

Bone Daddy

HOST:

Do you hear that? Time passes. Listen. Time has passed, baby. Welcome back, kiddos, to the place you never left, to the soul's hollow windows between this life and the next. Where you don't have to kill time because time is dead's the golden rule. Welcome back to limbo where you say, cool daddy, cool. Evermore your troubadour, you've got Bone Daddy here as your guide to the pearlescent vibrations in the dark. My lost souls, lost and found in the sound and finding ourselves just the same. Take a walk with me, a float, a squat, a mosey, a swagger, as we look into whatever humming little pockets of the past come our way, making our way across the forever together. Birds of a feather, and I never flock alone. See Daedalus here, my corbin companion, always has something in mind and something in beak, a shiny bit of what was and for all of us that were, what is. Because at the end of the day, my stardust siblings, we're all just ideas waiting to be remembered. So I ask you, my fellow electric skeletons, who's looking to get lost?

Oh. What's this in my hands? Peep this, newly lost souls. This here is an orb of memory, a consolidated collection of brief moments in one's history. A little piece of one's life, of one's death. All glittering across the ever-expanding void that is limbo. Daedalus has a penchant for finding ones of note and bringing them in my way. And boy, I can't get enough of them. Jive on this one for a second children of the bone. This smoky little nightclub, ooh. Love me a place like that. First time waiter fumbling with the trays, spilling high balls on all the suits. Half of them laughing, half of them waiting for him to get off shift so they can whale. Oh and look at all these fine little cats and dogs out for a night on the town, or for a morning if they play their cards right. Check all these little slinking kingsters, picking pockets, huffing lines, huffing rags. Ahh, living the good life. And beep this bass player, runnin his fingers up and down the neck as if it is his lifelong lover that he knows every inch of. This hand is

moving through those fingers, moving through those bones, plucking along those frets, all to reverberate across this smoky little club, to let everyone know, to let everyone say, yeah man, I've been there. That's the blues. The Tenebrae blues.

Jacqui Du Toit - Social Weaver Podcast EP2, Karan & Noor

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Social Weaver podcast. My name is Jacqui Du Toit, and I am your host, your storyteller of the day. For today I'm going to share with you the magical tale of the Social Weaver and what its purpose was. And then we're going to meet some wise young souls who are going to share with us their wisdom of the day. Are you ready? Are you ready for a beautiful story? Yes. Then let's begin with our magic words. Once upon a time...

The Social Weaver is a beautiful, tiny little bird found in the Northern Cape, a province in the southern regions of Africa. The bird is tiny with a sharp beak. And the bird is known for building the largest nests in the world. These nests are built in acacia trees or on telephone poles that can sometimes house over 100 different species of birds, as well as some predators. These birds are known for bringing community and weaving together a safe space for other birds to come in and find a home and a community. It was through this bird that I was inspired to also have the tattoo of the bird on my back. Being someone who loves to travel and spread her wings and fly, I saw myself as this little Social Weaver bird. And through the arts, and what I do in the art of storytelling, I found ways to build community with other little birds who have also been traveling around the world seeking community. And it was through the art of storytelling that helped me weave these beautiful stories together. I do hope that you enjoy the next few minutes in listening to these wonderful stories as much as what I did.

- My name is Karan, and I am from India. I am a 25-year-old, independent, jobless guy who is looking for any like, you know, job that fills my ambition, and I'm looking forward to a happy, healthy life in Canada. That's it. It's been two years almost. Yup. I love it here. I swear, yeah. The weather sucks sometimes, but um, yeah, it's like, it is good. It's really good to live in Canada, I swear.

- And what is your, what do you find is your philosophy of life when things are hard and like the weather's really crappy, and you want to go back home?

- It's not like, that I have a philosophy or something. But I have always believed in manifestations and for missions to be true. I mean, if something you're working for, and you're trying hard, but you're not able to achieve it, does not mean that you're a failure. It always mean that it's not the right time for that thing, maybe you just manifested a little, and you just give like those messages to the universe, it hears, and they're gonna answer you back. And you'll get what you want, eventually. Definitely, you have to work for it. You just cannot sit idle and ask for anything. And just, you're going to get it. You got to work for it, you got to prepare for it. But I strongly believe that manifestations do exist and you get what you want.

- I love what you said, you have to work for it, but you also said, you have to work for it, but you also have to prepare for it. So do you find that that's the same thing?

- Kind of. Preparing is something like a prelim. Like, if you have to, if you're in the kitchen and you gotta make some dinner, so you got to do the prep work, you just cut the veggies and you know, prepare the, you have to get your dishes ready, everything. And then you work on that thing, you cook that thing. If you're baking a cake you have to get the raw material first. So that's the preparation, and once everything is done, it's in the oven, that's working.

- And then you have to trust the oven to make sure that... it's like trust the universe.

- Definitely, yes. It's gonna be good, yeah. And of course you're gonna get the flavour what you've added in, you know? So it's not gonna add something automatically, so whatever you have you

prepared, you've worked for it. And if you believe in the universe, it's gonna give you back. Definitely it comes back. Thank you.

- Thank you for sharing. What a great philosophy. I really enjoyed that. I believe in manifestations too, what you said. And the reference to cooking food, right?

- Exactly. We eventually got to go home, have some dinner. Or, whenever we just wake up, we need some breakfast. And every time we're just like thinking about food, and yeah, yeah, that's great. It's just, you know, everything just came into place. The food example. Yeah.

- That's perfect. Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing.

- You're welcome.

- Do you have anything you want to share?

- Um, nothing?

- You can just introduce yourself, if you'd like.

- I'm Noor, I am 22 years old. I've been in Canada for about 10 years now. Yeah. I'm a student. I am working towards my career, towards my ambitions. Yeah, I'm getting into it. Just looking what I'm here for. Just looking the purpose in life. Just exploring new things. Yeah. I'm just going by what's written, destiny. Yeah. So just figuring out things.

- Are you happy with what you study?

- I am actually, yeah. I got to choose what I do want to study. I'm doing business information systems. So I'm working towards it.

- And what would you say is like, your philosophy?

- About life?

- Yeah.

- I don't know actually. Honestly, I do believe in destinies. I do believe that things come to you, yourself. You, no matter how hard you want something, it's just, you gotta, you know, what's written for you, it's just gonna come to you. What's not meant for you, it's just gonna, you know, it's gonna eventually be taken from you. So you just gotta wait for what's there for you, in life.

- And enjoy it.
- Exactly, exactly.
- Thank you for sharing, guys. I really appreciate your time and sharing your knowledge.
- You're welcome. Thank you.
- Thank you.

HOST:

How's your soul feeling today, cat? Nice and sturdy? I suppose nothing in life really prepares you for becoming a skeleton. Who would have thought that that *je ne c'est quoi*, that *huma pneuma*, that essence of being called the soul, it was a bone to pick. Some folks get a little spooked by that silly symphony when they first come to in limbo. They don't know the moves to this skeleton dance, much less their own steps in it. But that's the thing, sweet soul siblings. You've been part of it all along, piloting that electrochemical suit of bones as long as you lived. That soul was supporting you everywhere you bopped. It just ain't wearing the paint job you thought. That sturdy exterior, clicking and clacking its way across forever, that marrow of exceptional power and purpose swirling within. It's the great equalizer upon entrance, my baby teeth. Stardust and bones, stardust and bones, who are we but stardust and bones.

Let me get your eyes on something I think might help you newly dead cats here in limbo. I've been bumping in this paddle a long while now, and I've come to understand a thing or two. Bone Daddy gets that you may be feeling a little lost, lost souls, wondering what and why it is you're here between that life and the next. And once you understand the former, maybe you'll just get to the latter. See, you're all here to ruminate a bit, to let the weight of what's been sink in before you slink out. And you can take as much time and as winding a journey as you want to find what you're looking for. But let me try and draw you a little roadmap to help guide your way. I've turned my gaze to many an orb of memory across this abyss and heard the word of just as many lost souls. And there are some that I think we can all learn a little something from. I bagged the happeningest glimmers of worldly wisdoms just for you. And if you

can pick it up, you can happen just like me too. So turn on, tune in, and drop out. You've got bone daddies Seven Deadly Rules of beatitude coming your way. Rule one, little pups. Live in the present. Some artists, man, they want that a mortality. They want that unflappable, immutable stature along the flow of time, an idea so big that the future's going to see it from a mile away. But sometimes, quelquefois, you got to know that life is a bit of gabbing steam, changing the world with your breath for just a moment on a cold night before it all changes without you. Sometimes you gotta be here and now, ya hear? Let me tell you about this one soul that came my way. Let's call him the artist. Now the artist was one of them wall painters, dig? A spontaneous muralist, a tagger extraordinaire, a graffiti gorilla. When I first peeped this cat in the crowd around me, he was looking past me, you know? Past it all, kiddos. He was seeing something we couldn't, tracing that bony finger in the air, finding form in the formless. Daedalus brought an orb of memory right on over and I gazed down into it. And in that blurred history, I saw the artist armed with cans of spray paint, standing before the imposing walls of some nasty little factory. Big, blank, brutalist walls. But the artist, man, all he saw were canvases, and he went to work. I can't begin to describe it, my skelefriends. Curves of colour, layers of lines, a symphony, a cacophony, summoning the gardens of his mind in the jungles of concrete. Far, far out stuff. And then he was out, his work done, his purpose fulfilled on another slice of the world. But the next day, children of the bone, he found that every last bit of work he put in that piece had been stripped away, washed off and painted over till there was only that big, bad wall left. Now, some hounds might take that as a sign to bark up another tree, but not this dog. The artist wanted that wall. And he was going to have it. He painted again, an exact replica line for line, point for point. And then the next day, it was gone again. And so he painted, and they cleaned, and he painted, and they cleaned. And that's what the artist's life became. He never painted another piece, he never ventured beyond that small square of the world. Every day was spent making sure that ephemeral art remained, returned, reanimated. And as the lost soul of the artist stood there, tracing in the air with his finger before me. He said, Everything keeps shifting. I can't hold anything long enough in my mind. Everyone keeps coming and going. And I said to

him, Well, brother. That's a limbo. And that's life. The artist floated there a moment, and I heard him whisper to himself, Comes and it goes. And not long after that, he goes.

Mike Fan - Kiss of Tanya

- *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore*. I lived for art, I lived for love. Such famous opera line, almost cliché, Tosca is famous Puccini heroine. She literally is the role of opera diva, one of my favourite roles. Fiery, patient, complex. Like Tanya herself.

- Um, Tanya? Tanya Smania? What are you doing here? I'm supposed to be recording my programsound.fm radio show.

- Darling, with magic of radio? Of internet, all is possible.

- Oh my gosh, folks, this is so awkward. I just got hijacked by my drag persona.

- You're welcome.

- Tosca, darling, it isn't all about you, you know. The diva? I was going to record a confession about my exes. It was going to be very emotional, very serious, very private.

- It's okay. I sat around your head long time and always thought your disaster dating life could use some help. Of course guy now, okay, but Tanya wonder what may have been? Like villain Scarpia, many toxic men in your life. Mamma mia.

- Okay, Tanya. Pray tell. Teach you your wise ways.

- Gladly. We begin. Where? who?

- Well, the lawyer was an interesting character.

- Ah, yes. Lawyer. Quiet Jewish boy. Study be lawyer in UK. Had terrible habits, drinking all the time. Forget you, remember you.

- Yes. He adored my singing, was obsessed with drag before I knew what it even was, and was usually super stoic but would regularly get super drunk and try to propose to me.

- Ah, yah, train wreck disaster. In my hands, let Tanya see. Yes, eventually he act on drunk impulse and propose. We will dance hora at wedding, break glass together after ceremony. Jewish tradition, his idea. Très mignon, like Zuckerberg. Jewish Chinese power couple. Diva and lawyer, eat jiaozi at Chanukah. One year after wedding we moved with him year after he find lawyer job. Excellent city for classical music. But he always go bar with friends get wasted, yes - correct idiom? He always go drag show. We sit at home, not partier. Jealous, upset, lonely. You begin hate drag, resent. Tanya no born. Audition. Voice too big for London choir, though popular with local opera companies. Freelance career pick up, win Cardiff competition. Much offer in Germany and move. One drunken night lawyer beg you not move, not leave. You break up with him, move into hotel one week before start new life in gay Berlin.

- Interesting. After all that, the same issues. I like that I - we? - break up with him. How it happened in reality was that he broke up with me after practically forgetting my existence when we went long distance. Right before a master class when I was warming up.

- Rude boy. Truly boy, not man. Speaking of Europe, you had interesting Balkan man, past life connection. First true love, I think. Not so much in a romantic sense.

- Let's not say I had him. Unfortunate grammar there. Yeah, he eventually came to see me as a bitchy younger sibling. He did not bring out the best in me.

- Yes, the Balkan man. Dark, handsome, tall. Juvenile, with PhD. Strangely child-like. This dichotomy frustrate us. We went around the world. Eventually he went back to old country. Now he live in home he built in Europe mountains with wife and travel half the year. Perhaps he would be happier if Tanya's in Europe.

- Strangely, yes. I think he was more fluid oppressed about his sexuality than he'd like to admit. Perhaps he became more asexual with time. It was a conundrum I decided to stop trying to unravel myself. Too many headaches.

- With him I think we moved to former Yugoslavia together. You audition in many local state theatres, get some small roles, but face discrimination. Asian in this area not so common. Life in remote

mountains beautiful but inside we big city diva also. In end cosmopolitan life draw you. One time you vacation Italy together, birthplace of opera. We fall in love with Milano, apply job in teaching English, French, Mandarin online to Italian children. Eventually move Milano full time teach, go see opera regularly at La Scala. We began teaching Spain, Brazil, Taiwan, South Korea.

- Interesting. I guess the lack of opportunities and openness in this scenario means I give up singing?

- Yes, since educator part begin. Eventually we and Balkan drift apart. We enjoy wanderlust, travel single, bit lonely, but at least world riches compensates.

- Another sad tale, yet an interesting alternate reality. Over the years I studied and worked in so many different fields, education one of them, as well as pre-med nutrition and languages besides music. I guess there are many ways things could have gone.

- Yes, this is why we're here today, no? Chemistry. Interesting phenomenon, yes?

- You're thinking of the chemist?

- Yes, darling.

- A strange situation. We met through online dating and actually never in person. I sometimes wondered what it would have been like to meet him in the flesh. I never think it's a good idea to pursue something romantic with someone until I get the chance to meet them. Stranger danger. Would we have liked each other? Would we have had anything to talk about?

- Any chemistry?

- Yes, Tanya. Tell me. Tanya knows all.

- Now you get it. Let me look in crystal ball. You had planned meet in US-Canada border around Niagara Falls. At the time he was not adventurous enough to meet you but you no feel comfortable go alone.

- He wanted me to stay at his parents' place, and he wasn't out to them. Mama's boy.

- Yes, thank God, that may have been disaster. But perhaps you do meet him. You stay hotel instead and yes, you meet. He tall, how you say, adorkable young man. Meeting us, of course, how could he not fall in love. He come visit us on Canadian side next time. Eventually always reconnect on border.

We decide apply American Opera Masters in same city with him and go, but very expensive, much debt to pay. Fortunately he graduate doctorate, find the excellent position in university lecturing. He cover many costs. But you find work in medical office, university - many many job, no time sing. But happy together, so little better.

- Interesting. I guess we would have settled into a somewhat mundane, happy, work-centred life together. Me working off my debts, not singing, which is my greatest fear.

- And no drag. No time, no energy, no inspiration. Anyway, instead it is become big problem now.

- So, not missing much I guess?

- No, magic Mike. Ya, I think back now, not bad.

- It's the way it was meant to be. And fortunately, I'm happier and more fulfilled in this one. You too?

- Tanya always never happy. Want new roles, deeper acting, artistry and voice. Tanya work never done.

I guess there's a little bit of that in me too. But fortunately, I get to take off the drag and diva persona and live a little, too.

- Of course. Drag is fantasy. Painstaking fantasy.

- Well, today was definitely an interesting trip down fantasy lane. Thanks for letting me explore the kiss of Tanya.

- My darling, always pleasure.

HOST:

How're y'all doin for change out there? And I'm not talking metamorphosis, my chaotic little butterflies.

All of you still got two bones? No, no, sweet siblings. I'm not talking that skeletal soul of yours. I mean, the boatman's fare, the Grecian sleep mask, the Obolian blindfold. Some of you are definitely new

around here. Bone Daddy's been kicking it so long sometimes I forget to remember, but I always

remember to forget. Just a joke. Well, let me get you hip. See, dearly departed, we are gathered here

today thanks to two little coins. One for each eye and both for the great beyond, a wild little wonder that

those couple bones can take you so far. And even if your galaxy, your posse, your people forgot to see that eye to eye, big bad Limbo provides all the same. That's what we here call soul-cialism. And it's a beautiful thing. Two coins for the price of one death. It's your ticket in, cat, and when you're good and ready it's your way out, dog. A vamos to your former life and an entrez vous to your next. Me? No, no, no, no, no, no. I have got my bones but no reason for me to be checking out to lifesville, kiddos. I'm happy right where I am. Besides, who will guide you kooks if I went hanging, dig? Now why don't you go ahead and fish out that pair of coins, sib? Take your time. Find which the little hole of your soul they landed in. My advice, keep them out of your pelvis. One lost soul I know thought it was cute keeping them in there. Now he'll never hula again. Tragic, truly. Found em? Cool, baby. Cool. Now why don't we bunny hop these little currencies to a purpose? Seems a shame for them to just sit there for so long. Now cats and kittens, dogs and dittens, we're going to toss some bones. I want you to take the first coin, get a good gaze on it. Peep the side we know as heads. Authority and formality. Those folks of mean means and paragons of the squares of that crazy thing we call civilization. Humans, man. Now peep the so called tails. This side's wild, sister. The untouched gems of the wilderness. Fur, feathers, fangs, and claws. That's that far out realm of nature. Unless you're looking at a boat in which case I'm gonna need you to think a little harder. Now, toss that first coin skyward and on its daring descent, snatch it. Hold that Schrödinger in your fist a moment. Feel the fate you're about to make. Now ponder this, my poignant patellas. As you grip tight the reins of decision, hold just as tight in your mind the future and the divergent paths it might take. The two poles that it may gravitate towards, and sear the visages onto either side of that awaiting change. What do they look like? Who do you look like in them? How do they make you feel? And how does the grand gravity of these two different tomorrows weigh in your hand? That two pronged fork is piercing through your knuckles. What's your head? And what's your tails? Now, open your future to the world and look down at that coin. That's tomorrow in the palm of your hand. Let that sink in, child of bone. So here's is your future. But where are you at? And how do you get from here to there? Well, my petite ponderer, you've got one more bone to throw. Gather that second coin up. Give it a fond farewell. And up into the quantum leap it goes and back for another hand

hold, right in the fist of the architect of Fate. That's you, lost soul. Feels good, doesn't it? Now, where are you now? Who are you? What are you? Why are you? Why are you not? You found what might lay before you with the sheer flip of a coin. And now you've got two possibilities laying in flux in your fist. What's the change that's gotta come between then and now? What's the decision that breaks the dam for the flow of tomorrow to rush on in? What choice do you face to bunny hop from this coin to the next? Now, open up and find your footing. You have just been given your purpose. Welcome to the present. Make it last. Not bad life coaching for the cost of two coins and some chaos, huh?

Peering beyond the veil really does give the freshest perspective, my dead darlings. In this place where we're killed by time and time is dead by design, we get it all. In that funny little place called life, people like to think that they see what's happening, what's real, dig? That their peepers are fixed in the moment observing the objective truth of that dreary little thing called reality. That their eyes are on the present. Nothing else. But they forgot about the most important eye, my jeepers creepers. The mind's eye. And with that orb of vision fixed within the cranium, it can't help but pour through the contents of your grey matter. And what's contained in countless old cardboard boxes, clogging up the traffic, filling up the shelves in the corner store of your mind. The past. And without it, skeletal siblings, you would not be you. Rule two, lovelies. Live for the past. There are some lost souls that arrive in limbo a little more tired than most. Their lives they lived, the ends they met. It all multiplies to make for one sorrowful spirit. Now I don't catch that drift firsthand, of course. Your old friend bone daddy couldn't be happier here, came in dancin, I did. Then there's the widow. Now this winter chicken, an unmothered hen, you could almost smell the salt on her when she came floating by. But I couldn't pick up whether it was sea, tears, or a sea of tears. Daedalus gently flew me an orb, and I got that same whiff of wailing from it. So I held it in my bony hand and peered deep into the swirling tides. Within I peeped this chick, knowing it was none other than the widow herself. She was out in some little fishing town, right? Like those crazy little stories you hear of dark and stormy nights. Waves like skyscrapers, kiddos. That's where her little home was clinging to one of them damp cliffs. Looked all kinds of nasty to me. But the widow, she was

smiling, man. There was a strapping smiler right next to her too. Not hard to put two and two together. Except one noticeably nasty night, I'm seeing her stand on the pier of that storybook town. Alone. And as I watched the story of the widow's life playing out, she just keeps standing there, gazing out at forever. The waves whip right across her and she doesn't even flinch, man. She's like a statue, a pillar that won't erode. Everything else though? It ain't got her composure, cats. Her volition. I see all the smattering of houses empty out, falling away to the surrounding sea. Even her once happy little home greets the grey geysers eventually. And yet she stands there all the same. She doesn't budge, budgies. So I asked the widow one day, what were you waiting for, kitten? And she says to me, I wasn't waiting. I knew what was gone. So I turned my eyes back to this orb of memory. And I tried to really see, right? I looked hard. And when I looked at the widow's face back then, I realized something. She didn't look sad at all, my bone brethren. She looked acceptant. At peace. I asked at her again, what was it for? She said, because somebody had to remember him. Somebody had to remember all of them. I wanted to be that somebody. To not let the past pass. I had one last query. Was it worth it? And she just smiled man. Bony little smile. And I swear, I truly saw her then.

Lee Ingram - Frozen Cradle

You were the first birth cry. [*You were the first*] I was the last. A birth cry like razor burning, your eyes closed, tears shed. Womb stretched, loose, without a father. Father? [*Father? Father?*] You did not wrap baby in blue sky. Your heart did not swell, nor did your palms sweat.

Imagine, an ancient hospital, the cave, walls with giants, ground breathing. Birth cry cracks with fire, rattles with pain. Birth cry bleeds paint with the moon, whirling sounds and golden beads and bodies of melodies on repeat. Voices remember and reenacting the pasts. Lungs exalt. Rise. [*Mother. Mother. Mother. Mother? Mother. Mother? Mother? Mother? Mother. Mother? Mother. Mother. Mother.*] Many curse your

name, save with you and your crazy crofts and flesh hands that heal. The word speaketh through you. You say the Lord is my witness [*Lord is my witness*], say deliver us from evil [*deliver us from evil*], say I shall not be moved [*I shall not be moved*]. They did not consider you one of them, a lone lioness challenging the pride. So they threw you out. [*Cha.*] It must have been the way you grew. [*You think I grown?*] Too grown, too fast, [*Yeah, too fast*] too solid [*too solid*] to hit but you are not so different from them you'd hate to hear.

Do you remember? [*Do you remember?*] Strong women from the hills. Ritual histories walking, the land sweat misting to moisten hard earth. Secret burials in red sand, sediment beginning, cradling and chewing the bones. [*Mother? Mother. Mother? Mother? Mother.*] With you and your ancestral strains, this vengeance a strength, the soul a music. The baby sees a candle burning mothers up. All night kneeling, reciting, tongue twisting, verses and letters and songs and poems that have never been written.

