

# Faith Identity & Belonging

An Anthology of  
Creative Writing and  
Photography



Edited by Paddington Arts

## Editor's Note

**W**e live in dangerous and worrying times. Extremism, youth violence, climate change are in the news every day, and affect us all.

At Paddington Arts we encourage young people to use the arts to explore issues that affect their lives. We have been looking at the themes of Faith, Identity and Belonging for some time, because they are universal themes, and also because we know that anyone who doesn't have a sense of identity and belonging is vulnerable to philosophies or ideologies that might lead them down a dangerous and harmful path.

With funding support from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Google.org we set up an online competition in Creative Writing and Photography and invited young people aged 16–24 to submit photographs and articles, and offered prizes to the best three in each category.

We were delighted with the quality of the entries, and pleased that we reached out to young people to take part not only across the UK, but also Europe and beyond. We have decided to print a selection of the outstanding entries in this booklet. If you would like to carry on the debate please contact us at: [info@paddingtonarts.org.uk](mailto:info@paddingtonarts.org.uk) or [www.scribershive.com](http://www.scribershive.com).

Steve Shaw  
Director  
Paddington Arts

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## Sparkle

Sparkle  
by Melissa Bheekha

*But it will count for me if,  
even for a day,  
I can serve who gave me a  
life and people who love me.*



Melissa Bheekha

*Hi, My name is Melissa and I am living in East London since I moved from Italy 3 years ago. I am in my final year of A Levels applying to study Biomedical Science at university.*

*My ambition is to work in disease research and possibly become a doctor. Writing is just one of many passions beside reading from classics to fantasy, poetry and YA novels, science books and newspapers (yes, even those!), running and playing basketball, drawing, being with my friends and family.*

*For me writing is a way to give form to my thoughts that never make their way to be spoken, when you feel something that is so valuable that you don't want to forget you jot it down.*

*Writing, I can say, has saved me when I felt mostly alone and not wanted, but I also write when I am happy, like here. I hope you enjoy it.*

The sparkle ignited inside me,  
Is kept alive by someone who whispers  
in my head  
The reasons of my being in this universe.

And I am grateful to whoever watches over me  
To have given me an opportunity to feel the  
caress of a mother and the laugh of a friend,  
The breeze over my face, to get a glimpse of the  
horizon beyond the sea.

For all the tears shed at not being content with  
myself  
At trying to be someone else,  
To be just more than a drop in a ocean of  
despair.

I am in the biggest adventure yet to be written.  
Everything thrown at me,  
Despite nimbly dodging them,  
Has shown me that I am not a hero, not a  
saviour.  
But a girl trying to be bold and brave.

Nonetheless, with a smile plastered on her face,  
Trying to fly from a world of hypocrisy,  
Enjoying the simple quiet and beauty of a  
universe hiding extraordinary secrets.

A girl with confidence issues and retreated in  
herself,  
Not caring about the labels that this society  
sticks to her.

I am not a package, nor a product of  
conventions,  
Certainly not a doll to be exposed in a shop  
window because I have a life of my own.

Everyone has their say and try to influence you,  
But learn to weave your line of thought with  
grace,

*Everyone has their  
say and try to  
influence you,  
but learn to  
wave your line of  
thought with grace*

*Faith and reason  
can go hand in  
hand if you allow  
them to.  
Believing can be  
more powerful and  
reason often relies  
on it.*

Like a beautiful tapestry ready to be taken only  
by those who have reason in your heart.

Faith and reason can go hand in hand if you  
allow them to.  
Believing can be more powerful and reason often  
relies on it.

The core of who we are, just like the universe is  
made of galaxies and stars,  
Is within our beliefs and realizations.  
Living to find a purpose and bringing a smile to  
protect those you love from a pain  
That inevitably will doom us at the point of  
death.

Death makes life more than worthwhile  
living, sometimes a mercy when we fall in the  
battlefield of daily life.  
Though this life, this gift is not to be wasted  
especially not in accumulating a material  
heritage,  
But a cultural one that will enrich and entertain  
your spirit.

As your sparkle is extinguished, you want  
to preserve the good memories and reach  
happiness,  
As there is a life beyond what we are  
experiencing now and all that comes at the price  
of your deeds.

Call it blind faith, but we are not as independent  
as we may think,  
Constantly at the mercy of a superior force,  
which can melt and break us,  
Too fragile and miserable to see the truth  
immediately.

We are a shade of indefinite colour, a beautiful  
creation,  
Carrying the burdens of a planet to care about

which we are exploiting  
And making bleed black blood for our  
aspirations.

The worry sometimes sweeps me over when I  
think about the future of our race,  
When I will not be there as the Eye of God will  
explode and leave us to darkness.

How it won't be a life anymore but a survival,  
Degrading ourselves not to monkeys  
Who someone believes we come from, but  
something worse.

My life now, as it is, would just be a tiny chapter  
of the history of humanity,  
Not even worthy of mention,  
But it will count for me if, even for a day,  
I can serve who gave me a life and the people  
who love me.

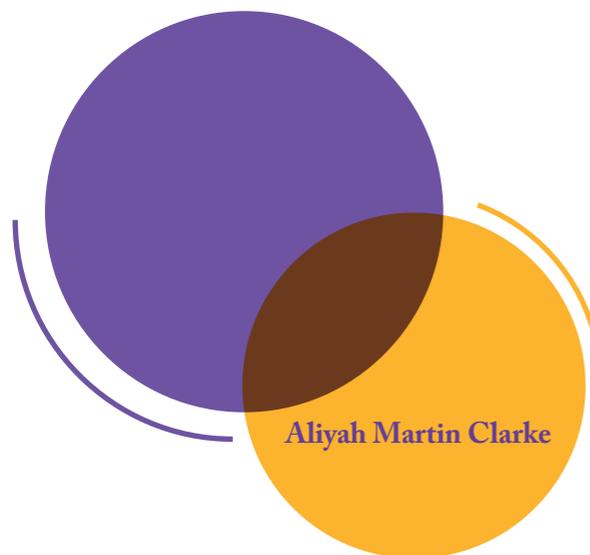
*We are a shade of  
indefinite colour, a  
beautiful creation*

## Incomplete

## Incomplete

by Aliyah Martin Clarke

*Where do I belong?  
Where am I from?  
A past buried down below  
With ancestors I do not know.*



I think therefore I am.  
Such wise words from a wise man.  
But these five words bewilder me  
As I don't know who I am fully.  
I am five feet and I have dark skin  
But does that reveal who I am within?  
No one knows the me inside.  
No one knows, not even I.

I am religious to an extent,  
But not even religion can make sense  
When people try to change 'the truth'  
It leaves religious people confused.  
So many different faiths out there.  
Why must one be the heir?  
The heir that has the right to the crown.  
The crown that proves that God's around.

Even if they aren't totally right,  
Why can't all faiths unify?  
Religion's a puzzle needing to be done.  
And all faiths have a piece; maybe more than one.  
Faith can make up your identity.  
But your identity can never be complete.  
You learn new things as time goes by.  
And there's more to learn even after you die.

