

# *Invisible Mending*

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Wakefield  
Press

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## *A Neighbour's Photo*

They appear suddenly in the dogbox flats behind us. Arwan and Niall, tall and slim and Sudan black. A generation ago they would have become 'Alan and Neil,' but now at least they can keep their names intact. Arwan is about thirteen. He meets our son on the school oval one evening. He says his older brother Niall is angry with him and he doesn't want to go back to the flat. Their mother is in a refugee camp in Kenya and their father is still in Sudan – doing what, we never find out. Niall, at eighteen, is Arwan's guardian. They walked thirty days from Sudan into Kenya and now here they are, stark against our horizon of cream-brick flats, trying to learn a new language, trying to understand how this place works.

This place where dogs are fed fresh chicken breasts, and swimming pools are fenced-off for the exclusive use of just two people. This place where the religious days are as mixed as the styles of food and it's all 'go easy, cruise along, don't take too much interest', but then suddenly a minor traffic incident makes strangers explode into punch-throwing violence. These dead-quiet streets interrupted by hotted-up cars driven by men yelling out something savage as they go past. This place where the magpies sing and the eucalypts form silhouettes against the orange west and their bark clatters and falls to reveal new phosphorous-green and

mars-violet skins. In this strange world at evening, Arwan waits out on the oval.

Arwan stutters badly – he’s in trouble with his brother because he went out all day without telling Niall where he was. Niall cuffed him about the head when he came home, so he ran out and has been wandering the suburb. Now that it’s dark he’s worried Niall will be even angrier. He shows us a bruise above his elbow, ‘My ... brother ... he ... hit ... me.’ His stutter is a series of gasps before each word, a gulping for air. We’re not sure how much English he understands. When our son brings him into the house he doesn’t react when we ask if he wants a lemon drink. He stands there observing. I am cooking dinner and he finds this funny, a man in the kitchen chopping vegetables, as odd as a horse in a tree.

We feed him. He’s hungry though we can tell he doesn’t like the chilli we use in the stir-fry. ‘H ... h ... h ... hot,’ he says, fanning his tongue. After dinner we go with him to the flat to tell Niall that Arwan has been with us. The front door opens straight into the lounge off a treeless pen of cement enclosed by a high metal fence. Inside there is almost nothing. Two plastic chairs. No television. A couple of beds in the next room. Niall’s English is much better – and he speaks another three languages, Swahili, Arabic and Dinka. He explains how hard it is to discipline Arwan. Niall must be the father now, but he’s only a teenager himself, and the boy doesn’t show him enough respect.

Arwan appears next evening in the middle of our

lounge while we are watching a DVD. One of us turns around and he is simply there, standing quietly in the dark. We explain about knocking on doors and being invited in. Now he is at our front door almost every night. He would like a drink of water. Can he use the telephone? He needs a lift to his married sister's house. He would like to live with his sister but since he has reached puberty, their tradition prevents it. He wants to play with our son. Arwan likes basketball but dislikes the egg shape of Australian Rules footballs. Later, he appears with a half-wrecked pushbike donated by the local church. It has no brakes and its tyres are worn through. The front tyre is flat. I fix the brakes and repair the punctured tube, but tell him it will keep happening with such threadbare tyres. He comes two, three, four times to have punctures repaired. I should really buy him new tyres, but never get around to it. In the end, when our son gets a new bike for his birthday, Arwan inherits the old one.

Arwan's English improves, but his stammer does not. We often wonder what it's like for him in a foreign schoolyard with a stutter like that. He says Niall has 'girlfriends' at the flat and he has to go out. He picks the grapes from our vine without asking. He comes over so often our son says he's sick of him – he's too annoying.

