



ONE PIECE OF LAND

A Storytelling Journey Through Deptford
by
Richard Neville

"The first time we met, he was telling us stories, Somali stories, Middle Eastern stories, European stories, from all other countries. And we realised that the stories are the same everywhere and people belong to each other. It made us realise that all the world is like one piece of land...."

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Mahad Abdullahi, Somali and Somaliland London Community
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Text by Richard Neville based on conversations and performances during the project**



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Are Empty

All Cases
Are Empty!!!

Let me introduce myself.
I am the Collector of Stories
Nobody asked me to collect stories, nobody told me to collect stories
But I collect stories
I wander through Deptford, talking and listening
Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing
Sometimes I wonder who I am
I walk, I have my routes and my pathways
I have my stopping points

So. Welcome to Deptford. But there is no welcome to Deptford. There is no sign or border that says you're here. Maybe at the top of the High street perhaps, with the anchor, smack in the middle of the road, the anchor where people gather snagged there, the anchor that holds Deptford in one place. Maybe that's where it all starts?

Are we on a ship, do we need to let go of the anchor? Or are we under the sea, is that the problem, we can't come to the surface?

No, there is no welcome to Deptford, no way of knowing when you're here. But if you walk from the top of Deptford High street, if you pass the gleaming prospects of the Pound shop (never been in there), if you go past the Betting shop ('Hey man, I didn't know you were going to be here...' 'What do you mean you didn't know I was going to be here...I'm always here'), if you pass the second hand furniture shop (I went in there once, by mistake, walked in slowly, turned round and walked out slowly), if you pass the market stalls, with the smells of food, and fabric and plastic and the butchers' shops and the fish shops, gleaming, earthly and unearthly, if you pass the shop with darkened windows, where there might be slot machines inside (but I've never checked), if you pass all those, at some point you can say that you are in Deptford.

And the street names will speak to you. Giffin Street - where there was an outbreak of cholera, a long time ago, so I heard, and someone I know remembered her gran saying that when *she* was a little girl she was told by *her* gran not to go down there.

And Frankham Street, where someone told me that during the war he was delivering supplies from a lorry, he got down from the tail of the lorry to look at the tires, when he jumped up again, he saw bullet holes along the side, where a plane had straffed. At least I think that's where it happened, Frankham Street.

And then there's the Red Postbox.

It's right on the corner, so people have to squeeze by it as they come past the bank. Must have been there a long time, that Postbox. Looks like it's waiting for someone who never came, still waiting, letting the world pass by.

And if you turn left or right now, either way, you'll be in the same road Douglas Way, at last, you reach Douglas Way. Right turn to the library, left turn to the market

Take the left turn

Past the market, past the stalls and the wares laid out neatly in rows like gardens, everything neatly tended or sometimes uprooted.

And now you go past the Albany, past its long low dark walls with the wide entrance, and glance at its automatic opening doors, breathing towards you, opening for you, offering to you the expanses inside. At least that's the new Albany, there was an old Albany, visited once by Queen Mary, burned down in a fire, that's what someone told me. And the new Albany was built after that, but nobody wanted it apparently, nobody had asked for it, but there it was, and it took time before it was accepted, so I heard.

Because there's always a new and an old in Deptford

The new Albany replaced the old Albany

The new library replaced the old library

The new railway station replaced the old railway station

And keep going along the stretch of pavement that is never occupied, that seems like an empty beach, where people drift and nobody stays. Beyond there, if you cross over the street (I've never known its name but it's the one that leads up to the garage where they have a large yellow sign), beyond there you get to the flats, and the small houses, rows of them, like chalets that make me think of holidays, this whole area makes me think of holidays. And if you walk past that you come to the Health Centre, and the underpass that goes under the railway line

And then in some way

In some mysterious way

You are no longer in Deptford

It has slipped away, fallen off your shoulders, fallen away.



How I came to the community centre. I came first when it was dark. I had an appointment. But it was difficult to find, I must have walked past it several times. It was raining, I remember that Kingfisher Square was dark and the streetlights blurred in rainy sheen. I must have gone up Clyde street, on the wrong side of the little garden and I fumbled around, getting lost, starting to panic, I always panic when I'm lost. And I was among the big tower blocks, the three of them that stand between Edwards Street and Evelyn Street. I had a strong feeling that I didn't want to be fumbling around there so I kept going quickly, until I reached the main road, and I wandered up and down it for a while. But it wasn't there, I knew the community centre wasn't there. And my map had got soggy in the rain, I unfolded it, squinted at it, puzzled by the dark and my glasses beaded with rain drops at the feet of the tower blocks, not wanting to seem a stranger, not wanting to appear alone

But I was lost
So I struck out again, retraced my steps
Kept going

Then from another angle I saw the centre, hadn't seen it before. Could this be it?. It seemed dark. I got to the entrance, just a door with a small awning over it and some buzzers. At last, the right place, at last, and the right buzzer too. But I am late, half an hour or so, I hate to be late. I press the buzzer. A voice answers, I say something, the voice asks again, I repeat what I said. There is silence, the voice has gone. Then the buzzer sounds, I push the door, I am in.

