

## **Cooked in natural time**

Zena Edwards

### **Past**

'I guess I'll see you next lifetime!'

— Erykah Badu

#### *Julie the Careers Officer*

Julie came to my school just before the end of a dull summer's day in June 1985. I sat opposite her, perceptibly uncomfortable, convinced I was doing something wrong. Like all my other exams, I sat this test with the same detachment as the school's assembly hall - a hollow shell reverberating with the tumble, crash and cry-for-help of teenage angst.

It was the end of a school year and the hall was now a squat and bleak shell of 1960s postmodernity, institutionally commissioned to be the belly for lunchtime mayhem, a reluctant, body-shaming gladiator's arena for PE.

I'm not sure how many times she had asked whether there was anything, anything at all I was interested in, before I noticed the look of unsettled vexation on her face. It had been a long day for her; that I could tell. Her body language told me I had become the irritant I felt within myself – petrification.

Six years at this institute of 'education'. A six-year stretch, dispiriting my foetal dreams that happened upon a mind cloud my imagination conjured. These bubble bursts of ravenous aspiration needed more room to breathe and school seemed to be all about limits. The discourse around boundaries is way too nuanced in a crowded and budget cut state schooling.

So six years of siphoning my soul into the ether and now... the trial of it was over. What was I supposed to do now? Not only were pubes-

cent hormones throttling my self-confidence, this education exploited this vulnerability, and society's commands to conform bitch-slapped me into a class-conscious coma. I didn't know that exactly back then.

Julie the Careers Officer's paisley shirt, along with her questions, made me nauseous. A strip-light lit her frustration: a sheen of perspiration halting her forehead, her cheeks reddening, the furrow of her puckered brow squeezing tighter.

I could see what she saw: a sixteen-and-a-half-year-old black girl, directionless, with seemingly no ambition. I would have been angry if, in reality, I hadn't been frightened and just disappointed. Her disapproval was a shadow pacing behind a muslin curtain of irritation. She had come to do her job of coaching young vibrant minds on to the path to success. She liked this part. The list of occupations on her clipboard made her feel efficient. She took pride handing us 'literature' on social work and plumbing and I was obstructing her from doing her job. I could tell she was nice. Now she was just pissed off. And I think I remember saying something about the cadets.

'You want to go into the army?' Julie brightened a little.

'No.' Julie looked confused.

'Well, isn't there anything you want to do?' She flapped an army recruitment pamphlet she'd quickly reached for. False start. Agitation.

I shrugged.

I didn't want to disappoint or ruin her previously successful run of career coaching sessions that day, but I also didn't want to sound like I had a vacuum between my ears. But mostly, I did not want to be judged as feckless and useless.

My silence was an internal call to retreat. An orchestra of numbness reverberated in the muscles of my body. Like a possum, words lay dead on my tongue as my brain shut down every time 'Julie the Careers Officer' asked me a question steering me into social conformity that, as I was to

discover later, had a special script for young black girls.

Just like Julie, I wanted to know what I was passionate about. No one told me the piles of notebooks under my bed, bulging with my curly handwriting, would be worth anything to the world.

I was serious about the cadets, though. I knew, at thirteen, I needed something that inspired commitment, discipline and routine in day-to-day getting by. I'd hoped to find friends that were genuine because we all had our eyes on the same prize. I wanted to know healthy competition, not bullying for the sake of traditional teenage popularity pecking orders.

I thought militarising my thoughts could calm the chaos in my head. My father was absent, and a shy imaginary friend on pages I scored in my tiny bedroom. I never wrote him as disciplinarian, although he himself was an army man.

Thinking about it now, the page was my Sergeant. Cadet Edwards was to begin to find mastery of Self through the regiment of pens, pencils lined up perfectly for nib and lead weight inspection. Stationery had to be crisp. Diaries were lined and hard covered. £2.99 from WH Smith.

I was hyper sporty. Lightning coursed through my teen body. I had a sharp and very creative mind with an imagination that sucked me into vortexes of distraction teachers often commented on in my school reports – 'Zena is a very bright girl with a lot of potential but she is too easily distracted.'

Thoughts can hold you to ransom, speed jet fighting with no target to vision bomb.

*Disorientation, panic attacks and aching joints.*

Writing was the perfect locus. It made my body home when I was alien in it.

There were days I could feel every emotion being lived by the populace within a five-mile radius of the London borough of Haringey. An empath. Too

sensitive. Get a thicker skin, my Mum would say.

I often felt lost in the enormity of the world beyond the school perimeter. My imagination seemed uncontrollably vast and I felt alone in it. I could sense the millions of lives pulsing like fireflies shaken in a greasy jar named London city.

## **Present**

### *Food*

Looking at the headlines today, in a pre-menopausal state of internal disarray, I feel that same numbness of pubescent disorientation towards the world. In a second puberty, I become 'vocabulary challenged', so make up words because the feelings and emotions are so huge no words exist that can quantify them. One has to determine that this word is valid, because if Shakespeare can do it – make up words – then so can you.