HOST:

Dig this, baby teeth. I just had the wildest trip. Me and Daedalus here, we were taking a look at some of the memory orbs, see. And when I started gazing into this one, it wasn't a memory at all. Held it up real close to me to get the vibe, and it was freaky man. It was like someone else was looking right through it at me. My brain was like a kaleidoscope, trying to focus in on them. It kept shifting in my mind's eye. One minute I was seeing some cats sleepwalking through a crazy little world, like dream walking, yeah? But then I blinked and I saw them laying there in bed, some kind of plant hooked up to them, all hooked up to some kind of, some kind of radio thing, man. I couldn't wrap my head around it, children, This dreamy little dreamer. It had me laughing, pups. It was just such a hoot. But then it changed again. And I saw something, someone familiar? But not. It was this old guy, a white beard type, you know? Had all this silver on his fingers, real ritzy digits and all, rocking some sweet little shades. And he was just sitting there, right? Sitting and smiling. That little smile split my skull in two, kiddos. There was

something magnanimous in there, like this doubter and dream dude got me somehow, like he could see me somehow. Into me. And he looked, dare I say it, cool. But last time I checked my books, you can't be cool and old. That ain't nothing but a dream. And I don't know whose. That orb must be broken, Daedalus. No one's dreaming around here. No use when you're dead.

Jonathan Shaboo - Bad Arab

Welcome to the Bad Arabs podcast. My name is Jonathan Shaboo, and I'll be your host. This is the, our first episode, I am so excited. The Bad Arabs podcast is a podcast where I sit down with a successful first gen Canadian, and figure out how they've managed, or dealt with, or navigated, whatever it is, the line between the old world the parents came from, and the new world where they live in. I named it the Bad Arab podcast because I myself am a Iraqi Canadian, and my parents were born in Baghdad, Iraq, and I was born here in Toronto, Ontario. And in my whole life, I have been struggling with my identity. I've never been white enough for the white people, and I've never been Arab enough for the Arabs. So my way of dealing with this is inviting people on who are better, smarter, who have done this longer, who might have some experience than me, more experience than me, and who could inform me. So basically, this is just a big therapy session for myself. And I'm so excited, I'm so excited for my first guest. She is a first generation Egyptian-Canadian comedian. She's opened for the likes of [Maz Jobrani](#), Ken Jeong, Beth Stelling. She's performed at numerous comedy festivals, including the Northwest Just For Laughs Festival, and the Women in Comedy festival in Boston. She has been featured on the CBC, Globe and Mail, and you can catch her on YouTube where she gives an amazing, an amazing TEDx talk about her emotional journey through comedy entitled, "Why People Pleasing is Hurting You." Aunties, amus, Salma Hindi.

- Wow. Thank you so much. First of all, that was the most like, tender, genuine reading of my bio ever. Nobody really says it. Everyone just says it, you know what I'm saying? But no one really says it. So, thank you so much.

- Well, hey, listen. I'm just so grateful. You put all that information in an easily-accessible place on your website.

- I also wanted to say you lost me at successful. What is a successful Arab?

- Well, so, here's, here's the thing, right? Like, I don't know, how do we, I guess that's a great place to start. You know, in my mind, when I see, when I see an Arab-Canadian, or any first gen, really, that is, to me, from my perspective, exceeding the expectations of the culture in some way, that resonates with me, that feels, it makes me feel something that is, that I can only like, I can only put into words as success.

- Okay.

- And also just like, you know, your social media is blowing up your, you know, you got stuff going on here. So, so yeah, I'm gonna call you successful for a sec.

- Okay, because yeah, I'm like, I wonder what, I feel like success differs from person to person and family to family. Because, if you were to ask my parents, is your daughter successful? They would be like, in the things that don't matter. You know?

- Yeah. No, I do know, I exactly know. Which is interesting, because you do, you're not just a successful comedian, right now. You have a, you have a lot of education. You have a Master's degree, you have multiple Master's degrees.

- I have a master's degree, I have one master's degree, in engineering. And I did, yeah. So I did my undergrad in engineering. And then I did my Master's in engineering, and then I work as an engineer right now, which is the only reason, that's like the last, that's the last thread between me and my parents. That's like the only thing.

- Is it? Is that the only thing that's holding it all together?

- Exactly. As soon as I leave engineering, which I am planning to do, whenever the time is right, whenever the opportunity comes along. You know, they're just gonna be like, well, we have nothing left to hold on to like, I don't know what's here anymore. You know what I mean?

- Right. Because that's a cultural divide, right? That's that, like, you know, there's an old way of doing things, and then there's a way that's Western.

- Exactly.

- And it doesn't necessarily line up, and you know, and I think we spend a lot of time defending the things that we love.

- Yes. Oh my gosh, yes. So much time defending, and almost like, begging for permission for, at least in my experience, growing up as a woman in like a really strict Arab-Muslim household. Just practically constantly defending, you know, who I am as a person. Being a loud, extroverted woman I always thought was inherently non-religious, like, which I thought was inherently bad. I thought, you know, and then they always talk about, for example, Prophet Muhammad in my household, in my family, in my community, as being someone who's really soft spoken who, you know, a man of a few words, very wise, very introverted. So I would always be mad at myself, like, why am I like this? Why am I so loud? Why am I so animated? Why am I such a storyteller? I hated my spirit, essentially. Like, I was like, this is such a, an awful program. An awful, you know, like. If I was coded this way, it was, why? You know, why me? Why would, why did I turn out like this? So I felt like the majority of my upbringing was like, begging my parents to let me be who I was, like, to let me, I don't know, like, join social media, to let me even run a half marathon in 2014, I think. I ran a half marathon and my dad was like, no, it's haram, because you're a woman and people are gonna see your body outside, like moving. I was like, what do you mean!

- That's a reality.

- Yeah.

- That is a reality of running, yes.

- Then I go to the marathon, and it's just like white families, families running it together. Like it's like, an annual thing. I was like, this is insane.

- Can I ask, can I ask what your. What was the feeling of showing up to a marathon, and I'm assuming you're, you're wearing your hijab, and you're, and so, what's the feeling of being there?

- Okay, so I grew up in a bubble. I was always only around Muslims. Not even just Arabs, like Muslims, but mostly Arabs, Muslim Arabs in the community. And we never even talked to our neighbours. We never went to public school. We weren't even allowed to have like, minimum-wage retail kind of jobs because my dad was like, that's going to entail mixing with the white folks. And yeah, and like, exchanging ideas when you're at your most, I guess, what is it like malleable age? Like, when you're a teenager?

- So to, to set the stage here, your father was an imam. Was or is?

- So my father is an imam. He became an imam when I was seven, and that's kind of when things really, they really became strict too? Like, we stopped celebrating birthdays.

- Can you divide, can you define an imam for us?

- Yeah. So, imam is basically kind of like the Muslim version of a priest. And he leads the sermon, like he gives the sermons on Fridays at the mosque, and then he kind of like is the spiritual leader at the mosque that people would go see or ask questions to, and he would officiate marriages, and he still does till this day, or you know, performs like religious counselling if people need it.

- And so I'm assuming he was like a, like a strong member of the community as well.

- Yes. A lot of people in the community know him, and so he kind of has in his mind like this reputation to uphold and stuff. So yeah, so we, we started like, I guess when he became an imam, we, our family, my family became really strict religiously. Like, no more birthday celebrations. Till this day, they still barricade the doors and turn off all the lights on Halloween because my dad would rather us fake our own deaths than to have to interact with white people during their satanic holiday. One time he like.

- No one's home.

- Oh always, always, our neighbours hate us. One time, he opened the door by accident because he was waiting for a package or something, and then there was like a little kid that was like, trick or treat, and my dad was like, oh, like we're still doing this shit? And then my dad literally was like, no! And he slammed the door, and I was like, he genuinely thinks he's like, doing god's work by making this child cry, you know?

- Just like, a little kid in like a Blue's Clues like, just a little puppy boy, just like sitting there.

- Yeah, he's just like, but why? Why does this man hate me? I'm like, good question, I'm trying to figure that out too, no I'm kidding.

- Did you like, did you like sneak chocolate outside to people, just like, through your window, just throwing chocolate out of it, just hoping that kids pick it up?

- No, like I don't even think that was on our mind, because in our mind it's like, why should other people get candy like, if we're not? Because we, I never trick-or-treated, I never participated in any Halloween activities ever. So, there's also that side. Like for us it was like, oh my gosh, we have to play dead, and we turned it into a game I guess. Like, you know, let's see if nobody will answer. Or like, when they answer we're like, oh my god, it's like the boogey man, like what are we going to do, you know?

- Right. Right, right, right. It was like, there's like this like fun tension of like, they're doing something bad and we're hiding from them or something like that.

- Exactly.

- So then you felt, so then there must have been such a divide then when, you know as you slowly started to integrate? Because at some point, you would have had to, as you went through school. Was it school that really, like university, that really started to get you integrating?

- Um, not really, like. Yeah, so university was the first mainstream educational institution I ever went to, before that it was all Islamic schools. And yeah, university, I thought, I thought it would, like I thought it would be the thing to integrate me, but it wasn't really, like, I stuck to my Muslim friends that I knew in the program, and you know engineering is filled with Muslims, filled with people of colour. And then I would always.

- It's either medical or engineering.

- Exactly.

- We got doctors, we got engineers, and maybe a lawyer or two, but that's about it.

- Exactly, exactly. And so, and I joined the Muslim Students Association on campus. So I was really involved in that. And that kind of kept me in my bubble. I think, I would study with, a lot of my close friends weren't Muslim, but they were like Sikh, or Hindu. And, you know, like, I don't know, our culture was really similar.

- Mhm. So at what point, at what point did your path start to diverge?

- So yeah, I would say that, for example, you said, you told me to describe how I felt when I was at the marathon. So it's like, me and my, my other friend who's also hijabi, and then my guy friend, who's Pakistani-Muslim, it was us three in a sea of like, white people. And I don't know, I guess the, the physiological feelings I feel is like, okay, we're entering, we're entering like, an unfamiliar space. It's a little bit overwhelming, it's a little bit like, like, legitimate in a lot of ways too, which scares me? Like, this is not just people who are shooting the shit or something, like this, people are doing an organized run. And it's like serious and it's fast-paced, and it's a little ruthless. Like, it's gonna go forward without you, if you don't know what's happening, like, it's just gonna happen anyways. So it feels a little bit scary in that way. And then you kind of just have to follow what everyone else is doing, or watch them. You're almost like observing, like, in a way you kind of identify as an outsider too, because it's all new to you. So you know, like, that feeling. And you know what, it was a lot to handle, physically, because I feel like I'm on, I'm on alert, or I feel like, okay, I have to focus now. Like, this is very, very uncharted territory. So the half marathon was like, you know, a one day thing or, whatever, how, it took us two hours, two hours 20 minutes or something. So that, you know, it was that experience, and then that's it. But then when I started comedy, it was like that all over again. Because, first of all, entering an uncharted territory, I don't know what comedy, live comedy shows are like, I don't know what people do. Like, even someone holding the microphone was like, you know, comfortably, was so foreign.

- Well, it's funny, because I was gonna ask, what was, what's more, what was scarier, your first comedy set or running in that marathon?

- Oh, definitely the first comedy set, oh my god I was gonna die. Because, because, like, the running, you know, there's a lot of training that you do on your own and all of that, and if anything, the group environment really inspires you and motivates you to keep going. Like, I think physically I checked out at around 18 kilometers. I was like, I'm so exhausted, because I had only trained until 15 kilometers. And then when we hit 18, I was like, oh my god, I'm so tired. Like, I'm really feeling it now. It's not even about a mental thing anymore. Like it's really physical. And then, but you know, you keep pushing, and then you get to the 22 or whatever. At that point you're just like, whatever, I don't know what I'm doing. And there's all these white people yelling.

- And your body's kind of on autopilot, and.

- Yeah. And there's all these people yelling, you know, courageous things at you and you're like, okay, I will do it for you, you know?

- Yes, Becky, thank you. I will strive for my dreams. Thank you.

- Exactly, exactly. And then, but yeah, with comedy, oh my god it was terrifying. It's like, my heart was like beating out of my mouth. Like, it was gonna come out. Like I don't, it was terrifying. And it was so crowded. Like, I remember I did it at 120 Diner, this place at Church and, oh my gosh, I don't remember where like, Richmond maybe?

- Is it, not Adelaide. Oh, I don't know.

- It's like, yeah, close to there.

- Downtown Toronto, downtown Toronto.

- And the first time I went there, there was literally four people in the audience, which was me and my two friends. And like one other person. And I was like, oh, this is a great place, it looks really great. And then I got up, and I went to the, and there's not many people so like, even if I bomb, whatever, and then I went to the producer, I was like, can I perform here? He's like, have you ever done stand up? I was

like, no. He's like, fine. And then anyways, he like books me for three weeks from then or something.

And then, on the night of, there's like sixty people! People were standing, it was so full!

- That's a lot. That's a lot for your first show.

- It was a lot. And then, then the lineup is really big too like, there's a lot of people in the lineup and stuff, and then the guy that is right before me is like killing. And I'm like, okay, you guys don't need to laugh that loud, you know? Like, save it a little bit. Save it for me. And then.

- Now is that like, is that a good thing? Because you want the audience nice and warm? Or is that a bad thing? Because you're like, okay, like, it's great, but like, slow down a little bit, like.

- Well, I don't know anything about comedy. So for me, I thought it was a bad thing, because I was like, they're wasting all of their laughs on him. Whereas I didn't realize like later, you actually want the crowd to be a little bit warm, or warmed up, so that they laugh at you.

- But at that point, you're just like, first time, freaking out, like this person's so much better than me. And I'm like, I feel terrified.

- Exactly. And then, and his style was very, was like one liners, and just like very eccentric, and just like strange. So I told myself, which is great, I love that style of comedy. So I told myself, like, you're different, you're different. You're like a storyteller, you tell a story, you're different. You look different than everyone. It's fine. Like, you have an angle kind of. And then, but then, when I was waiting for him, so they don't really have a greenroom at 120 Diner, it's literally the bar. So while I was waiting for him, I was like, leaning against the bar, and I could smell alcohol for like, the first time, and I saw like a drink next to me. And I was like, oh my god, I'm going to hell. I just feel so overwhelmed. Like I was like, like, I'm outnumbered. Everybody here is not Muslim. I'm barely used to this, I'm not used to being around people who are not Muslim.

- I'm in this den of sinners.

- Exactly. It's like, underground. It's like, uh, it's not underground, but it's like, you know, really dark.

- It's seedy. It's dark.

- Yeah. And I think there's like a club upstairs with, with drag queens or something? So there was just like, so much happening, that I was like, oh my god, and then, you know, we're like, I'm bringing people here. And then there's alcohol also in this presence, in this satan gathering. Like, so that was for sure like, a big part of my anxiety when I first started was, you know, being in that in that space. Which I wasn't used to.

- And then, and then it was your turn, then you had to get up there.

- Then it was my turn, yeah. And then I went up there. And everyone was...

- Did you have friends in the audience? Did you have people there to see you?

- Yes, I had like, really close. I was like, I have a lot of friends. So I was like, I had my closest like.

- Humble brag.

- No, no, no! It's not, it's not necessarily a good thing. But, you know, I think like five or. No, I think seven friends came. And it was like friends that, one of them later started comedy, and the other one was really into comedy. But it was friends that I was really comfortable. Like, they would never let me do something like this my first time without them being there. And if I had bombed like, it's fine. They would just be like, well, whatever. We love you and you're amazing and you did well, you know what I mean?

- Yeah. But you didn't. And here you are now. Um, how many years later now?

- We're at like, four years later. Four, yeah.

- And does it just feel like it's accelerating faster and faster? Kind of, was like the train, like just kind of ripped out of the station for you?

- Oh, yeah. Oh my god, 100%. Like, for me, it was, I feel like it was an emotional journey more than anything, where I was like, my dad was so devastated when I started. He was like, this is like, the worst thing ever. You know, if you watch my TED talk, you'll know a little bit more about the details. But I felt like, so much spiritual guilt. And it was overwhelming. Like, I think I was getting panic attacks in the beginning because I didn't know, like, I couldn't bear my parents being so upset with me. But at the

same time, like, I loved it so much. And I was like, I know I can't stop. But I rationalized it. And so first of all, I didn't want to call myself a comedian in the beginning. I was like, that's so embarrassing. I'm not that, don't call me that. And I, it's just for fun. I didn't, I was like, no, I'm not gonna leave engineering. I, like lots of protective mechanisms, because...

- Whatever you have to say to sleep at night.

- Exactly. I was saying a lot of that. And then, sometimes I would judge other comedians, like, I'd be like, how pathetic like he's 50 and he's doing this, like he's someone's dad. It's not my voice though. right? It's like, my parents' voice in my head.

- It's, well, that's the thing, right? That's the voice that we compete with. And it's, you know, it actually, it actually brings me to a point that I wanted to get to, to touch on after listening to your TED talk. You know, looking through our culture, why is people pleasing such a big part of this? What like, what is it about Middle Eastern culture? What is it about, and you can say a lot of first gen cultures, but it seems like people pleasing and expectations that we put on each other is such a big thing. Like it's so important to my parents what other people are doing. And it's so important that I'm in service to the family. And I'm just like, I'm always fascinated by like, why do they care so much?

- Yeah, I feel like, okay, so it, I think it all comes down to, and this is going to be like, my psychology, uh, part of me coming out. I think it all comes down to fear of abandonment. All of it. Because, first of all, people pleasing is so important if you want to belong, if you want to belong to a community, and our parents are minorities in this country, right? They're Arabs, and my parents are a bigger minority here, because they're Muslim Arabs, whereas your parents would be a minority in Iraq, right? Because they would be Christian Arabs.

- That's right.

- So they're, my parents are a minority here. So for them, belonging is really important in the community, in the Muslim community, specifically, because that's the one that they value, right? So they, to them, like what people are going to say about you, or what people are gonna think of you is going to threaten their position in the community, and is also going to threaten my ability to belong, or

my ability to find a spouse in the community, or my ability, like the, like, all the time it's like, what are people going to say about you, you're on the streets, no one will want to marry you, no one will want to marry you, no one will want to marry you, like nonstop. And my mom even went so far as saying as, nobody will even hire you as an engineer if they know that you're in comedy, because my mom's also really elitist, so she'll be like, it's really trashy, it's really low class, it's really this and that, whatever. And then when I got hired at my job, they told me, they're like, we watched all your YouTube videos before you joined. I was like, see mom! People can love me for who I am! I didn't think it was possible, but.

- Well, it's part of your voice, right? And you're right in the fact that, it does feel, it feels like it comes from fear.

- Yes, all of it.

- And, you know, this like line of being judged, you know, like their parents judged them for everything they did and their parents judged them. And then you go back, and back and back. And.

- Oh yeah.

- It feels like, we come from a lineage of fear.

- Exactly. We come from a very, like judgmental culture too, it's all about being judged and reprimanded. And, you know, people impose their advice on you, when you literally don't ask, and like your character, I'm just thinking of your character in Habib, you know, just like yelling at someone just being like, you know, you're not, it's not enough, like you, you need to be married, you need to hit these milestones, otherwise, it's not enough. And it also justifies the choices that they made in their life and their life path. Like if I, if, you know, my mom, for example, had a really hard time when my sister was going through a divorce, because, you know, I think to her, it was kind of like, no, you can't, you can't walk out on marriage like, this is, this is so sacred and holy. And this is what we were told. And if, if you do this, you know, obviously, my mom is not articulating any of this.

- Sure, yeah.

- It's coming out in very crazy ways. But like.

- Yeah, they don't have the language. They just don't have that language.

- They don't have the language or the awareness or, yeah, and they'll never admit it. But, but deep down, it's like, kind of like, no, if you do this, then it's gonna make me realize that, you know, all of what I did was useless, or me staying in the situation that didn't serve me is useless, or me staying in something that was incompatible, or what have you. Like, if you stay in it, if she, if my sister's unhappy and stays in a marriage that she's unhappy in, then it kind of makes, you know, everybody else who did that win, and it makes them feel better. And then ultimately, the last point I will say about fear of abandonment is that, our parents are afraid that if they don't, you know, kind of control us or make us fit this mold that the community and everybody else will approve of, that we might leave them. Like, our parents genuinely think that we might not love them, and we might leave them and we might distance ourselves from them, and we might abandon them. And so their way of trying to ensure love, you know, our love towards them, is by imposing and controlling. But that's not real intimacy.

- No, and in fact, it does the very thing that they're fighting against.

- Exactly.

- So like, when I was 25, I wanted nothing more than to get away from my family.

- Yeah.

- And I found a girl and I fell in love and I got an apartment and I ran as far away as I could from my family.

- Yeah.

- And I don't regret any of it, because I think it gave me a distance and it gave me a perspective. But I had a very opposite upbringing from you, like I didn't, I didn't have the, I didn't go to the religious schools, and I didn't go, I didn't hover within the culture, I was very on the other side. Like, all my friends were white. I skipped church. I skipped the community events. I would ditch my cousin's parties. I wouldn't go, like.

- Yes, so tell me about that? Like, why did you leave it really early? What was it about it that you were just like, no.

- I think, I think part of it is because I am, for better or worse, I'm born a creative, and I have a I have like, you know, as cheesy as it sounds, I got that artist's soul in me, so all I would do is like, I would watch these TV shows and like, oh my god Zack Morris? Ugh, I wanted to be Zack Morris, in *Saved by the Bell*. The Red Ranger? I wanted to be the Red Ranger, like, you know, all the like, everyone I would see on TV, there were all these characters and all these heroes and all these, you know, and they just didn't look like me. And they didn't go to, they didn't, you know, they didn't have the parents that were like mine. And they didn't have the culture that was like mine. And so, I wanted that, I didn't want this thing, this thing that I had to be. So at every chance I could take I would rebel against it and try and see what this more exciting thing was. And it really soured the relationship between me and my family for a long time, you know.

- So did you resent them for being Arab, and not being white?

- I resented them. I resented them for, yeah, I resented them for the culture. I didn't like the culture. I didn't like being part of the culture. I didn't like all the stuff we just talked about, like the fear and the judgment and the, and like, all that stuff. And I didn't really care where it came from. I was just like meh, fuck it. I'm out. I don't want to be part of it. And then at some point, well, not at some point. You know, I would say when the pandemic started, I was forced to come home. I lost everything. I lost my apartment, I lost my, the girl I was with, I lost all my jobs. So, I was kind of on my ass. And so I was forced to come home. And strangely enough, I kind of found this peace and fun and excitement and heart in the people and the food and the culture and my aunties, and like, then I'm left with this big weird thing I'm trying to match together where it's like, well, I spent all this time hating and running away from this thing, because this thing wasn't as cool as all the other cool stuff I could be a part of. But when I was here, and when all the cards are on the table, these were the people that were there for me. When everything else left. These were the people. And so here I am making this podcast trying to figure out what. I thought I hated this thing. Right? I thought I hated this thing. But, and so, when I, it's funny, because like when I get together with other Arabs, all we do is shit on the culture.

- A hundred percent.

- Oh, it's so easy. Oh my god, right? That's all you want to do. All you want to do it shit on it because it's like, it's infuriating, it's infuriating. And I'm gonna venture to say it's because maybe there are some good parts of it, you know?