I pull off the hood from my jacket, smooth the damp across my hair, take off my glasses and pull out a corner of my shirt to wipe them
First floor was it, that's what the voice said
I find the door, I push it, another set of stairs

At the top, a door is open, lights on there, I come to an office. Several faces look at me, I move from one to the next, smiling fixedly, recognising none of them. And then there is a call, my name is uttered, there he is, the person I have come to see. He takes my hand, he shakes it happily, warmly, he welcomes me, he turns to the others
He says-
'Now this is a great man....'
He tells them I am a storyteller, he explains to them what I do, they nod happily.

How grateful I am to be welcomed, to be recognised, to be valued
How grateful I am to be out of the wet, to be somewhere that knows me and knows what I do. I would like to find out, what is it that I do, what do you think I do, what is a storyteller or a collector of stories? You understand me, better than I do, I want to ask, what is it that I am? But there is no time. There is never time to ask that question. There is a story to listen to.



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Rory comes into the centre sometimes to use the computers.

Rory opens his pub then stands outside it and from the early morning, if I am sitting in Mahad's office, I can hear his voice going at a hundred miles an hour. And when he comes into the office, he likes to sit and talk and check his emails on the computer. Today he is talking about school.

"I didn't like it at school, I was one of the mouthy ones. I always wanted to ask a question, because I was interested, know what I mean. I was always interested. Used to live in Peckham, used to go up to the museums on a Saturday. Me and a few friends, went up to London on our own and went to the Science Museum or the Natural History museum I was interested in all that. Used to get thrown out of them and all, but I was interested. And at school I was the one who used to ask questions. And there was a teacher, and when he got angry with you, he'd pick up a ruler and wave it around and say 'I'm coming down to you, I'm coming down to you'. It used to make us laugh so much, 'I'm coming down to you'.

And one day there was a talk, in assembly, the whole school, a copper came to talk to us, a policeman, you know. And he talked and talked, and then he asked if we had any questions. So of course I had a question, and I put up my hand, and I said -'I'd just like to know why you arrest us so much. Because I live in Peckham and what I see is the Irish kids and the Black kids, we're not doing nothing, we're just leading our lives, but you're stopping us and arresting us, for nothing, and you should be catching the real criminals, not us, but you don't, we're the ones who are in danger, and you don't protect us...'. And it's a fair point, of course it is, because the police didn't care about us, they just wanted to stop us leaving Peckham, that's all they wanted to do. And I asked him that question, and he didn't answer, then I heard a voice
'I'm coming down to you, I'm coming down to you...'"

Rory's laugh is huge, voluminous, fills the space, fills the earth and the sky. Rory laughs at that memory, then he says-
'But the thing is, right, after I left school, we got this pub. And years went by, and I was standing outside here, and someone went past, and they looked at me, and they stopped. And it was one of my old teachers. And he started to talk to me about what I was doing. And you know what he did, he asked me to come to the school to give a talk. Because he said I'd really made good, can you believe it, it was wicked, he thought I'd really made good...'.
I am laughing, Mahad is laughing, we are all great laughers, and our three laughs join together.

“Come on Mahad”, says Rory, “you must have been naughty at school, I don’t believe you were on your best behaviour at school.”

And Mahad smiles, he remembers certain things, he smiles again secretly and privately in the memory of them, and then he starts to explain

“No, I was very bad at school. I was always talking or joking and my teachers didn’t know what to do with me. I was beaten often at school. And it was in Somalia, so it was very hot, very hot in the middle of the day. And the school was built round a square, with a flagpole in the middle. And we used to gather there in the mornings to have our assembly and we saluted the flag and that sort of thing. But when I was naughty in class, the teacher used to make me go out and stand by the flagpole. And in the middle of the day it got very very hot. And the class rooms were all round the square so everybody could see me.”

He smiles again, then he laughs, a series of quick guffaws, delighted by the memory of such things, such long lost things. And we laugh and smile too.

“And you know what happened eventually? When I left school we had a sort of thing, like National Service, we had to go to a village or a small school and teach the children. And so I was a teacher. I was skinny, I was not very big, and I went to a school in the bush, where the children had drunk camel milk and they were big and strong. And that is what happened, that was my punishment for being so naughty at school....”

Rory said-“Our family comes from Glasgow and we were Irish Catholics. We were mad Celtic supporters, railings down our way were painted Green and White. So I know what it’s like to be in the minority and when I came down here, and I saw the Somali boys, I thought, yeah, I know what that’s like. I’ve got a lot of sympathy for you, I have, because we’re all in one boat aren’t we?”



A few days later, I am sitting in the office with Mahad again. It's 4 o'clock, there are the usual sounds of children outside going home from school. And as I talk to Mahad, I can hear the sounds are changing, the sound is thicker, is gathering itself, is getting louder in its rise and fall. Then there is shouting outside, and someone in the office stands on a chair to look outside through the high windows on the side where it's possible to see the square

And he says, 'There's something going on...' And Deeqa who is also in the office says to him firmly - don't go outside". But he goes to the door.