Identity isn't just your name.  
There's a list of things, but we'll be here all day.  
There's so many things one needs to find.  
Therefore I won't bother waste my time.  
Where do I belong? Where am I from?  
A past buried down below, with ancestors I do not know.  
They must have fought everyday to break free from being a slave.  
Yet instead of being taught my own history,  
I've been taught pathetic fallacy.

I live in a community where there's a divide.  
I don't know if I should pick a side.

If I do, do I belong there?  
Or am I just another spare?  
I want to belong and I want to be safe.  
But I can't when I'm part of the human race.  
There's so much pain and it's killing me.  
I see humans but no humanity.

A poem's just a bunch of words.  
Words that long to be heard.  
But us humans don't care.  
It just goes through one ear and out the next.  
There's so many things I have to say.  
But I can't put it in a simple phrase.  
It's hard for me to say it straight  
Without making a multitude of mistakes.

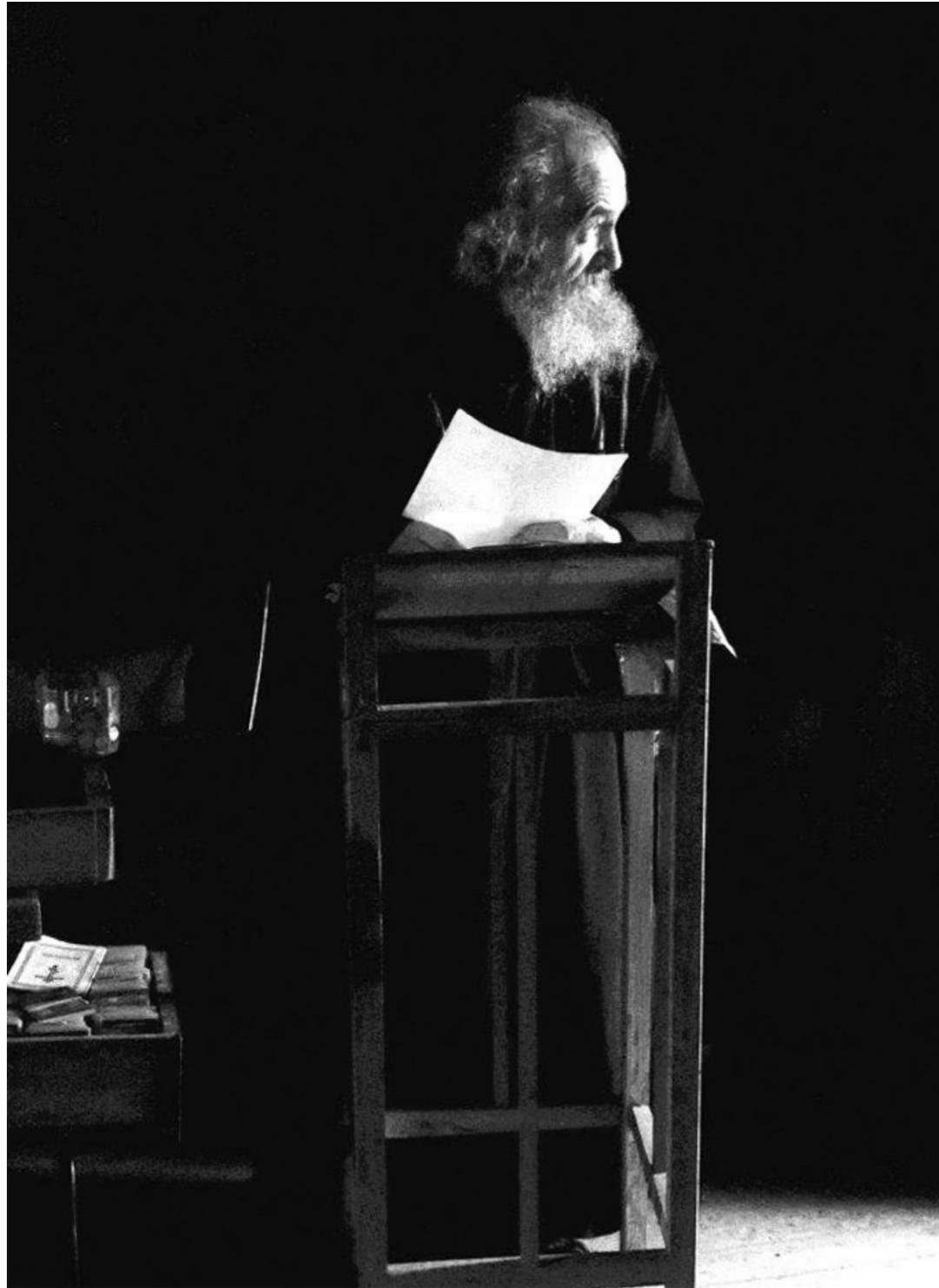
It all makes sense in my head,  
But what use is it, if it isn't said?  
People don't act until it's too late.  
That's why I can't stand the human race.  
As I write this, anger builds inside  
Knowing that many sacrificed their lives.  
They wanted us to live in peace and harmony,  
But this utopia is far from me.

This poem strives to make people aware.  
That humans are simply being unfair.  
People scared to speak up.  
Well I've had enough.  
Yes this poem talks about identity.  
But people are preventing me  
From finding more parts to my life  
Which is why this poem is long to write.

But at the end of the day  
I'm just another candidate.  
I'm not just here for money or fame.  
I actually want to make a change.  
If I don't see a change,  
I'd rather die than see another day.

# Inner peace

**Inner peace**  
*by Iulia Andreea Gheorghe*



**Praying for peace**  
*by Alexandra Sikoryak*



# Praying for peace

# Berlin

## Berlin

by Osoch Ogun

*She liked the freedom, the sun and everything. But most importantly, it was home!*



*I'm not kind of guy who talks much. I like sitting in silence, staring at walls and thinking of far off places. Lands I can only reach through my imagination.*

*I love writing. It's the cornerstone upon which my life lies and whenever I'm not writing, I feel lost. I think of writing as a way of escaping the daily hardships and through it managing to get the untold stories out to the world.*

*My name is Momanyi Osoro. You can also call me Osoch Ogun, which is my pen name. I am a journalism student and I also run [www.kinasisi.blogspot.co.ke](http://www.kinasisi.blogspot.co.ke) which is a weekly lifestyle blog, sharing stories about my life and the society at large in a satirical way.*

Berlin is beautiful. She will tell you if you ask. If you don't ask, she won't tell you nothing. She will just look at you ignore you. Her gaze, distant and forlorn. She doesn't have any ounce of interest you. Not a guy like you. She doesn't care about any guy. She's always looking out to world. Foraging for answers without questions. Maybe she's thinking of the skyline, maybe it's the beautiful roads. Maybe it's the unrelenting traffic. Or maybe it's the religion.

There are no rising minarets here. The calls for the afternoon prayer are muffled, at least not heard. That pains her in a way. It's only Allah she understands and likes. She also likes his prophet Muhammad. You told her that maybe Muhammad is like Jesus. She just looked at you, her gaze hardening into frown. Then she said: "You're joking obviously." Oh she just learnt these words from those American novels she reads online. There was an an unsaid pain in those words.