- Yes, for sure. Like, I guess I could talk a little bit about my Arab identity. So, we for sure have had very different experiences with it. But I will say that, like in every single community there is to a large extent, a lot of toxicity and a lot of toxic people in it. And I feel like a big part of growing up and your teen years and your early adult years is kind of filtering through all of that. Like, this is true from my friends who came out in their in their late teens, maybe early adulthood. And they had to navigate like, the queer community. This is true for my friends who like became vegans, and had to navigate through the vegan community and, you know.

- Oh, vegans are Haram.

- I'm dead. Oh yeah, my mom thinks there's something wrong with vegetarians, let alone vegans like, she's like, what's wrong with them? She, yeah, she's like, oh is it a health reason?

- Amazing.

- Yeah. But anyways, yeah. So, so. Okay, so I guess I grew up, and I identified first and foremost as Muslim, over anything else. Like, I would feel way more comfortable and way more connected to, let's say a Pakistani or Somali Muslim than I would to a non-religious Arab Muslim.

- Sure, yeah.

- Like, and that's how I was raised. We weren't even allowed to really be friends with my cousins who are not religious at all, not practicing. And so basically, like I identified first and foremost as Muslim, and then in the Muslim community, I grew up mostly with Syrians, mostly with the Syrian community. And there was like this all girls prom that we did in high school that the Syrian community ran, and like, oh my gosh, the religious Syrian Muslim community in Mississauga that I grew up with was toxic and misogynistic in so many ways. But my mom loved it, like it fit exactly how she wanted to raise me.

- Could you define some of that?

- Yes. So it was very much like the second you hit puberty, you should be on the hunt for a man. You should be on the hunt for a husband. Okay. And it's all about like, women have to be delicate and quiet and thin and white. You have to be like white as the wall, and.

- You mean like skin? Skin tone.

- Yes. And you have to be like very, just like petite and, you know, fragile and very feminine and you're just like waiting. Not even for a man to see you, but for his mom to see you. Yes. At one of these parties where you're just like decked out. It was basically a debutante ball, but like only for women, and for a potential mom-in-laws to see you. So, you know, whatever. I took part in it, and then their biggest dance was the dabke, like, uh.

- Oh yeah, oh, we gotta do the dabke.

- Yeah, whoever gets into the dabke is like the elite of the elite, right? And so for a long time, for so many years, they didn't accept me, they didn't accept me into the dabke, they would always put me in like all the other stupid dances. And then my friend taught me, like, she took me to the side and like, gave me a lot of lessons and stuff. She's my Egyptian friend that made it into the dabke. Yes. She taught me how to do the dabke. And then I got in. And that was like, oh my gosh, was like the biggest thing ever. Whatever. And then, like, and then you.

- Your parents must have been so proud.

- Well, my mom is just like, good, put yourself out there, whatever. But the other girls were so racist, and they were so rude. Like, they're basically like, who is like this tall African girl basically, like, they're just. Yeah, but there's so much fucking racism in the Arab community, because they're all like, extremely fucking white. Like, they're like vampire, like opaque, you know what I mean?

- Wow. Really?

- And then I come in. Yeah. And then I come in, and they're just like, what the hell is this, right? And, so anyways.

- And so how old are you at this time? How old, what's your age?

- I would have been 17, in grade 12. When I did the dabke.

- I feel like high school is hard enough, like on a regular day.

- Yeah.

- And then, but then you add in cultural expectation, and like, I feel like that just like takes a whole new turn.

- I know. You know what, for me, I never really identified with like, white people on TV or whatever, blonde girls or anything like that, because I was like, there's too much of a difference. I can't see myself, like, there's so many layers, you know, there's so many degrees of separation, like I can't really relate. But, but for me, it was like, yeah, being like a Syrian woman was kind of the goal, like being white in, and in like a very religious, whatever. I remember one of my Syrian friends told me that she can't wear red because it's too attractive on her. And she's gonna be a temptation to men.

- Hey, listen, if it looks good, you know, you gotta wear it.

- And it was, and it was a red hijab, so.

- And there's some Muslim guy out there like, bro.

- Oh yeah, totally.

- Did you see the girl in red?

- Yeah, yo, can you send me a picture of your ankles?

- Yeah, and it's all about like, oh, don't arouse men, but arouse them enough so that they're interested in marrying you forever.

- Right. Right. Right.

- And you know, all these things, so, and catch the attention of their moms, because these men are all mama's boys and they'll listen to their moms, whoever their mom's pick out.

- It's true, it's true.

- So it was really toxic on the other side as well. And then, and then I left like, as soon as I got into university, I was like, fuck the Arabs. To be honest, they're so toxic. And so, I, and because to me, it was like that community. And so I separated from that community, and then I remember they called me the next year, they're like, do you want to be in the dabke? And I was like, no, actually, I'm really busy

in engineering and like, I don't want to be in it. And I still remember the girl. She was like, how dare you. How can you reject us? You're lucky to have even been chosen. And I was like.

- She said that to you?

- Yeah. And I was like, peace, y'all are, y'all are crazy. Until you guys get your shit together. But then anyways, yeah, so I distanced myself a lot from them. And then, yeah, then I went through, like my university years and stuff. And then when I started my Masters, I met some Arabs. Interestingly enough, there was a Syrian Arab guy that I met. And these guys were like very Arab. But also, like, very successful in like engineering and in their jobs and consulting and like, all these other stuff that they were doing. And they also did a lot of extracurriculars. Like they had started an Arab book club on campus, and they were all about being Arab and like, uniting Arabs, and stuff, right? And so I really liked that, because I was like, oh, and you know, they would share poems, and they would share lots of books and whatever in Arabic. And so that kind of introduced me a little bit to like, you know, back to into Arabs, and how it's actually such a beautiful language, and there's so much in it to learn. And, you know, like, it's just and my Arabic is pretty strong, because in Islamic school, we studied Arabic all the time. So, I can read and write and, and I don't know why my, and I could speak like the Syrian dialect very well, because I grew up with Syrians. And yeah, and I always speak to my parents in Arabic. So like, my Arabic is pretty good.

- I have a quote from you that I would love for you to define a little.

- Okay.

- "I only went to Islamic school my whole life, where I was known by others as the Haram police."

- Oh my gosh.

- "I was extremely self-righteous and reprimanded everybody over their sins, the sins that they committed." What's, what are, define the Haram police for everyone that doesn't know what Haram is?

- So Haram police is like, Haram means forbidden, means sinful. So Haram police are Muslims, usually very self-righteous, very religious, who kind of run around judging and yelling at everybody else for their

sins. Your happiness is their trigger. You know what I'm saying? If you're happy about something, they're mad, they're mad that you're happy about that. And they will find a way to condemn you to hell.

- It's like a breadth of things. It's not just one or two things, it can be, there's a lot of the things that are considered Haram and these cultures.

- Oh, yeah. Almost anything that brings you enjoyment is considered Haram. Yeah, like so my friends, so in high school, I was, I was like, I was at my peak funny, do you know what I'm saying? Like, I was so funny. I'm trying to bring her back. The only time I ever met her again was when I did shrooms last year, she came back. I was like, oh my god you're still in there! Just so sharp and witty, doesn't care about what anyone thinks.,

- Yeah. Just takes a little bit of hallucinogens to get it going.

- Right? I'm like, I'm just gonna be like addicted to shrooms on stage. I'll be like, please, I need to do really well. Yeah, so I was so funny. And I was, I think a big part of it also was having no distractions, like no phones, nothing else to do. You're just so bored. And so usually that's when my mind thrives because it just goes into overdrive, like, and then everything comes out. Like there's no distractions, so a lot of the creativity comes out. And so we we're like, girls in an Islamic school, there's nothing to do. We're underfunded. The government doesn't fund Islamic schools. The guys take over the gym and we're not allowed to play with them because segregation and you know, they're just so religious. So there's nothing for us to do. So everyone's like, oh my god, Salma, tell us a story. So I start imitating the teachers, I start telling them stories. I'm so funny. The girls are dying. The girls are rolling on the floor laughing, they're holding their stomachs in pain. They're crying from laughter. And, and then, so everyone loved being around me, because they're like, oh my god, she's so funny. She's like, the life of the party. We love her. But then I would turn around and, if I'd hear any of them talk about like, boys, or drugs, or like, even going to the mall, things I wasn't allowed to do. I'd be like, What the hell? How are you doing that? You know this is wrong, like, are you trying to go to hell, whatever, whatever, and I would yell at them all the time. And I truly meant it. Like, I really thought like, oh my God, they don't know better, I have to save them. You know, this is the rules, you cannot break them.

- And how much of that do you think came from the fact that your dad is this religious figure?
- Oh, it was, so all of it was because that's what I was being told at home. And I genuinely thought I had to tell other people that. And psychologically, you can explain it by this concept called shadow self. Which, basically.
- Mm. We're going deep into Jung.
- We're going really deep into Carl Jung. Yeah, so basically, he talks about, yeah, how whenever human beings deny things for themselves. It could be anything, it could be like, if for some reason you were denied learning the piano growing up. The why doesn't matter. It could be because your family couldn't afford it, or you moved around a lot, or it's Haram. It doesn't matter why, it just matters that you were denied something. And then in the future, you see someone doing that. And then you get this insane reaction of either repulsion or insane attraction. It could be either or, towards them. And that usually comes from the fact that it's because you denied it for yourself. So either you're like.
- And our culture is arguably a culture of denial.
- Oh my god.
- We deny ourselves on a lot.
- Yeah, almost everything.
- Booze and sex and food and, you know, there's all sorts of.
- Even homosexuality.
- Well that this doesn't exist in the Arab nation, I don't know if you heard. Like, there's no gay people.
- Oh, yeah, for sure, for sure. The history just, you know, conveniently has no gay history, yeah.
- That just doesn't exist, I don't know what you're talking about.
- But yeah, that's also kind of why guys will freak the hell out. And that's where toxic masculinity comes from, too, right? Like, because they're denying a lot of things for themselves. They're denying emotions, or they're denying the possibility of being sexually fluid, or what have you. So it brings about this like, really intense, repulsive reaction. Like usually, if you react really strongly to something, that's an

indication that there's something there, and potentially is in your shadow self. So what the Haram police do.

- And so, so when you when you started seeing, sorry, just because like this is such, so fascinating. So when you started seeing a, did you see a shadow self in comedy? Was that like, did you see like, I have to deny this part of me that's really funny, that's killing all my friends at school. Was it that you had to repress that, or suppress that? And then it came out, eventually, like it bubbled over?

- Yeah, that's interesting. So comedy was for sure, I was actively suppressing it in university, and it was part of my shadow self, but in the good, in the positive way. So if I saw someone doing comedy, or if I watched SNL or Whose Line Is It Anyways, or like all that, all those shows, I would be like, oh my gosh, like, I'd be intrigued. Like, you know, Mindy Kaling, seeing her was huge for me, because I was like, oh my god, she's not white, and she's not skinny. And, you know, it's like, it's like, huge, like, and she's so funny, and she's so self-deprecating, which was for sure my brand of comedy for a really long time. Very self-deprecating. And, I mean, that comes from my own insecurities, and low self-worth and stuff, but like, but. Yeah, like, so I didn't ever do comedy or stand up as like a thing. But I did constantly, like, tell stories and make people laugh and kind of do stand up in my friendship circles and even in engineering. It was a quick way to make friends. It was a great way to burn off so much of the pressure of engineering, and just like, you know, own the fact that we all fucking got 35% on this midterm, you know what I mean? Like, we're dying, we're literally drowning, and it was like a great way to just kind of process and move forward. And so I always did it still. And I would argue I was my funniest during those times when I didn't do it professionally. But I think as a career, yes, I for sure denied it. I said, no, no, no, I want to do med school, I want to do med school. And I tried, I really tried for med school and like, physiologically, I would have a reaction. Physiologically, I would start binge eating, I would get insane anxiety. I was like, so not into it. And, and I didn't do well. And it was like, immediately I feel like the walls are closing in on me. Like I feel like I don't want to do this, but I guess I have to do it. And oh my gosh. And I felt nauseous, like all these things. And then, and then after that my sister sent me an article one time that talked about how people use med school as a safety blanket. Because it's a career

that gives you prestige, stability, money, all these things. And I knew in the back of my mind, like I, when I read that I was like, that's really true, I resonate with it. And in the back of my mind, it was kind of like, okay, if I spend, because how many years does med school take like, 13 years or something? I was like, if I spend, you know, all this time in med school in this life, then in the next life, I'll come back and you know, be like an entertainer or something like that, right? But it doesn't work that way.

- Like god owes you one?

- Yeah, literally, literally. Or like, you know, maybe at the end of, I maybe thought at the end of, like after I finished med school, I'll do it to like, prove to people that I could do it, and that I am a doctor, kind of like Ken Jeong. And then like, you know, then leave it and then do entertainment so I can be like, like, kind of like a dabke. Like I got in and now fuck you guys.

- Right, yeah, I'll check off the list and then I'm out.

- Yeah, exactly. You don't want me in? Well, now I'm gonna get in and then goodbye. But I was like, what a waste of time and money and like, everything. Why? Why are you? Once again, it's back to people pleasing subconsciously like, you.

- Well, it's one of my favorite authors, Steven Pressfield, calls it a shadow career. And a lot of times people get lost in shadow careers because they're, you know, it's safer and less scary than going after the thing you really want to do. Because you're subjecting yourself to so much abject failure for so long getting good at the thing you want to do.

- 100%.

- And it's a scary thing.

- Do you know how lucky we are to know what our passion is? Because there's so many people who come up to me and they're like, how do you even know, how do you even know? They've silenced themselves so much, they've really like, they don't know how to read what they want anymore. They've silenced their own needs and their own wants, because they've given in to people pleasing. And they've given into the milestones, and they've given into what the society wants of them, that they don't even know where to start. So they like, look at me, like in awe, they're like, how do you, how do you even

know? And honestly, I don't think I really knew until I met Zarkana Waz and she told me, you have to do comedy. And I was like, yes, great. I was thinking something along the lines of acting? And I was like, okay, so are you gonna put me in your next show? Like, how does this work? And she's like, you should do stand up. And I was like, oh my god, ugh, I don't, I can't think of anything I want to do less than stand up. Like, I wouldn't push stand up on my own enemy, why would I do that to myself, right? And then she's like, no, it's a great way to kind of establish yourself in the industry. And, but yeah, like I was saying in terms of my, the biggest journey for me, was actually overcoming the emotional, spiritual guilt and the anxiety that started when I started comedy because my parents were against it. And it was like, I've been trying to knock at the door of med school for years, and it just keeps closing tighter and tighter. And then I literally just breathe in the direction of comedy, and like all the doors open up, and I'm like, okay, this is not an accident.

- Sometimes you got to follow the, what's easy, you know?

- Yeah.

- What is, what does the term self-identity mean to you?

- Self-identity. Honestly, there's, there's a lot of layers. I personally think of it as, my initial thought is labels. Like how people see you, what the labels are. And, you know, like, I identify as a Muslim woman, or, and I have like, my whole life, because I wear the hijab. And now I'm getting to a point where I'm, like, in the process of basically taking the hijab off, and, which is, which is a really, really big deal for the community, for my family, for all my friends. Because, you know, most of my friendships were based off of the foundation of being Muslim, and trying to become more religious and stuff. So for me to take the hijab off in all of those relationships, is taken as a setback, or is taken as an abandonment of my identity, or is taken as, you know, as something that, it's not a good thing. It's, you know, it's a loss for the cause, right? So, I personally have a very hard time seeing myself beyond labels that I have given myself. And so when I meet people who see me past the labels, it's like really emotional for me, because I'm like, I don't even see myself past that. So, you know, it's wild for me to actually see somebody else, or meet somebody else, who does see past that.

- Do you remember the first time you went out in public without your hijab?

- Yes, it was last March. So March of 2020, literally two weeks before the pandemic hit. I was like, I was like, oh, I'm so overwhelmed, I want to book an Airbnb for myself so I can self isolate, literally not knowing what was gonna happen exactly two weeks from then. Um, and that was like, the first time I, I kind of like, a little bit found peace in all of the chaos. Because I was living with a roommate at the time, and I had moved out of my parents' home, but it was still, everything was still really overwhelming. And I felt like, I was fitting all these roles that people wanted me to fit and stuff. And so I, and I had convinced myself like, oh, yeah, I'm this because I want to, but it's not actually that. Um, so I didn't plan it but while I was driving there, I was like, you know what, I'm not going to wear the hijab. And then I turned this to a comedy, I was like, and then another voice in my head is like, and you're gonna have a British accent, might as well. We're trying out a whole hold new identity, aren't we? I was like, might as well. So I get to this town, and for the first time in my life, I don't wear the hijab. And I see people see me without it. And my initial reaction was like, excuse me, why isn't everybody throwing themselves at my feet? The hijab is a barrier to entry and I have removed the barrier.

- Enter, enter, please.

- Exactly. My whole life, I was told that I am a lollipop. And I need to wrap myself up to protect myself from the flies, who are men. I was expecting a swarm.

- And meanwhile people are just shopping like, excuse me miss, I'm trying to get behind you.

- Literally, everyone's like, yeah. Exactly. Also it was like a small town. So I was like, I'm still the only non-white person here, do you know what I'm saying? Like, no matter what happens, and you know, that's a big thing I'm kind of exploring and figuring out right now, because I'm like transitioning right now. Like, I don't really wear the hijab in my private life. But I still wear it to work, I still wear it on stage, I still wear it in front of my family, even though my parents know, but like, whatever. But I told my massage therapist I was transitioning, and she's like, like, into a man? I was like, you know what, maybe my parents would understand that more, because a man, they could respect. You know what I'm saying?

- Yeah, they might even be proud.

- Right? They'd be like, finally, someone we can fucking respect around here.

- Do you remember, what was the reaction when you when you came out to your parents as, you know, hijabless.

- Oh my gosh, they were really awful about it, to be honest. It was mostly like, how could you reject something that's a direct command from god? And my dad was like, what's the difference between you and Lucifer, basically, who directly disobeyed god? Versus Adam, who ate from the tree and that was weakness because of temptation. So he was like, you know, which one are you? And I was like, none of your business to be honest. I will not be sharing. And then he was just kind of like, if god comes down right now and tells you to wear it, are you gonna say no? I was like, oh my god, let him come. Imagine, like eight billion people on earth, what's happening in Palestine, like a thousand children, indigenous children, uncovered under residential schools. But first things first, Salma, wear the hijab.

- Yeah. Yeah, yeah, that's what he's coming down to talk about.

- Do you know what I mean?

- Yeah, I get you.

- I was like, please bring God like, there's so many things I need to talk to him about. So many questions, you know?

- I think the human race needs to have a conversation with him.

- Yeah, there's a lot, there's a lot.

- We need to talk about bone cancer and kids, we need to have a conversation about that.

- True, ugh. Yeah, that's another thing. Like, I've been thinking a lot about, I don't know, mortality. And like, suffering on earth, it's so hard to make sense of like, with. I don't know, I've definitely been exploring a lot of things, and uh.

- Well because religion is so, and like religion and the concept of god is so closely tied into who we are, because we're raised with it. Like, we're raised with this idea of this, like, you know, this, the patriotic god, they're, you know, whatever you want to call it, however different between our two religions,

however it's defined, it's still that same figure, right? It's so closely tied in, like, even the small, well, I mean, the big amounts of sins that I do, you know, but you know, breaking out of the Christian faith and the Catholic faith, there's a part of me that's still guilty, like, you know? There's still a part of me that looks up like, sorry, like, do you know what I mean? And it's not every time, but it's there. I have that like Catholic guilt that's like, on my shoulders.

- Yes. So you do consider things as sins still.

- I mean, if I was to say, you know, if you were to catch me on the street, maybe not. But I think when I'm putting my head down, and I'm going to bed, there's, it's, it's, I would be lying if I said that there's wasn't an inherent guilt, or you know it's just something you were raised with, and it's hard to just shed that and turn a complete blind eye to it and say, like, no, this was all fake and bullshit, and I'm not going to believe any of it, for sure.

- I mean, yeah, I still definitely struggle with that a lot. But, you know, for me, I think guilt is a good thing, like guilt is, but I have very different definitions of sins than my parents do for example. Like, for me, sins are oppressing someone, sins are abusing someone. Sins are traumatizing someone that's going to have real life impacts on them. And till this day, like my biggest regrets, or my biggest, you know, things that are hard for me to deal with are moments where I felt like I, I was, like verbally abusive to someone that was close to me, when I was much younger. Or you know, even just, I know, we joke about it, but like, me being the Haram police in high school, I was really fucking awful to my friends. Like I, and I'm still friends with them now, but they were like so traumatized, like, they, you know, it was like I was bullying them almost. It's hard for me to, like, grapple with that, because when they look at me now they just see her, and I'm like, she's not here anymore, she was a wounded child. But she was also awful to you. And I kind of, it's hard for me a little bit to sit in that space and reconcile, like my past with who I am now. And I think one of them in particular, because she moved away after high school, and I haven't really spent much time with her, whereas the other one, we went to university together. The one that moved away like that one in particular we have, it's like, I feel like I fucked her up so much. Because when she's, when she sees me now, like, she almost thinks who I am now is like a test.

And I'm, it's like a big game that I'm that I'm like staging to see if she's gonna fall for it or not, if she's gonna encourage it or not. So she tells me, I think you're just going through a phase. I don't think this is actually who you are. And I'm like, oh my god. And she hides a lot of parts of herself from me and she tries to tell me that she wants to be more religious and practicing and, it's. But it's all to do with who I was in the past and how she's thinking, that's still who I am now, right? So for me, those are, those are kind of, and I wouldn't really call them a sin, because I feel like sins have a lot of shame in them, inherently, there's a lot of shame.

- Yes, yes, the shame, ugh.

- But I feel guilty, like I feel guilty if I cause someone harm on an emotional level, because I feel like that that actually impacts them the most. Especially those closest to me in my interpersonal relationships. So those are like the types of things you know, like I would never, I would never lead someone on, I would never ghost someone, I would never like, certain things like that.

- Yeah. And I love that, because why can't that be the definition of god in our lives? Like if I, if I was to think of like when did I feel the most full of god or full of spirit or full of spirituality, it's usually when I'm, like, in, like, communion, or in relationship with another person. Like when, you know, when I'm with another person and we love each other, and we're happy for each other, and we're celebrating together and we support each other. And like, that, to me is so much more of a definition of god than a, or you know, god or like heaven, better than a place in the sky where I go to, after I die. Like, I don't have any control of that, but I have control of is the person in front of me, and the relationship I can have with you. And, and so, yeah.

- And those ones are the most impactful ones, right? Like, your interpersonal relationships, they're the most important, and they're the most, because those are the interactions that are going to cause the most impact on another person's life, so.

- Yeah, like I try to define this to my parents, you know, but there's so stuck in an older way, a biblical way of thinking, you know, by that book, and that book defines all those rules. And they, it's hard for them to see past that. So, in marrying the two, has been a really delicate tightrope walk where I've had

to like, yes, Mom, no, I pray, and I pray the same way you do, but my ideas of who god is who Jesus is who, you know, that has to, that's evolved, you know.

