

The Lost Voices

Simone Lazaroo

Extracted from *The Shores of Remembering and Forgetting*, a novel in progress.

Though she migrated with her parents from Italy to this port city on the edge of the Indian Ocean when she was a baby, she's never really felt at home here. Sometimes during those dog days of summer, when even the afternoon sea breeze is barely breathing, she comes to swim in the late afternoon sun before it sinks into the ocean. Families, lovers and loners cool their sweaty bodies in the sea. All bodies and faces are gilded by the honeyed light. No wonder film-makers call this the golden hour, she thinks. Moments like this, she almost feels she belongs here.

The locals have no ancient names for the winds that blow here. In Venice they had old names for the three winds that had blown when she visited. The temperate wind they called the maestral, which the owners of her bed and breakfast said favoured happy sailing, had carried her fathers' ashes that she'd released from the nearby bridge into the canal and out to the northern lagoon and sea beyond. Walking back with the empty plastic ashes container in her hand, the outstretched wings of the gilded wooden statue of the arc-angel Gabriel atop the San Marco weathervane appeared to flex slightly in the maestral. But the wind had changed overnight to the scirocco, which churned the Adriatic Sea into an acqua alta tide that flooded the canals and San Marco Square the next night, forcing her and other pedestrians to hover ghostlike above the water on the hastily re-erected passerelle walkways.

The day before she left, the harsh cold wind from the north the Venetians call the bora, made the ferry to the airport rock, rolling her suitcase across the deck. Just as well the crowd of tourists on the deck stopped it going overboard.

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When she'd first returned from her father's home city to their adopted port city on the edge of the Indian Ocean, unusually severe storm tides had swept away much of the local beach's sand, already eroded by the badly designed developments nearby. She'd swum there with her father since childhood. How forsaken that beach and adjacent streetscape seem now as she walks along it the morning before tutoring her first film-making class. She misses the layers of history apparent everywhere in Venice, even the names of its winds ringing with them.

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As the weather gets hotter, interstate and international travellers park their camper vans overnight in the carpark. Some of them are washing their breakfast dishes at the public taps when a couple of older men arrive for their regular morning swim.

~ Bit of an accent there, mate. Where you from?

~ Germany.

~ Ah, a civilised country.

~ So long as you don't look back too many decades.

~ The neo-Nazis are nothing new, right?

~ Whaddya think of Australia?

- ~ We like very much being in the nature here.
- ~ And the friendly people.
- ~ We're hoping to see more Aboriginal people.
- ~ They mostly keep to themselves.
- ~ You only see the homeless ones.
- ~ Haven't seen many Aboriginal people since we've been here.
- ~ They're good at camouflage mate.
- ~ No corroborees in this part of Oz.
- ~ We are shocked to see a few homeless ones in town. And so many other homeless people around.
- ~ Better weather and views for them here, mate.

~

Alongside the travellers parking their comfortable camper vans overnight in the carpark, a few people sleep on their car's backseats amongst piles of clothing. Others don't have a car and just sleep in the dunes, out of sight of council rangers. She sees traces of them here and there: a blanket, a plastic dish and cutlery, a pair of boots on the threshold of a hand-dug hollow in the dunes. Shelter from the cold windy nights.

Once when she arrived early in the morning, she saw a man sleeping under a shabby blanket on the sleek aluminium bench seat installed *In memory of Bob Green, who died here May 7th, 2000*, according to the little plaque on its backrest. None of the morning swimmers she asked knew the sleeping man, or who Bob Green was.

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The next morning, she hears one of the beachside luxury apartment owners make a phone call from his glass-fronted balcony, one hand on his telescope.

- ~ Time you flushed the homeless blokes out of the dunes.

The other regular morning swimmers are chatting at the bottom of the footpath through the dunes, their bathers drooping. As she pauses against the wooden handrails adjusting her bather straps, a man wearing torn jeans and a faded checked shirt passes them and comes up the path towards her. She's seen him before, sitting in the dunes. He's carrying a bucket of fish in one hand and a small flat piece of rock in the other. The granite rock looks almost oval-shaped, but appears chipped away on one side to make a sharp edge. It fits neatly in his palm.

- ~ Morning sister.

His accent sounds Noongar, like the old Aboriginal man's who lived in the State Housing Commission flats in her neighbourhood a few years ago.

- ~ Ocean looks nice.

He nods, looks her in the eye briefly as he murmurs:

- ~ Ocean and winds are always speaking.

His gaze is alert and proud, yet sad. She's about to ask him if he knows any of the old Noongar words for the winds and seasons, when one of the grey-haired regulars, black Speedos sagging, comes up and peers in his bucket.

- ~ Catch a few fish?
 - ~ Salmon up at the point. Be careful swimming. Where there's salmon there's sharks.
 - ~ Always been fish and blood around Easter, ever since it began, mate.
- She can't help asking them both.
- ~ Do you think climate change is making the beach erosion worse?

~ Yeah sister.

The man in the Speedos curls his lip, puts his hands on his hips.

~ Bullshit. Always has been climate change, always will be.

One of the luxury apartment owners coming up the path with his wife in their perfectly fitting designer bathers, consternation in his eyes and voice.

~ Is that a spearhead you're holding?

The fisherman chuckles softly.

~ Don't look so worried. Think I'm gonna spear youse? Just a cutting tool from my old people.

The fisherman waves his hand vaguely in the direction of the river.