They gushed out of her mouth like vitriol from a bottomless abyss of poison. She then ran out of the room. Never did that ever since she moved in with you. Well, technically, she didn't move in. Your parents brought her home, "our little service to humanity." That's how they called it, their idea of penance.

She rarely talks of home. If she does, it's the only time she smiles. Never laughs. Never laughs. It's a beautiful smile, she looks like baby in it, vulnerable and pulchritude. It's the kind of smile you kill for. She yaps about home, Syria. A Jewel of the East, so she says. You tell her she's the only Jewel from the East. She ignores you, the girl, always ignoring you. Maybe she's not thankful enough. So you let her be. She's already been through enough.

Her mood is always changing. Like colors of a confused chameleon. You can never tell when

*She rarely talks of home. If she does, it's the only time she smiles.*

*Sometimes she thinks of ditching it, but without the hijab she feels naked, she says.*

she's happy or sad. But when she's in the mood, girl talks of her home. Before Assad's minions blew it up. With Putin's bombs of course. She liked the freedom, the sun and everything. But most importantly, it was home!

*"The air tastes different in Berlin, winter is different in Berlin. I don't think Allah approves my stay here."* You tell her that Allah wouldn't like her to die in Syria. She frowns at you. *"You don't know a thing about Allah! And don't tell me about that guy, what was his name? "Jesus" You say smiling, "Christ".* You like her fieriness, there's something about it which lights up your German nerves. Or is it Gestapo demons. Who cares anyway?

She's never quite understood the culture here. She always puts on the Hijab. Sometimes thinks of ditching it, but without the hijab she feels naked she says. One time you asked her about the Hijab, mocked her that it was like a cassock. Silently, like a spectre, she measured you. Then launched into a monologue which has remained tattooed in your brain since then.

*"Mat, you're a funny guy. I can't blame you though, but don't again compare my glorious hijab to those sacks that priests wear. You call them cassocks, it sounds like sacks for sure. But I like your church priests though, they have helped me a lot. Islam and Christianity should be one."*

*"And people here in Berlin are crazy. Like, I walk and they stare at me like I am wall of Berlin, rebuilt. I feel like shouting at them. Tell them that it's my culture, it's what my grandmothers wore, it's what my descendants should wear, but again, I'm scared. What if they strip me? What if they burn me? Maybe I should wear mini skirts more. The weird looks will fade away for sure. But what will Allah think of it, what will my ancestors think of it. Teachings of the prophet say that a woman's body is only her husband's business."*

*She gazes at you, disdain suffusing through her forlorn face.*

This is the part you will laugh out loud. And tell her.

*"Sharafa (butterfly), here you won't get a husband if you continue hiding behind the defences of those clothes."*

She gazes at you, disdain suffusing through her forlorn face.

*"All that is in the hands of Allah, not good for nothing boys like you. But I swear in the name of my forefathers that I won't splay my flesh out here for the men of Berlin. In the name of fitting in."*

You tell her to *"Suit yourself."*

Her reply.

*"I am."*

That girl, she's never grateful for nothing. She forgets that she's living in your parents house. And soon you're going to ask for some piece of her, she better comply. Or else...

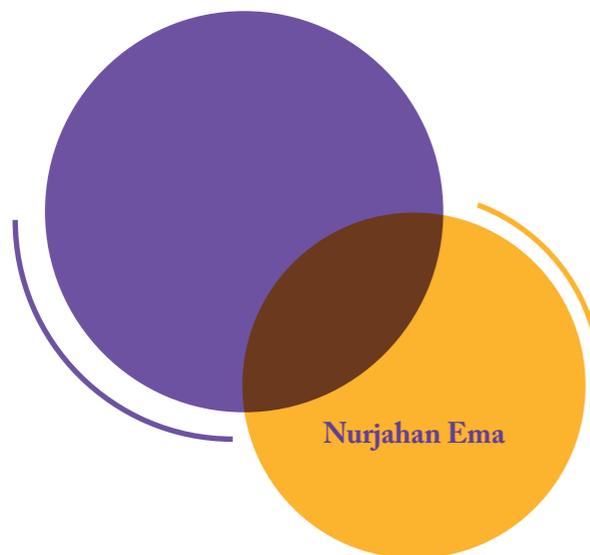
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# Identity

## Identity

by Nurjahan Ema

*What is it, Identity?  
To know where to belong?  
To know yourself worth?  
To know who you are?*



The word itself gives me shivers. It is a word of calm, comfort and contentedness.

What is it, Identity? To know where to belong? To know your self-worth? To know who you are? How do you recognise Identity?

Well those of you, who have never met a Muslim. It is great to meet you. Let me tell who I am.

I am a girl, a sports lover mostly outdoor. I am an extrovert and I am a practicing, spiritual Muslim. But not like Lady Gaga says, because baby, I was not born this way. It was a choice.

When I was 14 I had luck to go Saudi Arabia with my parents to do Hajj, from then I decided to start wearing Hijab, my head covering. My relationship with God, it was not love at first sight. It was a trust and slow surrender that deepened with every reading in Quran. Its rhythmic beauty sometimes moves me to tears. I see myself in it. I feel that God knows me, have you ever felt that someone sees you, completely understand you. And yet love you anyway? That's how I feel!

One day I was browsing while having my dinner when I look up on the screen and see the words "Punish A Muslim Day". In a flash I remember that night, me sitting in the passenger seat in silence, crouched as low as I could go in my seat, for the first time in my life I was afraid for anyone to know "I am a Muslim".

My mum called and told me "Ema, if you feel it's not safe, please take off your head scarf when you are out." I moved to my friend house that night when my friend seen me with scarf on my head shouted at me saying "Ema, you are such brave girl." and it felt like my world is upside down.

Then I was hearing and reading and seeing the warning online saying things "Be alert", "Be aware", "Stay at house". I stayed inside two days

*It was a trust and slow surrender that deepened with every reading in Quran.*

*Sorry for making you feel insecure and uncomfortable, sorry for offending your culture by covering myself.*

and I was also hearing about attacks on Muslims. Mosques were actually being threatened and I thought I actually should stay home and miss my class.

Hello World, are you listening?  
Let me try to give my Identity again.

So I am a girl. Oopss! Wait...wait! Let me try in an appropriate way.

Hello World, lovely to meet you. I am a terrorist, I am apologising for the 2017 Westminster attack. Sorry for making you insecure and uncomfortable, sorry for offending your culture by covering myself. Sorry for asking Halal food and ruined your dietary restrictions, sorry for Finsbury park mosque attack. Oh! Wait it was not me!

I am really, really sorry for waking up early in the middle of night at Ramadan and saved many people in Grenfell tower fire incident. I am sorry for everything, Damn! We Muslims...

Can I please brush all my saying with a word called discrimination. Can I put a level on it calling genericity? Can I please wash myself out from the unbelievable concept called Islamophobia?