- For sure, for sure. Yeah. And my definition of god is very different than my mom's definition, for sure. And I feel like, yeah, like, I totally understand what you're saying in terms of, instead of being like, I'm gonna, you know, throw this whole religion in the garbage and be like, there's no use in it for me anymore. Or, you know, I've had a bad experience with the people who preach in the name of it, so I don't want to have anything to do with it. Versus being like, okay, I'll take a distance and then, you know, there's always things in the religion, I think we were talking about this, like our favourite prayers, for example. Or, you know, certain things that you picked on your own that is really meaningful to you in your own personal private life, right? And so, yeah, like, I think, for me, a really big change in my definition of god and how it's been evolving, is, I feel like, I think Catholicism maybe also does this. But like, in Islam, like with Muslims, it's very much kind of like, it's all, you externalize divinity so much like, like, god is out there. You have no control over your life, you have no control over your affairs, nothing you have accomplished was your own accomplishment. It was god's grace on you. Nothing like, you even breathing is god choosing you and giving his mercy upon you. And it's all like, there's a lot of helplessness that comes from it. A lot of it is like, you know, shrinking yourself and being like, I'm so little, I can't do anything and nothing is in my control. God, please don't ever leave me, handle all of my affairs, I'm so small. Like, I am nothing. I'm made of mud, I'm made of clay, whatever, I'm nothing without you. But I found that that was making me miserable a little bit, because it was making me really kind of beg God for outcomes that, and then resent him later if they never came. And when I say he, like, I don't mean male, it's just like.

- It's like the biblical he. Yeah, it's the, yeah.

- Yeah, we like, so anyway, so yeah, I would then resent God later for kind of like not fulfilling those outcomes that I so desperately prayed for. Whereas I feel like if you kind of reframe it, as in, you have god in you, all of us have divinity in us, we have the same divinity that like a grain of sand has, then you feel a lot more powerful, you feel like you know, you have all of the qualities within you, they just maybe

need to be refined, or they need to be tapped into more, you just need to connect a little bit more with the self-worth that you already have, or the ability to articulate, or the ability to communicate, or what have you, right? So yeah, I think for me, that's been a really big difference is trying to take back the power and realizing that human beings can tap into a very high level of divinity where in some cases they can heal their own ailments or they can heal, you know, their own conditions that you know, chronic conditions, or what have you. So, I think that's kind of where I am right now that I'm trying to figure out, but.

- I love that quote that we all have, we all have divinity in us, you know, the same, the same divinity between us is the same as in the grain of sand. You say grain of sand, and that's like straight from the Bible.

- Oh is it?

- Oh, yeah. We love a grain of sand, in the Bible. There's all sorts of things about grains of sand.

- Referenced a lot, referenced a lot in the Bible. Yeah, so I don't know like, there's, and then, and then a lot of times, like the interpretation of religion in the past, I just feel like if you adopt somebody's values that are not your own, then you're, you are helpless once again, because you don't, you don't know to what degree that applies, you don't know the context behind it, you don't know, whatever, you just know what they told you, and there's not enough there. Whereas if you yourself, go out and explore, and then, you know, you, you come to these conclusions at the end, like, this is what works for me, this doesn't work for me, this works well with my body, this doesn't. You know, anytime I have gossiped, for example, it's never led to anything good. So I probably won't be doing that, whatever. As opposed to like, gossiping is wrong, never do it ever. Then I met, I met, you know, some people who were, took that so extremely, and they would just never even want to mention, like, you're recalling a story, or you're talking about an interaction that you had with someone else, and you want to clarify it. To them, like even mentioning another person's name is like, off limits, we've entered the territory of gossiping, we cannot do it, we're sinning. And I'm okay, but now it's impossible to have, like, a real relationship with you, because we're not allowed to talk about anything. So, you know what I mean?

- It's all very surface now, now it's only just having a surface conversation. We're not getting deep.

We're not actually exploring things.

- Exactly, like for me to tell you, for example, when I was younger, like, my mom did this or whatever, that to that person would be considered gossiping. And I'm like, okay, but it is an event that happened to me. And it is something I want to talk about, like, do you what I mean? So, like, the thing, what I'm trying to say is like, there's extremes either way, and unless you actually choose it yourself and know like, what works for you, like, yeah, the second someone starts talking shit about a girl who's like, not married, or who's this and that, or whatever, I'm like, all right, well, I'm not gonna participate in doing that, do you know what I mean?

- Yeah, totally. What's, um, I guess, you know, as we're winding down this conversation, if you were to see an outline, and I know coming to terms with our culture, like, where we, how we were raised, and where we come from, and where we're going, it's a process, I feel that, it's always going to be changing and growing and adapting, and, you know, you take a bit and you give a bit, and it's something we're always growing into, and it's always new. But if you, if you were to look down the line, and kind of, you know, say like, what your ideal relationship would be with your culture. What's your ideal relationship be like, you know. In an ideal world for myself, like, I would love to have, you know, I would love to have those family functions that I, like, cast out all my life. You know, I still, like, I missed having my aunties in my life. I missed having like, you know, my cousins, and I missed their kids, you know, the family element. I missed that for a lot of years. So having that back now feels good. And I want to keep that. But I also, you know, I want to be at arm's length from the judgment and the, and the doubt that I'm not going to be good enough, or I'm not going to be successful enough, or I'm not going to be wealthy enough. Yeah. So in my ideal world, there's a balance there. What do you think that definition is for you?

- Well, it's interesting that you kind of intertwine family with culture, because I feel like I've separated family as an entity on its own from everything else. But yeah, I mean, if we're going to intertwine them, I mean, I would obviously love to have a supportive family that understands what it means to be in the

arts and to try and strive for a career in this. But if I, yeah, I guess like the Arab community at large, I mean, I don't know now that I'm entering the realm of like, not wearing the hijab anymore. Like, I feel like I have a tendency and a large comfort to dress very liberally, for example. But I know that not even just the Muslim community, but I feel like the Arab community would be like, what is this, or maybe not accept it, and you know, certain things they would react really harshly to or whatever. And there is a lot of judgment, there is a lot of like, elitism, and religious undertones, and lots of misogyny, tons of misogyny and stuff.

- So do you see a way forward, then, to keep who you are and the trajectory that you're heading and your liberalisms and still holding onto parts of the past? Or is that something you feel like, you just need to walk away from?

- I mean, right now I'm trying to hold on to it a little bit. And I, it would be too scary for me to completely abandon it. Because once again, I think belonging to a community, or group of people who love you is still really important. It's like a need, on Maslow's, you know, hierarchy pyramid.

- For sure, yeah, it's part of the pyramid. Right underneath bread.

- Yeah, literally. So I think that as I move forward, I will gently release some of those relationships to the community, and folks that no longer align with where I'm headed. And I will be making more relationships and friendships with people like you, who are like very accepting, and very gentle and you know, are sort of headed the same way. And I'll make more friendships and you know, I know that, like friendships are constantly entering and leaving and they change as I change. And I think, I think I already know a lot of Arabs who are very liberal and progressive and comfortable in their Arabness, because, you know, what is being Arab? It's essentially speaking the language and coming from Arab countries, like in the Middle East and, and just enjoying the culture. And there's so much beauty in the culture and I love it so much like, music and film and shows and, you know, like, Egypt was huge for comedy. They always had so many plays, back in like, the 70s. And yeah, and there's so much to learn from there. Like I'm sure even from like an artistic side, there's a lot over there.

- I will say, like my playlist since meeting you has never been more Arab. Like, my Spotify right now, is all like, I've got a bunch of Arab bangers on there now because of you.

- Oh my gosh, this is my biggest accomplishment. This is the best compliment you could give me, for sure right now.

- I feel like this gonna grow more and more, like I'm excited.

- Yeah, absolutely. Um, there's, there's a lot there. And it's just like, you know, it's like with any language, like, I'm sure if I learned Hindi and I already am really obsessed with Bollywood, but like, you know, if I learned Spanish, or if I learned another language, like, there's so much more of the culture to unlock there. There's like the food, there's the yeah, entertainment, there's so much to learn. And there's a lot over there, you know. Now living alone and cooking and all that stuff, I look at village women in Egypt and I'm like, in awe of them. I'm like, how do you just have these skills, you know? And I'm a fast learner, but like, it's just I don't know, I just I find all of those things really heartwarming. And that's what I'm trying to bond with my mom for example, over. I know, we'll never see eye to eye on religion or our values or, you know, but she can teach me how to make warab enab. She can't teach me how to make, you know, molokhia.

- The food brings us all together in the end, doesn't it.

- I know, it's always food, it's always food.

- Salma, this has been a really, what a way to kick off this podcast. Thank you so much for your openness. You're willing to go into these topics and willing to be vulnerable, I really appreciate it. Is there any, you must have a ton of shows like coming, shows are coming back right? I just saw you were doing, you got rained on in a park and you were doing stand up?

- I got rained on in a park, oh my gosh, yes, I did. Yes. I have a bunch of shows coming up. You can find more information on my website, salmahindy.com/events. I put everything there, that's like my diary. Yeah.

- Yeah. Including your bio, which I used for the beginning of this.

- Yes.

- Thank you so much.

- Thank you.

- Please go check her out. She is one of a kind stand up. Thank you so much. And this has been the first episode with the Bad Arabs podcast, I've been your host Jonathan Shaboo. Hopefully more of this soon. Bye now. Bye bye.

HOST:

This is nice, isn't it, my lost souls. There's no place like limbo. This far-reaching and ever-teaching pad brings us all together for a rad session like none other. Where else does time stand still for the movers and the shakers to, well, move and shake without the woesome worries of the ticking clock? It's a gift to be here, children of the bone, and we should all remember that. Exactly, Daedalus. And with friends like you, friends like us, friends like me, who needs that world outside the veil? You've got a lifetime of lives to live in these little orbs, a whole history of existence to kick back on and ponder. Breathe deep in that sweet and sanguine spectrum of humanity, and let it take you up, down, and all around. Life's for the living, man. And for the birds. Oh, sorry, D. Didn't mean nothing by it. Hmm? No, my corvine companion, I'm not forgetting anything. Missing? Okay, I got my cap, I got my jacket, I got my two bones, and all the rest. What's there to miss, fair feathered friend? Man, well. Must be bird stuff, you know? Well, I'm off to get my gaze on for a mome, ponder the orbs a bit. I'll tickle your funny bones in a wink, kiddos. Now let's see. Oh, yeah. A classic.

Shawn Cuthand

Hey everybody, my name's Shawn Cuthand, and I'm a Cree-Mohawk hybrid living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. I'm a comedian storyteller. I'm going to tell you some of my stories, but there's no

laughing track. So you'll just have to listen to your gut, and listen to your heart. So, a little bit about myself. You know, currently, I'm a single native in my 30s, with no kids. Yeah, I'm like a rare white buffalo. Except no one's trying to hunt me into extinction, you know? No one's chasing me head over heels off a cliff. No one's trying to smoke my meat. Like, no one's making sure all of me is getting used, you know? I got sinew. Like, damn, no one's even trying to stretch my hide. I think I'm gonna have to relocate and repopulate pretty soon. But you know, as an urban Indian, there's not much times that I get to make it out to the reserve. And when I do, it's usually for a funeral. But like this one time, I was attending a funeral, and we were doing a pipe ceremony. And just the men were sitting around, and the elder at this, at the time, he took it upon himself to give us some pretty out of place advice, you know. Like, we're all sitting there, and all of a sudden, he was just like, and you guys, you know, I just want you to remember that there's always those cousins you've never met. And I was just sitting there like, what? Like, what's going on? Like, I'm here to mourn. I'm not thinking about getting with one of my cousins. Like, I don't know about some little lonely rez dogs over here, but me and cousins? Like, out of the question. But you know, like, after it was kind of bugging me. So I brought it up to my dad. And I was like, I was like, you know, why would he say that at that time? You know, like, we're all mourning. Why would he bring that up? And my dad was just like, ah, you know, he doesn't get everyone in all together at one place very often, so he just said what he had to say. And you know, don't kiss your cousins anymore. And I was like dad, no, like, come on. Like, she married into the family after that, like after that. Geez. But you know, like, man, I miss traveling right now. Like, I remember the last time like I left the country. When I came back into the country, I had to deal with an East Indian customs agent. Like, what a beautiful irony, hey? But no, he had, he had an attitude. And like, when I came up to him, he was like, well what were you doing out of the country? And I was like, oh, just having fun. And he was like, fun? What do you mean, fun? And I was like, whoa, buddy, like. You're barking up the wrong Cree, okay? Like, you and me, these borders are a little bit different. Just because Christopher Columbus made a mistake, it doesn't mean you get to be a prick about it. And then I was thinking like, could you imagine if you went to India, and there were indigenous customs agents? Man, I'd try and get

that job. Just imagine me sitting there when you get off the plane. I'm the first one you see like, hey, Tawow, welcome to India. Columbus fucked up eh? But man, I want to tell you a story about the time that the stars aligned for me. And it was a time that I got a call from my rez girl booty call. But the thing about a rez girl booty call is like, you don't call her. No. She calls you when she's mad at her man and has a ride to the city. Yeah, she just driving to town, listening to round dance music. Boom, ba boom, ba boom. My heart's just beating in round dance in anticipation. Ba boom. But you know, like a rez girl booty call, she needs to make the most of her time, you know? So when she comes over, I go to make a snack, I throw some microwave popcorn in there. But we don't even get to it. We just get down to business. She even humps in round dance beats. Boom, ba boom, ba boom. Like, damn girl, pick up the pace. But you know, like, in the morning, like just before she was about to leave, she started like eyeing up that bag of popcorn that we never got to. And then she, she looked at it with her Dakota lips. And she was like, aren't you gonna pack that up for me? For the ride? Like, anything from my rez girl booty call. But you know, like, that was one of the last times I saw her because I told her I couldn't be her side piece anymore. But then you know what she told me? She told me, it looks like your dream catcher started to catch feelings. Like, ow, yeah, that one hurts, you know? But me, I'm a fan of like, hardcore, you know? Like hardcore wrestling, hardcore music, hardcore pottery, ah you could put hardcore in a lot of things and I'll probably be a fan of it. But you know, when it comes to music, I'm a fan of this one band called Terror. They're a hardcore band from L.A., but they've toured through Canada and Saskatchewan a whole bunch of times. And I got t-shirts and hoodies that say Terror right across the chest. But you could see how that could be pretty problematic for a guy like me in Saskatoon, because there's a gang with a very similar name. Like if you saw six-foot-three native guy walking down the street with a Terror hoodie, you'd be like, what? That gang makes their own merch now? Like, man, this one time I was wearing the hoodie, and I got pulled into a check stop. And the officer, he was like, Terror? Like, the gang? And I was just having a bad day. And I was just like, oh yeah, officer. I am a gangster. I'm so gangster that I make my own hoodies. Wear them around town, and let everyone know how gangster I am. So yeah, I was walking back into the city that night. Uh.

Yeah, that didn't turn out good. But you know this one time, I was standing outside a bar, and I overheard these two guys talking. And it caught my attention. Because the one guy, all of a sudden he was just like, yeah man, this one time I got with a woman, and then after I found out that she was native. And then the other guy was like, yeah man, I got a buddy of mine, he had a kid with a native woman, and he didn't find out until after. And then the other guy's like, man, seems like all of our buddies have been struck by the arrow at some point. And I was just standing there like cha, as if. Like, struck by the arrow? That seems a bit little rude. You know? Like, I don't think if the tables were turned, I would be like that, you know? Like, imagine if I if I got with a Scottish woman, you know, and I'm talking to my buddies. You know, I don't think that I would tell them, oh yeah, you know, the other night, I was blown by the old bagpipes. You know? It just doesn't work that way for me. But, you know, I'm a fan of aliens. You know, like flying saucers and UFOs. So you could imagine my excitement when my cousins, they called me this one time to tell me that they saw a UFO come down over their land. And then like, a bunch of creatures came out of it and went into the bush. And they believed their story so much that they called the Paranormal Society of Saskatchewan. And they believed their story so much that they came to their land to investigate. But, you know, there was just one tiny tidbit of information that my cousins forgot to tell them, is that they were on mushrooms when they saw this UFO. Like, don't you think they should have told them that before the Paranormal Society got on their land? Like calling the Paranormal Society for a shroom trip is like calling the fire department because your party's too lit. Like, it's just wasted resources, everywhere. And you know, like, I still kind of hold it against my cousins because that was like 10 years ago, or more. And that could have been my in with the Paranormal Society of Saskatchewan. Like imagine, imagine the stories I could have had, imagine the news. Local native guy makes contact with aliens. Local native guy, first to bang aliens. Local native guy admits he's been on shrooms for 10 years. Like, uh. Not the headline I was looking for. But man, I used to go on like these parties with my buddies, or like these road trips with my buddies, and it would turn into like a big three day bender, you know? This one time we went, we went to Banff, and we're looking for a bar that we could fit in, you know? And we're just not fitting in anywhere. So then all of a

sudden, this guy, he's like, you know what, you guys should head to The Devil's Gap, you'll probably fit in there. And I was kinda like, should I be offended? Like, The Devil's Gap, we'll fit in there? I don't know. But then we went to find this place, and it took forever. So like, by the time we found it, we were just wasted from all the drinks at the other bars leading up to this place. But when we got there, this bar was just our style, you know? We go up the stairs, and they're playing our kind of music. We get in there, they're playing skater videos on the wall. And then there was a pool table, and it looked like, there was another side of the bar that had even more pool tables and more people. And I was like, I'm gonna go check this place out, like, I'm gonna go check out the other side. And then, so I go down this hallway. And it ends up being the hallway to the bathrooms, and I kind of turn around. And I notice that the bouncer he, he's right behind me. And he's wondering, what am I, what am I doing? And I was just like, oh, hey man. I was just wondering, like, how you get to the other side. And he was just looking at me like, like, he was just having a dilemma. Like, he was just thinking like, aw man, like, why is this native guy having a spiritual journey in my bar tonight? Like, and then I was like, no, man, like, honestly, I'm just trying to get to the other side. And then he was just like man, buddy, look over there. You see over there? That's a mirror, okay? That's a mirror. There is no other side. And then he said, you want to see the other side? And he kicked me out of the bar. So then, that's, ever since then I stopped playing Candy Man in the bar. True story. But I got another story for you. There was this one time, I was driving around, and they were doing construction on these overpasses. And I noticed that they were draining these ponds that had been there for like years. And I was just wondering, like, why isn't anyone sticking up for the ducks that inhabit these ponds? You know, like, people protest everything nowadays? Like, why not stick up for the ducks? And your chance could be so easy, you know, you could just rally some people and be like, ducks fly together, and so do we! Or you down with flying V? Yeah, you know me. But you know, like, all this inner joking in my head like, it came to rubbing my face where this one day, I was sitting in the very traffic of which this monstrosity was going to fix, where I saw a family of ducks waddling along side of the road. And I just couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with emotion. And wonder what must be going through these ducks heads, you know,

like. Like, I just imagined the father duck, he was probably feeling defeated. And just being like, aw, well, what are we going to do now? You know, we raised generations of ducks on these ponds. And then the mother duck, you know, she's just reassuring, and she's like, don't worry, you know, like, we can rebuild. And then this optimist duck, he just comes waddling along in a good mood. And he's like, well, maybe we don't have to rebuild. There's a few manmade lakes over there. And then the father duck, he's just had enough, and he's just like, well, then they win, Gary, you know? Like, what's next? First they displace us, then they destroy our homeland. What will be next? They take our ducklings, pluck their feathers, and teach them English? It'll never quacking end. Like damn, you know? No wonder I felt for those ducks so much. But I might as well switch gears and tell you that I have a kind of a weird obsession. Yeah, I have an obsession with yogurt parfaits. Yeah, it's like, it's so intense that sometimes if I go to the grocery store, and they're on sale, buy two get one free, I god damn near parfait in my pants. But you know, if you just look at a yogurt parfait, like if you just look at the cup, I swear it's got the answers to Saskatchewan's problems right there, you know? Because if you just look at it, first, you got the white yogurt, taking up all the space. But then up top, you got the brown shattered and broken granola. But then in the middle, you got the sweet berries of reconciliation. Because reconciliation's for everyone! And then all you got to do is just blend it, and blend it around like a blended family till nothing even matters anymore. It's reconciliation, the parfait way. But you know, in my city, they're going to change this road. But me, I grew up on John A. Macdonald Road. But I had a good life, on John A. Macdonald Road. Isn't that kind of ironic, though? Like, a native guy growing up and having a good life on John A. Macdonald Road? Like I bet you John A. Macdonald himself would be rolling over in his grave if he knew how well I ate growing up. Shit. I had love handles, you know? I bet you that pissed off John A. I imagine he'd just be up in the clouds being like, man, those Indian kids on my block are too chubby! But, you know, we had a trampoline in our backyard. I imagine that pissed him off too, you know, like, all these native kids just double bouncing each other, annoying his spirit. Ah, who cares. We were probably jumping on his head, you know? But reconciliation, hey. It's a big word. It's got six syllables. But six is also the number of the beast. No wonder why everyone's so

scared of it. But, you know, reconciliation to me? I used to think of it as when white women would cheat on their boyfriends with me. Yeah. But you know, I'm such a good guy that in the end, I gave myself white guilt. Because I showed her the seven moves of the seven generations, like the behind the knee Cree tickler, or the Dene roundabout hip sway. And then I showed her how to tap it the Tapwe way. And then I showed her the fondle techniques up in Fond-du-Lac. And then I showed her the Métis fiddle-diddle marathon. And then I showed her how it smells down in Fort Qu'Appelle. But then last, I had to show her how I'm related to Chief Poundmaker. Yeah. All right, thank you everybody for listening. My name's Shawn Cuthand. Check out the Real Deadly podcast with my buddy Danny Knight. Thank you.

HOST:

Let's look into another memory orb, shall we lost souls? Forget about life for a while, or at least limbo. Oh yes. The drive-in movies. Ain't this a funny one, though. And I'm not talking about the picture. Looks like there's only one car in the whole lot. Some schmuck just sitting on his hood, watching the silver screen go. How does somebody end up in a position like that? Solo driver. Look at this fella. Regular shirt and tie folk. Must have must have gotten off work just to come here. I wonder, what does coming here mean to this fella that doesn't have anybody to tag along? Is this his only escape? Does that tie feel like it tightens around his neck a little more every day? The only way you can loosen it is by those film reels rolling and rolling. By the silver ladder, the projector, and the grease of his popcorn bucket, it's the only way he can slip out from under the thumb of life and just be himself for an evening. Watch the funnies. Watch the sads. Watch everything he can. Until they're over. And then he piles into his beater, and he's heading home once again. To start another day. To dream of the movies. Not being in them. Not making them. Just watching them go by one more night. One more night.

You know, why don't we put that pocket change to work for us again, lost souls? Those two coins really ought to pay their keep. They get you in and out of limbo. But what have they done for you lately? Get to scroungin. You've got two to rub together, I know you do. Otherwise you wouldn't be here with old Bone Daddy. Far out, far out. Now let's take a look at those little arbiters of chance once more.

Deceptively flat for holding entire realities in them, ain't they? But here in limbo, there's magnitudes to be found. All those little orbs full of whole entire memories. Yeah. Why not? We're gonna hop back, children of the bone, back into the past. Careful, could be a bumpy ride. Anyhow, take one of them fine coins of yours and lob it into yesterday before you let it come back to bite your palm and hold it closed in that fist of yours. That's your whole life filling up your fingers. Every decision, every mistake, every event. It's all there with you. Feels like a lot, I know. I know. So, hip cats. Think about what you've been, who you've been, what you've done. Think about what that all adds up to. Because we can never be quite sure how our past follows us. Even the worst, the absolute worst bits of all, they're right there. And think hard about what that could or could not mean. There are two possibilities of what your past is. You know it. You know in your heart the shapes they take. It nags at you, which one is true. Well, you're about to find out. Open your hand and face your past. There it is, that's the tale you writ. How does it feel? Are you glad that you're the author of that story? Or do you wish you were only a ghost writer? Either way, it's all yours. Yours alone. Alone. Now take the other coin and toss it good and catch it. This one's simple. Who do you want to be today? What is the amalgam of your history amounting to? What is the statue that your past has carved you into from the marble of existence? Are you who you want to be? Or have you become what you never wanted? Has everything changed? Or has it all stayed the same? Simple. Who are you, really? Open up, pup. And face that mirror. That's you down there. Nice to meet ya.

