



Between the Acts



Omid

You asked me to tell how I was looking at the situation from where our story began together, my brother. I tried to hold it in words but to write is still a big task for me, harder even than A-level study. I think the best way is to sit beside you and try to *speak* the truth of what I saw.

I must start with the first day we moved here.

I saw you, Kai – a tall boy-man, broad shoulders with coiled hair like my missing brother Ishy. The way you held your head low reminded me of him so much it hurt.

I saw that the women were in mourn-shroud emotion, the girl too, but it was the boy who walked with shadows, fire and ravens at his feet, who I looked to.

“This is perfect place for us,” my aunt told me when we stood together on the balcony.

I could not think of perfect places but I understood she wished so hard for it. She closed her eyes, giving thanks, *Alhamdulillah*, that finally we were safe. As she prayed I looked over the small woodland to the school across the green field where in a few days I would go.

I read on my aunt’s face that, despite the small flat and that we have no garden of our own, she was in a happy place for there is nothing in this world my aunt loves more than trees and wildlife. But you did not know then she is Doctor of Conservation – environmentalist – all you saw in us was strangers, refugees.

I knew this by your look on our first day here, like you did not welcome us.

“No, man. It wasn’t like that,” I interrupt.

Om holds his hand up as if to say, “It is my turn to speak.”

I must tell what I witnessed. What I felt. People did not take us for who we are, did not see the potential in what we could be here in this country, and I had anger in my heart when you looked at me, but it made me stronger. I thought, *Let them learn who my Aunt Gisou is when her shadows lift and she has English language to show them. I too will show them.* These were my thoughts on the day I watched you and Orla and your mothers planting one small tree. The sight



of you brought shadow memories of my older brother Ishy and my mother and father too.

I asked Aunt Gisou about the tree and she looked closer, telling me it is eucalyptus. She explained, “Some believe if you burn a few leaves it will make everything pure again.

The smell is fresh too, like new life.

“Let us leave them to their grieving, Omid,” Aunt Gisou told me and so she went inside, but I stayed because, as a moth flies to a flame in the darkness, I saw you were like me and I could not turn away.

But then a sudden sound shrieked through the land. At first I was afraid it was my trauma shock screaming from somewhere inside and then I begin to understand it is some kind of music from within this new tower-home of Greenlands.

“Dad, trying to play his sax?”

“Yes, that I understood when I heard it again. Wailing notes played from some breath instrument the musician had no heart to play.”

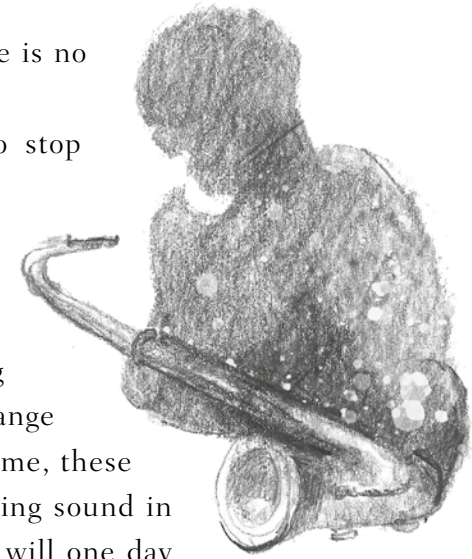
Aunt Gisou ordered me to go inside. “What strange

music is this?” she asked. “There is no joy in it. I wish it to stop.”

We both wished the pain to stop with equal force, didn’t we? Though then we did not know each other. This howl like a wounded beast released too many ghosts for us but knowing this pain was here also grew strange comfort in me. Like maybe, in time, these people can understand that tearing sound in me too and me and Aunt Gisou will one day plant ourselves into this land.

Sometimes I think we have travelled so long together my Aunt Gisou feels what is in my mind. “My nephew Omid... When we are settled here let us plant something too, a fig tree like in our orchard, if it is permitted.”

When she rested I returned to the balcony and I watched you fall to the earth like my brother Ishy fell on his knees at the force of the blast. My legs shook, wanting to run to you. I thought, *I do not know where Ishy is, even if he is alive, but maybe I can save this boy who lives in this tower-home with me.* You see, Kai, you were always close to my brother in my heart.