Mahad and I are talking and we go on talking and the sound outside, the murmur the shouting and calling, goes on rising, a flood of sound, seeping through the walls and he comes back inside to tell us - "There's a fight going on outside"

And so we stand up. We separately go to the door. Deeqa goes first, then goes flying out, running across the square to the pub. Then Mahad and I look outside, just in time. Or perhaps too late.

And there's a boy staggering from the garden, from the little garden, and he moves towards the pub and goes inside. And there are only a few people outside now. Where did that noise come from, who made it? They are mostly all gone. Only the figure who staggered, no he didn't stagger, he stumbled and he went into the pub.

And the only others left are four girls, standing there crying. They come into the centre. A teacher comes from the school, a serious man a real teacher with a jacket and jumper and tie and a solemn look slightly exasperated. And the girls are sitting in the hall and the teacher is with them and then the police arrive, also serious and compressed and business like. And then a helicopter lands on the football pitch next to the centre. And after a while it takes off again. We don't see it, but we hear it as we sit inside the centre, no time now for conversation, the solemn serious mood fills up everything.

And afterwards Deeqa tells us what she found out:
There were two girls, and one called the other a slag
Then there was her brother, or something like that
Then there were the other girl's brother and his friends
Then there was a knife

And she said, Deeqa said, that she saw the girl on the floor, with the others kicking her, kicking her head. And she says that the boy was attacked, then he was chased. That he went into the garden, got stabbed, came out again, went to the pub.

And she said that there was something else as well
Because there was a policecar parked in Edward street, in full view all the time with policemen in it, but they did nothing. Not a siren, not a warning, not a shout to stop it, nothing. And when they came into the pub, Rory had asked them why
Why did you do nothing?
Because we had a suspect in the car, couldn't leave him
But you could put on your siren couldn't you, you could radio a request for backup couldn't you, you did nothing, you could have stopped it
And then they started shouting at each other, Rory and the policemen
And then they threatened to arrest Rory

That's what Deeqa tells us. And later on, she tells us that we should have stopped it, Mahad and I. And she says that all we did was hide behind a desk and only come out when it had finished. She repeats that again and again, and from then on, we make a joke about it. We say that there was an important job to be done. Somebody had to stop the fight, save the boy's life, call the ambulance
But somebody else had to write a report about it
And that was us

And later on, Kingfisher Square is empty
It is October, Autumn, empty
Empty apart from the scatter of leaves that gather near the drains,
That lift and flutter and settle in a gust of wind
Damp leaves, from the small damp garden, with bending trees red and brown
And I think what a miserable place it would have been to end a life
A young life, that came so close to its end,
On an autumn's day in Deptford as the rain comes down.





But there are other routes through Deptford, other journeys to be taken.

For instance, if you continue past Douglas Way, if you don't turn left or right you come to the lower end of Deptford High Street. There is no market at this end. This is a different place, beyond the arches, where the totters used to keep their horses, beyond the railway station, beyond the bridge. This is the place of the food shops and the nail shops, of the photocopier shop, of the cafes. This is the place of the Newsagents where people wire money through Western Union. This is the place of the church, where a cross stands and gates open onto the graveyard. This is the place of small advertisements in shop windows – tailor wanted, apply inside. This is the end of Deptford High street that leads down to the river.

And if you turn right at the bottom, cross the road, head towards the old mission building, go up the steps, choose the right buzzer, ring it, no questions asked, the door is opened.

Go up the steps, past the big window, up the next set as well, through two swing doors, it's like going to an old cinema, wait a moment, perhaps it was an old cinema. But now, it's a community place, where Phil sits in his office which is also a kitchen and where he stands and greets me. This is another place, where I can come and sit and listen. And today Phil is taking me for a walk

Because Deptford seeps further and further, away from the high street beyond the areas that I know towards other areas, sneaking out, stretching beyond the end of the road, beyond the end of all roads. And Phil is taking me there.

We walk down the stairs, out onto the street again, along the main road, where the traffic is roaring and then quickly we go down the side of the building. Suddenly everything is quiet and the little old street wanders narrow and abandoned with temporary hoardings of wood, painted white, rising up on either side, looming walls, protecting a private world.

We walk on the narrow pavement until we come to a break in the walls where there are mesh gates with chains around them and we peer through them to see that Beyond, everything is flattened. And Phil says 'this used to be the docks...you can still see the jetty where they had the crane'. I peer through and look and see it, and he says 'there were buildings here, warehouses, but it's all been removed'. He says 'and the only thing they've left are the two arches there, I don't know why they've done that, what are they thinking of doing with them?'

I peer through the gate again, and see that standing on the flattened field of rubble there are two slender graceful arches, one behind the other.