Say, my lost limboers. Remember the playground? Remember the sand box? Remember that little thing called childhood? Where the whole future was laid out before you, nothing was decided. And everything was possible. You could be whatever you wanted to be. Or, so they told us. Rule three. Be

one with everything. Now I remember one little soul that couldn't think about nothing else besides those younger days. Dig this, my buckets and shovels. This little gal we'll call the Prodigy. You know, she was one of them gifted cats. Gifted at what? What *wasn't* she is the question. Age of three, piano. Age of five, tap dance. Age of seven, Mah Jong, man. See, little Prodigy's parents looked back at their own childhoods, and they couldn't bear to see their little one play out the same. So when she had a knack in something, they pushed all they could. And boy did she soar. But what they didn't get, lost souls, was the playground. In all their push, push, push of little Prodigy, they couldn't remember what makes or breaks a child. See every day at recess, the Prodigy made her way to the sandbox, as one does. But all she could do was stand and stare. There were kids digging, dig? There were kids building, right? But she had no idea what she was supposed to be there. And every day a little bully entered the sandbox and came up to the Prodigy. And she would say, you don't even know how to play right, who are you anyways? And then knock her down into the grains. And the Prodigy, she would just lay there looking up at all the sands of time before it was back to class. The years, they just boogied on by. Little Prodigy was the happeningest debater. the hippest mathlete, the howlingest operatic soloist. But all those things kept piling up. And she'd never quite stopped looking around that sandbox, seeing everyone playing at what they wanted. And her feeling like she was looking up from the grains. Sometimes I would catch the Prodigy looking up at me from below. I could have been a construction worker, or a landscaper, or anything I wanted. Or everything I wanted. I said to her it seemed like she was everything under the sun. She said, yes, but nothing i wanted. She laid down just like I saw her in that sandbox. At least she knew who she was. I wish I'd been a bully. I asked her, how did you die anyway? I had a stress aneurysm during my valedictorian speech. Well, children of the bone. I guess that is part of everything.

INSTRUMENTAL BREAK

HOST:

My cherubs, my mourning doves, my nurses stealing away across the night on the most holiest of missions. You ever felt a heart break? Your heart? Ain't it a beautiful thing. Dig this, side-eyeing souls, because Bone Daddy can feel your gaze shifting. I know it, I get it, but get this. You've made a journey through life. You've been on that ride. You've seen that movie, and you know the ending, otherwise you wouldn't be floating here before me. Now let me query. What do you remember more than anything? Or should I say, who? Do you remember what you had? Or are you spinning on what you didn't? Now I see you hearing me, soul siblings. Far out, right? As far out as I think can possibly be. Those fine feelings we fools filled our hearts were so full they felt fit to fracture. And then they did. Why is it that these moments of pure unfettered schism, these revolts of emotion, these cataclysms of love, why is it that we hold tightest to them? Let me ask a little more of you. Who are you betting on in the ring? The reigning champ, the victor supreme, the king of the castle? Or the underdog? The starry-eyed waif, the pauper with a fist of dreams. Money off the table. I'm gonna say you're backing that scrappy pup. And why is that, my dead betting pool? Let me tell you a truth I've learned since making my home in limbo. Heartbreak has made underdogs of us all. Brought us down to absolute zero, an uncool cold. A chill that has none. But still, but still. We carried on. And once you crawled away, you started to limp, dig? And once you had limped on, you started to walk, right? And once you had walked far enough and took a look back at the U-shaped hole in the dirt, you smiled baby. You smiled and ran, ran so far and so fast that you might not even remember how you looked down there. But you know you were there. And you know you're not now. You're farther than you've ever been. And that's cool, baby. That's the real folk blues. And that's real, and that's cool. Now when you look back, so far away that you can hardly see it, but if you look hard enough, those big bad blues, are just a dark Daffodil and stolen perfume. Me? Ha. No kiddos, this is all just secondhand sad. No heart to break in these bones. I'm just here to help you find your way, lost souls. It's just a funny little thing I've noticed, a funny little thing called Laurel. Anyhow, let's get back to siftin, bone babies.

Getting away from it all. On the road, Kerouac-style. Hopping the train to nowhere. Doesn't sound half bad, am I right? Sounds an awful lot like the limbo we find ourselves in, doesn't it, my wayward spirits? A big vast forever that you can't possibly comprehend, and little old you just gone with that littleness. Not a care in the world, not a world in your care. When you let go of everything and get to know nothing, you're free as a bird, chickadee. That's the kind of life that old Bone Daddy can get behind. Be like air, a true fool in the face of the spinning spiral of existence, and nothing can ever touch you. Nothing can ever hurt. What are you looking at me like that for, Daedalus? Shoo, shoo. I'm laying logic for the lost souls. Now where was I? Right, right. Rule four. Be one with nothing. The vagabond, man. That cat was someone I got, you know. Shame he was here in Splitsville in the blink of an eye, man. He really knew where it's at. The second he floated on in here, you could just tell, kiddos, he was on another level. A guy who got beatitude, beatnikhood, all those big beats of the world. Boom, boom, boom. You know, I found myself chasing after him to see what was up. *Me*. And not like he was running, but I just couldn't pin this dude down for a second. Daedalus flew up behind us as I was trying to get his attention and dropped history on me. There was never an orb of memory I was keener to look into. I popped it right up to my socket to get a peek. And let me tell you, family of the femur, it was a trip. Seriously, one non-stop bustling trip. The vagabond. He was one of them old school rover types, the real deal bindle and bundle hobo of the rails, shuffling cart to cart before he hopped right out onto any old town. Nothing but his flat foot kicks and threadbare digs as he went right on his merry way out into the wild world, miles from nowhere, on the road to find out. Find out what? Well, that's what I was wondering. I hollered after the Vagabond floating about the void. What's your deal, daddio? Not a word. Cool as a cucumber, kittens, what a card. So I kept watching, and the Vagabond meandered all across the planet. A train to Timbuktu, a plane to Polynesia, a boat to Botswana. No one, nothing stopped his trail, right? His footprints dotted the globe like busy little percussion on the jazz line of the universe. Never a dip to dally, no jawing away with squares, no time for dreaming. There was nothing but him and his path. Everything else just fell away. And then it ended. Right there the my sidewalk in New York City. The Vagabond stop and never started again. He had traveled all the way from Tasmania by way

of a little merchant ship. And in all that time, I realized he hadn't bothered to stop and eat. He hadn't had a sip of water. Come to think of it, I hardly saw him touch the stuff, sustenance, that is, my entire watch through that orb. He just ran out and then he ran out. I finally catch up to this cat and try to slow his roll, and when I looked in those sockets, there was nothing, man. No recognition, no wants. This was a soul who was lost anything like the idea of being, of having been, let alone chowing down to make the difference between being and been. He just held out his palm with his two coins for the boatman's fare, and asked me, Is this the next train out? And he was gone, baby. Like nothing ever happened. Now that, that is where it's at, skeletal siblings. That's someone who gets it. Who needs anything? What's so great about anything life has? Why not just let it all go and float down that river? It all comes down to zip, zero, zoo, zoo. Who? Me? I don't know what you're talking about, Daedalus. I must have just been thinking about animals, right? Yeah.

Life's a funny thing, lost souls. Me, I hardly have any care for it now. It's long gone. But when you look at the mighty myriad of ways things are staying alive over on that side of the veil, it's hard not to spot just how strange the gamut runs, especially when we check ourselves beyond that humanistic paradigm. Exactly, Daedalus, the animal kingdom. The ways they live can't help but tickle me. Because even a lost soul of bestial nature can end up taking space before me, and old Bone Daddy is obliged to take a look at their lives all the same. Take the not so proud cicada, for example. Man alive, those baby bugs can sing. Chorus of the sun, they are. Scatting faster than a horse on horse. And even though those suckers live years under the ground, they come and go under the sun, baby. Come and they go. But even in that brief little window, they live, dig? One time I found this funny little orb, this tiny guy, all dainty like. And as I squinted in, I saw this scared little chitterer. Lesley, its name was. Yes, cicadas have names. And it was saying ta ta to its old shell. But baring all like that, vulnerable as ever, it could hardly pull itself away. Couldn't stand the idea of letting go of the past. Even with the clock ticking as fast and as hard as it does for a bitty bug like that. It just wanted to hold on to who it used to be. But then we switch gears in the land of beasts. You know what a tardigrade is, kiddos? These wild

little guys get called water bears, but they're these microscopic floaters that are unlike anything you've ever heard. Get this man. These babies got the lifespan of a few months, yet they're around for decades upon decades, skeletal siblings. Now how does that come to be? Well, I had this funky guest here in limbo once of just such a genus. Only noticed him because Daedalus placed him right in my socket, not even an orb in tow. That's how I knew something was up with him. This little guy told me his name was Laz, and get this. This cat was from Mars, man. Far, far out. Said he was a kept man by the hand of some lonely little guy up there. Don't ask me how a person was on the Red Rock too, friends, because that idea is beyond me. I asked what he was doing in this joint. And he told me he was having a little restypoo, maybe for a few years. Years, children. These little things settle right down to near death for the Sandman, and stay in that stasis for a sweet spell. All of a sudden I saw him fading right out, dispersing into limbo. I told him to tell the Mars man that Bone Daddy says hi, but the cat was already out of a bag. Cicadas and tardigrades, man. Les and Laz. Ain't death of funny thing.

Charlie Cooper - The Buck

It had been like dancing, that locking eyes with the animal. It had been like the moment of stepping inside a warm house after a long time in the cold, that locking eyes with the buck and holding. The abrupt warmth that costs you and intensifies the cold that lingers inside, especially in the hands, and you want to be absorbed into it. But for that moment, you are alone in your coldness.

It was early autumn, and many things had lined the sky. The spires of the wrought iron fences, the sound of the university clocktower, the upper floors of a hospital down the road. It would have to go on like this for some time. I liked the river to the east, but I hadn't gone there in a while, wouldn't go there for a while. I parked the car.

I was in the cemetery, the graves are old there, tombstones read from the nineteenth century. Lots of mausoleums, when I thought that was only in New Orleans. I had just taken a turn down a favourite path of mine and suddenly we collided. We weren't more than fifteen feet apart when we caught each other's gaze. The hair on my neck stood up, and my body went cold. The horizon was bending. The ground became strange, a stage vibrating beneath me. We held each other in that gaze, sizing each other up but not seeing in. It wasn't a penetrating look. The eyes were huge and black. There was no way to get through. It felt like an eternity.

We took slow steps away from each other in perfect sync, holding the eyes, never breaking. At the top of the hill my foot hit gravel and the spell lifted. We were both gone.

The clocktower sings out, passing through the cemetery on its way to the hospital. I see the buck in the field in front of me now. I don't like that he found me again, don't like the way he's aware of me. The field is low so I think I should just get up this hill. Vantage feels correct, feels secure. I walk along the edge. Cars are elsewhere, the people elsewhere. The clock tower bellows.

I'm in the part of the cemetery where the dynastic family mausoleums keep the fragmented World War II sections from coalescing. Everything recedes. I can feel them, the eyes again. This time through a wreath on a tombstone off to my right. The antlers are sticking out above the wreath, but I keep my eyes face down. Is it looking at me? Is it fucking with me?

Now it's grass. Now it's cut grass in the hospital and pavement and memorial cannons and weeping European beech and rows and rows of souls. More than just the bones in the dust. The hoof clacks on a marble tombstone to my left. There's a hole in the fence. I find it.

The river's good. There's lots to do on it. There's a me that is always there, at the river. I bring myself to me when I get there, collapse into me. Straighten the back, roll the shoulders, take a walk. Every action is like an epilogue. This is all happening after. That's what it's like to walk along the river.

HOST:

It was all a dream. Rubber on wet pavement and the click of the gravel and the click click of a turn signal and the click click click of time. Fingers on leather. Always leather somewhere. Always fingers somewhere. Flesh on dead flesh. Flesh on living flesh. Snap clap snap. Smells like stolen perfume in this thing. What is this thing I'm in? My car. Wait. What is this thing I'm in? L. The big L. Some hill somewhere. Now stolen perfume and rain that's already passed. My leather, my flesh, not enough. Chilled to the bone. In not too long and not long enough she'll say, how did you get so cold? Not yet. I don't tell the future and I don't tell the past, just the now. Now. Hill to zenith. As high as it gets, as high as we get, as high as I ever was, because it was right before I knew what low is. Lick flick zip zip, working for the warmth anyway we can. Zippos, zippers, and zoo. Zoo? Zoo who? Nevermind. Nobody says that anyhow, only the cold and the cool. But there was one. I know it. Cigarettes, leather, and this thing we're in. This mess I'm in. Did I love a mess? The world hums so softly from up here. Ringing like tinnitus. This is as close as I want to be. As close as I wish I was. So close I can see her change the world with her breath. Steam, heat, nicking the beat, boom boom, boom. My heart was going. Away. My heart was going and then it was going away. I felt it there and I let it go. And then it was only the cool. The warmth went with it. How did you get so cold, Zoo? she'll say soon. But not yet. Not again. I've been here before. I'm not going back.

Zomkhonto - Words That Carry A Life Story

Africa, the cradle of humanity has long been a fertile ground for the art of poetry and storytelling. Its diverse cultures, landscapes, and histories have shaped a vibrant tapestry of narratives that continue to captivate hearts and minds across the globe. Whether told under the moonlit sky, around the communal fire, or through the modern mediums of literature and film, African storytelling, we use a magical thread connecting the past, the present, and the future. My name is Mbonisi Zikhali. I was born in Makokoba, a small township in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe. My spoken word and storytelling name is Zomkhonto, which happens to be my bloodline's totem. It means "them of the spear." I'm a spoken-word artist, storyteller, arts educator, youth mentor, qualified community services worker, grassroots community organizer and mental-wellness advocate. I know, that's a mouthful. I consider myself an afro-empath, and I'm driven to ensure that people find joy and healing in the power of words and storytelling. Now, I was raised among storytellers, most of whom had no idea as to the importance that poetry and storytelling hold in the global community, except for the impact that these have in shaping their own direct communities.

Now, some people in the poetry circles refer to me as Ngoni Le Makokoba. That means them gooney man from Makokoba. Let me paint a picture about Makokoba to you. Makokoba, nestled in the vibrant city of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is a historic and culturally-significant neighbourhood that holds a special place in the hearts of his residents. This bustling area is a reflection of the city's rich history and diverse population. Makokoba carries a distinct charm, blending traditional African aesthetics with a touch of urban vibrancy. As one of the oldest suburbs in Bulawayo, it has witnessed the city's evolution over time and stands as a testament to resilience and community spirit. The streets of Makokoba are alive with activity, filled with the rhythm of life, and the warmth of its people. Bustling markets line the roads, where vendors proudly display their wares, offering everything from fresh produce to handcrafted goods. The area is often filled with the scent of traditional Zimbabwean delicacies being prepared by street food vendors tempting passersby with their mouth-watering aromas. A walk through Makokoba reveals a blend of architectural styles ranging from the modest homes to colonial era buildings. The neighbourhood's layout reflects a time when segregation and urban planning divided communities

along racial lines. However, Makokoba has evolved into a melting pot of cultures and backgrounds, embracing diversity and fostering a strong sense of unity among its residents. Makokoba is a home to numerous community organizations, social clubs, and cultural centres that play a vital role in preserving and promoting Zimbabwean heritage. These institutions serve as gathering spaces for artists, musicians, and storytellers to share their talents, ensuring that the rich cultural traditions of the region continue to thrive. The heartbeat of Makokoba can be felt in its vibrant street art, colourful murals that adorn buildings, depicting scenes from everyday life, historical events, and celebrating local heroes. These vibrant artworks not only beautify the neighbourhood, but also tell stories of resilience, strength and hope. While Makokoba has faced its fair share of challenges, including economic hardships and social inequalities, the spirit of the community remains unyielding. The people of Makokoba are known for their resilience, resourcefulness, and their ability to find joy amidst adversity. Through music, dance, and storytelling, they celebrate their heritage, express their dreams, and create a sense of belonging that binds the community together. Makokoba is more than just a neighbourhood. It is a living testament to the spirit of Bulawayo and Zimbabwe. It is a place where traditions are honoured, cultures intersect, and stories unfold. It embodies resilience and vibrancy of its people, making it a captivating destination for those seeking an authentic experience in the heart of Zimbabwe.

Having been raised by a single mother, my life revolves around very strong women. My history does not begin without discussing the matriarchy that holds together my concept and memory of family. My first poem is about my grandmother, Ester Magagula. Her roots can be traced back to Eswatini, a small country in southern Africa, which is still ruled by a king, Mswati the third. The poem is entitled "Esther."

If you wish to know about my grandmother, she is a grand piano whose keys accompany sopranos of angels, from the tips of their lips into the most secret chambers of Heaven. The rhythm carried to the tune of her feet, a tune carried across the sky like a bridal train, whispering incantations of her tribal name, the one used by her ancestors before the world came to know her simply as Esther. I imagine

her, learning how to answer to it. Esther, Esther, Esther. A name she inhabits but cannot spell, which is good as well, because names are spells and that name, if it carried the shame of its own ancestry, will not get to her or bleed down to me. But I researched it, to strip it of any perversions, and found that in Persia, her name was her Adassa, and that Esther was a queen. So although she cannot spell it, it is by no accident that royalty is what it means. Esther. I imagine every time she closed her eyes and rehearsed it, Esther, because naming an African child is an initiation. It is a ritual that awakens the invisible cord that remains intact after the placenta is severed and neatly packed into a blanket and buried in the brown earth at the foot of a giant tree. That way the child's first cry is imprisoned by the tree's roots, even if the fruit of that tree chooses to gossip about it, and in case demons of the night steal it and make rainstorms out of its purity. I imagine her birth was attended to by midwives with gemstones for eyes, sapphire stones for nipples, and breasts that hang like the pendants of the mountain spirits, those said to have portals that lead us straight to the front steps of every planet known to the universe. She knows wisdom by the feel of its skin. She has run her fingers like a pianist along the spine of time, a spine vast like that of a matriarch elephant as she moves, silently, vast like piano keys made of ebony and ivory, composing the songs that pass underneath three generations of black skin. The royal matriarch from the house of Swazi, Magagula, Tombeni, Troila Miniella, Coachella, Wasali Linda, Konto, Tonjuaneh, Zillanfizi, Subfo. Your praise names are the blood that courses in my veins, traveling pathways that raise the fires that bring warmth to my skin. I imagine your shadow follows you religiously and even keeps your secrets intimately, like why you wake up at 4am to pray for strangers in wars, soldiers in coffins, emaciated children who will never know the love of a grandmother. You are a whirlwind of possibility, Magagula. Your smile is god's favorite memory. Magagula, you are the music that you play, the conductor and the sound, the singer and audience, an entire population in one human being, the melody to which every morning sings, the soundtrack to the rising sun, byeh teh! Byeh teh.

My grandmother had seven children. One of them is my mother, Marie Ann Komo. Her resilience is my lifeline. She used to be a stick fighter when she was young. Legend has it that while out herding cattle, she would consistently defeat the boys to the point that they conspired numerous times to exclude her from competing. Her father, a man from Mozambique, left his country at 16 while he was herding cattle, made his way to Zimbabwe, and never saw his family again. My mother is the personification of the African woman's resilience in a world that often forgets her in the grand scheme of things. The second poem, "The Spine of an African Mother," speaks to that strength and was written as a dedication to my mother.

They say the spine of an African mother is made of precious metals larger than diamonds, which have not been special enough to mine yet. They are hidden from this world. Because, with our mindset, if this very day, someone got the tender to mine the tender parts of what remains after the thunder and the rain, the gender violence, the pain, the wars, the floods, the rape, the scars, the world itself would remain stagnant for centuries. Whatever magic holds up her bones, its magician has a story to tell longer than time itself. And it probably begins and ends like this. Heywhen, if I had words to explain, I would have put them together a long time ago. So let it go, man, let it go. An African woman can carry both the world and the child on her back and use the 50 tonnes on her head as the counterweight. And with all this she walks with a lightness that allows even the smallest of insects their beauty sleep, so she silently weeps so the children can dream. She walks as if not to disturb the seams of the dresses that prayers wear when running towards heaven all at once, begging for a chance to be answered. She intercepts some of them mid-flight and answers them without asking to be worshipped. Mama, Mamawami. I have spent my whole life imagining the day you were born. Heaven must have taken a day off just to welcome you. I have tried to recreate the sounds the morning birds must have made. They must have spent the next day recreating your first cry while constellations in the sky competed with your own mother smile, mama. Each star competing with the one next to it to outdo its shine. Mama. ... The African mother is both a rock upon which spears of war are sharpened, and where

lovers sit to hear each other's name for the first time. There are diamonds yet to be mined in an African mother's eyes, hidden from this world, because if someone threw dirt in that part of her that sees the hope, the blindness that comes afterward knows a darkness that cannot be named. We would fill around the walls as they close in on us. And all we would behold in our palms is darkness, a razor sharp, tangible darkness that sees through happiness and crushes it. Mamawam. ... Your Mozambican roots have some more on my sore shoulders that carry boulders like pebbles in the hands of children. They say the spine of an African mother is made of iron that sharpens iron, made up of fragments of Harriet Tubman's dreams of the motherland, mama. Remember when we sat together at the market, when you sold oranges and sweets? I stole one that day. I wanted to keep a version of your sweetness with me. So I ate it in secret that same night. Wishing the sweetness would stay inside me in case I leave for far away someday. And here I am. Nothing tastes sweeter, Mamawam.

As children, many things were happening around us, whose lasting consequences we were not as yet aware of. I was born in 1982. Some of us are a generation born to the brave nationalists that fought for Zimbabwe's independence. The war of liberation in Zimbabwe, fought between the late 1960s until Independence in 1980, was a pivotal moment in the country's history, culminating in the end of colonial rule. Black Zimbabweans had played a crucial role in the struggle, fighting for freedom, justice, and the right to self determination. However, the psychological toll of war, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder, had profound impact on all the relationships that formed after this time, especially in the townships. The war of liberation had exposed combatants to extreme violence, loss of life, torture, and the constant threat of harm. Black Zimbabweans who fought during this time faced significant challenges that deeply affected their psychological well-being. But perhaps what's critical is that for many veterans of the Liberation War, the trauma experienced during combat did not end with the cessation of hostilities. The aftermath of war brought about its own set of challenges, including the struggle to reintegrate into civilian life, to reconcile with past atrocities, to deal with an emerging genocide, and rebuild a fractured society. As a result, mental health services were often overlooked,

leaving many war veterans grappling with their psychological wounds in silence. But many had psychological scars of that wars, which often manifested with those symptoms such as intrusive memories, nightmares, hyper-vigilance, emotional numbing, and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. Some of these frustrations manifested as trauma dumps, from fathers, frustrated, on to their own families. This next poem, "Pep Talks in the Ghetto," addresses an aspect of that dilemma, seen through our eyes as children at the time. It also addresses, for example, the migration that occurred in later years as people left in droves for neighbouring countries, particularly South Africa, to flee economic instability.

