

¹ Igiaba Scego, *Oltre Babilonia*
(Rome: Donzelli, 2008), 443-5,
34-40.

Epilogue

Mum talks to me in our mother tongue. A noble Somali, where every vowel has its meaning. Our mother tongue. Frothy, off-putting, bold. In Mum's mouth Somali turns into honey.

I ask myself if my mother's mother tongue can mother me. If Somali sounds the same in our mouths. Can I speak this mother tongue of ours? Am I as good as she is? Maybe not, no, certainly not. I'm not up to Maryam Laamane's level.

No, I, Zuhra, daughter of Maryam, come nowhere near any sort of nobility. I don't feel I'm an ideal daughter. I stumble around uncertainly in my confused version of the alphabet. My words are all twisted. They stink of tarmac roads, cement and crowded peripheries. Every sound is polluted. But I try all the same to speak to her in the language that unites us. In Somali I found the comfort of her womb. In Somali I heard the only lullabies she ever sang to me. In Somali I dreamt my first dreams. But then, each time, in every conversation, every word, every sigh, my other mother peeps out. The mother that breastfed Dante, Boccaccio, De André and Alda Merini. The Italian I grew up with and sometimes hated because it made me feel a foreigner. The vinegary Italian of the local markets, the sugary Italian of the radio reporters, the serious Italian of university lectures. The Italian I write in.

I'd never be able to choose another language to write in, to bring out my soul in. Written Somali isn't the same thing. It can't be. Or at least it can't be for me. Somali, to tell the truth, is a language I hardly know how to write in. A few words perhaps, but I muddle up the double consonants, the spelling. Written Somali has a strange history behind it. It is said to have been born in 1972, or was it 1973? I couldn't swear to the exact date, but I know written Somali is still a very young language. Mum doesn't even know how to write in it: she left the country before the literacy campaigns willed into being by the dictator, Siad Barre.

What an awful man that Siad Barre was! He killed, molested, tortured. But a lot of people only remember him for introducing the Somali alphabet. "He gave us a written language" some demented person will tell you, his arid mouth full of stupid enthusiasm. All the abuse, tortures, murders and threats are forgotten. All he's remembered for is his alphabet. "After his time, there were even more killings. In these eighteen years of civil war, the warlords have committed far worse massacres." But it was he who signed the first foul massacres in the red ink of Somali blood. It was that cursed Siad who paved the way for the present disaster. And then, the Somalis who say this forget that the whole question of putting their language into writing went back much earlier than Siad Barre, who merely harvested other people's

ideas. Even in the case of the Somali alphabet, all he did was to appropriate something that belonged to other people.

Maryam Laamane doesn't know how to write Somali in the Latin letters Siad swiped from others. She writes in the Osmania script. Mum's Somali is oral; her Somali is made of story-telling, poetry, music and song. On the rare occasions when she writes, she does so in strange letters no one else remembers any more. She learnt them as a child in the cultural resistance meetings she was dragged to by her elder cousin, the patriot. She was just a little girl then and she had fun making doodles on squared paper. Her doodles were the letters the young Somali members of the League for written Somali had chosen for their language, so that they could sign their new-found independence in an alphabet of their own.

It was Maryam who told me the story of Osmania. She says those first letters – curvy like water snakes and folded round and round themselves like ox tripe – were much more suited to the wealth of Somali sounds. “All these square shaped letters the white people use aren't right for us. Latin letters aren't right for our rich vocabulary. Look at the toughness of the T. Or the snaky sibilance of the S. You can't trust them, these letters. They'll never really convey what we say, what we think, or what we want to keep. They're traitors. They're foreign.”

When she talks, my mother is always pregnant. Pregnant with that other mother, her language.

I like listening to her. It makes me travel inside her. I'd happily be silent for ever, just to listen to her. To be present at the delivery of a mother, delivered by my mother. Instead I have to talk too and my voice comes out as a hesitant stammer. I hear screechy sounds, my sounds, and I feel so disgusted at hearing my shaky voice that it makes it almost impossible for me to continue. ...