In school I wore my shield of silence and no one crossed to me. Each day I looked for you but the tower was quiet, doors closed.

At weekends I looked out over this Greenland again to a field next to school. I heard other students call it a “Rec”, where they play football. Back then I wondered if I will ever have a friend again. Those first months in school I tried hard not to think of everyone who was gone... The forest of lost people I will need to plant.

Then one day through my stress my ears opened and I heard the whistle of a game, and my feet remembered football. The space of running, leaving thought behind. I thought this is something I can do and I decided to find a way to join this team.

But the sound of playing changed. In the distance I heard shouting like men in war.

Coming closer, I see by your father’s shoulders, his collapsed chest, that it must be he who breaks bricks with his heart to

make this Greenland’s tower cry with his broken throat music.

Your family resembled people I have seen before walking on the road from despair. I thought, *If I can, if he lets me, I will show this boy I understand. I will try to help him.*

“Om, sometimes I wonder if I’d be here at all if you hadn’t seen what was going on.”

He shakes his head. “We helped each other, as brothers do, that is all.”

I wanted to help. I looked for opportunities with football but time passed and your door was closed to me. Sometimes I felt we were all locked inside this tower.

Some months went by and I was standing in the playground after eating with Orla, because Zak’s mother asked her to be my mentor. How did she say it...? “To make me comfortable in my own skin.” I thought, *Miss, if you had seen what I have seen you too would not find comfort in your skin.*

It was Orla who first shortened my name to Om. I could not speak well in English to argue these things but I was not offended as I saw that she had kindness in her eyes. She was friendly and if she saw me alone she asked if I would like to walk and talk with her. Her mother too was friendly with Aunt Gisou.

“Sorry, Om. I don’t even know where I was... I hardly noticed anything.”

“I know, I know. It was a hard time to pass for both of us.”

Before I knew it I was Om to everyone except Aunt Gisou. In my loneliness I studied hard and words began to come in English easier. And, as I learned, I understood much more than anyone saw. Sometimes I spoke to Orla and Zak. They were friendly but it was you I kept looking to. Maybe because I was searching for my true brother.

For the first months I was sitting separate in many classes. Learning quickly with translators’ help. All the time at home, online, catching up in English language. Aunt Gisou teaching me science far advanced of anything we learned in school. My brain was sharpened every day.

At the gathering evening to show progress my Aunt Gisou smiled politely when the art teacher told her I was gifted, but she was only interested to speak to the science teacher. Even though Aunt Gisou’s speaking was improving, her progress in English was much slower than mine. My science teacher said, “Om has a sharp brain; his grades are very high.” This I understood and translated to my aunt.

“Omid, tell your teachers to call you by your true name and explain that our brains need to be sharp to withstand what we have survived.” I did not want to cause any difficulty so I

did not claim claim back my name. Instead I explained that my Aunt Gisou is a scientist and she teaches me well. My chemistry teacher sat forward in his seat. This is the strangest thing. When they hear the word refugee I don’t know what they are imagining. That a woman like Aunt Gisou had no life before coming here, no career, like we were all born on the road from despair? That made me burn with anger inside but I only sat next to Aunt Gisou and smiled, as I have learned to do.

Outside of classes I decided I would be like the raven birds that fly over the wood and come to sit on railings of our tower. I could have taught you, if you had allowed me to be your friend at that time... There is power in watching first. There is power in silence. I saw it in these birds that have a look like survivors. I saw in their eyes that they, like me, understand more than you think. I told myself, be patient. I will watch and I will wait, until my speaking English is good enough so that everyone will see me as I am. In the between time, until my understanding and my speaking flow together as one, I decided I would paint what I saw. For in paint I need no translation.

“That’s my first real memory of you, in the art room,” I tell Om, picking up his portfolio.

Om nods. “You say you would not have survived without me, but I think neither you or I would survive without art.”

"I wish I'd met you earlier. Maybe things..."

Om places his hand on my arm. "There is no point to think in a back-facing way. Trust me, I know."



There was fire in the air that day. I did not understand why, but I felt it.