It's not that I have forgotten the words. It is that I have forgotten how to call them. How to summon and command them to take form in my living room as living breathing stories that will cradle and confront simultaneously.

I second-guess the recipes of the past  
when I cooked words.

Stirred them, steaming, with chunky wooden spoons in Dutch pots.

Have my mouth warmed by the taste

Of common pimento and sweet basil,

Fire-breathing rallying cries to rebelliousness

As the chilli infiltrates, soaking

The belt and corroding the buckle

Of the straitjacket of conformity

I had not known I had internalised

So I needed to bake them on open fires  
When they were banned in the droughts  
And blow on the simmering embers of discontent  
I want to broil them: bubbles, colliding as protests  
Meet in central London streets  
To be the yeast that uprises  
As do the flashes through my body  
When hormones, licking the tip of the moon cycle of the Crone  
demand me to simmer down. And be sensible.  
To be grown up.  
Again.

‘Life is a cabbage.’ It is a simple food. The external leaves weather the harshest conditions. Closest to the dirt, they are prone to attack from the insidious munch of the slimiest belly crawlers. They are exposed to searing heat and withering frost. The fibrous spine and sinews of the darker hued leaves, rich with the chlorophyll, exhaling oxygen, the part of the cabbage that gets torn off and thrown away even though they hold the most nutrients. So when a season passes and layers drop those dead leaves, they nourish the maturing heart.

It is a beautiful thing to be able to serve a platter of poems that people can be proud to say they experienced me reading or shared creatively within the boundaries of limited characters on their social media. And I return tweets and Grams thanking them for their kind words of support. They do not know that they are asking a sixteen-and-a-half -year-old girl to stay in the room, in the attic-cum-poetry reading venue, in a noisy sticky floored bar; to let her voice claim the stage of a proscenium-arched East End theatre;

or to continue to hold space for people who want to forget that they are asylum-seeking case numbers in community centre halls where their children face-paint and make origami swans out of small squares of blue, pink, orange and yellow paper. They invite her to continue to cook and conjure.

A military chef is feeding the bellies of foot soldiers, ordinary people who did not know that their smile is everyday resistance to dehumanisation.

Future

Trees.

Adaptability. Resilience.

Two words that are perhaps the most important in my archive. For the last decade.

Words like these have proven themselves

Robust, yet fluid enough to flow

with cataclysmic shifts in the collective conscious

when the demise of pen to paper cross-fades

into rapid thumb movement, dreaming awake

technology crowds words with binaries.

Retired words knock from the inside

of hardback dictionaries, replaced by Google brain,

Who am I to say that meaning

starves in text speak?

That emoticons cram emotions?

Some of us just really do miss

the touch of wood

The smell of reams of paper,  
And do not mind the wait  
Or the scrawl of our hand

We read in the language of swipes  
Interest paid in tokens and credits,  
Quick thinking minds or short attention spans?  
Judgement about what should be is futile, What is, is interesting  
And there's nothing else to it  
Other than to learn a new language  
Of a digital age  
And focus on those who are planting  
new trees

I often speak of trees and ponder: when us literary humans become  
'the canon', how sturdy are the branches the next generations will use to  
climb?

Will the fruit they dream be too heavy with questions about the  
legacy left for them? Will it be enough? Will the branches be hollow? Or  
dense and oily with nutrients we promise them with our mouths?

We are trees  
our Ancestors' Souls lace the branches.  
Paper lanterns  
strung as pathways through the boughs,  
guide the climb to the highest fruit  
closest to the sun,

protect them from thieves  
and appropriators,  
trading on the highways  
of tangled roads to success and relevance.

Relevance is how we consistently throw questions at the page, how prepared we are to look into the abyss of our subconscious with a potential light at the end of life's labyrinthine tunnels.

When mentoring, I emphasise how risk must be taken, storms must be ridden as if we are willingly climbing upon the backs of angry, bucking bulls who will teach us to hold onto our courage, to write beyond what we know will make people feel comfortable.

Each toss to the ground will teach us  
to eat dust and call it sugar  
to make our bruises and scrapes landmarks  
of where a methodology failed. And each kick  
will put energy into our core stomach muscles  
that will support the ricocheting ripple  
that passes up the spine so that our necks do not crack,  
so that our tongues will not lose their focus.  
We are designed to dance with the punches,  
and to continue to advance forward  
as warriors of love and the pen.



## *Body*

'Poetry will put starch in your backbone, so you can stand, so you  
can compose your life.'

— Maya Angelou

It always feels important to challenge my voice to evolve, to force it into the body where it can grow strong with recognition of how far this body has come. I'm always mindful to express my passion in words with light attachment to other folks' definition of success because the black body itself is rarely wholly allowed to claim itself. There are boxes it has to tick. There is a script written for it.

