

CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION 2018/19

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Every day I watch her pass by. Pass by my dwelling and stop. There's nothing special about my humble housing whatsoever. It's what most of us here live in: a small shack on the outskirts of the city.

So at first I didn't understand what seemed to be magically attracting this nondescript small girl to the grey dirty walls I spend my days in. But now, when I think about it, it makes sense: It's the lines and circles on my door that are not just lines and circles, but signs of power with a meaning.

My name is Mao and I don't know their meaning. I only know what my great aunt told me all those years ago. I remember the flashes of emotions flitting across her face when I asked about them: surprise, then anger - fear, a sprinkle of pride, maybe even hope, but finally resignation. And the resignation lasted while she answered. "You call them letters and your mother drew them on there. They have a meaning, they're signs of power. But only for those who know how to use them." Only those who know how to use them... I didn't understand, so I asked again. And this time there was only one emotion on my great aunt's face: Regret - deep, bitter regret. I will never forget her answer; but much more importantly, I will never forget the sudden dagger in her voice.

"You have to understand that there are people who are born, and they get a name like you did. But when they grow up, there comes a meaning to that name. These are the people who understand the lines and circles."

Then she added - and here the dagger cut me, "But you are not one of them. You are just Mao and you will always be Mao." With this still echoing in my head, she left the bewildered little "just me" sitting on the cold floor.

"Just me". That became my new name. When the other children played football, I watched them cheer after somebody scored. And I often thought about joining, but then I remembered that I was "just Mao"; so I stayed in my dirty corner as part of the shadows and watched from there.

Now I wonder who that girl is in her head. "Just me"? For the first time since the moment where I was left alone sitting on the cold floor, I feel curiosity rising in me like hot magma that has been withheld inside an ancient volcano for too long. I find it hard to understand myself and even harder to explain, but to me the girls has a meaning now because she makes me consider that maybe, just maybe, I'm not "just Mao" after all.

One day she looks up and sees me watching her. And I make a decision because I have been just watching for far too long. So I get up and walk the few steps to the door. I realize that her body

tenses - like a frightened antelope prepared to run any second. But I am not a predator; I won't be the cheetah to hunt her down. I try to make her feel safe, but can't stop myself ask the question I already know the answer to: "Do you understand these?" She opens her mouth, but then decides otherwise, and just shakes her head. "Would you like to know more about them?" Very carefully she nods and I can hardly catch her faint whisper. "I would love to."

It doesn't feel real when I find myself sitting down on the cold threshold and she follows my example.

While reciting all I know, I realize just how little that is and I wonder why I never thought of finding out more. The curiosity in her eyes is inconspicuous, but I can't fill the hole dying for more. Instead, I ask another question, but this I'm unable to predict her reaction. "Do you think you can find out more about them?" She seems surprised, but then a shy smile forms on her face and she answers, "I could try... I think...."

And she does. But she doesn't just try, she makes it her mission to find someone who can explain. Every day when she passes by, she stares at the lines and circles so intensely as if just that would force them into making sense. When she gives up, we talk a bit. I tell stories from my life and she takes me into her world. Her name is Amara; she lives not far from here with six sisters and brothers.

I still doubt she will find someone to explain, but I won't be the one extinct her hope. Not yet. So I wait and to my astonishment, one day, Amara is not alone. An old woman, struggling to place one leg in front of the other, follows her and they enter together. We talk about this and that first, but then everything around us loses its essences when she finally takes us into the world of lines and circles. Only the letters, of which every single one has a meaning and a sound, matter now. The letters that you can put together to make anything... When the lady finishes, she's exhausted, but we still ask if we can learn from her. She hesitates, her frown deepens, but then she smiles and answers, "I used to teach them a long, long time ago." For a moment, we watch her get lost in memories, but then she adds, "And I think I could start again."

So we start learning. It's confusing and it's complicated. Sometimes all the lines and circles just become a big knot I will never entangle. But then there are other times when I start to understand. And I am also understanding something else: I am not just MAO. Because I am also seven lines and a circle and someone learning to use the signs of power.