Orla ran from my side across the quad, arms outstretched, hair floating behind her like waves. Now she started jumping up and down with joy. She was very happy, throwing her arms and legs round Zak. I looked away, embarrassed. I did not think before they were this kind of friend. Then in one moment, flashing across my eyes, I saw you, Kai. I backed away, making myself small as I have learned to do in battle, but I witnessed it all: the

violence, the fire, the anger,
the wish to cancel out
the happiness of
another.



The following day I observed that you did not attend school and also not for one whole week after. Orla told me it was because of your violence. Every day she was sad when we passed your door, and after she always looked to the small tree as we passed the Greenlands wood. One day I decided to ask Orla for some history of what happened to your family. I opened conversation by repeating what my aunt said – that planting eucalyptus is a sign of purifying, if you burn the leaves. But Orla cut my speech with sharp eyes and told me no one must ever harm this tree. I said she mistook my meaning and I tried to ask gently about the tree? But she would not answer me. Like to speak of you or it was to betray. This loyalty I understood, but it reminded me that I was the outsider, not trusted. After that I did not ask again.



Towards the end of Year Eight I finally grew the courage to try for the football team but did not find a place. Instead I poured my feeling into art and expression came out of me, like a river. In school I found a new home – the art room. I watched Zak and Orla grow close, bonded. Girlfriend and boyfriend.

"I can't believe I hardly even noticed you and you saw all this."

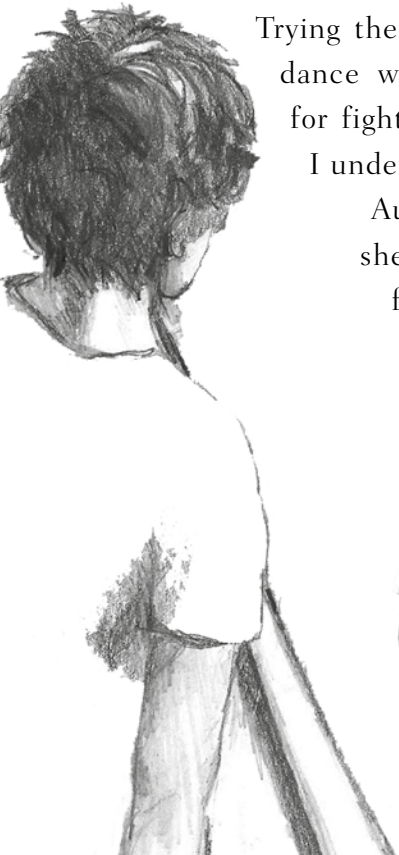
Om smiles sadly and just carries on.

In my ink paintings I thought of you at home. This family locked inside. After school and at night from my balcony I heard you play your music full volume, too high. Sometimes, in the wood, your dance with ravens made you wild. Hands, head, arms jerking this way, that way, backways arching, kicking off with feet and falling.

Trying the same move over again. The music and dance were angry – hot, repeated beats, good for fighting, good for blasting all thought away. I understood.

Aunt Gisou grew troubled. She was saying she will complain about the noise. "First the father with his heartbreak music, now the son with this cacophony." She warned me, "Omid, keep away from this family and that raven boy." But she was also sorry for them.

She told me then what she had learned from Orla's mother, the tragedy this family had faced.



Understanding of this, for me, changed everything. It was the first time I prayed in this country. I prayed for you and for me and for Ishy too. From the first day I saw you I felt some brother feeling but now I understood. I decided I could not stand by and watch the fires and shadows take you.



Later that day when Aunt Gisou rested I went out to this woodland. I walked past the young tree with silver leaves dancing and heard a sound from below my feet.

At first I thought it came from under the earth. I thought maybe Ishy was calling to me to save him as he does in my nightmares ... trapped in the ground and waiting for me to pull him into life. Too late I let myself remember. I could not breathe but from the grey cloud above rain fell like a blessing. I tasted it on my tongue and it woke me back to where I stood. More sudden rain fell hard and the path became mud-clay. I was slipping down and falling in the direction of the cry. Raven birds swooped above me, wings shining, rainbow colours flashing. The note of heartache I could not ignore.

I came to the building and saw you, curled into a corner, making moaning sounds like a wounded dog.

“Zak? Orla?” you called. I pushed the door and you cowered from me. Your face covered in mud, mine too from my fall. We were like boys of clay made from the same earth even if I am from faraway soil. I forgot all my English words and in my panic I spoke to you in Arabic, remember?