We are people of ancient tribes, people that stay alive and revive their own cultural essence, to love, to be there, to be kind. Pep talks in the ghetto are not usually pep talks but trauma dumps, towering giants brutally crumbling like saw dust upon their sons, because for years invisible hands have been chipping away at their own self-esteem. Their loose screws unraveling from limbs that have become accustomed to bringing hammers down upon steel. Sometimes they confuse that steel for their own children's limbs. These drunken men who will bend to nobody's will but colonialism, chained to the same freedom train that never left the system. And the few times that it did, it ran over their own kids and had to be brought back to the station to clean out the blood and make it gleam again, while the speakers repeat the message, to mourn in peace, and then repeats the pain. I had friends as a child that were so afraid to go back home, oh, so little did I know their skins were firepits, and what I thought was just a his skin through holes in their clothes was actually loud mouth drunken souls that only healed when they played with us, but that when they started walking home again, those wounds filled afresh with puss. Now I know why they never spoke much, we did not know why they withdrew from touch, so we left them out of tag teams. But if I had means today, I would seek them with the Midas touch turn their smiles into gold because, oh, how rich their laughter. Can you believe they laughed in paragraphs? It is hard as a child to watch another child sad so we prayed for change every chance that we had. Change for hot buns, change for ice cream, change for movies, change for dreams. But man is a different kind of misfit.

We know when to change a tire but if our own communities are losing air we puncture their lungs more, losing all desire to breathe as one, then sit and watch drunk fathers dump trauma upon the shaved heads of their sons. And from across the street, adding to the speech that pep talks in the ghetto are meant to be angry. Because goddamnit, we are angry that we could be such happy people and yet the world see only our ugliness. So we start hammering away at any love that stumbles into our day, walking past door mirrors wanting our face to change, because every inch of darkness is its own bout of pain. But oh, colonialism did a number system on our relatives. Some left for South Africa and came back as shivering corpses that tell no single story of where they've been. And what you do not know is that this is the first time anyone applied anything to their scheme, covering the knife scars that peered through the bomb looking calm, but you know their life was rough, knowing they wanted it to stop because you can see that the knife scars are not just a gang of rivers flowing to nowhere, but that they are parts with a trail often disappear, a change in the tide, like leaning over their graves and throwing some change inside, watch it land on rose petals, and wish those metal round pieces of miracles by them land on the other side.

On top of the traumas we had to deal with at home, most children encountered trauma from an education system that seemed alien to their immediate reality. After gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1980, Zimbabwe embarked on a journey of nation building, and sought to reshape its education system. However, the transition from a colonial education system to one that reflected the ideals and aspirations of an independent nation presented numerous challenges, particularly for young Zimbabweans. The colonial education system in Zimbabwe was deeply rooted in British culture and values, aiming to produce individuals who would almost serve the interests of the colonizers. The curriculum emphasized in European history, literature, and languages, often neglecting or marginalizing indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultural practices. Thus, upon gaining independence, young Zimbabweans face the task of navigating an education system that did not adequately reflect their own heritage, experiences, and aspirations. There was a huge disconnect between the education system

and the lived experiences of young Zimbabweans. In the poem, "I Would Have Told My Carpentry Teacher I Loved Trees," I interrogate this education system and how it interfered with our lives and understanding of the world.

To miseducate a child is to miss the chance to create something so wild in his imagination, something one hot air balloon short of his helium soul, and to watch it lift from the ground, to the sound of morning birds, to the skin of the sky, and see the ridiculous vastness of it all. Or, if you were like me as a child. to remain amongst the trees, and let the spirit of the forest bleed into me, such that whatever poetry was growing inside me is tentacled with the branches that carry my ancestors' breasts, their chests and shoulders the size of Baobab trees. When I heard my carpentry teacher passed away, a sudden sadness put a chainsaw to his memory. By all accounts, he was a good man, a man of iron discipline. But to us forest lovers, this man was no god. We had seen trees that towered above him. He was no emperor. The trees had seen his naked soul. But when I heard that he died, something put a chainsaw so deep into his memory, and I heard the loud scream at the root of it. And eventually it crashed with the thunder a silence in the deep of the forest. I haven't been there ever since. But I walked back to see where it lives today with this poem. So these are the things I never got to say to you, Mr. Gwainya. I loved trees. I woke up in the morning to climb a tree right in the middle of the front yard. Dead centre of one of the tiniest spaces in the world there lived a tree so majestic notoriously part of his days in the heavens. I thought somewhere in the sky sat the smiling large woman called God that let the tree sit in between her thighs and braided the sweet fruit of the fur tree into its afro puffs. I loved trees and when they cut the tree around the same time that you started teaching me, you were dead to me. Your classroom became the workshop of the devil. To miseducate a child is to tell them that beauty can only come from destroying the things that you love, that certain things can only be pieced together by breaking their spirits. In a classroom this very second, there is a child learning that puppetry is not geometry, that tap-dancing in the sky is not astronomy that studying insects is silly since yellow jackets do not sell in the stock market, and that their ancestors were not the same voices they heard in the

forests in the songs of their roots, the same ones whose tongues you urged us to chop into pieces and stop our poetry mid-sentence.

In keeping with the theme of education, the following poem imagines what I would do if given the task of building a school from scratch. Many children who dropped out of school were fighting against a host of interconnected factors, among them socioeconomic challenges, breakdown of family structures, peer influence and gang culture, and substance abuse.

If I were to design a new school from scratch, I would hire bricklayers with a history of building dreams, those unafraid to take anything apart from the seams, start afresh from the foundation. If even a single child gave an indication of feeling claustrophobic within classroom walls, they would have the patience to gather around that child as they sleep every night, build them a fortress, tearing it down every time that kid wakes up terrified, right until the morning they slid out of bed, felt around every inch of those four walls and believed they resembled four unique pieces of sky and that they themselves were a wishing star in the centre, then transplant it and join it to every single child's comfort zones. If they asked me the dimensions of the school, I'd say 95% playground, because I have seen these monstrous buildings push our children further and further against fences, and then everyone is shocked when they grow up defensive, punching out at the brick walls, as if they are already training for when they put them in the hall. If I could build a school, I would not build it from the ground up, but from the sky down so that we stop telling our children to reach for the stars, instead of reminding them of the history of their celestial eyes. Build a staircase down so that each day they know they are descending from where they truly belong. They would hold classes from the playground and read pages of books pasted upon passing clouds, and the only way to read them is from swings that go so high, that as their eyes get closer, they will naturally yearn to get higher and higher with each swing, seeing other stars every time they read the line, as if they had visited home during recess and returned back with moondust on their foreheads. 95% playground. Not a school yard. Nothing that suggests prison, because ever since

emancipation, the school yard was patiently waiting for slavery to reappear under a new fashioned statement, watching the children playing, waiting to throw the book at the child, history books that read them their rights by telling them about the wrongs with who they are. Because the school yard is a trap, and the principal a gang leader, and when they dropped out, jumped out by brutal body blows of labels, eventually the streets would be their best teacher, and the prison yard their new playground.

With the education system on our necks, the pressure to be perfect was always immense. Corporal punishment at school and homegrown discipline combined to place demands for only the best out of us. In a society where judgments and stereotypes are rampant, the residents of the ghetto often find themselves facing heightened scrutiny and expectations. The pursuit of perfection becomes a way to defy the negative perceptions and break free from the cycle of poverty and limited opportunities. It becomes a coping mechanism, a means to rise above the hardships and carve out a better life. The pain of trying to be perfect in the ghetto stems from the realization that the odds are stacked against you. As you witness the struggles and limitations surrounding you, the desire for a different reality intensifies. You dream of escaping the harsh environment, pursuing education, finding stable employment, and creating a safe and prosperous life for yourself and your loved ones. However, the path to achieving these dreams is paved with obstacles that seem insurmountable. My next poem, entitled "Imperfect Perfection", is a peek into this losing fight to be perfect as observed in people with whom we share this pressure and experience.

There is no perfect ten when counting fingers or toes, because growing up the milkman had four on his left hand, but he still arrived on time, with the most wholesome carton of milk you could ever find. And with the efficiency he delivered it to our front door, I figured he would sit in the figure four and grab on the cow's udder like he used to with his own mother's breasts, and at that moment, no hand would be deemed one finger less to do the best job ever done under the sun. I also knew a cousin that couldn't read or write a single line, she was a perfect ten and a zero at the same time. Those invested in her

perfect behind treated her body like a shrine, while her teachers would mark her absent from any decent futures, as if her facial features would someday fall out of place, and the world would demand more than a lap dance, as if it was her calling to be beautiful for a limited time, and that anything outside that paradigm, then she would have to learn to perfect her Os and Rs. So the world deemed her entirely perfect for something she silently wished wasn't her cross to bear. And on the other end of the spectrum, no matter how hard she tried to learn, her teachers acted like she wasn't even there. Just an imperfect perfection. An African kid caught in a matrix ducking the pendulum of rejection while the world keeps track of her body count. Not concerned at all if she could count to ten, because we live in a world that insists on crystal clear meth, addicted to everything having to make sense down to the perfect digit. But if our days are really numbered, how come we don't know the exact date when the Grim Reaper visits? Who gets to decide what and who's an improper fraction in the grand scheme of things? Fitting into these boxes got us choosing caskets while still leaving, planning in advance for the oohs and ahhs from the neighbours, like the most perfect wedding with death, spending our last millionth of a cent left to look like we still could come back for one more complimentary breath. Fixing kinks in our hair, as if our ancestors ever had clippers, planning way ahead for the Grim Reaper when we shouldn't be alive, becoming number one zeros trying to round everything up to the nearest ten when we could be the perfect four. Milk the cow for all it's worth, let the beauty within outdo the outside, because the anagram for perfect is prefect, and no one needs Big Brothers watching over them all the time.

In the midst of adversity, love has the power to blossom and thrive, weaving its way through the challenges and capturing the hearts of those living in marginalized communities. In the ghetto, where economic hardships, social inequalities, and limited opportunities often prevail. Love takes on a unique meaning. It becomes a beacon of hope, a source of strength, and a catalyst for resilience. In this environment, love can flourish in unexpected ways, defying the odds and reminding individuals of their shared humanity. And in the ghetto, with its vibrant and close-knit communities, it provides a fertile

ground for connections to form. It is a place where people share similar struggles, dreams, and aspirations. The challenges faced by residents foster a sense of solidarity and empathy, creating a bond that transcends mere proximity. Within the confines of the ghetto, love can emerge in countless forms. It can be the sweet innocence of childhood friendships that blossom into something deeper, or the support and loyalty between partners navigating the rough terrain of survival together. Love can be found in the exchanges of laughter, the shared meals, and the comforting embrace during difficult times. Falling in love in the ghetto is often accompanied by a deep appreciation for the simple pleasures in life. A walk hand in hand through the narrow streets, stolen glances amidst the chaos, or the joy of finding solace in one another's company become cherished moments of respite from the hardships of everyday life.

In that vein, I wrote this poem imagining that kind of love. Imagining my mother and father as the ideal first love, even as it was soon to be interrupted by the Liberation War.

I love your face illuminated by candle, because even nighttime can't handle your shadow. I love to sit and marvel at the trouble that it took to create you, because you're not just beautiful, I've always wanted to shake the hand that made you since I met you, I've found a spirit to connect to, I'd fight to the death if death came to collect you, because I'd rather lose my breath since I met you I love you and any other emotion would be painful. It's like we both graduated from the same school, but no degree of separation will ever take you away from my imagination now, constantly waiting to come back home and taste the beautiful treats you've been baking. At first, I thought that you were taken. And I was shaken, because I was ready to commit adultery in a second. Couldn't believe the goddess that I just met with. God is the greatest artist, and you are her best painting. Let's take a walk through the forest that is hidden inside. We can share great stories underneath candlelight. I was afraid for a moment, but this feeling is right. For the right price, we can buy a ray of sunlight. I love the fact that we attract a small crowd when we're working hand in hand. I don't care. Because I understand. Only if I had a magic

wand and I would extend photocopies of your touch for the lonely because they die when you hold me. I love it when you scold me. I was an unwritten letter till you opened the envelope and dared to unfold me with your immaculate hands. This is what you wrote me with your blood is the ink you said I'm the one and only, then you wrote the number to your secrets and said call me, you never put me on hold, it rang once and you talked to me. Your voice to me was like a thousand angels singing, possibly to create the soundtrack for our feet as you walk with me. I'll give you my last heartbeat, consciously. I know that you would never cheat on me if there was more of me. Your love comes with a lifetime warranty. You arrested me and I refuse to seek amnesty. Let's take a walk with the forest that is hidden inside. We can share great stories underneath candlelight. I was afraid for a moment. But this feeling is right. For the right price, we can buy a ray of sunlight. I love the fact that you'd never be caught dead faking the intensity that possesses your eyes as you awaken. I've lost touch of the mental photographs taken, even in silence it's like you're making a statement. We live on an island of our very own making, walk the beach naked, two divine shellfish. You're my greatest fetish and I'm just being selfish when I say my greatest wish is to put a leash on your essence. I'm tired of sitting on the fence when romance is the question posed to me. With you I feel I won the lottery. And I'm not cashing this ticket until you visit economy into sharing forever this life of luxury. Let's take a walk through the forest that is hidden inside. Let's take a walk through the forest that is hidden inside.

In the face of limited resources, love becomes resourceful. It finds creative ways to express itself through small gestures, acts of kindness, and unwavering support. It teaches individuals to value what truly matters, to cherish the moments of connection, and to find joy amidst adversity. And when it is lost, the loss itself is profound. The following poem is entitled, "Today I Refuse to Remember You," and speaks to such a time when I experienced such a loss.

Today I almost refuse to remember you. I shuttered the windows of memory forgetting that windows are not glass, but the space that remains when the glass is shattered. I forgot that when we throw stones at

our own glass houses, they pile up and form headstones right at the front of our door. And the world wonders why sometimes we wake up dead to love in all its suggestions, and several unmarked graves of questions. I almost refuse to remember your name. I forgot that windows are not glass. But that empty space that remains when the glass is now a sharp heap of cuts for wounds of the gut that will bleed only on the inside, the heart drowning in his own blood. This empty space that has left me vulnerable to gusts of wind, scattering your love letters across my conscience, picking up speed with every breath I breathe, making me wish I could not read but all my years in class seem to have prepared me for this day where I understand even the hidden unwritten meaning in all of this. I tried to unlearn the alphabet at the same speed that your love letters form their own, and your 26 letters for words that make it crystal clear, the whole thesis of why you're here, it won't even need me to be literate. To realize that it's deliberate. It's deliberate because you know damn well that I can read the writing on the wall. We formed our own language, remember? Yes, it says you are not there at all, in large print. Even my mother who never spent a day of school in a lifetime took the hint. It is as if someone you picked out of a lineup translated this perfect crime, up to the second that everyone who is able to see what the pain of you leaving did to me can understand without lending its lesson. I forgot that windows are not like prison glass that never shutters. So when I threw a rock at your memory, it revealed you afresh to me, as if saying get off the phone, I'm here, touch my elusive face, as if saying I was free to let you imprison me again, in your lies, my lies, the web of lies that we told each other. And when I tried to escape my dreams and wander aimlessly into daytime, I still failed to ignore the onslaught you have so perfectly devised, because now all of a sudden, every shop I know in my radius is selling your favorite dress, and I could save up and buy every one of those evil things and burn them. But you were dead certain that I could not convince you to remove the one you wear in my mind. And if you did, your nakedness is a living statue that I would need another lifetime to uproot. I think my mistake was that when I had decided to let you go initially, I accidentally packed myself inside my own bag so I could not leave. You just threw them right back into your closet. And the more I screamed to be released, the more I seem to fold, just like my clothes.

In 2009, I left Zimbabwe for Canada, due to memorable Canadian well-wishers who contributed towards my studies at Carleton University in Ottawa. Leaving Africa for the first time for North America was an incredibly overwhelming and transformative experience. The stark differences in culture, lifestyle, and environment can lead to a profound culture shock, which resurfaces from time to time. As I boarded the plane in South Africa, leaving behind everything I had known, a mix of excitement and nervousness coursed through my veins. The thought of embarking on a new chapter in Canada filled me with anticipation, but little did I know the cultural differences that awaited me on the other side of the world. Stepping off the plane in Ottawa, the first thing that struck me was the sheer diversity of people. I was accustomed to the warm and close-knit communities in Zimbabwe, but here faces from every corner of the globe filled the bustling airport. It was a true melting pot of cultures, languages, and traditions. I had finally arrived. At least that's what I thought. Fast forward to Christmas Day, 2015. I was homeless, a stint that would last for two and a half years. Being a Zimbabwean experiencing homelessness in Canada can present numerous challenges and hardships. Homelessness itself is a complex issue that affects individuals from all walks walks of life, and when coupled with the additional layers of being an immigrant or a refugee, the situation becomes even more daunting. Be that as it may, the experience is perhaps the turning point in how I understood the full spectrum of the Canadian experience. Homelessness introduced me to some characters who were butterflies themselves, despite the circumstances. I wrote the next poem, "Donny and Tracy," reflecting on some of those characters.

They're dreaming of a one world currency. Within the nightmare of this great food emergency, they've got swimming pools overflowing with Hennessy, and Donny ain't had a bath for like a week. Listen, when he speaks, he's the son of an engineer who seems to have disappeared, vanished into the thinnest air, in the casino, you find him there. And Donny ain't sober today. So you're forced to hear the pain that has interfered but Donny has persevered. You'd be hard pressed to find Donny sporting a beard. But when he does, his goatee's always soaking in beer, trying to outsmart the broken heart

that's soaking in tears. A gambler, hoping he gets lucky this year. His life is one huge slot machine with nothing in it. Only an evil spirit that keeps taking his winnings, whispers *play again* and stands listening from a distance. And when the coins clink in, it swallows it in an instant like a chameleon to a fly. He dreams of millions, but dies every time his daughter cries because she's hungry. Each to his own. We all out for the money. Last night I dreamt the slot machines paid \$1 for Donny, it's a struggle for lost souls caught in this rainstorm, wishing they weren't born. I sit and listen because their life is a sad poem written with sharp thorns, and when they bleed they walk on. They've got swimming pools overflowing with Hennessy, and Tracy ain had a bath for like a week. Listen when she speaks. She was the homecoming queen lost in a dream of catching the gleaming lights that turned out to be a horror film instead of supermodel. She won a different lotto. And now she does the cat walk down a Listerine bottle, the blistering sores on her face, whispering alcohol and meth. Her blundering steps defy her lingering breath. Her high school tiara is the only evidence left her former beauty. She carries it every place she has slept plus the major accident that left her with a limp in her step. She's lost, barely clinging off that government check. If she'd never believed in words that filtered like a sieve into her dream of being the most beautiful the world had ever seen then, maybe she'd be more than just five aborted babies. I dreamt of a fishing magazine. On the cover was Tracy.

The life. The life that we lead. There comes a point where it's pointing back it at us.

At its core, overcoming homelessness represents the triumph of hope over despair, of perseverance over adversity. It is a journey marked by tremendous courage and unwavering resolve to rebuild one's life, and find a way out of a seemingly endless cycle of instability. Homelessness can strip individuals of their sense of belonging, their safety, and dignity, making the process of overcoming it all the more challenging. When I emerged from it, it all felt like a blur. Yet it was clear that nothing would ever be the same again. After a lot of missteps in trying to navigate the trauma and deal with anxiety and learning afresh how to be kind to myself again, I eventually awoke to my potential in full bloom. The journey from

homelessness to stability is undoubtedly arduous, but it is one marked by hope, strength, and the tenacity of the human spirit. It reminds us of the profound ability within each person to rise above adversity, rebuild their lives, and contribute to the betterment of themselves in their communities. Overcoming homelessness is a testament to the power of determination, and serves as inspiration for all of us to believe in the potential for positive change, both within ourselves and in the world around us.

The poem "Surviving Erasure" speaks partly to that overcoming.

As we grow older, we get to know things more intimately, like burn victims, whose fingers linger over photographs saved from the fires whose flames, though twice higher in memory, could never scotch, their remembered skin. Images that say here's the evidence, the texture of how we survived erasure. We measure time as if each second carries desires and mysteries that can only be known by feeling a little deeper, running our fingers over the ashes of the phoenixes we once were, that burned down where we stood, thinking that maybe we could rummage in those ashes, perhaps find ourselves a feather as keepsake, the one that rejected the inferno, ejected itself, reclaim it and wear it in my hair and say even though this belongs to the person I burned down, I'll wear it next to my crown, proof that I did not learn to fly today, but that I survived erasure. As we grow older, we not only know why the sun rises, but that it surprises us time and time again with how resilient and resplendent our own spirit, that we emerged from our dreams like jet streams into another day, collecting in our own mouths like springwater, baptizing the lips of ear drums with kisses of poems and hymns. We know that the moon knows of the moondust in our eyes, which glows when comets and shooting stars light up the sky, and we are once more alive with possibility. We become masters of both joy and tragedy and can emerge from long silences with a renewed love affair with our own native tongues, the same ones that survived erasure. We know that everything slung on one's bed for too long needs to be placed down and left right there on the ground. That favourite songs should be played twice too often. So that should our houses be burned down, we have immortalized the sound. We spend days as children erasing

concepts we do not even understand. How many of us still use erasers up to this day? You know the ones at the end of that pencil so full of lead, like our brothers laying in dead in the streets, the ones that failed to survive erasure. And we've become accustomed to having lived this long, longer than Pac, longer than Big, longer than ancient trees. We learn the trees dress up in colours in the fall as if for prom dance. That breath is a homecoming dance from the world's fires. And each morsel of air clears the smoke like a mother's hand. We understand that not all things can possibly be remembered. But that face is etched in the flesh of our memories canvas, or like a compass back to the world we have lived, the lives we have touched, and that every brushstroke is a moment in time. The beauty of knowing we are here. We are here because we belong in the picture. And as we run our fingers on it, we become comforted by the fact that of all the things that tried to burn us down, we still survived erasure, we survived erasure, we survived erasure.

For two and a half years, I had been invisible, a faceless figure navigating the streets without purpose or recognition. Only a few cared to know my story or acknowledge its existence. Society's indifference had taken its toll, eroding my sense of self worth. But as I emerged from the cocoon of homelessness, a flicker of self-discovery ignited within me, urging me to reclaim my identity. That is how Zomkhonto was reborn. At first, it was a slow and hesitant process. I cautiously pieced together fragments of my past, memories buried beneath layers of hardship. I retraced my steps to a time when I was not defined solely by my homelessness, but by my dreams, aspirations, and richness of my cultural heritage. My rediscovery of identity began with reconnecting to my roots. I delved into the history and traditions that shaped me, immersing myself in the stories of my ancestors, and the struggles they endured. In their stories, I found strength and resilience, a reminder that I too, possessed an unyielding spirit capable of overcoming the darkest of times. One of my most treasured poems, once I was in a safe space, was "A Letter I Wrote to my Son, and All the Black Boys."

