



Commonword

Identity Writers' Group

Summer Collection - 2020

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction - Clare Ramsaran | 5 |
| Identity:Global Roots - Abiḡdún Abdul .. | 6 |
| IMAGINE The art of change -`J' Ahmed .. | 9 |
| Peace is - Rana Kadiri | 11 |
| Like Other Boys - Kirit Patel | 15 |
| Protest and Survive - Clare Ramsaran .. | 21 |
| Vixen - Jade Mutyora | 28 |
| The Lie - MW Sun | 32 |
| Mother Me - Marcia Hutchinson | 46 |
| A Large Suitcase - Amy Lai | 48 |
| Inside - Mahboobeh Rajabi | 53 |
| EQUALITY: The broader war -`J' Ahmed... | 55 |
| Changeling - Mickela Sonola | 57 |
| Biographies | 63 |

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Introduction

by Clare Ramsaran - Identity Facilitator

I'm proud to introduce *Loose Connections*, the first online playlist (accompanied by this PDF booklet) from the *Commonword Identity Writers' Group*. This allows you to hear the writers' own voices as well as reading their words. The cover reflects the history of the group, which started in the 1980's (era of the mix tape), as well as our future, with an online 'mix tape' of us reading our words.

The title speaks of 'loose connections', between families and also between people with histories of migration, and the lands and cultures that we, or our ancestors, moved from.

Identity has taken many forms. Sometimes a performance group, reading in local pubs, sometimes a writing/feedback group. And now, during lockdown, we meet online, seeing each other's faces and writing via screens.

Toni Morrison is often quoted as saying "*If there's a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.*" This is exactly what the writers in *Identity* are doing – telling the stories we don't often read, that aren't often published, but that we definitely need to hear.

Commonword is a writing development organisation based in Manchester, providing opportunities for new and aspiring writers to develop their talent and potential. Thanks to all at Commonword for their support with *Loose Connections*. Identity Writers' group started in the 1980s and many BAME writers have passed through Commonword's doors since then.

soundcloud.com/commonword-cultureword/sets/identity-2020

Identity: Global Roots

by Abiṣṣ́dún Abdul

‘You’re one is a million’, a special stat.,
though one in 8 billion more pivotal than that.

Each human perspective, all quite unique,
but more vantage lies from airborne peaks.

With privileged travel, I was blessed to see
through childhood’s eye, continents-a-three.

Onto African, European and Asian marks
my young life journey did oddly embark

Yorùbá-Nigerian, surface to core,
vibrant clothes and spice galore.

Zuma Rock with crimson sun-kissed clay
governs over Abùjá each passing day.

From northern desert to southern green,
Palace of Zaria to Great Walls of Benin,

Saro-Wiwa's passion roused and stirred,
Fela Kuti's music and Chimamanda's words,
With assiduous spirits and bookish minds,
Nigerians are truly one of a kind

The British Isles, my place of birth.
Snowy winters; my first glimpse of earth.
My northern school, ease did inspire
with diversity from across past empire
But street lessons differed from class
with many a racist laddie and lass.

To combat the ignorance I truly abhorred
Addai-Sebo & Bellos brought Black history to these shores
Still, 'Why come to this forsaken land?',
looped in my mind for hours at hand.

Japan, land where I regained the sun.
With chopsticks and manga, I did have fun.
Kimonos and green tea filled the air,
earthquakes and Godzilla aroused slight fear
I marvelled at beautiful narrow eyes
My wide ovals' equal praise, quite a surprise!
deftly shy, yet defiantly daring
mixed with Kuroyanagi and Takato's caring
In this friendly eastern community
Again, I embraced humanity.

Here I stand in the faithful present
Surveying my international development
With learnings both glowing and dull in tone
I advanced along these world steppingstones
Through many twists and varied turns
Body, mind and soul were both nourished and burned
Still, the collective moral was clear to see
love bonds our global family.

IMAGINE The art of change

by 'J' Ahmed

Imagine
All the borders
Which divide
Across the globe;
Dissolving into nothing
So people, free to roam
Could seek
A place of refuge
When they face a threat.
Unhindered
By bureaucracy.
Treated
With respect.

Imagine
How life would be
For a refugee;
Who comes to face
No prejudice,
No eyes
That cannot see;

Who comes to seek
The sanctuary
Of a place at rest,
And finds that place
With people
Who truly do their best.

Imagine
Better journeys
For the many refugees
Who come
To find a place with us
From trouble
That they flee.
Once you have that vision
Hold it fervently.
Keep it in your heart
Like art -
Create
What you can see.

Peace is by Rana Kadiri

Peace is famed in histories tales

Stories passed down from generation to generation

About nations living blissfully side by side

Salvaged from darkness and strife, ignorance and a stifled life

Stitched with white thread, embellishing oppressor to saviour
and victim to barbaric

Hemming archives full of heroic acts, lands conquered of
slaves obtained

Unpicking chapters that capture the bloodbath, the carnage,
the pillage, the rape

A tapestry of such lengths, its tragedies are still unfolding

Peace is a fable from Ancient Times

Told from parseltongued oppressors

Spilling bloodshed as easily as breathing

Of our ancestors who lived undisturbed until so-called
civilisation came to lands unknown

A history that has not redeemed itself

Of maps shrunk and boundary lines eroded, flipped over until
the birthplace is on its knees

Until continents no longer in proportion, Earth's gifts stolen

Peace is a hypnotizing recital

The tune they sing when they want a melody that hums to
their own score

A composition of notes and chords harmonized to create
nations hypnotized and living in oblivion

Of the harsh reality of fabricated truths carrying souls on a
symphony not of their own making

This cadence is one that does not resonate

The accents and tempos composed to remove all trace of
accountability

Conducted by white gloved hands to a sanitised coda

Peace is a colourful chronicle

Of victories celebrated at home as whole families lay
decimated in foreign dusky streets

It is the hanging tapestry of lies interwoven with blood and
thread, of hatred and shame spread

It is pride of place above hearth and mantelpiece of many a
conqueror

Showcasing culture pinched, dissected, ridiculed, appropriated

The colonial palette made more palatable from snowy, chai
latte, camel, caramel mocha, mahogany to ebony

While nooses wound tight of a different type of thread
registering another kind of hanging

This weaving is more than just intricate stitching, warped truths hiding in plain sight

Peace is simplified sonnets

Romanticised by fair poets and privileged authors reared in mansions with parlours for high tea

Leaves pinched, and plucked from worn, tanned, gnarly hands and hennaed feet, more than just souls cracked on the surface

From lands once owned by a hierarchy of colour, only the highest calibre will pass muster

Shades of beige make light of the origins of Earl Grey

Blue bloods measure of aristocracy through inherited silver spoons and status, manmade titles and deeds