I raised my hands to say do not fight me – you have nothing to fear from me. Finally words returned to me. “My name is Omid, but people here call me Om.” I saw that you were in a space beyond words so I pointed to the balcony above, saying, “I live here too.”

You nodded to me then like you knew but your mind was clouded. Your eyes were blood and fire. I felt in me, by instinct, that you and me were held inside the sadness of this globe. I was feeling sore in my heart for you. “Brother.”

That is all I said and, even though you are bigger than me, taller, stronger, broad of shoulders, I walked inside the flake-paint yellow room and took you in my arms and rocked you like you were a baby, as my Aunt Gisou held others on the road from despair. You allowed me. I saw that my instinct on first sight of you when we moved here was true. Your need was great, and mine was too.

Sometimes you can feel what another feels in your blood flow, in the beating of your heart, and in your open

arms. I also knew that, in this care for you, finally I have one friend. For my part it was a bond without the need of words.

When you became calm you did speak some words, and in the dance of your arms, the look in your eyes, I think I understood. “Please don’t tell anyone about this... Secret place... *Bothy*.” You placed your fingers over your mouth and shook your head.

“What is this *Bothy*?” I did not understand the word or the place we were inside. You did not answer. So I just said, “OK, it can be secret.” Who will I tell?

After that we walked together past the tree I saw your family planting on our arrival day and you told me simply, “This tree we planted for my baby sister – her name was Sula.”

My tears fell and in that moment I knew you trusted me with the deep of your heart, like brothers do.



On Monday I saw Orla leave early in her uniform. It was better for me that she had finally stopped asking if I wanted to walk with her. At the bottom of the steps I heard the door open and you were there in front of me. You straightened your tie and nodded, looking shameful,

like you wanted to forget we met. So I did what I had planned to do – show you the photo of my brother Ishy.

From that day on, through the rest of Year Eight, then Years Nine and Ten, it was always Om and Kai. Aunt Gisou's heart was softened because she learned the tree was planted for a baby. We walked together every day and the raven birds walked with us. Sometimes you spoke more to the ravens than me but it did not matter. I had a brother. I was no longer alone.

For our GCSE exam art portfolio the teacher asked us to draw portraits of each other, of the person next to us. One lesson I sat and painted you. The next you painted me. You looked straight into me, as if you were reaching to know who I am.

My first drawing was in charcoal, smudging in and rubbing out the lines until I found the right expression in your eyes. Staring, I noticed how you grew full of anger when any teacher came near. I understood this look ... this break from trust.

I liked the feel of the blackened charcoal stick because it comes from wood and fire... It felt fitting material for us to use. How to describe what I painted? Someone looking brave and strong but at the point of breaking.

When we finished the teacher said we could add one

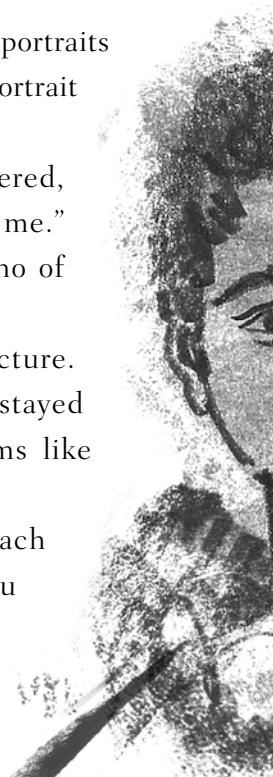
other thing to the portrait. Without hesitation I drew your sister's tree. After, you painted your hand and stamped it over the face I painted. It was a disturbing image and the teacher was angry, saying you had no right to mark my work, telling you this is exactly the kind of impulsive behaviour that gets you into trouble.

But I defended your action. "We are painting portraits together and this hand over the face makes the portrait true."

Afterwards you clenched me and whispered, "Thanks, Om, man. You are the only one who gets me." Then you laughed a sad laugh with no joy, an echo of your father's discord in Greenlands tower.

I carried on drawing to complete the picture. Above you I charcoaled in the two black birds that stayed by you. "My ravens!" You stretched out your arms like wings. I thought of your dancing.

All term we continued making portraits of each other. As we worked together I saw how tired you



were, how lack of sleep came creeping on you, turning your days slowly, slowly into night.