I find it hilarious how people assume me by my dress sums up that I can't speak English or I can't go out to do activities. But you all do mistakes when it comes to levelling me, I am a MUSLIM not a MAZ-LIM, my religion is ISLAM not IZ-LAM.

I am tired of the expressions and questions saying "But don't you get hot in the summer?", "How do you do cycling with so much clothes on?", "Honey no! I am hot all the times."

Dear World, Terrorist explain their injustice action using my religion, even though haven't read or understand Quran. Religion is not culture and that culture over there is not my religion.

*Dear world, I am sorry for all the sufferings, the bombing and the attacks, but can't you see that I am suffering too?*

Dear World, I am sorry for all the sufferings the bombing and the attacks but can't you see I am suffering too?! Can't you see it hurts me, to say sorry what I did not do!

I am not a terrorist, Islam is not a religion of terrorism. I create my world with kindness and humbleness. I am tired of seeking forgiveness, tired of taking blame and apologizing, tired of defending myself where I am a victim.

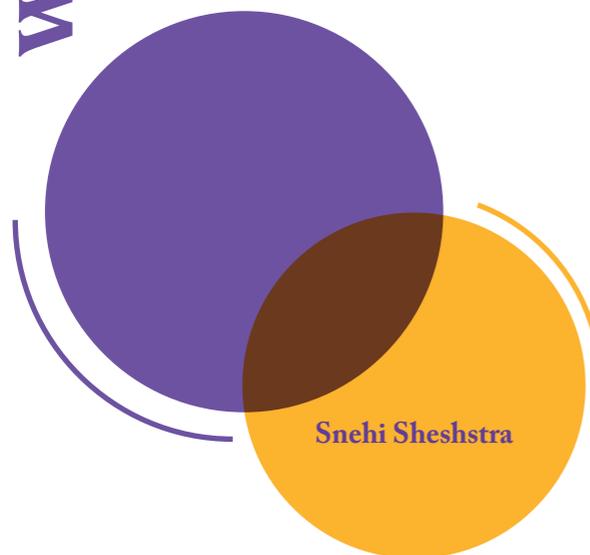
Finally, I want to say, I am a girl, I am a MUSLIM, my name is Nurjahan Ema and I am not a TERRORIST!

**Identity**  
by Holly Woolon



**Walking your mile with faith**  
by Snehi Sheshstra

*I want to make you realize that the power of your faith is immense.*



Everyone has a story to tell. Every story is unique. Every story is a story of their faith. I know, you too have moved mountains with your faith. I feel you, absolutely. And you have a unique story. Some stories worth sharing with the world and help, inspire, motivate and move their life mountains in enlightened path.

I make here, a point, appeal your attention you. I want to make you realize that the power of your faith is immense. You may have been using it unknowingly like you defeated your illness; being called of the old schools era, you are at par with the new age technology; or you were desperate to clear an exam after few attempts, you came out with flying colours. That's the power of your will, the power of your faith.

The sources of Faith are varied. Our religious and cultural teachings, our spiritual awakenings, our logical minds accepting from the physical environment and our diverse experiences of life. For example, when as a parent, the father hears his kids say "my daddy can do anything in the world" he pushes his limits to fit completely into this image. That is the power of the kid's faith on his daddy. We have read and heard of many stories children encouraging their parents for further studies and them graduating to prove themselves and keep up with the faith of their children.

There is a call from our planet. A call to protect her. We all can hear her call and still choose to ignore. Let's put this power to action for, our very own Mother Earth, a call for her healing! Lets make our earth a better place for our future and children's. Let's get started and do our part can be, starting from home "Our comfort zone". You have no reasons to ignore now!

Did we not hear or read of stories like these: a) there was a man, in the most infertile lands with least of the nature's attention! With his

efforts to save his family from dying of hunger and poverty starts collecting water from the rain (which was the least) over the long time converted the whole village into the most fertile lands with all the attention of the monsoons: b) a man who grew up to see the nearby ocean getting polluted, and decides to clean the ocean beach himself. Hundreds of local people joined him: c) people donating most of their earned assets for the ones who really needs: d) one of India's former Prime Ministers Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee donated one of his kidneys to a person, who was in need, and no where in any relationship with him.

I will quote the last words of Steve Jobs "I realize of all the beds I have slept, the most expensive bed is the hospital bed". I quote this not to dishearten you but to make you realize if we don't start to act for our Mother Earth's healing, it is going to cost heavy in future. I therefore, quote one more of Steve Jobs words "....Have the courage and heart to follow your intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary."

Come, join yours, with my hands. And I know you want to, too. Promise me follow the path your faith takes you to, in the healing of our own Mother Earth. Let's write/make some new unique stories to share will our grandkids and, inspire them too....with our non-stop, no-expectations efforts.

With my faith, that I have touched your heart and inspired you; with all the hopes that I will meet you again, somewhere, some path and some medium....through your story of how you walked your miles....with faith.

## The ethnicity tick box



The ethnicity tick box  
by Nabeela Mulbocus

*Belonging is me  
Belonging is us  
Belonging is we*



*Nabeela Nazma Mulbocus is 21 years old and she is of mixed race descent: Mauritius, Guyana and Afghanistan.*

*She currently studies Biological sciences with Environmental science at the Kingston University London. She has independently published numerous books, some of which are poetry collections and novels.*

*But what about  
The many countries  
They don't cover?  
We're a mix of this  
And a mix of that*

Neither did I fit in a box,  
It was always other.  
Because who'd think brown  
Would be a mix of colours,  
If you aren't a tone  
Of black and white  
Or white and other

But what about  
The many countries,  
That they don't cover?  
We're a mix of this  
And a mix of that  
Then they shout, 'you're a fake,  
you know that?'

So we accustom to being one race,  
When it doesn't even agree  
With our face.  
Because half breeds or half caste  
Is what we can't relate.

Because our race divides more into a  
Plate  
Where an island is one day our  
Home, but  
Our tongues don't match.  
Or a native to our souls,  
But our songs don't hatch.

Perhaps a tribal  
Yet we don't attack at our  
Culture  
And embrace...  
Who knows our race?  
Yes this head cover,  
Some say 'we know what  
You are'.

But how can they know,  
When even we don't?  
There are stars out there with beauty

And grace,  
So we know that we're still valid,  
When finding a race.

But it's not a race  
To find a place,  
And yet we breathe as if  
We need to hide  
What we are.

Where we best fit,  
Is into a pot of mix,  
Some jerk,  
Some raisins,  
Some coconut.  
Maybe, we are coconuts...  
To our mother tongues,  
Foreign to our land.

And yes, some think,  
Everything fits into our hands.  
Trying to be something  
You aren't,  
Then you embrace and still you can't.

Honesty is brutal when we tell you it's true.  
They will never accept you, unless you do too.  
So my ode is be what you are,  
Be it one race, two race, or three, mixed race  
star?

There are centuries in your veins  
And galaxies in your eyes  
If they don't understand then give them a sign.  
While mystery lies engraved in their words.  
You know it won't damage  
The beauty of the worlds.