While disowned fields with labour toiled from hands and feet severed from their birthright weep silently for more than just nature's kinship ties lost

Peace is a false truce

Treaties made in exchange for land, and gold, emeralds and cloves never owned by the ones that sold

Ignorance to the highest bidder bought with poached goods, rubies and diamonds, sugar and tea leaves, cotton and silk

Directing a theatre, of privilege, avarice and disdain

A one-way Amnesty

More than just lands taken, innocent men, women and babes
stripped to the bone and laid bare. Souls trapped in

Peace is a counterfeit memoir

Authored from One's perspective

Of a narrative shared the world over with momentary pauses
of acknowledgement

Icons temporarily revered and the magnitude of reality,
ignored

The scars of which cannot fade if the existence of continuing
privilege is not erased

Rewind. Return to Chapter One

Generations mourn losses they can't quite recollect but the
soul knows

Histories truth passed on from womb to womb

Unspoken legacies from grandmother to mother to daughter,
granddaughter

Tragedies stitched deep, unseen into the veins and lifeblood of
bodies that have never set foot on the plains where it all
began

So Remember

That Peace is a reconstruction

This legacy will never be forgotten

Because this story is never-ending

Like Other Boys by Kirit Patel

As he stood under the merchant carpet canopies hanging from the mosaic tiled mansion walls, Reza turned around to have a final deep look at his mother, stoic and hardened by grief, and his boyhood home. It was the last time he touched the ground of his Persian ancestors under his feet. Overlooked and surrounded by huddled crouching family members and silently weeping servants, Reza stepped into the courtyard and out into the unknown future beyond the iron gates, overhung with thin branches, thick with prickly thorns, and tiny wild flowers curling around rusted bars.

Reza was nineteen when he was dragged by his ankles and held upside down in the college canteen. Rumours about Reza's exploits surfaced in the winks and smirks among bronzed athletes, bookish worms and bloated tyrants; and he was betrayed in the silences and stares of his long-standing friends. Those whispers and asides were lies and half-truths. He sold cheap drugs in the toilets. As a foolish prank, he stole a professor's son's new shiny motorcycle. Emboldened by his own bravado, he jumped head first from the bridge into a bottomless blue ravine and emerged, triumphant, shivering and unscathed. A tight-lipped, petulant captain of the

wrestling team caught Reza kissing Sultan, a dimpled mild-mannered youth, pledged to a strict monastic order.

This was not a lie: in the aftermath of rescuing Sultan from his tormentors, a bruised and wounded Reza was gripped by a fever, shaking his orbit to the core. He harboured a secret yearning that consumed him, and Reza could not remember when or why Sultan slowly entered like an unwanted intruder and lit a small fire inside his dreams? Out of reach or by his side, he saw Sultan's beguiling expression, tousled hair and unshaved, concentrating on being a scholar: reciting poets and sacred texts into the night. Reza was not prepared to deny his growing feelings for him. He needed to escape. His desire was not against the laws of nature. It was not against God's plan for him. It was not a crime to love. Reza refused to cast himself as a criminal left dangling from a tightened noose, or a misguided soul thrown into the gaping fiery furnace of a waiting hell.

Five long years disappeared into a strange empty and lonely black chasm: he was slowly drowning under a grey urban Manchester skyline, drenched by relentless rains, and dampened by a cold chilly air stinging into his bones. He wandered on unfamiliar crowded noisy streets garlanded with neon lights blinding his gaze, and foreign tongues chattering

in his ears. He begged and jostled his way to fill an aching stomach: cleaning cars, digging gardens and painting fences, or standing guard, fending off flighty thieves in a corner shop.

Sweeping the floor of shredded tufts of hair mixed with dust and dirt, Reza found some comfort in a Turkish-run barbers. A year earlier, the owner spied him crouched on a wooden park bench shaded by a blustery pink wave of cherry blossoms. He gave Reza two things in his insecure world, a warm bed to lie in and, more importantly, he taught Reza a skill: how to handle a sharpened razor blade and a good pair of steel scissors. He learnt to cut and to trim, and to craft styles from discarded fashion magazines. His coarse blistered hands softened, as he rinsed and dried, waxed and oiled. His strong fingers and palms rubbed into the beards and scalps. He massaged the wiry and the rough locks, frayed and tangled, spare bristles and bare patches, smooth, fine threads and edges: dark ebony, chestnut brown, and milky white.

He was reminded of what he had lost in his quietest moments. He felt his mother's breath on his cheek, the taste of tangy oranges, the smell of sweet rose perfume oil in her hair and scented powder soap on her skin. He was wrapped in her warm embrace, and caressed by her soothing hands. He had buried his beaten bloodied face into the tainted yellow folds of

her dress: *'Nothing can break you. Nothing can hurt you Reza, I am here, I live for you'*. His mother implored him to *'ignore their taunts, their jibes, Yasser and Farouk and the other boys, are not like you . . . they are not your equal. You will follow a different path'*.

And at nights, when Reza pressed his lips against the pillow, peculiar, unfulfilled longings swept inside his mind like a spiralling tempest; where he was reunited with a half-naked Sultan in a swirling delirious dance in a luscious emerald field. And on the station platform, Sultan was standing and waving outside the train window. He pressed his faded henna painted hand against the glass, wished him well, and mouthed three words: *'God keep you'*.

Awoken by a loud burst of a Chinese firecracker, Reza was no longer in a mystical landscape studded with a thousand stars. His days merged into weeks, and his autumns into winters; and unknowingly, he stopped caring. He grew his black hair to his shoulders, and wore an oversized hooded shirt emblazoned with a crimson skull and cross bows. His boyish grin replaced by an indignant cocky slur, his muscular frame reduced to gaunt lines and his enigmatic eyes haunted by ancient ghosts. In the daily stream of nameless clients queuing for a quick service, Reza avoided being drawn into

conversation and sparingly asked, *'sir, what you like me to do?'*

Once he had adjusted the height of the barber's chair with his foot, Reza took a sideways glance at the fair-haired stranger gazing at his own golden reflection. This was the Blond's second visit in less than a month. A faint beat quickened in Reza's punctured heart, and he had not fully grasped the meaning of his awkward uneasiness in the Blond's company. He quizzed, *'how goes it?'* or the nonchalant tryst, Reza left unanswered: *'are you married?'*

They had barely exchanged more than couple of phrases but their eyes met and spoke an old familiar language: spellbinding sounds and tenors of a kindred spirit, Reza had hushed inside a genie's bottle. He combed the Blond's shortened curls with careful attention, accepted his money, and, Reza restrained a parting gesture, and burrowed a clenched fist deeper into his trouser pocket, as he saw him leave.