The muscle and the sinew of my writing hangs upon the bones of my memories.

I believe writers should have strong bones. Calcium rich. For re-mem-ory, for carrying the archive. My bones are sturdy from a diet of self-re-flection, nourishment of writers such as Octavia Butler, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Sapphire. I will not forget the biographies of Tina Turner and Miles Davis. The music of Miriam Makeba, Sarah Vaughan, Bootsie Collins, Bach and Kate Bush. Pretty much all of them rebels and trailblazers in their genre.

Also, I value the gravitas of the traditional West African Griot. Fully com-prehending the responsibility and honour of that role was the most potent vitamin supplement of information for every writer cell in my body. What does it mean for me to have had no children except for the time I have for deep investigation of how to navigate, not negotiate but defiantly navigate ways through maddening political climates that re-iterate the diminishing affects of preserved, ignored and/or upheld colonial tropes that squeeze

diverse cultural narratives.

I, and many artist colleagues, know so well the role of the artists in times of crisis because of this squeeze – the conflict of knowing that you are oppressed but recognizing the pressure for the innovation it inspires.

What my work graces me with is the ability to offer others, through poems and songs and words, some reprieve from the noise of duplicity and violent greed. I will jog beside you in this marathon of life, telling the stories anchored in new myth creation for new times and fresh futures. It can be hard work reimagining the present. It is forever evolving and we must be literary fit to keep up with the changes.

### *Generations.*

My belief is the creation base of literature should be intergenerational.

Tired of the cacophony that baby boomers make, Millennial Minds make a new music. They see the strings of the puppeteers and work to cut themselves free. Those of us born in the 60s and 70s must adopt a type of bravery that comes from surrendering ideas that we will no longer be relevant in a world that seems to be designed for the young and the beautiful.

Many are pushing back on that trope anyway, because they know they are pawns. They know a media construct when they see one. They recognise the ruse that is virtually impossible to live up to. So they opt out and produce their own media around sustainable entrepreneurialism, self-care and a future that embraces all. Julie would've loved this Generation Z.

These new generations are showing an excitement in literature since performance poetry and the spoken word scene elbowed its way into mainstream, bypassing the approval of the literary establishment. Something I

am proud to say I am a part of.

They are making innovative use of free online platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook. Every poetry and spoken word night they attend, they get to exercise their voices.

That said, many I haven't worked with are stressed out because they have found a purpose in building bridges, but have family members and loved ones who hold on tightly to stifling comfort zones that are either on the edges of ,or are deeply embedded in, discrimination and prejudice. They have complex emotions to navigate – loyalty to their bloodline or to the future of their own lives. And this is where I believe my job is to inspire transformative thinking from the dark ages pre the Word-Wide-Web into a space that they define as light.

Regardless of whether or not us traumatised Baby-boomers will see the results or impact of wisdoms shared, we must be generous as genies, offering emerging writers the wish of a dream space to artistically breathe, and offer a hand up to the next branch above the noise of the media machine of mainstream industry.

Unabashedly radical, open-minded literature, that reflects the diversity of folk who exist across the planet, is an exciting prospect to work the body of the mind, and to also challenge what we think we know and understand. Comprehension is not a destination, it is a tollgate where we pay attention. The world is in our hands with a white fiery halo. So I wish to say farewell to the stony past and pass on the key that breaks the chains.

When I think back to 'Julie the Careers Officer' and how the numbness crept into my body to keep me safe, as I have seen happen to so many young people since I have started this incredible work, I can track how my writer's path has run a parallel marathon at the shoulders of a young

Afri-Carib-British working-class woman, who stumbled through racism, contorted her way through sexism and boxed-clever out of the labels and boxes the British script had of me. For us, the children of colonial leftovers.

I wish I could have told Julie I wanted to be in a similar vocation to her but in the writing world. And I definitely would have told her that she would be inspiration for a piece of published work on a revolutionary technological platform for freelance and independent literary creators. I'm not sure she would've been able to get her head around it, but it certainly would have been a trip painting a picture of it for her.

### **Zena Edwards**

For 27 years, since graduating from Middlesex University, Zena has been a professional writer/poet performer, facilitator, creative project developer and vocalist. She studied storytelling and performance at The London International School for Performing Arts and is published in several anthologies including Margaret Busby's *New Daughters of Africa* (2019, Myriad), and *Dance the Guns to Silence* (2005, flipped eye publishing). Zena is a passionate advocate for environmental issues, decolonisation, race and power and has been mentoring young and emerging artists in professional artist development and creative campaigning since 2010. As a multidisciplinary collaborator, Zena has worked with internationally acclaimed choreographer and dancer Akram Khan (*Xenos*), visual artist Theaster Gates (*Soul Manufacturing Corporation*), radical filmmaker Fahim Alam (*Riots Reframed*), and The Last Poets.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**writersmosaic.org.uk**

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