Where you intertwine like a prism art.  
Belonging and identity is the creation of your  
heart.  
Let them stare, whilst they

Mimic your accent of fluent knowledge  
Whilst the match is still lit.  
The times will tell when times  
Are rough.  
Or when they judge you  
Of who you love.

As you sit in McD's trying to chill  
Really getting to the core of what life's  
And how your children will be.

Cultures times a hundred more.  
Souls like us dive into the shore.  
And love who we love,  
So one day we can say  
To our mixed-race children  
Today is your day.

For difference is beauty,  
To be the same is the same.  
We're all golden colours, with our  
Slight touches of brown.

When that form comes back to us  
Soon.  
They'll have understood the words of  
This tune.  
No box will define what a world it can be.

Belonging is me.  
Belonging is me.  
Belonging is us.  
Belonging is we.

Because some aren't just white, black or green.  
We are we. We are we.

*For difference is  
beauty,  
To be the same is  
the same.*

*We are we.*

*They will never  
accept you, unless  
you do too.  
So my ode is be  
what you are*

# Belonging



**Belonging**  
*by Erin Spillane*



Highly commended

**Faith**  
*by Nurjahan Ema*



# Faith

## Don't tell me



First prize  
Creative Writing

Don't tell me  
by Shaniqua Benjamin

*Even before rules  
were recorded,  
morality was expected*



Shaniqua Benjamin

*Shaniqua is a writer and poet from Croydon, who draws inspiration from her life experiences to create meaningful pieces of writing. She has used her passion for making a difference to found Young People Insight, a platform that empowers the voices of young people and encourages community engagement.*

*She wrote the lyrics for the London Mozart Players' Anthem for Peace, wrote and performed a poem that was used as part of Croydon's London Borough of Culture bid, and performed in Apples & Snakes' spoken word show, Rallying Cry.*

Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant.  
When our laws are grounded in Ten  
Commandments,  
Words engraved in stone,  
Translated into ink on paper.  
Even before rules were recorded, morality was  
expected – Abel's murder forced Cain into  
banishment,  
Dinah's rape, the tremor of a city's fall,  
Rebekah's lies passed from generation to  
generation,  
Lessons in dishonesty not paying off.

Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant.  
If we walked God's carefully laid path,  
disparity between rich and poor would cease to  
be a national crisis.  
Greed alleviated, generosity weighing heavier,  
equilibrium reached through sharing at centre.  
Not convinced?  
Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15 or 24 will fill you  
in.

Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant.  
Keeping Sabbath holy benefits health,  
time to recharge between weeks.  
Constantly grinding kills our batteries, shutting  
down bodies unexpectedly quick.  
Powered by moments of reflection, fellowship  
with others,  
plugged into rest away from hustle of working  
days.  
Did you know it's linked to Loma Linda's famed  
longevity of living?

Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant.  
Foretold prophecies in Daniel and Revelation  
already come to pass;  
others to be fulfilled in earth's enduring story,  
drawing nearer to its closing chapter.  
Behaviours lined up in Matthew 24 and 2  
Timothy 3 brought to life around us –

hearts gone cold, love for money verging on  
obsession,  
disobedience to parents ramped to rebellion.

Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant.  
Its influence flaring through film and television  
screens,  
jumping off pages of fiction books – it has  
everything.  
A hero tasked with saving the world,  
betrayals of brothers, partners, friends.  
Stories of redemption, romance, wisdom, war,  
drunkenness ending in mistakes, polygamy  
ending in hurt.  
Tales of actions supernatural, deep family bonds,  
consequences of wrongs committed, mistreat-  
ment of those deemed different.

Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant.  
Poetry and song hum from its verses,  
prayer and praise run throughout.  
Battle between faith and works not just for our  
time – religion blocking relationship.  
Women showing bravery, intelligence, resilience,  
men showing sacrifice, tenacity, strength –  
two wholes to become one, equally supporting  
the other.

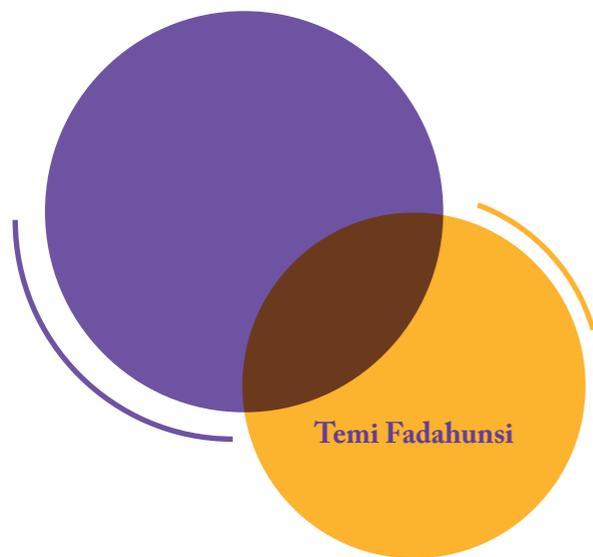
Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant.  
It's provided comfort and hope,  
Taught me right from wrong,  
Advised how to live the best life,  
Laid out inspiration in the example of Jesus'  
perfection.

Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant  
without having read a page of it.  
Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant  
because you cannot comprehend it.  
Don't tell me the Bible is irrelevant  
because you've chosen not to believe in it.

# Run free, girls

Run free, girls  
by Temi Fadahunsi

*Girls from all over the country, had led very vast lives and had come to need each other for this very life.*



*War gave nothing back to men unless in its conclusion, then fragmented peace reigned tenuously where war had ardently prospered.*

After the blood moon had rained blistering storms onto the earth, only masses of soil remained. With mud cleaving on to shoe soles, debris was sure to settle on door steps. Wet clothes dangled weighty on tired lines as waters gathered into the nearby sewers. The tropical draft festered on heavy hearts and hopelessness met with men. As Tutu looks God in the eye, she murmurs: *“there are no happy endings unless You make it so.”*

War gave nothing back to men unless in its conclusion, then fragmented peace reigned tenuously where war had ardently prospered. The preacher is howling into the megaphone. Such vigour for a slight crowd. There are only three other women in the congregation. One with a slobbering child in her hands. Nobody is looking for God in buildings when they need Him to find their sons and bring back their daughters from evil forests.

Tutu stands up from where she is sat at the back of the church. She makes one seamless turn and she walks out of the tent. If Ayo returned today, it would be a glorious day. Moni is doing Dola’s hair on the porch. Grandma is sat on the first stair. She unties a section of her wrapper and counts her money.

Moni appreciated the finer things of life. She once lived in a really big house in the capital. She wears her nails so long that grandma doesn’t know how she wipes after a toilet break. Moni doesn’t eat dinner with the girls. Except for Thursdays. She tires out after her weekly night classes and comes right back to grandma’s house. Otherwise, she would be with whichever boyfriend she embraced that week.

Dola lived in admiration and envy for Moni lived in the life she coveted. They would have been the same person, rather they were one spirit living in two bodies and only one body wouldn’t have the luxury of beauty at her expense.