They stand there dazed, expecting at any moment to be carted off but they remain there and work goes on around them. And Phil says - 'It's been like this for years...there were so many different developers and they all had a plan, and they never got anywhere with it, because they all want to put up flats and sell them and make their money and it never gets past the council...'

The river is very near, I can smell it, and Phil beckons me on. We come to some bollards, and a notice obstructing the way, The notice says - 'no pedestrians beyond this point' We go beyond this point.

The path narrows, is cobbled, with scaffolding structures and tarpaulins flapping on either side. We come to some steps, and there at the end framed between the scaffolding and the sky there is the River Thames. Just a small scrap of river. Just enough to fit into a small space at the end of some narrow steps. Just enough to slide and stroke the steps with water swilling and falling gently. And as we walk down the steps, I remember the person who told me about his childhood here when the docks were thriving and when cattle were driven down Deptford High street to the boats and Phil stands with me on the steps and we peer out around the walls that jut out further and now we can take in the great width and scope and spread of the river.

And he says - 'it seems incredible how thriving this place was, how the whole life of Deptford was connected to the river, how many people worked on the docks, it must have been a very different place then'

And the water by the steps, the water of the river, returns and returns. Slapping and striking and blowing and sucking and hissing and lispig and surging and gushing and breathing and panting and stirring and whispering and whispering





Outside the community centre, I am standing with Deeqa near the garden. There is a butterfly, dancing in the sunlight, whisking about, leaving, returning. She says - "when I was growing up in Somalia I used to try to catch butterflies. They had a dust on their wings and I wanted to brush the dust and collect it in my hand. I think I must have crushed them, but I didn't understand."

The sunlight is falling on the garden, and on Kingfisher Square. The sunlight has caught one side of the nearest tower block, the one with the burned out windows about two thirds of the way up. There was a fire there, the whole block was evacuated and some of them came, temporary refugees, to spend the night in the centre. Afterwards the tower block remained blackened on the outside where the fire happened which gave it a piratical look, an eye patch.

And the sunlight was shining on it, as it was shining on the garden. And the butterfly was gleaming brilliant white as it swirled and flickered. And Deeqa said- "My father used to show me how to catch grasshoppers. The grasshoppers in Somalia are big. We caught them and tied a little thread round one leg, then we let them go. But we held the thread so we could follow them, and it was a game to run after them. Holding onto the thread while they hopped through the grass."

Years have passed, since that time of holding the thread as the grasshopper hopped. The grasshopper has hopped over continents, the child has grown up. Still she holds onto the thread, where has it taken her, the thread that connects her back, and back, is it still in her hand?

Yes, she stills holds it and still follows it, but where will it hop next, I wonder? And these are the threads of memory that link each person, that they must hold onto or lose.

Mahad said to me "My father is beginning to forget about things. He complains that he is in prison here. He can't talk to his friends, but I am going to help him. I'm taking him to Kenya, that's where they are living. And later on, he tells me that when he took him over there he began to live in the old way, going to the café, sitting with people he knew, talking about the past. And within a few days he was back to his old self, he could remember things, he could name names and share stories. It only required that he was in a place where he was known with people who he had grown up with.

And Mahad said to me "You know it is strange with me, I have forgotten many things. My friend Ali can remember the names of people we were both at school with, he can remember what we did, the names of teachers, the problems we had, the adventures we had. But I have forgotten nearly everything that happened to me, after the age of ten.

"I was at a wedding in Canada, and someone came to me and greeted me very warmly, and I had to say to him 'I am sorry, I don't know who you are'. But he was an old school friend of mine. And there's someone else who I met here, in Deptford, right here. He was walking up Deptford High street when I was coming the other way and he stopped me and started talking to me. I realised that he knew who I was, but I didn't recognise him at all. Then he started to sing a song. It was a song about the sun, how his face was black because the sun liked him more than anybody and was shining on him more than anybody. Then when he sang that song, I remembered him."

Is this what stories are?

Ways of capturing memory, trapping it before it dances away

Threads to link to living experiences just out of reach

Dust brushed off the wings of butterflies

Is this what a story is, a thread, a smudge of dust, a song?

How much is caught and how much is lost in a story?





**SSLC
COMMUNITY
NOTICES**

Lewisham Homes
Residents' Business Plan 2012/13 Summary Report

Residents' Business Plan 2012/13 Summary Report

Residents' Business Plan 2012/13 Summary Report

RESIDENTS ARE MONITORING THE 'GANGS'

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Get out
Get walking**
Volunteer Walk Leader Training

Get up Get out Get walking

Get up Get out Get walking

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**My Self Confidence
Work for women**

My Self Confidence Work for women

My Self Confidence Work for women



When Sam comes to the office to see her friend Deeqa, they sit and talk.

I can't always hear what they're saying, but when Deeqa talks, she likes to tap the other person on the shoulder or the elbow. She sits there talking, and tapping Sam as she talks and from time to time I can hear Sam say "Deeqa, stop hitting me."

