

2020

Life Writing Prize

JOANNA BROWN



SPREAD
THE WORD

LIFE WRITING PRIZE HIGHLY COMMENDED 2020

Birds can be heard singing through open windows

Joanna Brown

Birds can be heard singing through open windows

Joanna Brown

That night, you are teaching me to cook: golden roast chicken, fried plantain, steamed rice, sautéed greens, pepper sauce. You giggle and we wriggle around each other in the balmy heat of the small kitchen. I watch you chop, mix, stir. Look at your beautiful hands: fingers slender, elegant; nails smooth ovals tipped with ivory; ringed with promise, wedding, eternity. Perfectly poised, they stir thyme and lemon, nutmeg and cayenne. You conjure spiced alchemy, the steam rises and drifts, fragranting the air with memory. I kiss your brown, freckled cheek. Soft, warm.

After dinner, you go to bed early. Being on your feet exhausts you; pain screws your joints tight. It has been four years since you left work. Four years pinned to your bed. I am thirteen when it begins. You need my help in almost everything you do. Need it, but don't want it. It's a cruel reversal for a tiger mother. A spiteful paralysis for a woman always moving. Sang and swang whilst ironing. Danced whilst cooking. Ran for a bus no matter what the distance: legs reaching further with every stride, laughing breathlessly at the driver as you dug into your purse for the fare. Now you lean on me to move from one room to the next; gripping my arm, sucking air through your teeth with each laboured step. I lower you into the bath, lift you out of an armchair. Your bed is by turns your prison and throne. I come and go daily: shopping before school (milk, magazines), shopping after school (medicines, groceries). Locked together, we bicker, we love, we argue, we laugh, we talk, we cry, we fight. Sisters, friends, enemies: mother and daughter, daughter and mother.

Sometimes we are silent together. I climb into bed beside you and read.

My thoughts are entangled in the story of someone else's teenage drama, but I feel your breath on the back of my neck, butterfly soft.

You'll need to look after yourself, you tell me.

I'm not going to be around forever.

You'll thank me when I'm dead and gone.

When I'm in the ground, you'll understand.

One day, when you're a mother...

You love uttering these prophetic wisdoms. Sometimes they are laced with black humour, chased by cackles.

Don't let the boys tamper with you, or I'll come back to haunt you. Tell them I'll come after them with scissors.

I tell myself it's because you're a nurse. You worked nights. It brings out the dark side.

I have just left school. A-levels under my belt, a place at University awaits next year. We don't talk about how you will cope without me. This year, I am working as a medical receptionist at a plastic surgery clinic. You've pulled strings with one of your nursing friends. Every day I don a trouser suit and sit in a bright and airy room, waiting for the phone to ring. Occasionally they let me type up letters or invoices. I once accidentally walked in on a rhinoplasty. I had a phone message for one of the surgeons and went through the wrong door. Four ghosts, gowned and masked, looked up at me, eyes wide with outrage. On the table, a still body with an opened face. The flat insistent beep of a machine. A sickly smell, chemical. I backed out, apologising, and ran blindly for the loos. I made it just in time before throwing up violently. When I tell you this, you rock with laughter, wide smile flashing, hands clapping, once, twice, then held together as if in prayer, thankful for the image.

The job at the clinic is easy enough. It's quiet. When the phone rings, it's usually you. Boredom and solitude prompt you to break off from reading

your magazines and call me, but I hear the pages flap as you flick through them while we talk. *Nursing Times, Nursing Mirror, Cosmopolitan, Hello.*

Do you remember taking me to work with you during the school holidays? It was easy when you were on children's wards. I'd bring a bag full of books and read stories to your patients. Young children with plastic tubes taped to their noses, or sprouting from holes in their chests. Aboubakar, a chatterbox with a gap-toothed grin who had four holes in his heart. Idris, soft-eyed and sad, who loved card games, and had only one kidney. Amina could not move, but her eyes sparkled whenever she heard music. Sometimes I would peek through a half open door and silently watch you rearrange their pillows, smooth their hair back from their foreheads, hold their hands in yours. We had photos of each one. They were my imaginary siblings. I never questioned that my mother was mothering other people's children. I understood. And the other nurses would mother me in turn when you were busy. Bring me tea, biscuits. I loved reading aloud to my hospital family. Fairy tales, nursery rhymes, nonsense poems. The words lisped and tumbled out of my mouth: the children giggled and asked for more. *They went to sea in a sieve, they did. In a sieve they went to sea.*