In the red bricked alley, behind the shop front, Reza rested his tired body and legs, among the thrown away household clutter, and his worn shoes muddied in murky puddles. He smoked, sprinkling of tobacco on slim cigarette paper; and in

this gated track he shared with stray cats and scattered pigeons, he craved and imagined a different kind of life. Sultan had deserted him for the first time in a very long time.

When the Blond opened the door, and entered the musky, tamarind coloured salon, Reza was holding a mirror to his last remaining customer. Imperceptibly, he radiated an electric, ember glow, as he covered the Blond in a barber's gown.

This was Reza's third encounter with him, and in three simple acts, he was dazzled by a splendid kite flying over his heavens and landing at his feet. In the middle of shaving the youth's jawline in sliding strokes and gently grazing the ridge of his neck, a heady aroma of freshly cut grass, paint brushes and cologne crept into Reza's senses. His usual crest fallen grimace changed, and teased the Blond with a daring ivory crescent smile.

Protest and Survive

by Clare Ramsaran

Most teenagers feel like outsiders, and I was no exception - I was the mixed Indo-Guyanese/Irish kid in a very white school. And I was not showing any signs of growing out of my tomboy phase.

But, when I went to Hounslow Borough College at 16, life changed. The other students were a mix of ethnicities and religions – there was no norm. It felt liberating. I found the first of my tribes. We dyed our hair, wore skinny jeans and created mix tapes for each other. We went to see punky, indie, thrashy guitar bands at the weekend and hung out in record shops in between. you would find us at the local pubs, which were happy to serve 16-year-olds – we were always careful though, to avoid the National Front pub. I even kissed some boys - but don't worry, it was just a phase!

At Hounslow Youth CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), I met a gay man and a bisexual woman. He shoplifted. She smoked weed. How much more glamorous could they get?!

We all walked the 50 miles to Greenham Common (where women, many of them lesbians, had set up a camp to protest this US nuclear missile site). It took us a couple of days to get there stopping off at a Gurdwara halfway, where they fed us and let us sleep on their floor for the night. The next day we reached Greenham Common and at last, I saw my first real live lesbians.

I didn't think that I was one myself, until I met a woman at a Cuba Solidarity group (remember solidarity?!) She flirted with me, so of course I – avoided her. But it made me acknowledge my attraction to women.

But by the time I headed off to University in Norwich, I was wearing Doctor Martens and sporting an orange Mohican - suddenly more visible than I'd ever been. And then - I kissed a girl, and I liked it.

While I was coming out, dancing to Bronski Beat and Soft Cell, and chasing love affairs in Norwich, I was also out protesting. And believe me, having Margaret bloody Thatcher as Prime Minister gave us plenty to protest about – cuts to the NHS, her government's support for Apartheid in South Africa, closing the coal mines and decimating trade unions, to name but a few.

During this time, I progressed from the orange Mohican to a blue flat top and then to a bright pink one.

Apart from my hair, another major event was a new law - Clause 28 of the Local Government Act. It said that a Local Authority should not promote “homosexuality” or “the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”. Pretended! How dare they?

And you know what we said? We said we were Never Going Underground! Soon 20,000 of us gathered in Manchester – outraged at our rights being eroded in this way. My girlfriend at the time and I, piled on to a train - the Pink Express, even the tickets were pink, and we cracked open a bottle of pink cava on our way up to Manchester Piccadilly. Nearly took someone’s eye out with the cork if I remember correctly. And although the mood was celebratory and defiant there was a backbone of anger.

This law was different from other anti-gay laws. Those focussed on sex – usually between men. This law focussed on us living - out and proud in the world. Clause 28 was partly a backlash against the great LGBT projects which had been set up in the 80’s, support groups and switchboards

and publications – often funded by the more radical local councils.

We gathered outside Manchester Town Hall and heard speeches from activists, actors and pop stars. I remember chanting ‘Stop Clause 28’ and then cheering celebrities like Ian Mckellan and Sue Johnston (Sheila from Brookside). By the time we got back on to the Pink Express that evening, my voice was gone.

Sadly, Clause 28 did become law and was now known as Section 28. But the protesting was not over.

While some lesbians abseiled into the House of Lords another group broke into the studio of the BBC News at Six, while it was live on air - to protest Section 28. I remember feeling so proud, so visible and so public. That I was them, and they were me.

Back in London, the main effect that I noticed from Section 28, was that LGBT community groups and publications started to lose their funding and eventually close down. Section 28 also encouraged self-censorship – if you were applying for a grant for a group, people would want to play down the queer aspects of it because of the fear of Section 28. I helped to start a group in the early 90’s for

mixed race queer people. We received some small grants and set up a bank account. One of our members proudly reported back to us that she'd taken the words 'lesbian' and 'gay' out when naming the account at the bank. What the hell? – now it seemed, we were doing Thatcher's dirty work for her.

Being in any marginalised group often involves protesting, but of course it's about partying too. Amongst my friends in London, the lesbians went to the barbers to have a number two crop before the weekend came around.

We met up to get ready together on Friday or Saturday nights, gelling our hair, sharing bottles of Jazz aftershave to put a dab of it behind our ears, and then we'd venture out to Venus Rising, to the Fridge, or to a Blues in the Brixton Women's Centre. A lesbian night would open up at a club or bar and we'd all suddenly be there – before it closed down again.

Other times, we joined the boys, at industrial-style gay clubs with the smell of poppers and male sweat wafting from room to room, and music so loud that the bassline thumped through your torso.

I wore my labrys earring (a double-head axe from Lesvos) as a sign - (in case the doctor martens, and flat top

hairstyle weren't enough of a clue!) and when other women out on the street spotted it, we'd give each other a slow nod, of acknowledgement .

One day I went to work at my office job, and found the Sun newspaper, in the break room, open at the page of a homophobic cartoon which featured a mean-looking lesbian decked out in huge labrys earrings. I felt suddenly exposed.

I was scared of homophobia at work, and tired of being yelled at in the street. It felt as if Clause 28 emboldened homophobes in the UK, in much the same way that Trump emboldens white supremacists in the US now.

A man on the tube spat right into my face and another man on the bus threatened me, yelling at me for the whole bus journey home and no one on the crowded top floor intervened. I was looking over my shoulder for weeks.

The gay boys started a trend of wearing neon pink and green whistles round their necks, so they could call for help if they were attacked on the way out of a gay club. We had to rely on each other, to keep ourselves safe.

And now, all these years later, the hated Section 28 has been repealed. We have new language, new identities, recognised and hotly debated. We are pansexual and

polyamorous and genderqueer drag kings. We are trans and we are non-binary. We are she and he, and we are they. We are conventional and middle-aged....

We ask whether Pride should be a protest or a party as if we've arrived at equality and all that's left to do, is hang out the bunting.

But 2020 has seen us locked down in our homes (if we're lucky enough to have them) sheltering from each other, and Covid19. We feel even more indebted to our healthcare workers and key workers and woefully underserved by many politicians.