Mum likes my mixture of Somali and Italian. She says it's my language. But I still feel ashamed of it. I'd like to speak both of them perfectly, without any smudges. But when I speak one of them, the other turns up impudently, an uninvited guest. There are perennial short circuits in my mind. I don't talk, I mix.

The Negropolitan (extract)

“They're polytheists, a bunch of fucking polytheists, that's all they are these Romancatholics.” Abdel Aziz says all this without any punctuation marks. All together, without a single breath in between. His little boy's voice getting tougher and tougher with every vowel that comes out of his mouth. A condensation of dry fury, that's what Abdel Aziz's uvula has produced. It almost scares me. I'm forgetting I have a naughty little boy in front of me and above all that this little imp is my cousin.

I'm worried. Very worried. His high-pitched voice pierces my nervous system. Almost shattering it.

Please tell me it isn't true. Tell me they aren't back. Tell me I'm on an acid trip and that Abdel Aziz isn't saying what I'm afraid he is, what my ears are boycotting

and what I'm not even sure I've really understood. Say something. Anything. Even an insult. I never take anything, I swear, but today I'd rather be on a high, at least I'd have a rational explanation for the rubbish my cousin's coming out with.

Silence. No answer. I've tried them all. Jove, Buddha, Shiva, Ra, Zoroaster, Mithra, St Paul, St Francis, San Gennaro, Milingo. No one is able to explain. No miracle happens. The heavens aren't opening. Nor even the waters of the Red Sea.

They're back. It's so evident it stuns me. They're back, it's them, the Jehovah's Witnesses. When Abdel Aziz goes over the top like this, it can only be them. What can they have said to get him into this state? I'd like to say: "Cousin, the Council of Nicaea has come and gone. Anyway, we're Muslims, whether or not Jesus Christ was a spirit, a man, God or sheer madness, it's none of our business. For us he's a second order prophet. A reserve." But I haven't enough energy to say anything. I want my dilapidated old sofa. I want to lean my head back and maybe even close my eyes for a second. But I don't have time even to sit down. In less than two hours Lucy will be here. I've got to get a move on. Our seats are booked on a shaky old train heading for "Paleemmu".

From there a boat will take us to Tunis. To Africa. I don't know Africa. Despite the fact that black blood runs through my veins. And that I was born there. Still, it's not like I knew it, it's not at all the same thing. You are born for the strangest reasons. For one more lemon vodka, a languid gaze, a mistake, a revenge, or sacrifice, and yes, even for love. So I was born in Africa and that's that. I came out of Maryam Laamane's warm womb, whimpered a bit, was washed and then sucked that sour milk I have no memory of.

I don't understand why I'm going there now, to Africa. I think Lucy insisted. And I didn't know how to say no, I suppose. I hardly ever manage to say no to anybody.

"Zuzu, you'll see, it'll be like being at Miami Beach." For Lucy Miami Beach is the tops when it comes to entertainment. To her Miami is a place made of three Ss, sunshine, shopping and screwing. You stretch yourself out like an iguana, get suntanned, go on a shopping spree and *last but not least* [*in English in the original*] get screwed in an energetic gym session with some goodlooking local. Lucy knows all this because she's seen it on tv. Her favourite series is naturally *Miami Vice Squad*. That old stuff from the eighties, with these two politically correct policemen, one a pale-faced infidel, the other a deluxe version of a curly headed negro, who go at it full strength with the three Ss, especially the last of the three. Between one babe and another, they also solve the odd case, with plenty of chases, gunfights and fake sweating sessions in their authentic 100% cotton Armani suits.