When each child died, you would place a photograph of them in an album, carefully peeling back a film sheet from a page in a little red book with cushioned covers, and gently placing the photograph to rest in the centre, before smoothing the film down again firmly with the flat of your palm. There. Every now and then, we would take the album down from the shelf, sit wedged against each other on the sofa and turn the pages together, naming the children one by one. Naeema. Irina. Idris. Abdul. Jacob. Aboubakar. *Remember them, you said. You can talk to them, remember them, continue to love them. They can still hear you.*

Now you also have a plastic tube sprouting: a little tap taped to the soft

flesh above your breast. You have had so many blood transfusions that the veins in both arms have collapsed and the tube is the only way to get the sickled blood out and the fresh blood into your body now. All eight pints drained and replaced. A week of tough days in hospital, followed by a week of quiet days at home. It takes four weeks for the blood to sickle up again. For it to slow and thicken in your veins, coagulate around your joints in a sticky stubborn mass. Pain is your constant companion. Sometimes it rages about your body, ravenous, tearing away at you from within: other times it just sits patiently, holding your hands and looking you straight in the eyes. You stare it down, but it never leaves you.

Deep into that night, the smell of the chicken and the plantain still heavy and warm in the air infuses my dreams. Something invisible drags me to the surface of my sleep and slaps me awake. I sit up with a jolt. Your voice, somewhere far away. It comes again, crying out my name: shrill, harsh, closer. I stagger into your room, switch on the light. You are lying in bed, struggling to get up, shivering violently. The whites of your eyes are yellow and filmy: you stare into me, not seeing me. Your teeth chatter through clenched jaws. Your hands twist the sheets into thick ropes. I hear my voice cajoling, comforting. Your eyes widen. Trembling and trying not to cry, I grab the phone next to your bed and call for an ambulance. It's a familiar drill. I want to hold you still, to stop you shaking like that, but something has you in its jaws and will not let go. I bring a mug of hot water to your mouth: your teeth clatter on its edge, water spills down your chin, you shudder in my arms.

Flashing lights on the wall. I look at my watch. 1:47am. Did you sleep while I was sleeping? I open the door to a young man and woman, serious-faced, gentle-voiced. I worry about their heavy boots on your bedroom carpet. They take control: offer reassurances, give instructions, ask questions. I stand back. They ask me to pack you a bag. Comfortable

clothes, underwear, a comb, hair oil, toothbrush, perfume, magazines: then, as an afterthought, scarlet nail varnish. You asked for that last time you went in. I watch as they lift you out of bed, into the hall, downstairs to the front door.

“Should I come?” I ask. They tell me no, stay home, phone in later, come tomorrow. Strapped to a metal bed you disappear into the back of the waiting ambulance. It is freezing outside. I can see my breath billow and rise in front of my face with my words: “Will she be warm enough?” When the doors close between us, I stand for a moment in the road feeling foolish, redundant as the ambulance pulls away, spinning blue light, siren screaming. Silence falls again like a cloak over the street.

When I call the hospital, a woman with a heavy, tired voice says she can give me no news yet as you’ve not been seen by the doctor and tells me to call again later. I give it another hour. The same woman says that the doctor is with you now: try again in a bit. When I call a third time, she says that you are “stable” and that I should go to bed and ring in the morning. *Get some sleep, darling.* Her accent reminds me of yours. Sierra Leonean? Nigerian? It’s comforting. Reluctantly I return to bed. I dream that I am standing alone under an umbrella in heavy rain, an open grave scooped out of the earth in front of me. Ice floods my chest, rousing me. I ring the hospital again. Four a.m., fourth call. A soft voice with a Cork lilt tells me that you are asleep now. *I think I should come and see her. Now.* The edge in my voice wavers between assertion and panic. The returning voice sounds weary. *She needs to sleep. Call again in the morning, love.* I want to say, *It is the morning.* I want to tell them about the dream but I don’t.