Sam comes with her son who comes to the Saturday school and she smiles with a gold tooth and she says - I used to run around Deptford in short skirts, and I had money and I had boyfriends and I went to parties. But you know what, it didn't mean anything and I knew that it didn't mean anything. And I started to think about the world how everything fitted together, that was what did it for me, there is so much order in the world, just look at nature, at the animals and the plants and you'll see it. And I knew that god exists, I just know, you can't tell me nothing against that, because I know."

And Sam sits with Deeqa and they talk about politics or about people they know or about anybody who is in the office, and they pretend to pick arguments with them.

And Deeqa said - "I was sitting in my car near the Albany and a man came and leaned down to talk to me. He told me that he could see into the past and the future. He said that he knew I had had trouble with a window and there was something about fire, some trouble with fire. And I wound the window up because he was talking bullshit."

I show her a ruler I have bought with the kings and queens of England listed on it in date order. She says - that's all bullshit isn't it. And we argue about whether it is or isn't. I don't know what we argue about really. And Sam is with her son, and I start asking her son questions, things like - what is your favourite book? What's your favourite game? If you saw some money in the street, would you take it or look around for someone who had dropped it? And he wants me to ask more and more questions, and keeps saying 'Ask me some more questions.'

And Abdi is listening and he says “you know, that thing about money, I found some money once. I was going to the Western Union, because I send money back to my family every month, because it’s my duty to do that. And I was worrying, because I wanted to send them eighty pounds, but I didn’t have that much. And as I was walking down the high street, I saw something in the road. It was a wallet you see. And I opened it, there was money there. There must have been about one hundred pounds. I was with a friend, and we wondered what we should do. We both needed the money. And then another friend came up to us, and joined us and he said he wanted some money too but we said we found it but he said he had seen it too. And I sent eighty pounds to my family that day”...

And someone said, no you should hand it in to the police. And Deeqa tells me a proverb- The well fed mouth does not speak. It means that someone who has been bribed will not speak out and tell the truth. And she tells me another proverb - Do not touch the lion’s nose, which means that you should be careful if you approach a lion, not to provoke it. And she says that money on the ground is probably drugs money, and you should not touch it. And she says - “I am a lion, be careful not to touch my nose.” And we laugh.

And Mahad tells stories about lions, about real lions and story lions About a man who sat on a lion when it was asleep and regretted it when the lion woke up. And he tells me that if you meet a lion in the day, you can stand up to it, just look fierce and feel contemptuous and walk around the lion and it will be afraid and it won’t touch you. But at night time, that’s a different matter. And Deeqa says - that’s all bullshit, he’s never seen a lion. And we laugh again.

These are the best times, sitting in the office, when stories come into the conversation as naturally as visitors come to ring the bell. And I’ve heard so many stories and proverbs that way but often the story is not told, just referred to, as though it left a trace, a track in memory, but the story itself has passed on, has gone, and I have to think what story that could be, and I try to tell it to the person who tries to remember it. And sometimes they say - yes, that’s it, that’s the one, you know that too?

I have heard stories about a goat that fell into a pit. About a cat that met a mouse. And there is a story about a man who's girlfriend tests him and asks him to bring her his mother's heart, and the man asks his mother to give him her heart and she plucks out her heart for him immediately, and then he brings it to his girlfriend and she says 'if you can do that to your mother, you can do that to me' and she rejects him and he wants to kill himself and his mother's heart says 'you killed me once, don't kill me twice...'

There was a woman who said - "When I came to Holland I heard stories there, and they were just like the ones my mother used to tell me. I used to wonder, how is it that the stories in Holland are the same as the ones in Somalia. You must meet my mother, she has many stories, she tells them about a monster we have in Somalia, she's called Dagheer, have you heard of her?"

I have heard of her, I am very interested to meet her mother, I am very interested to find out more stories about Dagheer. Mahad says that he knows the girl's mother, he will invite her to the office, but he never does.

And there are always more stories and there is no knowing who will know these stories, young or old, or which ones they will know. And in the cafes too, where I go sometimes, the men are sitting watching TV - Not Al Jazeera, nobody watches Al Jazeera any more - no, they watch Press TV from Iran or Russia Today and they talk and they argue and they tell stories. All these stories appear, quite naturally, served up along with the food. The whole of life is shrouded in stories, accompanied by stories, explained and justified by stories. And the TV is blaring, telling its stories too. And the men tell stories about Gibril the angel of death who comes to take your soul when your time has come and they tell jokes about a Muslim child who wants a dog, and his mother says no, Muslim's don't have dogs, but he says - surely there is a dog that is a Muslim too, we can have him.

And there are stories when I stop in the photocopier shop, where I know the woman who runs it, struggles with it, complains about the business, does my photocopying. And her son is there sometimes, he recognises me, and sometimes he asks me to tell him a story, and I tell them all a story in the shop, and they tell me stories back too.

After a while it seems that there is one frequency, that broadcasts stories all day and all night. And I am tuned to that frequency. I am simply tuned to the universal storytelling frequency.