The wife mutters to her husband as they hurry towards their gleaming concrete and glass home.

~ Isn't he one of the homeless blokes camping in the dunes? Heard the neighbours on the ground floor had a few thefts lately.

No-one asks the fisherman more about the cutting stone, because none of them care enough. That's how it is here, the film-making tutor muses. When someone carrying something historical comes up this close to us, we barely recognise it, let alone acknowledge them. Only gold and new shiny things are recognised here.

A police van pulls up in the dune carpark opposite the luxury apartments.

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She goes walking along the trail on the river-top cliffs that evening after class. On one side of the trail are the glass and steel mansions of the wealthy, some of their garages larger than the State Housing Commission flats in her own neighbourhood. The fisherman had waved in that direction. But she knows only from reading that fading public information sign during her evening walks, that the local Noongar tribe had a story about the small caves by the river here. They believed the Dreamtime rainbow serpent named the Waugal had rested there after creating the big flood that separated the mainland from Rottnest, the offshore island visible from her little beach. Noongar ancestors camped and fished on that narrow strip of land between river and sea for countless generations, until they'd been driven out by the English colonisers.

She guesses the little beach where she swims would've been part of their land. Sometimes in those caves, she'd seen a sleeping bag and the remains of a camp-fire, and wonders now if the indigenous fisherman had anything to do with that.

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The following month, she's surprised by the overwhelming numbers of Australians voting in the referendum against establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Voice to Parliament.

The next day, she hears the man with the telescope talking with his neighbour from their luxury apartments' glass balconies.

~ So, the tide didn't turn.

~ Waste of money, that referendum. This country's constitution and voters always favour common-sense and equality.

~

At home before bedtime, she flicks through her phone's photos of Venice's buildings Byzantine, Gothic, Baroque, Renaissance; their maroon, purple, pink and ochre exteriors reflected in the glass-green canals and rippling in the wake of vaporetos and gondolas. Filigrees of mildew and slime embellish the walls, bridges, wells, the statues of angels, saints, dukes, rich merchants and famous philanderers. She will remember Venice's shimmering images forever, but its history is so long and dense she's already forgotten much of what she learned about it while she was there. How young and impoverished the streetscape with the new beachside apartments seems in comparison. How different it would seem if the history that existed for centuries before they were built hadn't been almost completely erased by developers. Except, perhaps, in the memories of people like the fisherman months ago.

She switches off her phone and light, drifts into sleep and dreams of searching for her real home, a place she truly belongs. In this dream, she almost enters lean-tos built of branches in the bush along the river clifftops, architect-designed apartments of steel and glass, thatched houses in tropical jungles, Byzantine palazzos on the edge of the Grand Canal, houseboats moored in rivers. But they belong to other people, and she stays outside and wakes desolate, realising she hasn't found her own true home after all these years.

It's still dark outside, but the magpies are warbling and she can hear the gulls in the distance, calling her to the sea. If she could, she would make a film showing the little group of regular elderly beachgoers, standing on the shore with the indigenous fisherman, a few more loners and lovers, maybe even some of the luxury apartment owners. They would be looking out to sea, all of them gilded by the golden hour. But another unseasonal storm would be approaching along the horizon, the waves and wind increasing suddenly. The camera would pan across the horizon and ocean and then slowly over their faces, revealing the lines on them. She sees them now, clear as yesterday. But try as she might, she can't see the face or hear the voice of that Noongar fisherman, because she hasn't seen him since the police cleared the dunes. So he couldn't be in her film, and she knows no-one else to speak the old names for this place, its winds and seasons.

In her film, only the ocean and wind would be speaking, almost roaring as the waves of forgetting come in so fast and strong that everyone would have to link arms and stand firm against them, or be swept away like the other lost ones of this small beach on the southern shores of the Indian Ocean.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Waugal story mentioned in “The Lost Voices” is an abbreviation of the story on a public information board at the Swan River in North Fremantle (part of the Noongar nation’s Walyalup country in Western Australia). That information board concludes by referencing a report for the Swan River Trust by D. De Gand, titled “Anthropological Guide for the Discussion of a Community Engagement Plan for the Nyungar People Affiliated to the Canning and the Swan River Systems” (no date given). The Waugal story belongs to the Wadjak people of the Noongar nation.

I respectfully acknowledge the Wadjak people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land where I live and work in Walyalup.

Dr Simone Lazaroo’s novels and many of her short stories explore individuals struggling to make better lives and meaning at the juncture of cultures. Her award-winning novels have been taught in Australian, North American and European universities. Her short fiction has been published in Australia, United States, England, Portugal, Cuba and Spain, where some of it has also been translated and published. Her second novel *The Australian Fiancé* is optioned for film; she will be co-writing that film-script. She currently has two novels in progress. *The Shores of Remembering and Forgetting* explores climate change and communal and personal memory and forgetting in a small Australian coastal community. *The Empire of Stolen Dreams* is set in Lisbon and Fremantle, Western Australia, and explores the impact of financial inequality and cultural differences on the relationship between an Australian tourist and a Portuguese archaeologist. Simone is also working on shorter creative non-fiction pieces about traveling and searching for a sense of home. After teaching creative writing at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia, for many years, she continues mentoring emerging writers, and will be writer in residence at Barcelona University in 2026. *Between Water and The Night Sky*, published by Fremantle Press in 2023, is her most recently published book.

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