When my alarm goes off, my head is thick with confusion. I can’t remember what I’ve dreamt and what has happened. In your room, the light is still on, the bed is empty, and the sheets are crumpled and damp. On the bedside

table, a half-drunk mug of water. I phone the hospital again. The woman with the West African accent reassures me. You have been seen by the doctor, you are still sleeping, you are stable (that word again) and we should let you sleep now. *When can I see her?* Later in the day, she tells me. They'll run some tests when you wake up. Visiting hours are from two till eight. *Can I come at two?* Yes, do that. This gives me time to go to work for the morning first. That will please you. Try not to worry, the nurse says. I thank her, happy that I know I am going to see you at a prescribed time.

I make a cup of tea. Staring at the wall I think through the day ahead. I want to show you that I can manage on my own, that I can keep up the work, balance it with looking after you. I think about how much easier it will be without having to study in the evenings. I put fresh sheets on your bed, water the plants and get in the shower to wash away the residue of dread from the previous night.

Outside, it is a crisp cold morning. Everyone moves quickly and with purpose, bright and hard-edged in the sun's dazzling light. When my bus arrives, I sit upstairs, at the front, as always: the view is best from here. I'm feeling calmer now. It's been years since you and I took a bus together. You're just not well enough anymore. We used to take trips into town. *Up town*, you called it. Oxford Street, shopping. When I was small, I'd hold your hand from the minute we left the house until we returned, or so it seemed. You bought perfume, watches, handbags from men who shouted from their cardboard box mountains on the street, preachers of thrift. You were a devout worshipper: chatting, cajoling, chastising, charming, bantering and bartering until you triumphed and had exactly what you wanted for just the right price.

Once, we were weaving in and out of the crowds as usual: I hurried to keep up with your determined stride as you pulled me along. I was six, I think.

We were heading towards a crowd on the edge of the pavement. Men and women were standing in the road. I thought they were buying handbags. But you could see something I couldn't. *Hang on, darling*, you said, and you let go of my hand. I took a deep breath as you disappeared into the crowd. People closed around you like water closing over my head. I pushed my way through the forest of legs and emerged breathless to find you kneeling next to a woman lying on her side in the road. You had your ear to her mouth. Her blonde hair was matted with blood. A few metres away, a bike, its front wheel twisted. People were muttering about a taxi. You were pulling a scarf from around your neck and making a cushion for her head. You were cutting clothes from her with your scissors. The crowd continued to jostle and push, watching, murmuring. No one moved to help. Their muttering buzzed in my ears, irritating, menacing. You were bent low over the lying-down woman. Your lips were moving but I could not hear what you were saying. When the ambulance arrived, the crew jumped out in their boxy uniforms and black boots. They joined you on the ground next to her and started asking you questions. I wanted to be over there, with them, with you, helping. Instead, I was in a crowd of bystanders. When the crew had strapped the woman with bloodied hair to the metal bed and rolled it into the back of the waiting vehicle, they thanked you. As the crowd dispersed, your eyes found me; you smiled at me and made your way towards me. Your hands were covered in blood. I watched, blinking away tears as you took tissues out of your bag and cleaned your hands. You knelt down in front of me with your arms outstretched, mine again, and all my fear fell away like black feathers from a fairytale ending. I threw my arms around you and buried my face in your neck. Your heavy perfume filled my nose, a wave of relief. As I sobbed into the sweet warmth of you, pride rose like a lump in my throat, threatening to choke me.

The walk from the bus stop to the clinic where I work is brisk: it clears my head. Working takes my mind off things for a few hours. The reception area is

drenched with golden light and birds can be heard singing through the open windows. I type up invoices and half-expect your usual phone call. I leave at one. That way I can walk onto your ward the moment visiting hours begin.

I wait for ages for the bus. The sky turns grey, it begins to rain, the traffic starts to coagulate. I wait and wait and slowly it dawns on me that I am going to be late to see you. It has gone half one. When the bus finally arrives, I sit upstairs, at the front, staring at the water-soaked window. My hair is wet through and I'm shivering slightly. I try to console myself by thinking about what flowers to buy when I arrive at the hospital. *Which flowers will make you feel loved? Which ones will make you beam as I approach your bed?*