COLOVA
FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

Muraverde

I am telling a story at the Annual General Meeting

It happens every year at different times in May or June or sometimes July but definitely before August. It always starts late, very late, to the extent that some people unwisely coming at the hour stated on the invitation are obliged to leave before anything has started. I have come an hour late, to find desultory preparations in progress. Some people have gathered, the chairs have been laid out, the table in the hall is ready with a book for people to sign, there is a programme, at this moment being printed, there is a speech of welcome, at this moment being written. In fact, I sit down and help to write it.

There are new arrivals coming, sitting in the office with practiced patience. There are greetings, shaking of hands and conversations. This is the best part of the meeting, or any meeting, the talk before and the talk after - 'How are you doing, I haven't seen you since last year, where have you been?' 'I've been around, here and there, I've been busy, are you still telling those stories?'

And then the food arrives, in trays and bowls, delicious, welcome. And then the meeting starts, served up too with welcomes, speeches, presentations, with guests and votes and applause. The management committee steps down, is voted back, returns. There is laughter and congratulation and approval. And as the meeting progresses more people come until the place is filled, with people sitting side by side, enjoying every moment. There is a sense of relish, of presence, of necessity. People have come because they want to be there, like to be with others.

Someone said to me 'in Somalia if there is a newspaper on a wall, the first person will read it, the ones who come afterwards will say 'just tell me what it says''

The hall is filled with the animation and the conviviality of sitting together. Men sit with men, women with women. There is an undercurrent of talk and conversation even during speeches and presentations. And with each line in the programme I am waiting for my turn, because I am expected to tell a story. I used to be nervous, but now I look forward to the sea of faces. They know me, many of them, recognise me, greet me. How grateful once again I am to be known and recognised and greeted.

And I have found another story, from my secret book, the book that some people say they remember from their school days, the book in parallel text, English and Somali, that I found by chance. It's out of print, because I looked for a second copy afterwards.

And there's a story from that I want to tell, one I haven't told before. Mahad has promised to translate it for me, as we go along.

So I stand up, laugh theatrically, step up to the front, stand by the table, ignore the offer of a microphone, because my voice will fill the hall, my strident voice, too forceful sometimes, I know, I know I overdo it sometimes.

But now I know everybody will listen. Everybody will listen in the way I like, listen without too much ceremony, listen in that straightforward way, which increases with interest and decreases if there is nothing worth hearing, so I know at all times if I am acceptable to my audience because their faces and their minds in their faces will tell me clearly.

So I start.

I say 'once there was a man who had a friend, and one day he told him about a dream. He said 'last night I dreamed that I had...'

I pause

'...one hundred camels'

Mahad has translated everything, and I notice that he translates not just my words but also my gestures. And at the word 'camels' there is an eruption in the hall. A great explosion of laughter, everybody, really, everybody is laughing. It is their word, their animal, even if they have never seen one, even if they grew up in a town, they know a camel, and when it is mentioned they feel they are at home, they know the story is meant for them, and they laugh.

And now I say

'And his friend said 'Really, did you dream that...?'

I pause again

'And he said, well, I had a dream too...'

Another pause

'And in that dream I dreamed that I had...'

A third pause, the faces are looking at me, there is silence

I say 'One hundred....lions...and.....my lions were eating your camels...'

Now there is so much laughter, the hall is echoing, the laughter is like a shout, the mention of the word 'lions' has such power. A simple word, but a shared word, a shared understanding. With one word a whole world is invoked, the world in which lions were in the bush, lions were on the roads, in which lions were familiar.

Deeqa said to me that when they were escaping from the civil war they were in two cars, in the bush, and one car broke down and when someone in the other car went off for help they started to smoke nervously and opened the windows. Then they realised that they should keep the windows shut because there were lions about.

And I remember there was an old woman who told me that when she was a little girl, she used to look after camels and one day one of the camels she was tending started to shake and quiver and it fell down and she came face to face with a lion on the other side.

Truly this one word has conjured up the magic of a whole existence and this laughter welcomes such a world, welcomes that it is shared and understood, celebrates that everybody in the hall knows and shares and understands the same world.

And now I say-

'And the two friends started to argue. The first friend said 'I thought you were my friend, but your lions ate my camels'
My gestures are becoming exaggerated, I am holding the reins of the story, as though it was a lion, trying to ride it and Mahad is exaggerating his translations of my gestures.

The story is so simple, I want to laugh too, it is not so much a story as an operation, I feel that I am performing micro surgery on a giant brain. Each word is an incision, a probe, creating thoughts and feelings that were not there before.

And I now I add - 'and the other friend said...you call yourself my friend, and yet you have one hundred camels and you don't share them with me?'

There is more laughter now, understanding laughter, acknowledging this demand between friends, this power of friendship, of reciprocation, the old principles of clan and kin and trust.

Is this true, am I imagining too much? But no, I can see it in the gathered faces, the old men in skull caps, the women in shawls and scarves, each of them smiling, open, with their eyes and faces welcoming me, a stranger. They are welcoming me into their laughter, their understanding, their memory, and with this laughter I understand too.