But Lucy's never been to Miami. I don't believe Tunis is like Miami Beach. I mean I don't even know if Miami Beach is like Miami Beach, but Tunis isn't, that's for certain. Everyone I talked to before this trip told me it's like going to Latina. What did you say? Am I understanding rightly? Am I paying 230 euros for the train and ferry round trip to end up in Latina? A town full of Fascists? Sorry, I want my money back.

“And then, Zuzu, the school is excellent.” Ah yes, the school. I’d forgotten. Lucy and I have enrolled at that Arabic language school, the Bourguiba School, highly esteemed by Arabic scholars the world over. You go in and after a while you’re a grammarian of the first century of the Hejira. And, *in sha’ Allah*, after just a few days of the Bourguiba treatment you can hardly manage to recognize the uvula you arrived with. The enrolment fee includes a complete transplant of your vocal apparatus, roots and all. After only a few lessons you’re able to pronounce even the infamous ‘*ayn*, the most bastard letter of the Arabic alphabet.

Shit, it’s ages since I last had thirty days off (thirty-two, since I managed to include a Saturday and Sunday), and where do I go to spend them? In a school! No comment. And not in any old school – in a school of Arabic! Couldn’t I have had a hobby like needlework or pottery, like normal, sane people? Did I really have to get messed up with classical Arabic? What a terrible idea, Zuhra. A terrible idea. Like all my other ideas.

...

“What I’m saying is that these Romancatholics believe in the Trinity... They believe God was made as three beings, which is absurd. God is one. Jesus is called the son of God because he’s the primogenital spirit, not because his father had a fling.”

What shall I do, shall I block him? Yes, I’ll block him. Also because Abdel Aziz is frankly too good-looking to end up in the arms of that dirty swine, Lucifer. I fill my lungs with as much air as I can, hold it the right amount of time and then let it explode as I yell at him. What do I yell? *Haram*, of course. *Haram* i.e. impure, *unkosher*, *unhalal* – smelling of sin, in other words. Abdel Aziz jumps back. Well, he doesn’t exactly take a jump, but a step or two. Maybe only a little step. But the blow has struck home and he’s going white, my little cousin. I’m beginning to enjoy myself, in the meantime, and I say it again, *haram*, putting even more stress on the H this time. If Bin Laden were to see me he’d recruit me right away for his next videoclip from the grotto. I can already see myself with my Kalashnikov made in Transnistria – a dump of a place where if you have enough money you can make your own nuclear bomb and sucks to Bush and Ahmadinejad – there I am, being watched by families whining in front of Al Jazeera from the Gulf to the Maghreb. My voice would get to be more popular than that of Fairuz, the Lebanese nightingale.

For now, all I am is an unlucky idiot who if she doesn’t get a move on won’t be able to catch that train for Lati... Oops, sorry, for Paleeemmu.

But first I have to tick off that little cousin of mine and remind him we’re Muslims and there are certain things he really can’t say. At least out of respect for his elders, me that is, who entered her thirties just three days ago. I couldn’t care less if he doesn’t say his prayers five times a day (like I do, even if I only started to quite recently. But I feel guilty about the time I didn’t. I mean, I wasn’t brought up the right way. I was at boarding school. But I do know the Opening Sura, I really do), nor could I care if he keeps Ramadan, or pays his annual *zaqat* or goes on the pilgrimage to Mecca. But he can’t come and preach Christian stuff to me every

day. The Vatican's definitely not in my top five. And I'm even more allergic to the Jehovah's Witnesses. It's open war between me and them, I'd say. Before, I swear I couldn't give a damn. I'd see them on the street and when they stopped me I'd smile, walk more quickly, overtake them gracefully and give them the slip. Then one very unlucky day, they caught my two little cousins alone in the flat. Mina was asleep and Abdel Aziz offered them biscuits and tea, my biscuits, my beloved chocolate cookies!

"It's a good way to learn Italian, sister," he said. "What's more, it's all free." You see, my cousins have only been with me seven months, they came on a makeshift, overloaded boat and now Italian is a must, since they'll be spending their life here for a while (as *clandestini*). What was I to do? So, "OK, if it's for your Italian..."