*Governments treated prisoners like they weren't human at all. Their prisons were scoured with uncontrolled outbreaks.*

Grandma's husband was assassinated before they could have any children. She remembers him by what is said about him and not by the sons they share. A freedom fighter. All freedom fighters die. She knew it when they first cast minds at each other. She was lucky to have had all the years they venerated. She counted it not as loss. Something of a sour sentiment. An acquired taste.

This country was worth dying for. Worth leaving a wife behind for. Worth losing a husband for. Worth being a mother too. All these daughters she gained, living in their home with her, calling her grandma with no blood-ties. She had spent her youth being the lover to a troublesome man. Now in her old age she was a mother to a hive of equally resilient girls. "Tuberculosis", Grandma spits, "it's what they used to assassinate my husband. They infected them in prison and rolled them all in like tin food. It was an epidemic. Over 2,000 prisoners died that year."

Moni swivels her gum in her mouth. The girls don't respond. They never know how to when grandma spoke about her husband. They leave it mid-air. None of them had ever been in love before but there lingered an unspoken reverence for this kind of old love. They did know it wasn't an assassination as such. Then again it was.

Governments treated prisoners like they weren't human at all. Their prisons were scoured with uncontrolled outbreaks. If one man got sick, they left him in there where he could infect the others. Who cared if criminals got sick? Criminals didn't deserve any kindnesses. They go to jail to rot. Tutu is trapped in so many worlds and there are men she wishes she could love. She wasn't at the liberty to fall in love. But she admired the way it cloaked Moni - to be loved by so many men. She envied the way it sounded on Grandma - to have loved so wholly. If Ayo returned today, she'd never let her go. Ayo's absence was beginning to dawdle like the smell of a rotting dog. The Run

*Protests for electricity, water, road and better healthcare. Protests against the current military regime;*

Free, Girls were laying low under grandma's instruction. Sometimes a few girls would sneak out in the afternoon to protest anything where they could. Free education, free sanitary towels, Free Ayo.

Protests for electricity, water, roads and better health care. Protests against the current military regime, cutting senate salaries, gentrifying poorer communities and anti-homosexual bills. The other girls were out now marching against the cancelation of free antenatal care that the pregnant women received.

When Ayo was arrested ten months ago, they were protesting the hike in tuition fees. Usually, when one of them was arrested they would be out within the week. The message was received.

Tutu was weighted up against the pillar on the front porch, looking into nothingness. Disregarding the conversation between grandma, Dola and Moni. How they all came to become sisters and live under grandma was a mystery in itself.

Girls from all over the country, had led very vast lives and had come to need each other for this very life. This very thing. Girls that were plucked out of lust and lost and forgotten. Girls that fled from death and men became strong posts themselves. It didn't matter that the government had dubbed them, first, a brothel and then an insatiable gang. Grandma had given something to believe in, after God - each other.

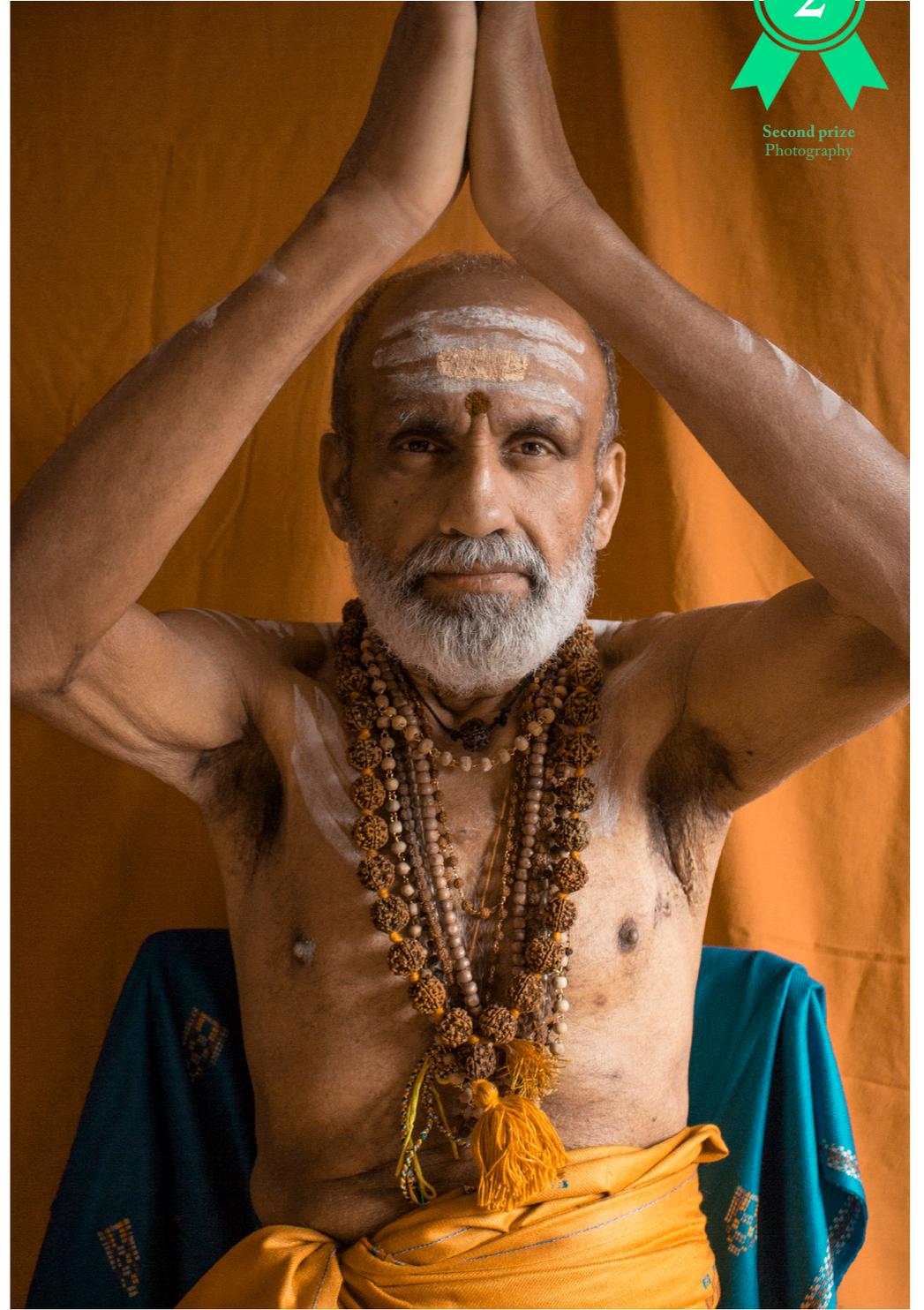
A crowd emerges out of this same nothingness. There is screaming and shouting and dancing. Tutu pondered why they would bring the protest here. Nobody with any real power could see it here. Ayo transpires from the midst of the people. Now, a pledge to keep, to never let go.