With existing inequalities highlighted and amplified, we learned those of us in the 'Black Asian and Minority Ethnic' populations are more likely to die from this virus. We've seen people fighting for their lives, and having to protest once again, that Black Lives Matter.

At the intersection of the desire to party and the need to protest are many brave individuals, asking the questions that we need to address.

How, they ask, can we be proud, when not all of us are free?

Vixen - by Jade Mutyora

vixen

/'vɪks(ə)n/

Noun: a female fox.

INFORMAL: a spirited or quarrelsome woman

Exhaustion pierces me to my marrow. Your cry slides into my veins and carries with it an ache that branches out across my body. My wrists feel like they could snap, reminiscent of ten years ago, when they were laden with richer people's plates transported back and forth from a kitchen to smoke-drowned tables. Except now there's no break. Not for months or years. Maybe ever.

You sustain yourself from my breasts. It's the only way I have to quiet you. You're not content to lay serenely in my arms the way you do for others. When other mothers talk about the eye contact their babies reward them with, I make pleasant, affirmative noises but when I feed you I watch your face desperately as it stares blankly beyond mine. You're too disgusted with my cowardice to look at me and this small act of defiance is the only way you have of making known your resentment towards my absence at your birth after I'd promised to be entirely present.

You grow as I shrink. I quench your thirst more quickly than I can quench mine. Water poured into my mouth seems to cruelly bypass my throat as if it is coated with impenetrable sandpaper.

I cry out with each latch that “looks fine” but invokes an invisible knife to my shoulder blade. Eventually even sobbing requires too much strength. I’m wilted, deflated, depleted.

I don’t have flashbacks of your birth, because I wasn’t there. The images that fill my mind are from before and after, like the arresting lights on the ceiling that flashed across my vision while my paralysed, useless body was wheeled along a corridor. I see the mountain of my belly spread with brown liquid. I see masked faces with dead eyes.

Every night I hear, “Your husband won’t be able to come into the operating theatre, I’m very sorry.” He snores beside me now, proudly martyring himself to diagonal sleep in his noble refusal to abandon us to the spare bedroom. He’s oblivious to our screams.

I need a few minutes, just a few, away from your jarring cry that floods my nervous system with icy terror, just like the alarm that accompanies my memories. I don’t know if it’s the sound of beeping monitors or the beginnings of your cry from inside me or something else.

I'm like a glass held too firmly, squeaking under the pressure, about to shatter into shards that could slice everyone within reach.

You need to be away from me. I need to put you somewhere safe, while I have a rest.

The doorstep seems like a good place. I can put a sturdy door between us then, and it will form a shield to protect you from me. Over the threshold, maybe sound will cease and your anguish will melt away and I'll get a splash of sleep. Then I'll be able to hold you safely again.

It's cold outside though. One thing I know, through all of this confusion, is that I'm supposed to keep you warm. I know my skin is best, and tightly tucked blankets are fine, but I'm not sure they'll be enough against the chilly Autumn night.

The dustbin starts to look like a sturdy, outdoor cot. It's the right size and I can place you gently on its squishy, black, plastic pillow. This seems as sensible as becoming a mother to find myself, or allowing countless strangers to needlessly put their hand inside my vagina because they said I had to. It's as logical as smiling serenely in the face of every misinformation, every patronising smirk. The lid of the dustbin will act as a canopy to shield you from the salty breeze and hide you from the foxes, hopefully. I wonder if

they'd sense the warmth of your soft beating body. They might hear your wail or smell your milky breath and the sweet odour of your nappy. I imagine they're well-practised at knocking off bin lids. These seaside streets are often littered with the discarded remnants of residents' lives, shredded and chewed by foxes' teeth and seagulls' beaks. I picture a vixen discovering you in your al fresco refuge, eyes wide at the delicious bundle. She might carefully take you home and nestle you amongst her warm, soft cubs and maybe you'd like that. Perhaps she's exhausted and undernourished too, and wants to keep just one thing for herself without thinking of others first.

Even as I empathise with the vixen, I know with every enervated fibre of my being that I don't want her to take you any more than I wanted a surgeon to yank you from my womb by your face. You belong to me almost as much as I belong to you. Like the lighthouse on the rocks, the only thing clear through the fog is that keeping you in one happy, healthy piece is my life's purpose. So I'll keep you in this bed against my sore, tired body and we'll wait together for this torturous, exquisite time to be over.

The Lie by MW Sun

Lizzie and I saw the luggage as soon as we entered the house.

‘They’re back!’ I dropped my school bag next to the suitcases and boxes and ran into the kitchen looking for Mummy.

She was talking quietly to Ah Kam, going through the foodstuff she had brought back. I stood smiling, feeling awkward because I wanted to hug her. Lizzie dashed in from behind and wrapped herself round Mummy. I put my arms round them reluctantly, hoping she wouldn’t tell me I was too big for hugs and cuddles, and that would spoil everything.

‘Did you bring prawn crackers?’ Lizzie asked.

‘And pork jerky?’ I asked as Mum pushed us both away.

‘Yes, everything you wanted,’ Mum said, ‘Ah Kam has made snacks. I must go now to run a bath for Daddy. He’s tired so keep your voices down.’

We followed Mum up the stairs and watched her disappear into their bedroom. I caught a glimpse of Daddy lying on the bed with his shoes on before the door was shut. Lizzie and I

washed our hands and faces and changed into the cotton tops and shorts that Ah Kam had laid out on our beds.

When we finished the hot Ovaltine and luncheon meat sandwiches, Ah Kam told us to get on with our homework.

‘But I want to see Daddy,’ Lizzie said.

‘The Master will come down when he’s ready. Now do your homework.’

The dining table was set for four. Ah Kam had prepared Daddy’s favourite steamed fish. Mum sat down at the table and told us to start eating.

‘Don’t we have to wait for Daddy?’ Lizzie asked.

‘He’s sleeping. He’ll eat later.’

I could tell Mum had a lot on her mind but I was afraid to ask. Throughout dinner, Lizzie was the only one who talked and although Mum nodded and made agreeing noises, she wasn’t paying attention. Half way through the meal, Ah Kam came in to ask if everything was all right. Mum told her to make some *tsuk* for Daddy. He would have that for breakfast, she said.

‘Is Daddy ill?’ I asked. *Tsuk* is what you eat when you’re ill.

‘He just needs to rest,’ Mum said.

When Lizzie and I came down for breakfast the next day Daddy was in his pyjamas having *tsuk*. I hadn’t seen him for almost a month and he looked thinner and even his smile seemed weak. We must have gawked at him because Mum told us to concentrate on our breakfast. We lowered our eyes and stared at the food instead. Then the doorbell rang and the driver was outside to take us to school. We didn’t see Dad when we came home from school. Mum told us he was resting in bed. In the evening Ah Kam told me Mum had taken Dad to see the doctor. When I asked her what was wrong, she didn’t say anything, just shook her head and sighed.