Dotonaia. My son. I wish you mountains that stoop down and crumble the tufts of hair on their crown to create beach sand for shows that this world will not stumble into and dare to pollute, where the music of ancient flutes is trapped in shells that populate its blanket of pebbles and stones, which when thrown against the surface of the ocean, with each bouncing motion, we saw back the secrets of the snails that died inside them, carrying hell on their backs and heaven inside their hearts. Those said to have slowed down deliberately, and sacrifice themselves so their shells can become refuge for the songs whose melodies are now known for guiding the bruised heaps of lost ships back home. My son, I wish you to speak bright words the way light was named, with sound in attendance, and that I live long enough for the chance to tell you the story of how light and sound learned to dance together for the first time, trapping the universe in a trillion light years of rhythm. Dotonaia, I wish that as you whisper your own name you believe it, that each letter in it is the further insight, the largest wind to ever host a wind, and that when you fly, you're not distracted fighting that wind, but just enjoying the aerial view. My son, I want to take all the insults of this world on your behalf, so that you find half of the world's untruths about black boys already shelved in a bunker somewhere. I would have walked back and forth through time to collect each falsehood and hold it captive in the underworld, not to burn a single one, but to remind you that another generation would soon need you to collect the other half. Make sure the collection is complete, then have a bonfire and invite the neighbours, all singing together, screaming to hell with the racist! Dotonaia, I wish your teenage eyes will take long walks inside the hallways of histories begging to be written, and that those that died gritting their teeth while holding on to olive branches can see you plant seeds and be proud. And that seeing you hunger to know more disarms their spirits and charms them into forgiving the trees from which the spears that dug into their chests were carved. My son I wish you the rarest form of love, the one that plays catch with itself. Throwing boomerang kisses at the sky knowing the love will come back, glowing with the remnants of dying stars, and that each tiny sparkle of those dying stars will hustle its way back into the universe and become a fully blown sun. Dotonaia. I wish you to know that the hourglass will always be a desert full of seconds ticking away until you're brave enough to shatter that glass and find water, because that's what I wish for you, I wish

you water to flow towards your future, like hip hop, like poetry. My son, I wish you an elephant's memory so that you remember to forget what they did to me. Write that debt to ancestry. Find your identity. But more than anything, my son, I wish you to remember that you are royalty. Byeh teh.

The other poem, which I call the equivalent to "Letter to My Son and All Black Boys," was one I wrote for a friend whose daughter Amani was turning nine years old. That friend, Desmond Longo, is one of the two mira players you hear in the background. By default, this piece is entitled, "This Poem was Written with Feathers in Mind" became "A Letter to Black Girls."

Your father said I should you write you a poem with feathers in mind, meant to be stitched together by time into the most beautiful bird the forest could ever find. And the wonderful thing is that you get to choose whatever colour this bird might be. Take your time, because this world loves to choose colours for black girls, right down to their favorite dress, as if someone chose to second guess if they needed to be blessed, not knowing that ends of their soul are rainbows, and that heaven still uses those ends as ribbons to tie presents for the most well-behaved of angels. Amani. Amani in Arabic means wish. Amani in Swahili means peace. So I wish you peace. And as parents, we always hope that our children do not learn too young why they need peace. But even then, I pray that if the world ever made you search for a peace of mind that you remember to think only your name, and that your mind will recognize its echo and remain calm, remain peaceful. Your father said I should write a poem made of diamond-cruled wings and tell you that the worst that you can ever do is make eagles blind when you take to the sky, but that you do not be afraid to fly. Because this poem was written with feathers in mind, meant to be stitched together into the most beautiful bird that the forest could ever find. And the wonderful thing is that you get to choose its morning song. Take your time. Because this world loves to choose songs for black girls, as if their ears cannot make out for themselves the ebony skin of melody, as if they haven't been the fortune tellers of the greatest dances to ever trip the human body in spirit. I say, create your music, Amani. Find your dance slow, and own it. Become the lyrics to the song of your own destiny.

Amani, your name means wish in Arabic and peace in Swahili. As you blow out these candles and those of years to come, I wish your greatest wish the light of day. May your dreams find the peace of mind to come true. May you shine so bright that light accidentally flows into the world around you. Brightening your day, brightening our day.

Lately, I've been reflecting on Africa's place in the world. Africa has immense potential to harness its own resources and capabilities, to address its challenges and build a prosperous future. By embracing homegrown solutions, the continent can reduce its dependency on developed countries and create sustainable development pathways tailored to its unique needs. Its young people are the most connected ever. Through them can be ushered a new age of pan-African synergy. Collaboration among African nations is crucial for maximizing on the continent's talent. African countries can share knowledge, expertise, and best practices. They can work together to address common challenges, they can find innovative ways to take advantage of new technologies. The last in the series of letters is my letter to Africa, otherwise named, "If it Was Up to Me."

If it was up to me, Africa would have declared its existence in a whisper. But our humanity is like loudspeakers so colourful and loud that the outside world began to take more than just pictures, erected systems that stripped us of ourselves, while claiming to hide our nakedness, made us victims of a sickness that severed our connectedness and, as they undressed us, October's hands patted us down, as if we had stolen our birthright, and that somewhere in the deep pockets of our melanin they will find grave so dark, so black, like our skin, to bury us in. If it was up to me, each compass point would confess to the biographies lost at gunpoint., give up the totems of each broken slave, surrender each wave that leapt out of the sea to wipe off surnames, torn from the back of trees where countless were hung from tips of their native tongues. Each compass point would confess to the coordinates of those myths that that virus is permanently on our conscience, but silenced by our songs and dances. Naked drums scattered across the Atlas echoing different flavours of blackness, dancing to the beat of

our humanity so colourful and loud, way before tongue in cheek speeches from leeches that justified employers riches, way before tires screeching. midnight lynchings, and wise teachers missing from the classrooms of each generation, only if it was up to me. But pray it is not up to me. I ask tormenting questions. If it was up to me, I might ask who weaponized my identity? If it was up to me, I might ask how many college degrees does it take to be free? If it was up to me, I might ask who holds the master key? But honestly, deep down, all I want to ask is simply, what hand guides the blue now from Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt? Is there some database above or below that holds the footprint and glow of the entire Bantu people whose noses are bridges to the breath of ancient times? I want to ask, do the Khoisan hide medicines that have never been found ever since, ever since healers changed surnames and their sceptres exchanged hands? Simple questions. As curious as the eyes of those that have dreamed of the motherland and never been. Or the African with my soul who idolizes Scarface in a hustle he never wins. If you've ever watched an African child play, you would know that all the artificial intelligence could not compute even a minute fraction of the innocence. We all wish upon a star in a reality that tempers with our galaxy, until our universe is the black market of what it used to be. But I still know of some who, if it were up to them, they would invest all their savings in this craving to be free. Free like the voices of the griot in Mali that shoulder the secrets of the ancients, the way the hills that surround Kigali in Rwanda carry tea plantations of infinite wonder, free like arrows from hunters of the Hadza people in Tanzania that stare elephants in the eyes and wipe away their memory, free like birds made of soapstone from the Zimbabwe ruins, which fly into the lucid dreams of young men like love letters from the dead, free to dream the dreams of Miriam Makeba, Patrice Lumumba, Nina Simone, Tomas Sankara, Pilsan Dwanbwe, Marcus Garvey, Wangari Maathai, Yaa Asantewaa, Quinsey Na, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo, Winnie Mandela and all the dreamers combined, and as clear of mind is Dr. Samuel Achilefu, the Nigerian scientist that developed the glasses that see cancer cells, the deep wells of all the aspirations underneath our breath, in our chest, screaming it's up to us, it's up to us, it's up to us.

In closing, I'd love to thank you all for giving my words home. Let us all be reminded of the remarkable strength that resides within the human spirit. We are complex machines, capable of transforming lives, overcoming adversity, and embracing change. The human spirit is resilient. It possesses a remarkable capacity to adapt and grow, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. We are not bound by our past, nor are we limited by our circumstances. We can reinvent ourselves, and such reinvention requires courage. It demands self-reflection, it begs of us a willingness to confront our weaknesses, and a commitment to continue growth. Healing too is a profound journey. We have an innate capacity to heal ourselves, to find solace in the depths of our being, and to emerge stronger, wiser, and more compassionate. Here's my final poem, entitled "We are Complex Machines."

Remember the next time that you break down that you are a complex machine, and that the tools that it takes to put you back together again are not made of metal but soft things that do not weigh much on the scales used by this world to measure our worth. We are boundless, weightless, and your birth is a magical musical note to complete the rhythm of all creation. You are a complex machine. Breaking down is necessary because we are made of very delicate breaths held together with the silken ropes of extremely fragile heartbeats, each trying to connect to the next with as little heavy breathing as possible, not struggling for air, but fumbling for a strength that holds together our bodies just long enough to exhale. Because we have a lifelong contract with trees, a promise that these lungs, although not made of bark, the branches that hold them in place in our chest, will suck in each morsel of oxygen and help us proclaim at the top of those same lungs, that we are here voluntarily, that we are not forcing this living thing, that we did not arrive in this world kicking and screaming, but that it was the world that started yelling in our faces in a language we couldn't recognize. And when we became traumatized, the world still charged us for inventing our own language of love. That in our several attempts to find meaning, life was hurling stones at our engines, and since we are not grindstone machines, we broke down. But those same stones that the world threw at us over time, we use them to build the mountains you see in front of you right now. Because rather than be buried underneath them,

we built ourselves a fortress, erected rock statues out of ourselves instead of become stone-hearted. We are complex machines. There are parts of us that cannot be replaced. There are tiny screws in us that cannot be mimicked, the mechanics of our being need more than a simple oil change. We repair our brokenness by making poems out of ourselves, wind chimes that dance from the raging feet of our resilient love songs. We are smart, complex machines, putting the A-R-T in art, never in artificial.

This has been Mbonisi Zikhali, otherwise known as Zomkhonto. Stay curious, stay inspired, and keep exploring.

HOST:

So how are you feeling lost souls? You're learning a lot, huh? Not a better bag of bones in limbo to drop truth on you than your old friend Bone Daddy. My methods are immaculate, my wisdom unparalleled, and my coolness, well. That goes without question doesn't it? You're lucky that you got me here cats and kittens, dogs and dittens. Without me you'd be really lost lost souls. But don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. What are you jabbering about, Daedalus? Of course I'm staying right here. Same as it ever was. Okay, same as it's been, then. What's the difference? Either way, everybody ought to know that I'll still be kicking around to help them figure out their messy little minds. Oh, very funny, D. If I needed that I'd just do it for myself. Cool recognizes cool. And besides, I don't need any help. And your chattering sure ain't doing that. I don't know what you're talking about D, and I don't like your tone. Buzz off, buzzard, I'm busy. You, lost souls. You stay lost, okay? Old Bone Daddy's just gonna, just gonna sift the orbs a bit. Let's see...

Lili Robinson - Kindling

The piece you're about to listen to, "Kindling," is inspired by the post-apocalyptic novel *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, and borrows some ideas from it, including the concept of the drug Pyro, which in the novel is described as making watching fires better than sex. In the novel, use of Pyro has become an epidemic amongst people living in poverty, and surviving middle-class and wealthy neighbourhoods are regularly destroyed by fires set by groups of people addicted to Pyro. These people are called "paints" in the book, but referred to as Pyros, the same as the drug's name, in this piece.

I tell Asha how the cities used to glow at night, hundreds of tiny boxes of light across a treeless concrete horizon. She doesn't believe me when I tell her how the lights were so bright that they washed out the stars. She's never known that fluorescent buzz feeling, electricity on that kind of a scale. It's been four months of us here with this community next to the river. Asha's fitting in fast. Myself? Not so much. No surprise there. There's a research facility upstream that counts the salmon. This year, the researchers said the numbers were the highest they've been in 50 years. The cities are still fucked, but out here in the woods, you can see things starting to recover. I want to say that that's what I'm doing too, getting better. The people who've spent more time with the stewards, the people who get to spend time around them, they talk about this feeling of being a part of the earth. That's how they describe it. A part of the earth. And, I can see it in them, I just can't feel it. These people have been lucky. In other places the stewards have just kicked everyone off their territories and said that's that. You can't blame them. This group's just lucky the elders in the area were willing to give them a chance. Same way we're lucky this community was willing to take us in, I guess. Moving forward in a good way. A steward said something like that at the welcome, which was beautiful, but there was a fire burning over in the woods across the river, and I just couldn't quite focus on what was being said.

I didn't get rid of all of it, Taz.

Do you remember that first summer, when we went up into the interior? We just watched everything blaze. We didn't have to do anything, the fires there were already going. No fault, no blame. At least not directly. At least not on us. We just fucked while the forest roared. You remember that sound, crazy loud? And like, like another texture of orgasm. And the smell. There's a sweetness to it. It's what's nearly got me so many times over the past year. The smell of smoke brings me right back to you. As far as the community heads know, I haven't touched Pyro in a year, which is pretty much true. I haven't been high in a year, as of next week. But, you'd better believe I've held the leftover tabs in my hand and wished. Now, there's this. A box of matches. Last night, the other one of us here, Aiken, took off. We weren't exactly friends, but we understood each other. At first no one else noticed he was gone. I went to his tent. Bedroll gone, but lots of other stuff left behind, including these. Matches, which you'd think he'd have wanted to keep a hold of. These few communities willing to take in Pyros, of course they're gonna keep anything that makes a flame under lock and key. Not easy to find a box of these out here. But maybe he didn't even leave to get high. Maybe he just couldn't handle the self-righteousness of this place a single second longer. I know the feeling. If it weren't for Asha, I might have fucked off out of here by now, too. So I took them, the matches. Slipped them into my tent, tucked them away where no one would find them, and pretended like I haven't been thinking about them every minute since.

Sometimes I wonder, did it feel good? I mean, of course it couldn't have, but you know, you would have been right in the middle of it. In a way you never could have been before, right? And from there, watching the flames reaching up all around you, it must have felt like, like everything. The worst pain and the best high you could possibly imagine. A spectacular end. How the fuck could you do it without me, Taz?

The camp people, they resent me for surviving. Of everyone who's died in all these disasters and sicknesses, I get to live. Me. A Pyro, a killer, kid snatcher. Asha's parents had trusted me. I was the one who carried her. That connection doesn't just go away. That motherhood is just as real. For a while,

they understood that. They could have just given me the money and put me back out onto the street, but they saw how important it was for us to be with each other. They let me take care of her. Stay at their house, babysit her. You remember. You were almost jealous, this new life of mine. And then, things got bad. And they decided it would be better for her not to know me anymore.

I don't know if you know, I don't know if you knew what torture that was for me. Being kept away from her. But why would you have noticed? Suddenly we were always just trying to get high again. It didn't matter why. And then, the night you died. We didn't know those other Pyros well enough, Taz. But we wanted to go hard, and we knew that that was what those guys did. Burn the rich, right? Those middle-class fuckers. They don't care if we die, so why should we care about them? Then that night, we were so fucking high, feeling so fucking powerful, running around, watching these big houses burn. And you must have gotten too close. I knew something was wrong, I could tell. And so I'm trying to find you with these houses exploding all around me and I'm thinking, why are these places so familiar? I hadn't realized what part of the city we'd gotten to. We'd been moving so fast. I hadn't realized how close we were to my baby girl. And then she's there, walking up to me, looking for her mother. And I knew we had to go. It's taken us a long time to find people who will let us stay for more than a few weeks. But it's been easier since I quit. And Asha's happy here. She feels safe. There's good food, clean water, teams to keep watch at night. And now that someone else is taking care of all that, I just wish I was with you.

You told me once that grief is something that catches you when you're not looking. That if you're feeling empty, it means you're safe. It hasn't caught you yet. And then you smiled at me. And you said, grief will cut you up. But love will kill you. But what you didn't tell me, what I've learned? Taz, grief is just another face of love. I was falling for you then. And it's killing me now. We did unforgivable things, Taz. You think we're even now? With the universe? You, burnt to a crisp, and me, having to live with that. To stay here, alive, with all the shit we've done. I don't know which is worse. I want to say you didn't feel too much when the fire took you, but I don't know how much the Pyro would have helped the pain. But I

know that what was left of you is growing into something else now. Fireweed where we used to be, Taz. Think of that. You know that fireweed, it helps a place to be more fire resistant? It grows where fires have been, but it also adapts, resistant to burns. These kids are like fireweed, Taz. All the shit that we've destroyed, they're growing up in the wake of it. Holding the soil together, going out roots so the whole world doesn't just blow away. Some new things can be nourished and start to grow.

When Asha's in the river with the other kids playing, I look at them. And for a second, I can believe that there's a way forward that doesn't end up with us right back in the shit again. You can tell that most of us adults wish we could just go back to the way things were before. But these kids, they never knew that shit. And it's like they're clearer for it. Not hooked on some endless dopamine loop of technology and media and consumption. Maybe there's less pleasure in their lives. But there's more peace. And these kids, Taz, they know how to listen. Things are so much quieter now. And they know how to feel for the world around them in ways we never dreamed. And I try to get quiet. I try, Taz. I try to listen, I try to feel myself as part of the earth. It's like learning to pronounce a sound that doesn't exist in the language you were raised in. That sound and all of its significance has always been there. But if you didn't grow up with it, it's something you have to work to learn how to hear.

No electric lights out here. Asha and the other kids wash their faces by starlight. Do you remember what that felt like, Taz? The light of the stars? Something burning, so far away, so long ago. It feels almost like nothing at all.

HOST:

Ah okay. I need another, I need another memory, I need another memory orb. Ah, well. Well I'm fine lost souls, don't worry about it. I'm just doing the one thing that we can do here. That is what we are here for, that is what we can do. Sorry. Just a, just a little tired, lost souls. Just gotta find another memory orb, gotta get my skull on straight again. Oh yeah, this one. Yeah. Yeah, I think we ought to

see this one together. Take a look at this, lost souls. There's this gal, walking the mean wet streets of a cold and rainy night. It's a mean, mean world out there. And her, she's looking meaner. Take a look at her hand, brothers, sisters, and siblings. She's got a silver piece in there, and I'm not talking about a coin. I'm talkin a revolver. She's walking through the alleys. Take a look at her eyes. They're glowing just as silver, like moons, crescents in her head. She's far gone, daddio. She's over the moon with a spoon and all. There ain't nothing better get in her way. And what's this? She comes across a little gang of greasers holding court in the alley, all jivin and going on and on, tossing back bottles and tossing bottles. The pop pop of all the glass, well it startles her a bit. But she don't know what she's seein. Just sprays of iridescent light, shattering pieces flying down from bricks. It's awful scary for a moon-eyed person. The greasers, they start to hear her muttering to herself. But they hear too late. But just in time to hear click click. Boom. Boom, boom, boom. There goes the gang. Sorry there, kiddos. Guess this coin toss just wasn't in your favour. It's good to look at memories like this, lost souls. Good to look at the real people on that side of the veil.

Do you ever sit there, just thinking to yourself, you know, why do those bugging creeps got what I don't? You dig what I mean, you dig what I mean, I know you do, wayward souls. You're sitting here in nothingsville, you, me, all of us in this court of lost and lingering limboers, and you can't help but remember it, man. Those fat cats, those squares, those cubes, they always had their pockets and pads stuffed to the brim. And where were you, you know? Outside looking in, always outside. But what those people inside don't get, dig, is that they can hardly see into our world in the shade for how bright theirs is. But us? Oh, my slinkin kinksters, we see the light and we know that it's just sitting there for the takin. And that's just what one lost soul did, my skeletal siblings. Rule five? Find the light, baby. Let me tell you about the thief, my fine femurs. See, this was a soul who rang with a vibration that I could not help but resonate with. There was something about their vibe and vibrations that was all too familiar in some way. And when this shadowy surreptitious skeletal soul slinked their way towards my stomping grounds, all the other souls cleared the way. I saw Daedalus circling behind them, callin like mad, then I

saw them handling something. "Not like I need any help remembering." So I looked into this memory, and in it I saw someone with little more meat on their bones than the skeleton I saw before me. Daggers for eyes, daggers for teeth, daggers for cheekbones. They'd look awful cool if they couldn't send a chill right up your spine. This was the thief, looking at the world of the squares and the cubes with the proper level of disdain. Looking in from the out and starving for what they saw in the light. And let me tell you, captive carpals, there's only so long you can take in that kind of oppressive hunger before you need to take a bite. And bite they did. The thief took to the craft with the swiftness of an animal to its most primal abilities. Like a bird to flight, they found themselves whispering into windows, dancing past doors, and cuddling coin purses without a second thought. They knew what they needed. They knew where it was. And they solved for that simple equation, soul siblings. Soon enough, they had pockets fatter than the cats they were playin. They had a pad that would make a penthouse blush. They had everything they were starving for and more. And they were good, right? Hell, they were great. I told them so myself. "No, there was nothing good about what I did. The good only came later." What was it they were talking about, lost souls? Well, it wasn't long before they looked around at where they were, at who they were, and realized they were in the light. They were inside. But now they were the one blinded, although sharp eyes and sharp cheekbones were just outside their window. And that got to them. So the thief started copping harder than ever before. Anything that was worthy of a headline in its absence was worthy of their sticky little fingers. Things were going like gangbusters. And for what? For who? Well, I saw that thief funnelling every last bit of the wealth they grew into the hungry lives of those they came from, satiating stomachs and spirits all around with the ill-gotten gains they snatched up. A real Robin Hood move, you know? But you get a little crazy when you're on that kind of roll, right? I tell you, lost souls, there's no high like a real spree, slinking deadly just under the snouts of the pigs. The thief, see, they reached too far and landed themselves in a tight little penitentiary. No more sticky fingers. No more stomachs fed. They told me, "If I could do it all again, I'd put them all first." And it wasn't long after that I wasn't seeing them anymore. Off to the shores of new life beyond. But I don't know why. Because they sure as hell didn't get the lesson, babies. The thief found the light. But they

screwed the whole pooch to hell. They had it all, and they threw it all away. And for what? Some little grubs? That's gotta be a joke. Don't you start, Daedalus. What's a crow know about it, anyways? Yeah, you may know your way around the orbs and things that shine, but you'll never get what it means to take a life at gunpoint, to take your time, and take all your time back that the light just take, take, takes. Now that's cool.

Gabbi Greco - MINDFUL MOMENT 5 SMILE

It's time to slow things down. For a mindful moment. With programsound. This mindful moment is dedicated to smiling. First, let's get ourselves into a comfortable position. Sitting on the ground on a chair, lying on the floor, on a bed, couch, whatever feels good. Allow your eyes to close. Relax your jaw, shoulders, and any other tension you might feel in your body. Take a big breath in and out. Start by calling attention to moments that have made you smile. Maybe it was the act of kindness you saw between two strangers, or coming home to your tail wagging pet. Or maybe it's the song you and your friends sang at karaoke one night. For me, it's thinking about connecting with listeners like you from around the country. I'll give you a few moments to think of some of your own. When we feel good, we smile. But also when we smile, we feel good. So even if you're having a difficult time thinking of a moment, the act of smiling itself can actually bring on positive feelings. It all works through sensory motor cues. A smile also releases tiny molecules from your brain called neuropeptides. These molecules help to fight off stress. Give it a try. Smiling is pretty awesome. And so are you. Let's gently open our eyes. And together take one big final breath, all the way in, and all the way out. I hope this brought some peace to your day. And thanks for joining the final mindful moment. With programsound.