The ocean in a drop



The ocean in a drop  
by Nasra

Swami  
by Thaakshanjini Vansanthakumaran

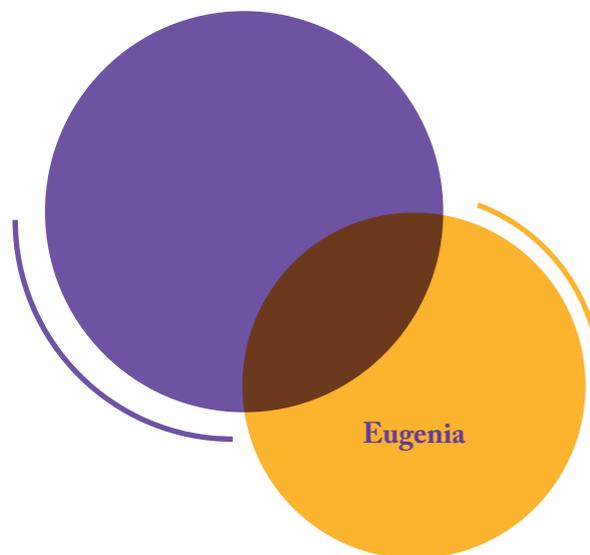


Swami

A study in translation  
by Eugenia

*Everybody wants  
what they can't have  
Led by our nose to  
satisfy a thirst for that*

Note: This poem was originally written for a live performance. It has not been previously published anywhere.



Everybody wants what they can't have  
Led by our noses to satisfy a thirst for  
that—

A dose of that exotic stuff to spice up our lives  
Like the Chinese kid thinking the rice must be  
sweeter in America,  
Like the expat thinking the grass must be  
greener in East Asia.

We all want in on the things we can't have  
This human nature is the demand for the  
scarcity making the world go round and round  
and round and round.....

I've been a sojourner too training in the language  
they told me is important  
Leaving behind my mother tongue while they  
etch nonsensical words onto their skin saying:  
I'm obsessed with anime and K-pop.  
I'd love to visit your continent.

Your traditional dresses look so pretty.  
Let me live in your skin for a second.  
I read about your political struggles,  
Let me have a piece of that experience.  
I've never slept with a Chinese girl before,  
Let me have a piece of that.

And there's coloured money to be made, won't  
you tell us more of your story?  
On the outside looking in, trying to catch a  
glimpse of the mythic city that only exists in  
fiction.  
While I'm stuck on the doorstep of a place I can  
no longer call home  
My monolithic eclipsing the history of  
malnourishment in my aunt's frail body (And  
still I'm ventriloquising her speech in a language  
she doesn't speak)

A thousand miles and a thousand books and I  
still don't have the vocabulary.  
The value of my valedictory is just as pretty  
sounds to my family

This human nature – supply for the demand  
envying what they can't have —  
And she could buy an education or just an eye  
colour

My Chinese friend affecting a BBC accent  
even as she taught her students Fanon  
And my cousin that's never left Hong Kong  
switching ex-boyfriends for another white one  
Friends swiping right on anyone blond-haired  
blue-eyed  
While they fear for the future of Cantonese  
pride  
Like the Kasoura's of the writer's imagination  
I call it cultural cannibalism, they call it  
acceptance  
When I speak my mother tongue I feel twice the  
distance

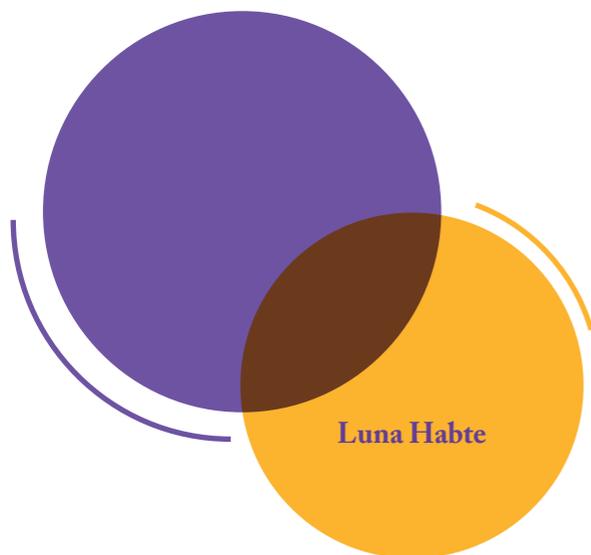
And if life imitates fiction it's because it holds  
up a mirror to you  
And I, the speaker, a funhouse reflection  
of all the things you paid for to see  
A simple three-act morality tale: action, conflict,  
resolve at the finale  
Put me in Tate Modern next to the Guerilla  
Girls  
Lithograph me in one frame before I break  
character – ambiguities need not apply  
'Cause it's all good long as we've got our  
5-minute high  
Racking up credits in wokeness aplenty, this  
armchair activism  
While some still say I'm invoking pity like this,  
playing the victim  
Damned if I speak dialectical, damned if I don't

So tell me, is this the narrative you wanted?  
Was this an enlightening performance?  
Am I worth 5 minutes of your attention?  
Because let's be honest now  
You think I'm only as interesting as I am vaguely  
East Asian

# Imagine if I stayed

**Imagine if I stayed**  
by Luna Habte

*I went to a land of beauty.  
I went to a land of strength.  
I went to a land of history  
and I found myself.*



**I** imagine all the memories we could have made together. Imagine the trust we could have built and the secrets that we could have spilt.

Imagine the cookies we could've split and the coffees we could have bought, but all I can do is imagine.

Because it's a thought, not a dream, but a thought. Because it was my destiny to move, but it aches and kills me inside. I'm slowly decaying away.

Moments, where you're hurt, is when I want to be by your side. Moments, when you feel weak, is when I want to be next to you, comforting you, aiding you, but I can't.

But please always, always remember this...I may not be there for you, but I will always be there for you.

*Eritrea.*

I went to a land of beauty. I went to a land of strength. I went to a land of history and I found myself.

I was buried within the souls of the people and the sounds of overcrowded buses and the patters of the non-existent rain.

And now still, I hear the buzz of flies and the never-ending laughter of the boys I left there. I miss them. I crave their company.

But life keeps us apart as I left the land of beauty and returned back to the land of opportunity. The land of misunderstanding and the land of second chances.

I came back only to be greeted with the things that were oh so familiar. The big red buses and the unfamiliar stares.

I miss the land of history. I miss the land of

strength. Although, I miss the land of beauty, it's always engraved in my heart.

I will never forget what I learned and how blessed I am. I won't take my life for granted. And when I feel weak and to give up, I'll remember the land where I found myself and garner the ability to carry on. That's a promise.

Sometimes I'm upset. It's funny how the past has a way of creeping back into your mind. Sometimes I'm happy, surrounded by blessings how could I feel misery. Sometimes I'm lonely.

From time to time, I'm surrounded by a sea of people, yet I feel all alone. Sometimes I'm excited, I dream of life in all its spectacular glory and pause.

*I failed.*

I really thought I could do it, but I failed. I tried my hardest and did all I could, but I failed. It broke me. I cried eternal tears and felt a never-ending heartbreak. My heart bled with misery.