You started using charcoal too but first you painted your page in yellow like a desert in full glare of the sun. I do not like this colour: it is a blast of searchlight in my eyes. My mouth grew dry at the sight of it, my throat scorched with the desert sun reflected from the sand. The endless yellow we walked and walked and walked across in search of green.

In art we found the way to see ourselves and each other beyond the border of language. People do not see enough the truth in the language of eyes.

It felt good to be seen. I sat still as stone when you drew me. I was used to sitting still. Hiding in woodland, crying inside hard enough for feeling in me to reach the stars.

I saw the way the teachers looked on our friendship, suspiciously. Perhaps they thought you were bullying me, or maybe that we were two troubled boys who should not be encouraged to be together.

The young teacher tapped me on the shoulder when I sat for you and said, "Om, don't forget to breathe!" I thought this is something no one needs to tell me.



I realize I have forgotten to breathe as Om tells our story. "I remember... You asked me why I painted in yellow."

"And you told me it's because that was where our friendship began when I found you ... broken against the yellow wall of the Bothy. You will never know how it felt for me, Kai, to have found a true friend."

Only in art were you settled. There was something strange in how you gave up just when you should be working hard for examinations. I moved forward. I wanted to take you with me into progress, but it seemed that all I could do was to show you how to paint your way out of sadness. We did that in the Bothy – you allowing me to cover the yellow wall. Even there, in our secret place of art, only in small moments could you find peace.



When Aunt Gisou stood on the balcony with the letter from the Red Cross, the one we wait for every year for the four years we have lived here, I tell her to open it because I cannot. Hope can burn as brutal as hate. It burned so bright in me that day, but the first word I saw when she opened it was 'regret'. I collapsed to the floor but Aunt Gisou said, "No, my nephew. Regret that there is no news,

that is all. Nothing has changed.”

But something did change in me that day, because I knew I could not keep looking back. I had been burned too many times by hope. So all my hope I put into you... You were the brother I could help.



In Year Eleven I took trials to join the football team again and finally I got in. I thought maybe Zak had told his father who is coach that he should let me join because my football skills were rusted. Then I understood Zak also wanted to speak through me to you, Kai, to make me a peace flag.

After football Zak asked me please to tell Kai we need him too on the team. “We miss him. I miss him.” It is hard sometimes for boys to speak, isn’t it? Even when they share the same language, it is hard.

It is different if that language is in your feet and eyes, in the twist of a shoulder or a raised arm on the pitch. I also wished my brother Kai would join us on this precious free land they call a Rec – but no matter what I said you would not. You preferred to dance, but I did not like the way you turned to the beat of your heavy music. Some days your body began to jerk in a strange rhythm, more raven than human. I grew afraid for you.

What I came to learn was that Orla, Zak and Kai were close friends in the past but not now. I did not exactly understand why their bond grew weak. This too I have seen on the road. Pain can bring you close or it can break you. Now it was you and me walking together, painting together, and, because my language was flowing more, speaking together. I couldn’t understand why you would no longer play football. I did not understand why you refused to see your old friends again in the Bothy, in these woods you discovered together. My world was growing and this is all I wished for – what you had... To still know the people who I grew up with.

My questions and encouragement to see old friends made you angry and I think suspicious of me. You thought people were talking about you and your family, especially your father. I am sorry, Kai, but my Aunt Gisou spoke of him as the Shadow Man of Greenlands tower. I told her she should not say sharp-tongued things because we too have our ghosts. I did not tell you of these conversations because sometimes Aunt Gisou’s path has made her speak hard words, harsh words that do not reveal her softness, the kindness she holds inside. But at that time she became anxious and it was harder for me to see you.

At school you grew in paranoia. Telling me everyone has their eyes on your family, not to get involved, that they

would interfere. You would not listen when I told you that they care for you.

I saw it in Zak's eyes he wanted friendship. I told you to forget that this division ever happened but you insisted that the fight with Zak was not the kind of fight so easily forgotten. "Just remember, Om, Zak's from one side of the Rec and we're from the other," you told me. And it sounded foolish, because I have walked over the world, not a small football pitch, but still I saw that the struggle was more than I understood.

"You must have thought I was such an idiot. I never imagined it would be so hard to see myself through your eyes."