HOST:

Hey, lost souls. Get those coins out again. I know you still got them. Two coins. Vamos. Got them? Good. Now you get that chump change ready for one last coin toss. We're throwing bones. We've handled all the pointlessness of time. But what does that matter anyways, right? It's small time. Dreaming's for dreamers, punks, and we're wide awake here in limbo. Wide awake, bored. So take one of those coins in your hand and huck it and grab it and just throttle it. Hold it there in the dark where nobody can't ever know what it's got to say. Time bends to you and nobody else. You reign, baby. You rule. Nobody can tell you otherwise. But that mouthy little coin has got one thing to tell you. Were you ever really alive? Yes or no. Yes or no. Carve the answers into the sides of that instrument of fate and unleash Pandora's box. Open your hand and find out if your life was a life at all. What did you expect? What did you get? Not always one and the same. But we're not done there, my lost souls. No, no, no, no. You got one more coin to flip, and this time, I'll tell you just what's been decided. Heads. You do the thing. You come and you go. You bloom once more in the garden of shit called existence. You step through the door of tomorrow to start life once again. You pay the ferryman's toll and you leave limbo. Tails. You stay here with me. You and Bone Daddy, lounging in limbo forever. An eternity of eternity, holding court with the coolest cool you've ever known. It'll be a gas. You ready? Well, even if you're not, toss it kid and catch your life sentence and hold it. This is the last decision you might ever make. How does that feel? Every possibility for you has been distilled down to this one toss and you don't have a lick of a say in it. That's a real drag, huh? And that's life. Are you ready? Because... You're the most lost souls I've ever met. You were really going to put that decision in the hands of a damn coin toss? That is too far out, boneheads. I can't believe you fell for that. Putting all that weight into a piece of metal. You are too much, children. What kind of fool lays their eternity at the feet of a game? That's rich. Oh, come off it, Daedalus, I'm just having a laugh. That's all of this is anyways. A big old joke. And you don't mind, do you lost souls? What's a joke between old friends, huh? If you can't laugh at this goddamn joke of a—

Doesn't matter. I'm done with kids' games.

Sometimes, lost souls. Sometimes you can't help but see the darkness of limbo. All of us here. We know what true dark is, dig. We know the blackest blackness. Because it came for us, and we went. We went here. This place that we all end up someday. This place that swims with tides of ink and depths of shadow. The orbs of memory and wisps of souls, just a grain on the shores of oblivion. This place that is ever more, ever more. But then sometimes, sometimes you want it darker. Sometimes you need it darker. And that darkness will guide you where you were meant to be. Isn't that right, Daedalus? Nah, nah, you're remembering it wrong, D. That's what you're here for. This is my purpose. My guiding beacon from the dark to the dark to become the skeleton I am today. The one that you all need, know, and love. The dark is the only thing to thank. Rule six punks. Find the dark. Let me tell you all about this cat, dogs. This is a good one. So dig this, right? Saddest soul I ever did see this side of the veil. Comes in here wailing, inconsolable. Like he felt every second of his skeleton popping out his flesh suit. Bad mojo from the get go, babies. But Bone Daddy don't judge. I'm here for all to answer the call. So I swim on over to him and ponder, what's with the horn section pops? Looks at me like I'm a goddamn ghoul, like he's not looking the exact same, jittering and jiving about like some nutcase. "Why am I here?" He's moaning and twitching. Cause you're here, man, I says to him. But he's not buying, just clutches his skull like Horatio and glares like no tomorrow, which there ain't. And right on cue, Daedalus here hits me with the square's memory orb. Not really looking forward to it. But hey, I'm a man of the soul. And I soon find out, so was this cat. The priest. This steamwhistle was a godforsaken priest, literally. See, I got a good gaze into this orb. And what I saw was a broken man. The priest was a man of god, alright. But god was not a man of him. This square doted on every word of his little Bible from cradlehood, spent his days poring over it, living it, loving it, never laughing. Never missed a sermon, never missed a psalm, as devoted as they come. And what did the priest get for it? Well, first off, he was one of those lucky little Bible thumpers that could have himself a wife. And that good old wife of his got sick. Bedridden years before he laid her down. Not to mention two kids, a little nuclear boy and girl hit by a car outside the church while their grieving father was trying to figure out how to give them the news about mommy dearest. Through that all, through that all, man, he still held that Bible right at his heart,

reading every last syllable. He still held tied to those dusty words and hymns. He held his head heavenly high, knowing there had to be a reason, right? That big ol plan, yeah? Then his eyes went. Not a slow dance of a thing. Out like a light, gone. All at once. He couldn't see that big bad JC statue, couldn't see his trusty good book, couldn't see the point. And that's when he came to the realization, if all this could get shot at the president of the fan club, if all this suffering was rewarded with more suffering, if such holy sights fleeted like so many fair-weather friends. Maybe there was nothing to see. Maybe Job was just some schmuck so that all the shepherds would have schmucks to herd. And that made the priest laugh. And that made the priest cry. And that made the priest drink. He downed bottle after bottle like he thought he'd find new peepers at the bottom. The world floated on by him like reefer smoke and gasoline puddles. I looked up from the orb at him and saw that hollowed soul gazing along. "I didn't want to remember what I'd seen. I was trying to drown the light." And I smiled at him. Nah, daddio. You were trying to find the dark. And you did. Congratulations. And he wailed, and he wailed. I don't get it, man. The priest figured out the biggest truth and found out just how sweet oblivion can be, and he just can't stand it. Oh, he's still around here somewhere. He sure as hell never left. Probably never will. What, you think I can save everyone? I'm your daddy, not your padre.

c.p. maze - Loaded Dice

Hello, world. My name is c.p. maze. Once a Marine, always a Marine. I rock the vest of poet proudly. Shout outs, shout outs to Laurence Maher, for playing the music behind this narration. Shout outs, shout outs to programsound. For without you, we wouldn't even be here. I got a poem for you. It's titled Loaded Dice I am not the one. Let's start off this narration having a little fun. Last year, last year, I was voted most likely not to succeed with second chances. Currently, currently, I hold the world's record for most failed attempts at saying I love you when it counts. I catered all the merlot, manna, and mustard

seeds for the final farewell party Jesus threw at his last supper. Hey. Never ask angels auctioning off your prayers if they were just bored and needed something else to do. Last night, last night I caught a glimmering glimpse of a suicidal firefly flicking off its own light switch and cried. Can't explain why in my second past life I was first to throw Yeshua a baby shower, but I did. Can't explain why he got kicked out of heaven, maybe hell just did and Satan needed a second job y'all. Can't explain why turning water into wine turned wiseman into winos, maybe Jesus was just being too flashy. I'm a gambling, I'm a gambling going all in God's got a good feeling, I'm not playing by the house rules anymore. I'ma drop a coin inside my slot machine mouth and you betta yank that lever knowing I brought thunderstorms with me. A poker face player playing with a pair of loaded dice for eyes. I'm a misplaced safe bet, hey, miracle called, raising money for folk who can't afford to go to heaven, as if Christ forgot what it cost him to get there. I'ma make no mistakes, sultry, sexy, top-shelf, expensive liquid pour of the river Styx in the dirty water glass. A firefly full off a fifth of lighter fluid getting drunk in the lighthouse with the lights out. Say I ain't. A missing teeth midnight hummingbird's gospel prayer sung in a lisp that the Lord can't understand. I'ma sit, sit, sitting silently next to several saints in the nosebleed section searching for God. I am telling marginal, from margin to margin. Make no mistake, I am a monster made out of saliva, snake venom, spit. Mouth of a madman with the mad man's mouth-to-mouth madness of a mind matching Ghandi's grit. Know my graceful exit sign smile sleeps comfortably underneath the bottom of God's untied shoes. Though I doubt Daddy didn't know we'd missed our pearly gate curfew because Christ confiscated all of our fake IDs. No, no, no, no. Point me to the closest Wal-Mart, I heard Let's Make America Great Again is coming with Rollback prices. Noah, point me to the slave trade with the slave ships and that middle passage that made America greater. From the joke Mr. Trump I can rival a rival on arrival. With Jesus, a Bible as the only two American idols I keep in my rifle. The last time my self-worth left Earth it came back with skeleton bones as a snack. Last night I caught a glimmering glimpse of a suicidal firefly. Flicking off its own light switch. And cried. Poem.

So yeah, Charles Daniel Perry Jr., known in the artistic world as c.p. maze, known in the Marine Corps world as C.P. Maze, but if it was a rank thing, you know, you would call me Sergeant Perry, right? So I'm in the United States Marine Corps and, at the time, I'm a sergeant. And we're coming back from our second tour overseas. And the last place we hit coming back to the States is a city called Rota, Spain. So Spain, their economy is built upon us service people going there. Like, that's what this city is kind of holding onto for its character, you know, that's what it's known for. So we're coming back across, you know, to the United States, have to hit Rota, Spain. The last night there we're on a midnight curfew. That means, hey, Marines, hey, Navy seaman. Don't go out there starting anything that we can't finish and be done with by the end of the night. You have a midnight curfew, don't tear up the city. We need to leave without having an international incident, right? So my buddy, it was his birthday, and I remember we were looking for a place to party at. And we come across a taxi cab driver, and he's like, oh, yeah, I know a club, I know a club, I'll take you, I'll take you. So we have hop in this cab, right, and we drive for what seems like 30 or 40 minutes, and we're in the boondocks. I mean, the sticks, I mean, the forest line, I mean, we're deep, deep, deep in the woods. And all of a sudden, out of nowhere, pow, a club appears. Pretty big one too. So we get there, having a couple of drinks, we see more and more, you know, people from our tour coming into the building. As the night progresses, though, we started realizing like, hey, it's becoming kind of late, and we need to start figuring out a way to get back home to the ship before we get into trouble. So we kept asking the bartender, hey, can you call a cab for us? And the bartender would be like si, si, si, cab, yeah. So he'll call the cab for us, but the cabs never came. So we end up coming across one specific bartender who just checked in, this beautiful lady, and she told us on the side, like he's not calling the cabs for you. The longer you guys stay here, the more money he's gonna make. Oh yeah, it's also a brothel. Hookers and prostitutes work there. It wasn't a club, it was a front for a brothel. So now we're trying to get people to get cabs, get back to the ship, we're facing a midnight curfew, break. So we're out there, we're out there, we're out there trying to get cabs, none of the cabs are coming. Me and the two Marines underneath me go to the back where the manager's office was, and my buddy, he spoke Spanish. So I was like, explain to this guy in Spanish

the words that I am saying. Let him know that if he does not get cabs out to this club to get us back to our ship, we will tear your entire club apart. Make no mistake about it. We are United States Marines, you do not want that to happen. Naturally, he end up calling cabs. So by the time the cabs came and got us all, we got back to the ship, it was way past midnight curfew. I'm being read my rights, you know, you have the right to remain silent, you know, you have the right to an attorney. And we're being read all these rights. But we were the ones who got everybody else back to the ship safe. We refused to get on a cab, unless everybody else we knew who trained with us and did operations with us was on a cab first. So that got us getting there back, you know, past midnight. So we get read our rights. And I remember this first sergeant was like, so you guys are turning down, you know, getting the lawyer, and we were like, we got the best lawyer in the business, and pointed up to God like, yeah, God's got us, because we didn't do anything wrong. We were making sure the Marines and seamen got back home safe. So the very next day, they're bringing us up for a court martial. We get called in first, explain the scenario, and the CO says, if it wasn't for you guys, most of these guys outside would be in the brig. You guys did wonderful. Oorah, oorah. Fast forward, I'm in Charlotte, North Carolina. I'm taking poetry a little bit more seriously. It's something that a buddy of mine believed in wholeheartedly, and he lost his life. He was murdered. Right before my second tour. So I started taking this craft a whole lot more serious. So fast forward, we're in Charlotte, North Carolina Arts District, NoDa Arts District, and I'm running an open mic for the last like two or three years. So we have a production company that rocks out on Thursday in the arts district, but the open mic is on the Tuesday. So like learning and going to school and all the college stuff I learned about writing and rhetoric and rules and all of that, I can figure out what's beautiful about any poem, depending on what criticism I apply to the poem. So these two cats one night, you know, because you live that rockstar lifestyle when you're a host, and you get free drinks, and people are buying you this and that. And this guy's like, yo, I got, I write poems too, I write poems too, Maze. I was like, alright, cool, cool, cool, you got to bring them by sometimes, let me hear them. He's like, no, we stayin right around the corner. So, grab my skateboard, we walk across the street and down the corner to the spot him and his buddy was at. Now, we're talking three, big, stocky,

country, corn-fed, redneck kind of looking people. And I'm sitting down at the table, and I'm listening to poems with my eyes closed, just vibing to what these guys are writing. Come to find out, they're fresh out the penitentiary, fresh out of doing time in jail. I look up and look to my left there was mountains upon mountains of cocaine. There were guns sitting over here. Serial numbers scratched off of guns stashed over there. But at that moment, nothing else mattered but the art. You got poems, I wrote poems too, let's hear em. Fast forward that night. Later on that night, after realizing I could have easily went to jail, I find myself on top of this warehouse with a bunch of other artists from Concrete Generation. We're loading up instruments by pulling them up the side of the building by a rope. It's about 12, 15 of us on top of this roof, and we're staring into the beautiful moonlight, and we're reading poems, and people are sitting on the ground and gravel top of the building. They're writing poems, writing songs, the cellos, the guitars, like, all the instruments up there, we were creating magic, as if we didn't have to abide by the rules that this world lived upon. And we were honest with each other. We got more in common than we got different. I hurt like you hurt, she broke my heart, like he broke my heart. And I started realizing that this art form, it was a lot like the court martial. When you have the best lawyer in the business, you don't have to worry about copywriting what's beautiful in your world. God's taken care of that already. As we spit poems to the midnight sun, it was gorgeous. The next day, I got published, and this is the piece. For a magazine.

Eardrum echoes. Last dance kisses and goosebump breath. Your solar-scented skin slips and slides across should have, would have beens, like back-flipping fingers all fickle-flicked and I dare you to find me or forgive me again. I'm not here, but then again, you've never been all there. So sell me a smooth lie I could curl up with in the corners of your mouth. Swing at every insecurity hurled and fastballed and projected towards you, for you've never been one to play games. But you're damn good at walling a wallow and winning anyways. That's why curtain calls, voicemail miracles, in your name. Our imaginations hop date in each other into the backwash of a brunch Thursday. We planted our conversations inside the fields of each other's irises, getting to the bottom of each other's beautiful,

squaring up each other's roots while watering down colourful margaritas with our top-shelf self. I lost my self in you. Told heartbeat to tell my inner voice to beat the life out of my eardrum within. If you don't make it back to me before this night's over I will throw caution against the patiently and smell your sweet back to me. I don't know who you were in your past life but I can tell by the way you shoot me shotgun looks you've killed many of love's maybes with the moons of so what before. You know how there's something special, right, about being in a foreign city that allows you to be a kid again. Your mouth is that foreign city that allows all of my lovesick to become kid again. I stacked and saved up all of my mistakes in past relationships just so I could afford to not make the same mistakes which are skin. If I gave up the fight or flight back to my sober self, sling-shoot me down with a whisper and remind me to try again. Golden chairs, buckled bath wash, mutant moments scream for our deepest secrets to be heard by anyone but our self. Honesty left you silk-worm condoms on the I-don't-understand nightstand with the note that read, thanks for the smooth ride. Sincerely yours, your rocky times. Water-coloured brush symbols fill up from the ground. Can I lay by your side and wrap whispers around the symphony of your ribcage? I want to sleep with the lights on in your conscience. Could you see the I'm yours in my hello? Senses are sheet music when I'm around you. Linen, listen to me. Lay paradise down into the parade of passion floating waves across vain streets of loneliness. We've both fucked our way across burning bridges before so this time shouldn't be as difficult as your down-trodded, upbeat, crooked, bow-legged orgasm that never learned to shoot straight or narrow anyways. I want nothing more than to grasp at the God-given ghost haunting your hip bones, but that can only happen if you learn to let go of your past and hold onto me. And by me I mean now, and by now I mean love. I don't want to wait for shallow waters to run deep. Oh, swift kick universe, chinny chin chinning above these treetops, I know your alarm clocks are made out of recycled human beings falling in and out of love, not making a sound. 'Tis the season of salt shakers, and save your wounds for the thrift stores that were born wanting to live here. We should never try to perfect a double-dutch decker of chessboard-checkered front-yard lawns. Someway, someday soon, it's going to explode. Taurus tickle, I miss you. I miss the tinder of skin between your left-hand fingers holding mine. I never kissed a guitar

riff that's smooth as yours. The sky looks pissed, and the raindrops are tossing up their graduation hats into the cloudy horizon of the future's bright. And it's yours. I can smell the limit of your love across the careless truth of dare that's become my name. Have you ever seen a whisper in slow motion? Have you ever read a smile that's only been considered a foreign language? Your wrists are out of place caterpillars that crawl across the save me from hitting the road to nowhere again, or hitting the brick wall of your I can't forget to let you close to me and that's okay, it really is. It's really the only reason I stayed up so late last night in my prison stitching together all of the dirty laundry we've both acquired. I use the tattered, battered bedsheets and bleach-worn hearts ripped from sleeves and climbed out of the window of why not just stay filthy. I want to run through fresh cut grass and bowls and drink lovers' spit until liquor stores open up. Lewd and crass, sensual and organic, obscene and salacious, Crayola purple silence, a Jesus drink special you've become

HOST:

Yeah, what do you want, Daedalus? I'm not really in the mood. What do you mean, lost? I'm the most found person here, D. Looking for something? Since I got here? You. What do you mean some *thing* I lost? Spit it out, D. Daedalus. Daedalus. What is this?

- Heads we wait the rain out here, and tails we drive back down into the rat race.

- Zoo.

- Look at that. Heads. Guess we better huddle up for warmth.

- I know when you're using your trick coin

- Oh well, you know, sometimes it's up the fate. And sometimes fate needs a little nudge.

- Zoo.

- What is it, Laurel baby?

- Where did you go, daddio?

- What do you mean, Laurel?

- You know what I mean.

- I'm the same cat I've always been. You should know that, you know, you know me, man, you dig the real me.

- I did. But I think I dug so deep I can't see the sky anymore. The past's no gift when that leaves the present, and I don't know who I'm looking at anymore.

- Laurel.

- You used to be so full of life, light, and colours, Zoo. I always knew you were real blue, real noir. But the terror I see in your eyes, of everything you've done, and everything you're gonna do. It's those real Tenebrae blues now. It's all black and blue without a fleck of the world outside shining through. You're a bruise that refuses to heal.

- What's all this jive, Laurel. Are trying to paint me a picture? Come off of it.

- You're a garden of ice and I'm scared that nothing can bloom in you any more.

- Flowers, colours, whatever, whatever man. You're, you're talking my head in circles, girl.

- Please, Zoo. You have to know that you've changed, too. You have to see that. If you can't even see that, I don't know what else I can say to you.

- Yeah. Yeah, you know what I have changed, right? You know, because I've, I've finally smartened up. Look at this world, Laurel. Look at this dim little hole we call a life. Look, look at the ways the black hole of existence just swallows everything that we have left. We kill time, we kill time, we kill time, we kill time, and then it's dead. Dig? No, no. It's worse than that. Because we kill it. And we kill it, and we kill it, and we kill it, and it just doesn't die. So what's the lowdown, then? So what's the goddamn point?

- Living. That's the only point we get, baby. And it's got to be good enough.

- Well, it's not. I'm sick of just living. And I'm not about to do it on borrowed time. I'm gonna, I'm gonna take it all back, Laurel baby. I'm gonna fix it all. And I'm gonna hold a gun to the head of Aion itself right and get every wasted second back, man. No skeleton in a cloak is gonna get the jump on me, dig.

- I just don't understand. It's like you're on another plane. Like you're on some station I can't tune to anymore, like you're some lost soul. And I just want to help you. I just want to understand, and more than anything, I just want to cherish this time with you, because I know what you're staring down. I want to make some last brushes together. I want to put the daffodil back in those blues. But like this? You're scaring me, Zoo.

- If you're scared of me, then you better open up your eyes to this world, Laurel, because it's a nightmare out there. If I'm different, it's because this Bone Daddy is through being a punch line to time. I'm gonna live like a goddamn loaded gun. And it ain't my problem if anybody gets hit on my way. So you better decide if you're down for the ride.

- It doesn't have to be like this.

- Fine. We'll flip for it.

- I'm not doing this.

- Then choose, Laurel.

- When did you get so cold?

- Why don't you just walk away then, huh? If you can't even handle me anymore? What do I need you for? Just, just leave me and my Tenebrae blues, man. Maybe, maybe I'll catch you when you stop being such a square. What do I care if you get me. Maybe you never got me at all. Because I'm the same Zoo I've always been, and I always will be. In every life, in every death, in infinite realities, I'm exactly who I'm supposed to be. And one more thing, Laurel baby. I'm not cold. I'm fucking cool.

Children of the bone. Friends, lovers, sisters, brothers, siblings. My fellow lost souls. How does one reckon with true loss? With becoming truly lost? With losing it all? Your life, your love, yourself. The only way you can ever reckon with carrying that weight, cowboy. Rule seven. Be cool. But when do you know if you're too cool? Let me tell you about the most lost soul I know. The beatnik. When he got here, he was so deep down in the long dark blues that he couldn't even find his way to limbo. There was just

that basement base *evermore* ringing deep and lonesome through his every fibre he the hung there in the firmament, lost man, out of sight, out of mind. See the beatnik he lived a wild life. And I mean wild. He liked the finer things. Jazz, poetry, and living life on the edge of the edge, children. A razor so sharp you could cut eternity on it. That's where he laid his hat, dig. The beatest beatnik you ever heard of. He painted it all black and liked it that way. He was the coolest thing you never met, and he was going to make sure everybody knew it. Because the beatnik. He had a hard knock life in the Tenebrae of the world. Nothing seemed to go his way. He was dead-end dire on his best day, and on his worst? So he kept that cool up every tick of the tock, because he couldn't let those broken mirrors show. But this beat, there was one warm thing about him. The love of his life. A gal, grown from the same dirt as he was, but where he sprouted thorns, she grew flowers, man. The most golden daffodil of a darling you ever did see. And she grew as close as she could to those thorns, knowing that some plants need a little more encouraging than others. She knew that there was enough yellow inside her to match every bit of blue he threw. And he loved her. Like a pup loves the kitten. Like the moon loves the sun. Like tomorrow loves yesterday. But sometimes love isn't enough. He was sick, man. Not in the head. Well. There too, but all that cool little life of his festered on inside of him long before, and long after meeting this golden flower. And he could feel it pulling away. Every beat of his heart was a beat of the drum marching him to the grave. And that beat drove the beatnik wild. Boom, boom, boom. That's when it got bad. That's when he got bad. He knew where he was heading and all bets were off. If this world was going to take from him, he was gonna take right back. He took what he wanted. He broke what he touched. He turned his whole world to ice. He felt like he had been killing time his whole damn life, and now that time was killing him, he was willing to put a gun to its head to try and take it all back. He lost his cool. And then he lost her. And then he was lost. And he stayed that way. Maybe he's still that way. A lost soul. See, my siblings, one day, a little sound came, a caw caw at his window there in the dark. And he followed it to this glittering expanse of forever that we call home. And when that sweet corvine creature started to show him through all the little orbs that floated all around, swirling with a history of every dead little darling, he started to forget about his own. That memory got lost somewhere. He

looked around him at all these wayward wisps, and thought, now these cats could use a Bone Daddy. And so he would be. And so he is. For so long that I could hardly remember what brought me here. For so long that I could hardly think of something after here. For so long that I didn't want there to be anything after here. Because what if that tomorrow is just like yesterday? Because what if there's only one you that you know how to be? Because what if this toss is with a trick coin, when you're betting it all?

Daedalus, all I ever wanted was to be cool. But I've been here so long, I can't even tell the temperature anymore. I don't think I've been cool for a long time. Just numb. Guess a little warm does do the trick sometimes. But what if there's no more warmth? No more sun? No more daffodils. Hey, Daedalus. Where are you going? Daedalus? Daedalus. What if I'm not ready. Lost souls, I think. Man, I don't know what I think. I've had too much to think. Well, no time like the past, present, and future. Remember, children of the bone. Be cool. Call it.