*I lost my faith. I lost my trust.*

That's all a piece of paper did to me, so what would life do? My conscience whispered to me:

*"Baby girl, don't give up. You have only just started. You have only just begun to walk on the plank of life. Keep balanced. Stay motivated.*

*Dream of the land of beauty and wake up to a life filled with opportunity and blessing. Never forget, you're stronger than this and remember one thing: you're a soldier. You're fighting a war with life and disappointment and you will. succeed.*

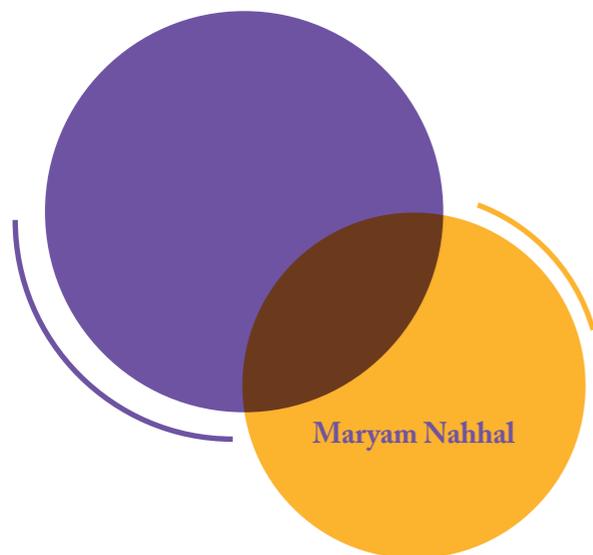
*Make no mistake, the war will never stop, but advance further and further. You may face setbacks, but push forwards and never ever look back."*



Third prize  
Creative Writing

How I  
by Maryam Nahhal

*London. Multiculturalism. I can be who I want and nobody will care. And it was freeing.*



As a child, I never thought of myself as brown, Muslim, or foreign. Granted, I never had silky smooth blond hair like my friends. I never attended religion classes because my parents had opted me out. Instead of catechism, I spent my Sundays at our local mosque learning Arabic. I always had different meals at the school canteen. But I was not different. Or was not aware of it. Yet.

I learned I was Muslim on September 11, 2001, and that ‘Muslim’ meant ‘bad’. I had been wearing my hijab for one month and eleven days. Christian, a Filipino guy in my school, called me kamikaze at the park that afternoon. Then Mehdi, Moroccan Muslim (just like me, because apparently that is what I had become!), pulled my scarf the following day as we were waiting for the bell to ring signalling the start of afternoon classes. Not long after that, Eric, a Black boy from Madagascar, cornered me in the school corridor and beat me. I did not cry or shout. I did not report. I found it very strange. Why was I being harassed by people who, like me, looked different? Surely we were meant to be in this together. Years later Mehdi apologised through a Facebook message. *“I had to, they would have done the same to me. I was scared and stupid.”*

Then Iraq happened. My mum came back from work one evening, and she and my dad were laughing so hard. Her boss had told her *“I am very sorry about what’s happening in Iraq at the moment. You must be very worried for the safety of your family!”*. *“My family lives in Morocco, sir.”* *“Yes yes I know of course, so close, you know, all the Muslim lands.”* My mum nodded and smiled *“I appreciate your concern, sir.”*

In secondary school, what I like to refer to as Dante Alighieri’s “Inferno”, I started being casually punched and kicked by actual Italians, and was continuously asked what I thought were very, very dumb questions. Do you shower

with the scarf on? Are you bald? Do you stick the pins in your head? That’s so cruel! Why do men not wear it? Did your parents force you? You obviously would not have chosen to wear it had you had a choice! Guys don’t like it. Are you not hot, because I AM SO HOT! How can you not be? How can you fast THE WHOLE DAY?! And not even water? That’s so cruel!

It did not take long to realise that being a Muslim and being brown was synonymous for being an immigrant, and that all immigrants were really bad and thieves and they stank, which was very difficult to wrap my head around. I was born there. Never stole anything (ok, besides Elisa’s beany in kindergarten because it was cool and I did not have one and she had loads anyway). I showered every day.

I started to be ashamed of my mother’s accent. How could she still have that “foreign” accent after twenty years in Italy? Of my father’s extreme friendliness. Why was he always trying to be liked by everyone? Why were we always going back to Morocco every summer? Why were we not going on fancy holidays to Sharm-el-Sheikh or Istanbul or Croatia, or on fancy cruises to Greece? I resented them, resented what I had always thought of as normal, as just me and my family’s way of being.

My mission in high school was “operation-be-like-everyone-else”. And everyone else was wearing hippie clothes, listening to Jimmy Hendrix and Pink Floyd, getting dreadlocks, going to protests. So, predictably, I did just that. I wore hippie clothes, listened to Jimmy Hendrix and Pink Floyd, got a dreadlock (underneath my veil), went to demonstrations and almost got arrested. I was also simultaneously brainwashed by my ultra-nationalist history teacher. I believed I was so patriotic, I loved and cherished Italian history, and wrote my high school thesis on the statues to the fallen soldiers in the World Wars.

A brown, Muslim, hippie, self-declared communist, self-declared nationalist, loved Kant and supported the Palestinian cause. Could I have been more confused?

But I decided that I wouldn't go to university: I would join the navy. I applied, confident in my abilities. The first online stage was anonymous, and I met all the requirements to proceed to the first selection interview. Dad and I drove to Bari, 983 kilometres from home. *"You know you will have to remove the headscarf in case you were to be selected, it is not part of the official uniform."*

I think this was the precise moment where it all hit me. The world crumbled beneath my feet and an insidious feeling of hate crept in my heart and I hated myself for loving a country that hated me. So I left.

London. Multiculturalism. I can be who I want and nobody will care. Sorted. And it was freeing. Nobody looked at me in the street, on buses, at the gym. Or they did, but in a very different way. I was still different, but all of a sudden I was no longer an "asexual-oppressed-voiceless" Muslim. I was exotic. I was fascinating. I was *"wow you're so mysterious and voluptuous"*. I had never received as much male attention before. And with male attention comes sexual assault.

But I stopped being so hyper-aware of my skin colour and religion. Besides in airports. Or in fancy shops, when obsessively followed around. And in first class trains, that is definitely not my place. At job interviews, why would they hire me, have you seen me? At tube stations, stay away from the track, someone will push you as the train is approaching. Walking late at night in East London, someone will throw acid at you.

I carry fear in my body, wherever I go. I brought it with me to St Andrews. I had not been verbally assaulted since secondary school. You would

assume St Andrews is where smart people are. And so you are at a party, having fun and dancing with your friends. *"Basta con l'invasione!"*. Stop the invasion. An Italian guy, self-declared supporter of a racist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, sexist, homophobic party shouts at me. *"I was joking"*. *"Ah don't worry, he's a prick. You can't change people like that"*. And so I finally gave a face to the expression "the banality of evil".

*I was still different, but all of a sudden I was no longer an "asexual-oppressed-voiceless" Muslim.*

*I carry fear in my body wherever I go.*

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