After resting for a few days Dad was better and went to the office. When he came home, he went straight upstairs, and he and Mum were locked in the bathroom for a long time. This became a pattern: going to work tired him out and he would rest for two to three days before going to the office again.

One day, Lizzie and I opened a new box of jigsaw. Although she was four years younger, she always beat me at puzzles. As she put down the last piece that completed the border, she asked me if I knew what was wrong with Dad.

‘If we find out what pills he’s taking, maybe you can ask someone at school,’ she said, ‘we can take a pill from the bottles and ...’

‘They’re pain killers for his stomach ache.’

I knew Lizzie was worried. We were all worried. Mum put on a brave face and pretended it was nothing serious but I could tell she was concerned.

‘Maybe Ah Kam knows, why don’t we ask her?’ Lizzie examined her fingers and when she tried to chew her nails I grabbed her hand to stop her.

‘At least they’re here, both of them. I think this is the longest they’ve stayed at home,’ I said.

‘They’re here but they’re not really here,’ she said. ‘Daddy sleeps all the time and Mummy doesn’t talk to us anymore.’

Lizzie stared at the piece of jigsaw in her hand.

‘I saw the blood,’ she said quietly as she dropped it back in the box.

‘What blood?’

‘On the underpants.’

‘Have you not heard of periods? Women have periods. Mummy had an accident, that’s all.’

‘It was Daddy’s.’

‘Maybe he had an accident.’

Lizzie looked at me; I had never seen her so upset.

‘Not an accident. Go to the laundry room, there’s a pile of them.’

I went to the laundry room; there was nothing. The basket was empty and there was nothing in the wash basins.

It was a Sunday, my parents had been home for over a month, when Mum told me Auntie Rosie was coming from Hong Kong.

‘Please be on your best behavior. You know her Mandy is top of the class again.’

Auntie Rosie was Mum's older sister. She lived in Hong Kong with her husband, a son and two daughters. Mandy was five months older than me and whenever Rosie came to visit, I was reminded Mandy was better than me: she was smarter at school, she was taller and prettier. And she had whiter skin. I had never met Mandy and hoped to keep it that way. But I once saw her in a photograph. About two years ago, during one of Mum and Dad's long absences, I sneaked into their bedroom looking for I didn't know what exactly. I found a photograph in Dad's bedside table. It was taken in a restaurant, he was there with Auntie Rosie, a boy and two girls. One of the girls was much older, the other was my age and I concluded that must be Mandy.

Lizzie and I greeted Auntie Rosie who barely acknowledged us. Her eyes were fixed on Dad who was looking out of the window. Mum stood awkwardly by the door. I grabbed Lizzie's hand and we walked out of the room quietly. The door closed behind us.

'Why does she hate me?' I asked Ah Kam in the kitchen.

'She doesn't hate you,' Ah Kam said.

'She just ignored me and Lizzie. She didn't even look at us.'

Ah Kam went on peeling potatoes.

‘Every time she comes, Daddy leaves with her.’

I sat and watched Ah Kam work. When I went back out, Dad and Auntie Rosie had gone out. Mum was in the sitting room gathering up the tea cups. A school report was on the side table. On the cover it said *Mandy Au-Yeung*. So like me, she was also an Au-Yeung. I was surprised: it’s a rare double-barrelled surname.

Mum came over and snatched the report from me.

‘Do you know where they’ve gone?’ I asked.

Mum hesitated. Then she said Dad needed some medicine.

‘What’s wrong with Daddy? What has he got?’

‘He’s been working too hard, all that travelling takes its toll on him. The doctor told him to take it easy,’ Mum said.

‘But he will get better,’ I insisted.

‘Don’t you have exams coming up soon? Shouldn’t you be studying?’ Mum said, waving Mandy’s report at me. ‘Auntie Rosie never has to nag Mandy about her studies. Why can’t you be more like Mandy.’ She went on to say she was worried about my future if I carried on like this. She said she would get me a private tutor in the summer holidays.

Needless to say I did badly in the year-end exams.

The school holiday started and Lizzie and I spent most of the time playing with the children in the neighbourhood. Mum forgot about the private tutor; she was busy looking after Dad. About two weeks into the summer break, on a very hot day, Lizzie and I had been playing in the park; on the way home we went to the corner shop to get red bean ice lollies. When we got back, Auntie Rosie was in the sitting room with a young man. I recognized him: he's the teenager in Dad's photograph. Lizzie and I greeted her but she said nothing while the young man stared at me. I was too scared to ask if he was Auntie Rosie's son. And why was it that apart from Mandy I didn't know anything about Auntie Rosie's family. I wondered if I should greet the young man, say something like *Hello Cousin* when I noticed Auntie Rosie and the young man were looking angrily at me, their eyebrows knitted together. Just as I was reminded of how much she hated me, something icy and wet gripped my hand. I looked down: the half-eaten ice lolly had melted and the little red beans were swimming in the melted ice on the parquet floor.

I escaped to the kitchen and washed my hands. Then I heard footsteps coming down and a suitcase being dragged down the stairs. Ah Kam rushed out to help with the suitcase. I followed

and saw Daddy walking out of the house with Rosie and the young man. Rosie was holding his arm on one side and the young man holding his other arm. Lizzie and I stood by Mum and watched as they got into the car. Nobody spoke. Then the car drove away.

In the days after Dad left, Mum went to the office every day. At breakfast she would leave instructions for us to study. But as soon as she had left, Lizzie and I went to our neighbour's house where we played Monopoly or jigsaw and sometimes we danced to the Beatles' *She Loves You*.

One day, as Lizzie and I were coming home from the neighbour's, Ah Kam was talking to the driver outside the garage. They were deep in conversation and didn't see us approaching.

'It's not easy keeping two households happy,' the driver said.

'I told Missus she has to tell the girls,' Ah Kam sighed. 'You can't keep a secret forever.'

Lizzie turned to me, 'What's the secret?'

I squeezed her hand and told her to shush.

Later I confronted Ah Kam but she wouldn't tell me anything.

Sometime after that Mum told us she was going to Hong Kong to see Dad.

'Is he alright?' I asked.

'He's the same.'

'When will he get better? What do the doctors say?'

Mum didn't answer. 'Come back soon and bring Daddy back,' I shouted as she went upstairs to get her bag.

Lizzie was waiting by the front door when Mum came down. 'Don't forget the almond cookies.' She handed Mum the box. 'Eat one when you're home sick.'

My parents always took almond cookies on business trips. Macau's famous Koi Kei Almond Cookies they gave to their business associates in Singapore and Malaysia.

