs, you can go to your class, so you don’t miss out.”

I leave my mum with the protesters, and I go to join my colleagues in class. I had told myself to just suffer in silence, but my family members would not allow it. I am so grateful for my family.

I look out through my classroom window, and I see the principal walking towards the protesters. I can also see my mum and my aunt leading the protest. When they get together they are a force to be reckoned with. Their chants of “Black Students Matter!” are ringing throughout the entire school, and I can’t even concentrate on what the teacher is teaching.

Eddy comes to my desk. “Tabs, is that your mother? We should join the protest. Black students should be treated with respect.”

I don’t know if I should be proud or ashamed. I manage to mutter, “Eddy, you are not Black.”

“Of course, yes. I am not Black. I am White, but what is the difference between a White and a Black student? We are all humans. I want to use my ‘privilege’ as a white student to make a difference. Silence is tantamount to betrayal, Tabs. I will not be silent.” I look at Eddy. I am flabbergasted.

Lily also comes closer to my desk, and then she addresses the class. “Listen up, class, we are all the same on the inside. If Black students don’t matter, then, we all do not matter.”

I look at Lily, and I can see the love in her eyes. Our class teacher, Ms Julian, is tired of the tirade, and she shouts, “There should be order in class. Now Lily, if you don’t keep quiet, I will detain you.” The entire class stands, and everyone joins in the “Black Students Matter!” chant. I am surprised and happy at the same time. I join the chant and raise my fist as I chant.

Cara brings out her iPhone and starts to film the protest.

I go to her desk. "Please don't do that, Cara."

"Don't worry, Tabs. Everything will be okay." Cara smiles and adds, "Even if I want to, it is too late."

"What do you mean?" I ask her.

"I am doing a live video on Instagram," Cara says and she goes outside to cover the protesters.

"Wow, see the comments. Tabs, your mum is Insta-famous!" Cara screams. I don't even know what to say. I don't want Cara filming my mum protesting, but I know that there are some times in life that we have to fight for our rights, and my mum is not doing anything bad by protesting peacefully.

Looking through the window, I see Mum talking to Ms Kate in her thick African accent: "What is going on in this school? Please answer me. How is the school dealing with the racism that is eating it deep and affecting our children? Ehhhhh."

"Madam, I am disappointed at the incidents. I apologize on behalf of the teachers and the students," Ms Kate says.

My mum continues. "I am losing money by the minute because I should be on a morning shift. Here am I fighting for my child's rights instead of being at work. Is this what I am paying this school for? My husband and I came from Africa so we could give our children a better education. We have worked tirelessly to make that happen, even to the point of enduring sleepless nights. I am working shift to shift so that my daughter can have a good life. Principal, why is your school making things difficult for me? Why are you stressing my daughter and me? Why are you stressing Black students? Why do you think it is okay to have an insensitive non-Black person talk about Black issues? Why give him the topic when you know he is racist?"

The principal addresses the protesters. She apologises once again and tells them to go home as she will address the issue.

As the last protester leaves, Ms Kate heaves and goes to her office.

A few hours later, Mr Black leaves the school premises. Ms Kate calls a meeting of all students and teachers and says,

"There is zero tolerance for racism in this school. Every student matters, no matter the colour of your skin."

Eddy pulls my hand, looks into my eyes, and says, "I love you, Tabs."





Willa

By Tanith Chippendale

“Why don’t you just take Willa to the formal?” Willa heard a boy laugh as she walked by her school bus stop. Her shoulders were hunched and she hung her head down, trying to cloak herself from their ridicule. They were boys who almost looked like men, tall with dark and blonde facial hair dotted around some of their faces, some with thin curly hair, some with thin straight hair. They huddled together, too many of them for her quick glances to decipher, a pale and olive pond of derision. Their Friday afternoon attire was routine, their perfectly ironed Catholic School shirts remained untucked while they bounced insults off one another like a game of verbal dodge ball, using her name to deliver the winning point and elicit peals of laughter from the group.

Two of them were the boyfriends of girls she had once hoped to befriend. Kristen and Peyton had invited her to hang out with them and Willa had been excited at the prospect that these girls would welcome her into their world; Kirsten with her silky golden curls and Peyton with her sleek black hair were admired by all the boys, so athletic, their personalities so bold they beckoned attention from boys, girls, men and women alike – Willa hoped to share in that attention.