And now I say - 'And the two friends started to fight...and they were fighting and fighting'. I make whirling movements to the left. 'And fighting and fighting'. I make whirling movements to the right. And Mahad faithfully translates each movement. And then I say - 'And then they stopped'

And I stop now, out of breath, brimming with the story. It is time to pause, to let the story settle, to let the surface tension hold everything. And there is silence in reply, the faces settled too, and listening, trusting that I know what will come.

Then I finish, I say- 'And then those friends say...Why are we fighting?'. I address the audience directly, as though it was a question from me to them. I say 'Why are we fighting over a dream?'

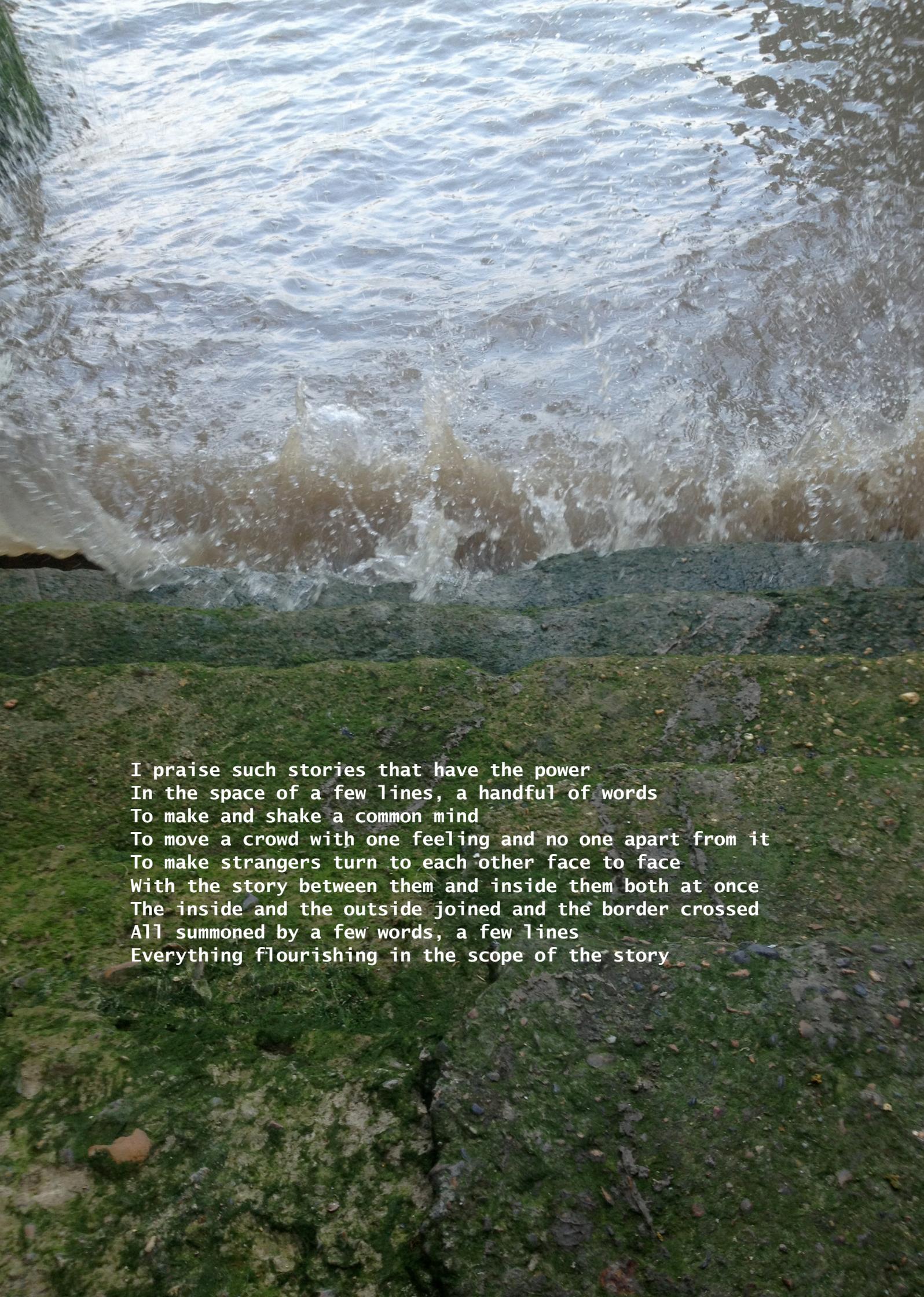
Such dreams are visible in each face, such dreams are tangible in me too and I add, regretfully - 'and what is a dream? A dream is...', I make a gesture over the top of my head, ...'nothing...'

I am sad to tell them that a dream is nothing. I don't want to reduce whatever it was that was there in their faces. I don't want to crumble the fragile exhilaration that was built on what they imagined and remembered. I don't want to tell them that such a power to share such things is nothing. Because there is power in a dream, the power of imagination, of listening, of stories heard and turned into laughter and silence. I don't want them to think I have denied that power.