'You and Daddy will come back soon,' I pressed her again as we walked her to the waiting car.

But Mum didn't come back, not during that summer holiday, not when the new school year started. Whenever she called, I asked about Dad. Her answer was always: He's the same. She wasn't interested in talking to me or Lizzie but she went on to talk to Ah Kam for a long time.

Lizzie and I were in the bathroom brushing our teeth one night when we heard noises downstairs. Mum was back. We flew down the stairs and hugged her. To my surprise, she hugged us back. She was dressed in black: black blouse, black skirt and black shoes. And she wore a white crochet flower in her hair. Someone had died, someone in the family.

'Daddy?' I croaked.

I looked at Mum in disbelief. There she was, in all her blackness, in all her silence.

'You said he was better,' I said accusingly.

'I said the same,' Mum said. 'He was, the same.'

'You're lying. If he's the same he wouldn't be dead.'

'Stop shouting at Mummy.' Lizzie took my hand.

I shook Lizzie's hand off, with too much force. My little sister was confused, horrified at what I had just done.

‘I want to see him,’ I muttered.

‘Daddy was buried last week,’ Mum said.

‘But I didn’t say goodbye.’ I cried and ran upstairs.

As if it wasn’t bad enough to lose Dad, in the morning Mum said we were moving to Hong Kong to live with Auntie Rosie. The next few days were hazy. Mum went out every day. Ah Kam said Mum had a lot to sort out in the office and with the banks. When she was home she was busy packing with Ah Kam. We were allowed to drink as many bottles of Coca Cola as we liked, and helped ourselves to chocolates and pork jerky.

The day before we left, Mummy sat down to talk to us, about something serious, she said. We were in the sitting room, I was standing at the exact same spot where the red bean ice lolly had melted.

‘Things will be different. We will be living with Auntie Rosie as one family.’

I thought of Mandy and how unbearable it would be to be compared to her all the time.

‘Promise me, you two will behave.’

Mum looked at us as if she was expecting some sort of reply.

‘We can’t stay here,’ she continued.

‘You will go to a new school.’

‘New routines,’ she said. ‘New household. New rules. Just follow them.’

I didn’t know what to make of what she had just said, so I said, ‘Okay’.

Then she said, ‘You will have a new Mummy.’

She swallowed hard.

‘Auntie Rosie is your new Mummy.’

Lizzie started to cry. ‘You are my mummy, I don’t want a new mummy,’ she screamed and ran upstairs.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘That’s her condition. We can’t stay here. We have no money.’

I stood there frozen. After a while, Mum added, ‘There’s no other way’.

The following day Ah Kam fried the prawn crackers which Mum and Dad brought back from their last trip to Singapore. She gave me the rest of the pack, saying I could ask the maid in Hong Kong to fry it. Lizzie and I cried and didn't want to let go of her. She told us she was going back to the village to stay with her parents for a while, then she'd come and see us in Hong Kong.

The maid at Auntie Rosie's apartment opened the door and we followed Mum all the way to the back to a small bedroom. The room was dark even though it was sunny outside; the small window was only a few feet from the kitchen in the next building and I could smell fried fish. There was a single bed and a bunk bed. We put our suitcases down and there was hardly any space left. Mum started to unpack.

Then Auntie Rosie was at the door. 'You have to make do now. Before you say you want to go back to Macau, just remember I don't want you here either.'

Lizzie started to cry.

Tears were streaming down my face, and on the red tiles drops of my tears looked like the red beans in the ice lolly that had dripped onto the floor back home.

Mother Me by Marcia Hutchinson

Slinging words as swords at me

Mad at mothers muddled meanings

Asking for abject apology

I do not have the heart

What you want

Is wisdom wrought

From a life longed for and loved

That did not exist except in expectation

Holding your hurt heart in my hands

Alas antipathy ascends to animosity

Darling daughter's demon dance

Patiently pushing parent past pride

Gladly goading from the gut

Meaning to manipulate

Roaring resentments

Wrestled from my womb

Listening for a lull in lashing language

Falsehoods flung full in my face

Until a temper tantrum tears the telephone

From my earnest electronic ear

To break beyond brain and breath

Sentiments simply searching for solace

Noting nothing, neithers needs named

Gone is gratitude or grace

Feeling for you through the fog of fear

We cannot consciously communicate

I reach for written worth.

Mother me. Mother. Me.

A Large Suitcase by Amy Lai

Hai Yan, slim and in her fifties, pressed the door bell outside her parents' flat in Hong Kong. She carried a heavy shoulder bag with the airline check-in label hanging down, and a large suitcase was by her side.

'Mahma,' she called when the front door was opened, and her mother emerged behind the rusty metal gate. Her mother helped Hai Yan with the luggage then went into the kitchen to make tea. The small sitting room was the same as on her last visit two years ago in 2008. It was drowned with the familiar sound of Cantonese opera from the blurred TV screen and the old leather sofa was there. Hai Yan turned the television off, then walked to her father's room. This time she felt that the room was a desolate place. Perhaps, she thought, this was because her father was not there on the sofa reading his newspapers.

'Baba, I'm back to see you,' she said nervously and opened the curtains. The summer sun shone on a pile of unread newspapers at the bottom of the bed, a bowl of rice and a plate of stir fried food untouched on the side table. Her father turned around with a warm smile on his pale face. He raised

himself up from the bed and leant his hollow back against the bare wall behind him. Hai Yan moved the chair closer to him and sat down. She wished to hold his bony hands and tell him how much she was worried about him. But haplessly, she gripped her own hands tight and looked away from him at the packet of cigarettes by his side.

‘Oh!. You are on your own!’

‘Hai ah baba. Jeff has to stay in England to teach in university, he couldn’t come with me this time,

‘Ah.’

‘You must be hungry?’ Hai Yan was annoyed with herself by changing the topic. What she wished was to shake him up and asked him why he was depressed, had stopped eating and wanted to die.

‘The food that your mother cooked is a little hard,’ he replied with his sense of humour that calmed her down. He was still handsome at seventy-four, and had a self-assured quality about him.

‘I know Mahma likes her rice dry and hard,’ she agreed. They both smiled at each other.

‘Hai Yan I’m taking you for lunch.’ The mother shouted over from the sitting room.

Reluctantly she left her father. Hai Yan found her mother was ready to go out: she had her gold rings, a pair of large pearl clip earrings on to match up with a red and pink floral blouse.

‘The tea I made for you has gone cold,’ her mother complained. Hai Yan wished to tell her mother that she loved her too. Instead she said:

‘I’ll cook some soup noodles for baba in the kitchen before we go out.’ Her mother started patting the sofa and humming something to herself, the rhythm of sounds softening the silent tension in the air.

Soon they were inside a cafe, a five minute walk down the road from the flat.