As Willa recognized the two boys at the bus stop, she thought about their girlfriends. She remembered walking down the dusty path a few suburbs away from her home as Kristen and Peyton had exchanged glances to each other as if they were communicating through their eyes something foreign to her. She remembered their questions: “Have you ever had a boyfriend?” “Are you a virgin?” “Why don’t you have a dad?” There were no statements, only questions. And, while it would soothe her to dismiss them as curiosity, she remembered how she couldn’t shake the rising shame, slowly shrinking her down until she felt like an ant among giants. She remembered their nimble slim legs each crossing the thin log to the other side of a lake and the piercing crack of the log as it was her turn to cross. She remembered the frightening feeling of water as it enveloped her, her clothes clinging to her body as she made it out and deciding to walk back home. She remembered the pang of shame as she heard their loud laughter and taunts of “Fat bum, fat bum!”



As she walked further away from the boys at the bus stop, Willa inhaled the smell of burnt coconut oil. She imagined for a moment that their suggestion of taking her to the formal was genuine. She wanted to mould herself into a figure that appeared beautiful to them and delivered the self-assured persona that often seemed to accompany this beauty. As she retreated to the footpath on her way to her house, she felt the same urge that she felt every day after school. The taunts of these boys gave rise to an urgency as she unlocked her phone and opened several of the dating apps and online forums she had been using. One man invited her out for the night. Her family was having a braai but she wasn't hungry for smoked boerewors and Cape Malay barbecue chicken at this moment. She was ravenous for something different, and each text message with honeyed words of interest gave her a taste of the feelings she was aching to consume.

Willa arranged for the man to pick her up from the station close to her house. When she sat next to him in his big, shiny-white Mercedes that smelt of acrid fumes and new leather, her stomach clenched with both dread and curious anticipation. His salt and pepper strands fell from his perfectly coiffed hair onto his face. He smiled at her and called her pretty. This comment elicited a delight in her that pushed her doubt into the back of her mind.

When they reached his place, he led her immediately to his room and she sat on the mattress.

"I'll get you something to drink babe."

She smiled at the endearing name and shyly shook her head, unable now to meet his eyes from the nerves attacking her body.

He sat next to her, so close it almost felt like he was on top of her. She could feel his hard chest pressing against her arm as he leaned into her and she shivered at the heat of his peppermint breath.

He touched the tips of her hair. "Do you ever think about straightening it?"

She forced a smile, thinking about the day and a half she had spent trying to straighten it. "Yeah..."

He placed a hand on her leg and she just stared at it, feeling frozen for a moment, his pale hairy hand stark against her chubby brown thigh.

"I need to go to the bathroom," she said and stood up.

He smiled at her suggestively. "Okay, I get it."

Still processing her strange environment, with this strange man, doing these strange things, she quickly walked out of the room. She realised then that she didn't actually know where the bathroom was.

"I think you missed it," he called out. "It's just down the corridor on your left."

It was unusual for her to be in such a big house. She lived in a very modest home, just one storey with two rooms for her, her mum and her five siblings. Willa was the youngest at sixteen. This house was a double-storey house, triple-storey if you count the game room he

said was downstairs, underground.

In the bathroom, she looked into the full-body mirror next to the shower and wanted to shut her eyes immediately, but resisting the temptation, she inspected herself. She saw her round swollen brown cheeks, her hair which was basically her usual afro but without the curls. A polka-dot top and a denim skirt stuck to her body, but where she could see sexy curves before she left, all she could see was her round stomach and the cellulite that the thin material of her denim skirt clung to. Trying to even out her lashes that were clumped together, she stained her hands and her cheeks. She reached for her pocket to reapply lipstick to her chapped lips but couldn't find it and when her teeth started to ache, she realised that she had been biting down hard since she had been picked up. She felt a swell in the back of her throat.

The man knocked on the door. "Hey, is everything okay in there?"

"I'm fine, just fixing myself up."

He sighed. "Just come spend some time with me, babe."

When she opened the door, he grabbed her hard by the waist and she pushed him back as a reflex, surprised by this quick forceful movement.

"Sorry, I don't think I'm ready," she said, forcing herself not to lower her head.

He rolled his eyes and sighed. She felt a temptation to placate him, make him like her again. She felt ashamed of her confusion and guilty for the mixed signals she was giving out.

"I didn't expect a girl like you to play hard to get." His eyes were a vacuum, complete disinterest now replacing the earlier desire in them, and the shame and doubt Willa felt gave way to the stir of fury. She didn't know how else to express herself, but she pushed him aside hard, swiftly opened the door and walked out towards the pathway. As her feet padded along the white footpath next to vibrant green grass and brightly coloured flowers she recognized that she was walking in beauty but still felt like an alien in a cage yearning for home.

She checked her phone; she had told her Mama she was going to a friend's house tonight. Her Mama sent her a picture of a pot of what Willa could see was her favourite meat stew. She didn't know how she would get home, but she would find a way.