I tried hard to understand but I did not know why you were telling me something obvious. That is why I continued to question. "Why does this matter? Why can't Zak and Orla come here? You told me how Bothy means shelter for anyone."

You bitter-laughed at me and said, "You have a lot to learn about this country, Om!" and I felt my own fire inside thinking you don't even know my name Omid, meaning hope. This hope I carried with me like a flame. I questioned how you would survive if you had seen what I have seen.

I knew your ears were closed to me, that I should not

push further but if I was to help you I needed to try so I asked, "Is it because of Orla? Because of jealousy with Zak? I think you love her?"

I stepped back from you, ready to leave the Bothy because by the look in your eyes you would fight me too, but I did not read you well that day. You did not fight and that made me more afraid for you. When I left you shook your head and only said, "Om, you don't understand. It's about everything."



Especially at revision time Aunt Gisou was not happy with my bond with you, Kai. Every day she sensed more fire in it, in you and your family. Every time she saw you not in school she told of her fear that you will bring danger to her door.

After all the experiences I have had she still was not happy for me to go into this small woodland without her. She tried to forbid me to go to the Bothy. Each day her fear grew until she did not even wish me to play football on the Rec. This is something of which we argued. I said, "I am not a child any more." I asked her, "Why did we come here to this country only for you to take my freedom from me?"

I was sorry I raised my voice and to make peace I made her cinnamon tea. Then she told me, "It's OK, Omid. I am

proud of you. You must grow in this country. I am finding it more difficult. This season of winter is not good for my mind-health. That is why I am full of fear.” I was pulled in two directions because I knew I had to care for her, but I also wished I could go to help you, Kai. And also, yes, I wanted to play football and meet my new friends Zak and Orla. My world was growing.

Something I saw many nights made me think perhaps Aunt Gisou was right to lose trust in you. Small groups of older boys wheeling their bikes down the path to this Bothy and I did not like their look. Boys with shaded faces. Ghost-grey skin, like ash. Boys living in the shadows whose clothes smell strong of drug-weed.

Then came the day when I smelled it on you too and saw it in the hopeless heavy lids of your eyes, like shutters closing.

At school your wild ways and fury mouth were always getting you detainment. It made me afraid for you, my brother.

It felt like an emergency. I thought to myself if one brother is lost I cannot let another slip away. This is why I made a plan to ask Orla and Zak if they will meet me in the Bothy so they could see for themselves. I felt like I was betraying you, my brother, but I knew I must. This was my aim to bring you all back to your old times,

to bring us together, because I knew now, with the arrival of these shadow boys, that they wanted something of you ... and I could not help you alone. To remind you of who you are I needed the help of your childhood friends.

After my plan was set I did not have to wait many days for you to be in trouble and kept after school for swearing in the face of the temporary art teacher. I told you this is not respectful but I do not think since the shadow boys arrived, bringing their smoke, that you could hear me. Maybe you didn't care.

It was my last idea of how to help you so when the siren went for the end of the day I made sure I was the first through Ravenscroft School gates and out on the Rec. There I waited for Zak and Orla. I saw they were holding hands and looking close into the other's eyes. They were surprised when I called them to ask if they will come with me to the Bothy.

“Did Kai ask for us?” Zak's voice rose, hoping that the idea for this was yours.

I shook my head and pointed into school. Your ravens sat on the school gates, waiting for you to come out. “He is detained again, but you must come with me to see,” I explained.

They broke hands and asked no more questions as we walked to Greenlands wood. Like each was thinking their

own thoughts, perhaps memories of a past I did not live.

Zak tried first to enter through thick growth. He said the path to the Bothy used to be a “secret short cut when we were kids”, but the bush-spikes were too sharp and so we walked along the concrete path to the road, past our flats and down the hill.

Zak tried to hold Orla’s hand as we took the path to the Bothy but she pushed him away and sniffed the air. “This place stinks of skunk.” She looked to me for the first time, suspiciously. “Do you two smoke in here?”

I shook my head. “Not me. This is why I asked you here. There are others who have started to come... Older boys. I do not know them. They come here on bikes. I see them passing, throwing night-shadows over Greenlands.”