‘Mrs Chan welcome,’ a waitress waved to them with a cheerful face. ‘This must be your beautiful daughter from Britain, your mother loves talking about you,’ she said while taking them to a centre table.

‘They like you.’

‘I give big tips to buy their hearts,’ her mother continued, ‘your father has stopped going out, he smokes cigarette in his room all day long, he makes himself and me ill too, you know, by having to breath in all that smoke. This time you’ve come back for him, but how long can you stay?’

‘Are you punishing my father?’ Hai Yan asked ignoring the question. Her mother gazed at her daughter with shock as though the words had cut through her heart and caused a deep pain. At this moment the food and drinks arrived. Quickly her emotions had gone as clouds being blown away by stormy winds. Hai Yan could see her mother’s anxiety had disappeared as she chewed the deep fried chicken wings and sipped at her cup of sweet lemon tea. They did not talk again.

The home visit had slowly entered into the fifth and final week. At night, Hai Yan slept in her mother’s room, by day, the kitchen had become her world of domestic life. She was happy, as her father had regained some strength and weight from eating daily, he smiled more and made jokes in conversations, and he even sat on the sofa in the sitting room, once or twice, when her mother was out. Her mother had kept herself busy at seventy-two: she had kept going with her morning walk then breakfast and lunch out, played mahjong in the afternoon, and ate twice a day in the cafe.

The departure day arrived. Her mother was pacing at the door, urging her daughter to leave for the airport - going back to her life in England with her husband, friends and her job. Hai Yan put down her father's lunch on the side table in his room. For the last time, she made for him sweet white coffee, a soft ham sandwich and a bowl of, his favourite, potato and fruit salad. She drew the curtains to shield off the burning midday sun.

'Your mother has suffered a lot, don't be angry with her, I'll look after myself,' her father said from his bed, but she escaped his gaze in order to hide her own sorrow, knowing that during her visit, she had failed to break away from her reserved Chinese upbringing, as she could not embrace her parents and show them her love. At the end, she uttered the words 'bye-bye' and left her father.

'Hai Yan.' She heard her name. She turned and looked back. Her father was standing alone in the sitting room waiting for her. She dropped the suitcase and ran back to him without thinking. For the very first time in her life, Hai Yan hugged her proud father, and kissed him on his forehead with a flood of tears. She then walked past her mother and away through the rusty metal gate.

Inside . . . by Mahboobeh Rajabi

Surrounded by lights

When the darkness is leaving

When the time decides to cross

Windows open one by one

each includes one season

Sunny, warm, spring weather

Like the angels cleaned the air

Hot, live, summer

Yellow, leaves' songs, autumn

Quiet, ice, winter.

And they are all ready

when the windows called them

Magic is nonsense

and even the high power of nature is nothing

And it's the big truth

When the heartbeat of “life” proves that it is
more than magic and all.

And when the darkness is coming

Life creates the peace,

draws another life.

Darkness is when life’s drawing board is black

and the brush draws white...

the truth of opposites.

The truth of harmony.

Harmony that creates life.

Life that creates harmony.

It’s inside the Human heart.

EQUALITY: The broader war...

by 'J' Ahmed

Not just about
Black politics -
The fight
For ebony.
It's about
The wider change
We make,
Not just
For you and me.
It's all about a levelling
Towards equality.
So, everyone
Is seen
For exactly
Who they be.

Equality's
Not just a word,
It stands
For something great.
A concept
That we manifest
To free the world of hate.
A broader war
We fight for sure,
For everyone

And all.

Why complicate
The struggle?
We bricks
Can build a wall.

A wall of many bricks
Many histories
That speak;
Of a world
That fails to act
And lacks
Humanity.
A world
We face together,
Undivided
In our quest.
Strengthened
In our joint resolve,
To fight
For what is best....

Changeling by Mickela Sonola

It starts with an itch behind your ear. The skin gives way,
peeling and flaking like a snake sloughing its dead skin.

Cautiously, you trace along your hairline with your fingers.
What used to be smooth skin is now covered in overlapping
scales. Your heart beats a little faster. You must be dreaming.

It is quiet but for the sound of your father's low nasal snores.
He sleeps heavily when he has been on Watch all night. Your
mother used to say, that 'the trolls could come in and hang
him upside down and he wouldn't wake up.' Your Da would
say, 'trolls aren't no laughing matter.' He would smile though.

Since your mother passed, he doesn't smile much anymore.

Your big sister Erica's mat has already been rolled up. She
will be feeding the chickens and picking eggs, you hope
there's one for you today.

You sit up slowly, so not to disturb your father and feel for the
scales that now frame your face.

You are definitely awake.

There is something else. There is a tingling sensation behind
your ears and you tentatively touch the crescent-shaped

openings. Bile rises up into your throat and you can feel your heart beating hard against your chest. No it can't be, you touch them again and you know what they are...Gills.

(Do not waste any more time, grab your coat and hunting pack and leave.)

(Take a few minutes to gather some food and a flask of water before leaving.)

Outside, there are only a few people around this early in the morning. The shrouded sun rises over the hills in the East. There is a small group by the Ovens, rekindling the flame and making the daily loaves of unleavened bread. You scurry by, keeping your hood up and eyes down. They must not see you.

You quicken your pace as you pass the Watch Tower but someone grabs your shoulder.

It's your uncle. "Is that you?" he says cheerfully, pulling back your hood. You try and pull your hood back over your head, it's too late.

"What!" He lets go of you and staggers backwards.

You turn and run, out of the confines of the township. Your only thought is to get as far away as possible and you head towards the forest. Your size will be an advantage as you are quicker in that terrain than most adults. You hear your uncle shouting behind you.

As you approach the trees, you see your sister. She has been feeding the chickens. Erica lets her basket go and the eggs drop, bursting as they hit the ground. You switch direction and flee down towards the reservoir.

Your uncle is closing in on you.

There is a long stretch of cobble stone beach that slopes into the water. Although Spring has started to make its mark; crocuses and daffodils are scattered around the village, the lake is still mostly frozen and more dangerous as the weather warms than it is in the dead of winter.

You are trapped. You turn your back to the thawing lake. By now, your father has caught up, he slowly walks towards you. He looks at you with so much hatred, you feel your body grows cold. Your sister runs towards you screaming your name but your uncle stops her, both his hands gripped tightly on her shoulders. You know your sister well enough to know

how much she will hate being stopped. Defiance runs in the family. She screams, "Da, please, they're our kin!"

"No, it is not," he shouts back at her.

"Please, Ma wouldn't want this, you know she never believed..." she shouts.

"Don't you dare bring your Ma into this, I'm glad she's not alive to see this. You are not my child," he says again.

He turns to you and says, "You are nothing. I hope you're still alive when you reach the bottom of the valley and the dogs tear you limb from limb."