Since then, the rat hole I insist against all evidence on calling home has been stuffed. What with? The magazines brought by those conversion fanatics.

It's not that I have anything against them, understand. I don't hate them, that is. I have the greatest respect for them, but they've invaded my vital space. When I found *The Bible – God's Word or Man's?* in the midst of my dirty bras, I swear I really burst. The flat is lined with stuff like *Why should you read the Bible?* Yes, why? Abdel Aziz slips them in all over the place. In the kitchen, in between my Caetano Veloso cds, among the fake gardenias and, last but not least, on the shelf I keep for books on Islam. If he puts one of those shoddy magazines in with my Qur'ans, I swear I'll kick him out of the flat. Hey, wait a minute. It's not what you're thinking. I'm not one of those blasted fundamentalists. But, shit, everything in its place. You see, I'm really fond of Abdel Aziz, but his brain's turning into a piece of gruyère with all this stuff. Or is it the mourning for his lost homeland that's rotting his brain away?

I take out my plum coloured passport. I look at it. Zuhra Laamane. Me, with my mother's surname, even if that's a bit unusual. Me, myself, in person, flesh and blood, tits, cunt and all. Me, an Italian citizen. An Italian citizen? The usual doubt assails me. Will my passport be enough to prove it? What if I brought my driving licence too? And my film club card? Yes, I'll bring that with me too. And my supermarket gift points coupon? And my cultural association card? And my National Library card? Yes, I'll take them all, the whole lot. Even my petrol coupon. It all helps. All these cards have my name printed on them in block capitals, don't they? And my address as a resident in the Eternal City. None of them say I'm Italian, unfortunately, but at least they show I live here. They strengthen the Italianness of my passport.

You see, I never want to go through what happened to me in Spain again. When I went Zapata wasn't there yet. I think the right was still in power. Not that it makes all that difference. At least in Italy. People say you can see a bit of difference in Spain... perhaps... but I live here. In Spain they wanted to arrest me. Not at the airport where even a Saracen negro takes it for granted this sort of thing might happen, no, not at the airport. They wanted to arrest me at the central police station. Think how batty the *guardia civil* must be. Imagining I had gone there in order to get myself arrested by them. All I wanted was to get a temporary residence

permit so as to open a bank account. I was just a girl who was taking her first steps as an Erasmus student in Valencia, the home of *paella* and *horchata de chufa*. Shit, only a bank account, nothing transcendental. The chap at the door looks at me with his half-wit little eyes drooping like a sixty year old's fake tits. He looks at me, his eyes popping out of their sockets. Then he begins to finger my identity card almost as if it were a porno star's bottom. He turns the poor thing over and over, ignoring the seventy odd people in the queue behind me. Then up he jumps with a feline leap and two minutes later I get taken away by four energumens, huge, muscular blokes, who look as if they've just arrived from a training camp for marines and are about to break your bones to bits. They look at me and one of them shows me his badge. "*Por favour, seguidme*" says the friend beside him. I didn't understand at the time what was happening. I was a nobody. An Erasmus student. But scenes from films I'd seen began to surface in my mind. The things that happen in a Hitchcock film when the hero is unjustly accused of a crime. You know, the sort of thing that happens to Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*, not to Zuzu baby. Instead they take me into a room, blind me with a lamplight (like in a B-movie) and begin to question me. Well, perhaps that's too big a word for what they're doing. They just go on and on repeating the same old motifs: *Eres clandestina. No eres italiana. Puta. Marica. Falsificadora de papeles*. I lose my temper. They let me go forty-five minutes later, after my phonecall to the embassy in Madrid. Apologies from everyone in the police station. Fuck your excuses, *entiendes, amigo?* Those were the worst fortyfive minutes of my entire life, olè.

Since then, I'm always lined with documents every time I go away.

Translated by Jane Wilkinson