The ravens must have got tired of waiting for you at school because they followed us here, making friendly greetings to old friends. I observed the look in Zak’s and Orla’s eyes, as if they were travelling back in time into a sacred place that was now a ruin. “It used to be so sunny here,” Orla whispered.

“It is winter,” I said but I saw she did not mean the season.

Quickly I shut the door so the ravens didn’t follow as they always want to do. Today the floor was littered with rolled cigarettes and there were sofa stains. I saw also

evidence that the ravens now do come inside.

In the gloom-light Kai and Orla stared at the walls. “Is this your art?” Orla wanted to know.

“It is both our art,” I told her. “I painted my city and Kai, he painted ravens.”

“I don’t see a city?” Zak said, picking off a piece of yellow paint.

“Give me that!” Orla said and Zak shrugged and handed it over. There was stress between them.

I saw admiration and shock together in their eyes, and now I realized they were right. It was worse than I thought. My Aleppo sky in miniature that took me one whole year to paint, to remember, was destroyed in red-blood spray. I have to tell you I felt sharp pain in my heart that day, Kai.

I hurt inside, thinking, *How can Kai allow this?* I do not believe my brother would do this to me. “I have never seen this red paint before,” I told them “This is new. I think it is the work of shadow boys.”

I see deep sorrow in their eyes. But they had no true understanding of me. I hated the yellow brightness that was there before, but it was not my idea to paint it out. I wanted to tell them so because the look Orla gave me that day made me think she blamed me – for the painting out of yellow and the change in you. As if I was a bad influence. She placed her hand on the wall, like she was searching

for an old heartbeat.

“I had no idea,” Zak said. “We should never have let him push us away.”

I tried to explain. “We painted many hours together here. This was survival art but now he needs something different... Some connection with others.” In truth I needed it too.

I touched the red spray paint as if it would burn me. “These new visitors are not healthy.”

Orla leaned against the wall and told us of a boy she met in a play-den up the hill when she moved into Greenlands. A boy so full of life and happiness that he was like the sun. Zak told of making friendship bonds on the first day of school, of bathing and blowing wish bubbles from your balcony. These stories of sweetness brought tears in all three of us.

I cried also for the memories of my childhood city, my lost friends who will always be strangers to them ... for my lost brother. I told them that the Kai I know would never paint my city out. This is how I knew how lost you were then – that you had allowed it. I saw they felt for me though they did not know all my grief. I told them I have survived worse, but I insisted for them to see what I saw then – the dying light of the hopeless. I have seen it take people too many times to ignore.

“You did the right thing to ask us here,” Orla whispers.

“He must not know that I told you. You must not betray him to others. I don’t want to make him more trouble. I brought you here to ask of you to find a way to build back your friendship. So we have strength together to offer him.” I wished then that I had a chance to show how I climbed trees in our orchards of home when I was a small child. “Even if you aren’t children any more, you remember each other as who you were. That is something precious.”

We were inside the Bothy only a short time. The ravens sat outside like bodyguards. I thought they were waiting for you, Kai. I told Orla and Zak that it was better that you did not find them here but I am happy they came, because now... I saw it in their eyes, the desperation and determination that everything must change.

When I walked up the hill past the Sula tree a silver leaf touched my skin and my thought was clear. I knew I had done a good thing – some secrets are too poisonous to keep.



Days turned. Winter grew colder. Zak found me and Orla one break time. He told us that Kai is in more trouble because he did not attend detention. From my count this

was the fifth time he was shunned from school – one time excluded for his fighting, three times suspended, also many times detained. Zak tried to find out how much trouble. “Mum said the head teacher is being patient with him because of the family situation but if he carries on this way he’ll be expelled. Have you seen this?”

Zak showed us an article cut from the news. I read it over Orla’s shoulder and I realized I understood almost every word now. It said the council planned to turn the Rec into a new estate because of a shortage in housing.

Zak shook his head. “They can’t do this. The school’s going to challenge it. What about the football pitch? We hardly have any space at school as it is.”

But I saw the look in Orla’s eye, that she and I did not think of football. In my mind I saw only Greenlands wood and you, Kai. I understood straight away from the computer-made map at the bottom of the article showing the boundary on the new plan for buildings. The road cut through our wood.

I pointed to the grey block that is our flat and the ‘access road’ that would cross the wood, through the place where Sula’s tree is planted, through the Bothy into a new place called the Greenhaven Estate with three new blocks of housing.