You tread cautiously onto the lake and feel the ice beneath your feet and glide forward. You get your balance as you walk further into the centre. Your father picks up a large rock and it lands behind you. You hear the ice crack beneath your feet. Another heavy rock is thrown, this one hits you and then a scatter of smaller stones pelt the ice around you and you feel the ice splitting.

(There is no point in struggling, you are a Changeling.)

(You fight for your life as your body hits the water.)

As you descend your instincts break through the shock and you start to swim. Your body plummets in through the icy slush water and you realise that you're not cold.

Not even a little bit.

You force your eyes as you swim, paddle your feet, and start to rise up to the surface of the water, glowing with morning light. When you reach the top, you hit thick ice. You pound it with your fist, trying to break through but it won't give. You desperately look for a gap in the ice but there isn't one.

Meanwhile the current of the reservoir is pulling you away from the land and towards The Falls. Here, a drop in the reservoir where the water is funnelled down to the river. It is the only place on the lake that never freezes. You will be dragged over the waterfall before you even have time to drown.

And then you realise two things. 1. Despite the freezing water you are warm and 2. You have started to breathe...under water.

Still, you have come too close to The Fall to be able to swim against the current. As you are pulled down, in the wash of water pouring into the river, you feel the sensation of falling, butterflies take flight in your belly. Time stops as you fall

through the air, encapsulated by the mass of water and plunge into the river below. For a moment, as strange as it seems, you feel safe. As safe as you were when your mother held you when you were still a child. You let the river carry you for a while.

But you are not a child, you're no longer even human. *You are a Changeling.*

Biographies

Abiódún Abdul

Abiódún Abbey Abdul is a Yorùba-Nigerian writer who won various poetry awards as a child. Fascinated by the way grammar can be bent to facilitate new meaning, she has worked for several years as an English Language Teacher & Assessor. Whilst most of her expressive writing is now creative non-fiction prose, and autoethnographical memoir in particular, she still enjoys composing poetry from time to time.

J Ahmed

An insightful poet who writes about the things which connect us, so as to promote positive change. Particularly recognised for his poems which express the hardships of those in society, his work emphasises the solutions we might search for, and encourages us to dig deep for our answers.

"I feel I have a responsibility to my art. I am humbled by the many opportunities I have to share my work widely, and I feel it is my duty to ensure that my art is not only beautiful, but constructive too"

Marcia Hutchinson

Born in Bradford to Windrush generation parents, Marcia Hutchinson was the first from her family to go to university and first from her comprehensive school to attend Oxford University.

After working as a City lawyer, she started multicultural educational publishing company Primary Colours. She was awarded an MBE for services to cultural diversity in 2010. She has written for The Guardian, The Yorkshire Post and other publications.

She founded Migrants Union in response to the Windrush crisis. The organisation's first project is Windrush Wonders - an oral history of those affected by the hostile environment. She writes short stories and the occasional poem and is working on an 'alter'-biography about her early childhood.

Rana Kadiri

A storyteller at heart, Rana channels her love for writing to raise awareness on everything from intersectional feminism, identity, mental health, race, social injustice and politics to cats.

A spoken word poet and aspiring playwright she channels her experiences as a Kenyan-born Indian British Muslim activist to focus on societal issues that interconnect gender, race and identity.

Amy Lai

I felt an urge to start writing after losing my husband to cancer. I came to England from Hong Kong in 1976. I have degrees in fine art and completed a PhD in Chinese immigrants' experience in the UK. My story is about two separated worlds conflicting with family responsibility.

Jade Mutyora

Jade Mutyora (she/her) is a writer of British and Zimbabwean heritage based in Yorkshire. She is currently working on her first novel. *Soaring* follows the friendship between two young people and how it positively influences their approach to life as they navigate relationships, racial identity and mental health. She also writes fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry. Her work appears in *Untitled:Voices*, *Ang(st)* and *Forever Endeavour*. Connect with Jade on:

Twitter @JadeMutyora and Instagram @jademutyorawriter

Kirit Patel

I am Kirit Patel, a Brit Asian gay man with roots in three continents: my parents were Indian farmers who migrated to Tanganyika (now Tanzania) where I was born; and then moved onto South London, where I grew up. My parents spent most of their working lives in factories and scraped together savings to enable them to buy their council home in Thatcher's Britain. Now in my mid-50s and living in Manchester, after working for more than two decades in the charity sector, I am exploring a new found love for creative writing with Identity, and within the Commonword family.

Mahboobeh Rajabi

Mahboobeh Rajabi a filmmaker, creative producer, theatre maker and writer, has been working in Greater Manchester and internationally since 2010. She is the Digital Literature Coordinator at Commonword, working on the first digital literature map of Manchester. Mahboobeh was awarded the Jerwood Creative Fellowship in 2017-18 by Manchester International Festival and her passion for community arts took her to the World Health Organisation, in 2017, to talk about the impact of art on mental well-being in society. Mahboobeh's work focuses on telling untold stories. She believes in the power of women and fighting for equality for international women in the UK film and digital industry.

Clare Ramsaran

Clare Ramsaran, a proud member of the Commonword and VONA Voices writing communities, has an MA in Creative Writing. A writer of Indo-Guyanese/Irish heritage, she is working on a novel about two Indo-Caribbean brothers who join other immigrants in 1950s London, in the pursuit of love (of the inter-racial and queer varieties) and justice. She has worked in human rights education, and in various tech roles: for the Mayor of London (Ken, not Boris...), in

Silicon Valley and now in Manchester.
Her creative writing has been published in anthologies and journals in Europe and the US.
Blog: clareramsaran.blogspot.com Twitter: @clareram

Mickela Sonola

Mickela Sonola is a British-born writer and educator with African and Caribbean roots. With a passion for teaching, she has led workshops across communities from schools to methadone clinics. It's from growing up in England, Nigeria, Zambia and Papua New Guinea along with her multicultural childhood and bi-racial home life that she has drawn from these experiences, reflecting in her writing as well as her outlook on life. Her debut novel, *Dead Dogs & Angels*, was published by Holland House Books in 2018 was short listed for The Saboteur Award for Best Novella in 2018.
textadventures.co.uk/games/view/cvog2e0mbeiy-uxghbzea/changeling

MW Sun

MW Sun was born in Shanghai but grew up in Hong Kong. She is a former news journalist reporting for the BBC, CNBC and Radio Television Hong Kong in London, China, Hong Kong and Singapore. She also worked in NGOs, quasi government organisations and listed companies leading corporate communications teams in Hong Kong and New York. Her short play, *Arachnophobia*, was produced by Yellow Earth Theatre. *From Shore to Shore*, a collaborative work, toured three times in England and Scotland. She has recently completed *Behind the Curtained Door*, a commissioned play and is currently working on a novel.