But they don't think that, they smile, they nod, they agree that fighting over a dream is a fight over nothing. Because for them such a fight is real, such a memory of fighting over nothing is real. And such a fight is the reason why they sit here now, the reason why they left their country, the country to which they are tied by the involuntary power of certain words and certain images, the country that nurtured and made them and then unmade and rejected them, the country that has lost its mind in civil war.

That is the fight that is nothing, that has spent twenty years in a dream, in which camels and lions that never existed are the cause of so much strife.

And afterwards several people come to me and say "That story was the story of Somalia. It was very good, you told it in the proper way."



I praise such stories that have the power
In the space of a few lines, a handful of words
To make and shake a common mind
To move a crowd with one feeling and no one apart from it
To make strangers turn to each other face to face
With the story between them and inside them both at once
The inside and the outside joined and the border crossed
All summoned by a few words, a few lines
Everything flourishing in the scope of the story

When I came back to Deptford, it had changed. I hadn't come for several months and when I stood at the top of Deptford High street I realised something was wrong. There was the Pound shop, some building works outside it, there was the furniture shop...Then of course, I realised, the anchor had been removed, uprooted, pulled out, extracted. The street had been dug up, by the digger standing there innocently with wire fences round it. Surely they haven't taken away the anchor for good?

And walking down towards the community centre, I felt already that I didn't belong. Already I felt that things had happened that I was not part of, that the bustle and the business that surrounded me was taking place in another key, in a different tone.

Only a few months had gone by but Mahad had gone to Somalia, to find out what happened to his family house which had been occupied and sold. And Deeqa had gone to Saudi Arabia and she wasn't coming back.

I got to Kingfisher Square, the doors of the Lord Clyde were open and Rory was inside, he greets me, hugs me, asks me how I am. He's lost weight, his father has injured his hip, the other person in the pub says hello, he is an artist, he went to Camberwell School of Art in the sixties, I remind him what he said to me, he smiles.

And then I go over to the community centre and when I press the buzzer Mohammed lets me in and he has failed his exam, must rewrite a dissertation, doesn't want to. And Naomi is there, she has left her job, become a social entrepreneur is doing well. I used to argue with Mahad about how to pronounce her name, where to put the emphasis.

Everything has changed, I feel that. There are no community groups, there are social enterprises. There are no fundraisers there are social entrepreneurs. There is no grant giving, there is commissioning of services.

I always thought that one day I would walk out of Deptford that I would shake it off, let it fall away but perhaps it's not so much that, perhaps it is that Deptford will find a way of leaving me. Perhaps there is no boundary around Deptford, perhaps there is only my boundary, the one I make with who I know, with the things I remember, perhaps that is how it will be, and how it has always been that Deptford simply changes around each person and if you do not move quickly enough, suddenly, you are no longer there.

But then, there's another arrival as I sit in the office. It is Mahad.

He has just got back from Somalia. He came back three days ago, slept and rested and today is the first day when he has come to the office

He shakes each hand, we laugh, we say he has got fat, ate too much food, got a sun tan, a hair cut, looks different.

He looks at us all, sits there, says "My god, you should have seen that place, Mogadishu. You should have seen it. On my first day there, I walk out of the hotel, and I see a man, a crazy man. He is walking up and down, like this, in a crazy way, he is pacing up and down and when I got up to him, I saw that he has a machete and he is swinging it and you should have seen the look in his eye, my god, what a place. Everybody has a gun, there is no rule of law, absolutely none."

And he tells us the long story about how he tried to get his house back, how he missed explosions, how they happened within minutes of his departure from somewhere, how he was followed, threatened how he swam in the sea, climbed up the side of a boat, fell off, perforated his ear drum, how he ate fresh fish fried on the beach, how he saw Mogadishu for the first time in more than twenty years.

He tells stories.

Tells them on and on, we talk, we each tell stories.

I just dropped by by chance but I stay for four hours.

Then Mahad says 'let's make a time to meet, so we can catch up.'

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The background of the entire page is a photograph of the Evelyn Community Centre building. The building is a modern, multi-story structure with a dark facade and several windows. A sign on the building reads "Evelyn Community Centre". The sky is a deep blue with some light clouds, suggesting dusk or dawn. The foreground is a paved area with a brick pattern.

Evelyn
Community
Centre

This is an account of my time in Deptford, working with community groups and telling and listening to stories. It is an attempt to write an autoethnography. Autoethnography is a genre of writing that presents moments of insight into the lives of a group of people through autobiography, fictional reconstruction and poetry.

Ethnographers generally work alone and often rely on a few individuals to help them but in a mainstream work of ethnography the subjective and random nature of the ethnographer's experience is hidden behind an appearance of objectivity. The aim of autoethnography is to remain true to the impulse to represent and explain, but to be honest about the path that was taken.

This is my attempt to retrace the path that I took.



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