One afternoon Arwan gives us a badly torn black-and-white photograph. The bottom left-hand corner is missing, and the whole picture is crushed and dog-eared. He asks if we could fix it for him. The image

shows a young Sudanese woman in a Western tailored dress and an older Sudanese man in a Western suit. They stare seriously, unsmiling and slightly off-centre, at the camera. The stamp at the back of the image says 'Modern Photographers Khartoum'. We imagine the heat and the dusty light outside the studio walls – how sweat patches are hidden in the Western clothes by arms held formally at their sides. Arwan's mother and father in this family portrait are as impersonal as a mugshot. Never the less, this is Arwan's only picture of his mother and as it turns out, the only sight he will have of her for the next several years. We do not understand the delay in his mother's arrival from the Kenyan refugee camp – that is, if she is really there – and we see it causes him distress, so we stop asking him about it. He tells us the man in the photograph is not his father, but his uncle. Another aspect we don't really understand.

Arwan and his brother move out of the dogbox flats. Everything they own fits in one carload. Niall has a factory job and wants to be closer to it. Arwan continues to visit, turning up unannounced, having walked kilometres across the western suburbs. He never phones first. Sometimes our son is not home, and after a glass of water, Arwan walks away again. We had forgotten the photo. My wife pulls it out of a drawer and carefully repairs it with sticky tape and puts it into a spare frame. It waits on a side cupboard for Arwan to collect next time he walks here. Two strangers stare down our hallway, watching the front door.



## *Adelaide*

You old quincunx.  
Colonel Light playing tic tac toe  
on the Kaurna's pages,  
that little brownsnake of a river  
winding through its parklands frame.

Over your eastern stairs the sun appears,  
filtering through skylights,  
the footfall echo of your arcades,  
to end with a long bath in the west –  
your curve of beaches  
which are summer's collective.

Clever, pretty, but lacking confidence,  
exposed here on your plain.  
We always have to talk you up,  
get your festival clothes on.

I like you best in November  
when you spill buckets of jacaranda,  
April too, when the slow light cools  
into shouts in the stadia.  
Even now, after a week of 40 degrees –  
it's raining at last,  
upstairs at the Exeter I can hear  
chuckles in the gutters  
and applause from the rooftops.

Beyond the brown haze of your suburbs  
we smell desert,  
so we love to see the water run.

Adelaide – *heimat* of sandstone terraces,  
gargoyles, lacunae, suffocations.  
Once I thought you were too small,  
but after all these years we fit each other:  
here in front of Bonython Hall,  
my first memory – a pantomime giant  
came down through the floodlit trees  
chasing Jack and his golden harp.

Place is voice as much as view:  
'Legs like Payneham Road'.  
'A pash at Windy Point' –  
It's better up there than Los Angeles,  
that hot glitter, all the way to the Gulf.

## *Meeting the Ghost of Don Dunstan on Norwood Parade*

He slipped out of the median-strip trees,  
carrying a humble bread roll  
on a white china plate –  
'Here,' he said, 'a gift from the Shades.  
You're still dining out at my table.'

Heads turned at the sidewalk cafés,  
all the fine-looking women of Norwood  
sensing a presence, but still un-fazed.  
'You've all gone back to sleep!' Don said,  
'I wanted a renaissance, not a dormitory with malls.'

I liked Pliny, Parsee eggs, and young men –  
and I made a few mistakes.  
No one's perfect.  
It's necessary to break open some tombs  
if you intend to raise a dead state.'

Then parrots shrieked past  
flying over the red galvo roof of the grandstand.  
Still holding his serving tongs, the ghost began to fade –  
disappearing into the listless night  
of shop signs and car lights blinking along The Parade.

## *Learn to Speak the Language*

I was on the bus to town.  
On the seat in front of me  
two women were chatting in Punjabi,  
and the guy sitting next to me says:  
'If you come to this country  
you should learn to speak the language.'

'Yeah. You're right,' I said.  
'So how's your Kaurna?  
And how good are ya  
at Pitjantjatjarra?  
Fancy a chat in Ngarkat?

And you know, it's a pity we don't hear  
more Peramangk at the bank,  
more Tiwi on the TV,  
more Wik at the picnic  
and Arrente on the verandah.

And, if you expect to live here,  
you really oughta  
know some Yorta-Yorta,  
get your tongue  
around Bundjalung,  
grasp the meaning in Mirning  
and know the score  
in Eora.

Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri,  
Luritja and Walpiri,  
understand their poetry.

You're right, if you come to this country,  
You should learn to speak the language.'