Once more I saw understanding in Orla’s eyes. Her mouth was tight, green eyes sharp with anger. We were thinking

the same. *This will break Kai.*

I also thought how Aunt Gisou loved this wild space. I thought of my Aleppo sky painted out and I had this strong feeling. I told them, “This is an opportunity out of difficulty. We must take this news to Kai, to my aunt, to your families, and we must fight for all our sakes.”



After school I headed straight to the Bothy. It stank and music was coming from inside but I heard no shadow voices so I went in. You tried to stand against the wall to mask the graffiti.

I handed you the article. Your eyes were drug clouded. It seemed as if nothing of this news could touch you until I made you understand that you would lose Sula’s tree. Only then you woke up. “Over my dead body. This wilderness is mine and Dad’s. We discovered it. They can’t take this away from us.”

I told you that Orla and Zak wanted to meet you to work out how to save this land.

“Not here!” Your eyes were panic-full. I saw in a flash you were



seeing yourself as they would ... and I knew you cared. Still had pride. *This is good*, I thought.

“Tell them to meet me after school tomorrow at Sula’s tree,” you said, and I was happy you had not slipped too far away to pull back.

Then you stepped away from the defiled wall and shook your head. “I’m sorry, Om. This wasn’t me. I should have thrown them out.”

I took your hand. “This is no way to repay the kindness I have given you. I can paint again but still it will not take me home. My land is lost to me but you must fight this, for your sister, for your family too, for me, Aunt Gisou and Orla. For this is the ground where your sister is planted. Now where we too are planted. This is our Greenlands.”

Then speaking low, as if digging somewhere for the Kai of distant memory, you said, “We have to be Greenlands Guardians, cutting through the dark. Like when we were kids.” I did not understand exactly your meaning but that night I slept peacefully through the night.

I woke to the cold, bright blue-sky morning of hope and it made the flame in me burn stronger. Walking past your door, I wished you would not be suspended any more. I willed all day for you to keep your appointment on our Green Hill.



I met Zak and Orla outside the school gates. My heart was full of happiness to see you waiting for us, sitting by the Sula tree. I was relieved you did not smell of bitter herbs that day. Your eyes were shining clear but I saw that you were nervous, transferring weight from foot to foot.

I observed this meeting closely, like a moment in history, a truce between friends. I was happy feeling that I was the peacemaker who brought you back to childhood bonds.

“I heard you’ve got a sister,” you said, and Zak looked at his feet. “What’s her name?”

“Hope.” It came out as a choked whisper and you kept tight hold of Zak’s hand.

“Kai, man, your hands are ice blocks!” Zak said, pulling away. “How long have you been waiting here?”

“Too long,” you said. “Me and the ravens have been having a little conference! Working out what we’re going to do.”

Zak and Orla laughed a little. I was not tuned for jokes but I felt the power of this reunion and I felt sure in this moment that if we stand all together then those other shadows could not so easily descend.

Many things were said, all of it I understood, maybe better than any of you. I listened. I observed and recorded pictures of a time before I arrived in my mind.

These are the words I will always remember Orla said:

“This land is our past, our future.”

Only one thing I had to add...

I interrupt Om – his words seared on my mind. “I remember what you said... It is our present.”

We held each other in the embrace of brothers. And I thought that here at the roots of this purifying tree is where all our stories can meet together. Zak walked away to the other side of the Rec and I followed you and Orla back to our Greenlands. For the first time since I arrived in this country I felt like I belonged.



I stood on the balcony that night, searching the moon, thinking of my old life. The ravens flew to your balcony and one of them stared at me with its shining eye. I saw this clearly about us– we were like a delicate friendship tower, trust between us was just starting to build.

With one balcony stacked on another.

Me at the top,

Orla in the middle

and you, Kai, beneath, were the foundation.

And I felt a rush of happiness that we were strong together.

Because I know this to be true:

if foundations fall

all

will

fall.



Kai

As I finish recording Om’s passage of writing he passes me a thick envelope with my name on it. “Orla instructed me to give you this, only when I had completed my part. She said for you to listen to the inbetween notes of all our tellings and then you will reach the truth. She told me you will understand her meaning.”