Once you picked me up from a friend's house when you'd finished your night shift and we got on the bus together to go home. I was eight. I was holding a bunch of scarlet roses, wrapped in cellophane. They were a gift to you from the grateful widow of a patient of yours. *Thank you for everything you did for him*, the card read. We climbed the stairs and sat at the front. I laid the roses across my lap. You smoothed down the skirt of your blue raincoat, belted tight over your chequered nurse's uniform. "Oi!" A voice from the back of the bus. Probably not for us. "Oi! Nigger! Nigger nurse!" My heart fluttered like a bird, trapped. Dark laughter. Two, three voices. I grew cold. You stiffened. You stared straight ahead; your mouth fixed in a grim line. "Oi! I'm talking to you, Monkeys!" My insides turned liquid. "Mummy..." I said weakly, shifting in my seat. You stood up abruptly, gripping my hand tightly, and pulled me up. As I stood, the roses dropped to the floor. Instinctively my hand moved towards them, but you yanked me forward towards the stairs. Three shaven-headed youths lounged across the long seat at the back of the bus. One of them leapt up and swung towards us, eyes fixed on ours, half-grinning. Everyone else was either looking down or out of the windows. I stumbled down the stairs ahead of you, trying not to trip. You followed steadily, still holding my

hand. All at once the bus stopped, the doors opened, I heard the hawk and splat of spitting. Flecks of bubbled white landed in my hair, but the mass had landed on you. An oyster wobbled on the shoulder of your raincoat. Instantly you pushed me gently through the open doors, and as I stumbled onto the pavement you turned, clenched your hand into a fist and smashed it up into the spitter's grinning teeth. His head bucked, he staggered back onto the stairs and sat gaping as his mouth filled with blood. You stood over him for a moment, one fist raised, the other hand raised flat towards him, half warning, half curse: he froze. I screamed for you, terrified that the doors would close between us, and the bus would carry you away from me forever.

You straightened your raincoat, stepped off the bus, back straight, head high as the doors closed behind you and the bus pulled away, taking that gaping red mouth and the roses with it. You cleaned up the offending mess with brusque efficiency and tossed the dirty tissues into a bin. On the way home, we stopped to buy another bunch of red roses. Later that afternoon, as we dozed, after a bath, curled up on the sofa, you combed my newly washed hair with your fingers, lifting and dropping the dark, curled tresses in rhythm as you sang in your silversweet soprano, "*Golden slumbers kiss your eyes, smiles awake you when you rise, sleep pretty baby, do not cry and I will sing a lullaby....*" I realised then that you had not spoken a single word on that bus.

When I finally arrive at the hospital, I hurry to buy your roses. I choose ones that will match your nail varnish. Deep scarlet. Perfect. The almond-eyed woman behind the counter lifts the dripping stems from the bucket, wraps them in cellophane, leaving the vivid scarlet heads open to the air, "So they can breathe. Watch out for the thorns," she winks.

I know my way to your ward with my eyes closed: I take the stairs - quicker than the lift. I burst through the double doors, relieved, triumphant.

Breathless, smiling, I stop a nurse, keen to reassure her that I am here now. "I'm so sorry... I'm late." She looks blank. "I waited for ages... the bus..." She doesn't respond. "I'm here to see Margaret... I'm her daughter." She blinks twice, hard. Says nothing. Disappears. I am irritated now: she's holding me up. I look around but can't see you in any of the beds. Maybe I'm on the wrong ward. Somewhere, a quiet voice says, "She's here."

A young man in a white coat appears in front of me, blocking my way as I step towards him. His eyes are clear green, like glass, but bloodshot and ringed with shadow. "Are you Margaret's daughter?" I hold up the roses in response. "Yes, I'm sorry I'm late." Still breathless. *Right ward, at least.* "This way, please." He indicates an open door to our right. I hesitate. He ushers me in, closes the door: the air thickens around me. He sits down and beckons me into a seat opposite. I don't move.

"Is she alright?"

The nurse has joined us and is standing awkwardly, close to the door.

"Please, sit down."

I sit, slowly, looking from one to the other. *Which one is going to answer me?*

"Is she alright?"

"You know, when you mother came in last night, she was very ill."

"Yes. Yes, she's very ill. I know. She's always been ill."

I look from his face to the nurse's and back again to him.

His hands are trembling and his eyes are wet.

"Excuse me, but my mum, is she alright?" *Is that me again?*

He takes a breath, exhales slowly. "When your mother came in last night, she was very ill. We managed to stabilise her and she slept for a few hours." *She's still asleep. Or maybe she's being seen by a doctor again. Yes, that makes sense.*

"We were planning another transfusion. But earlier this afternoon she had a cardiac arrest."

Inside my head, a window closes.

“We tried for half an hour to revive her.”

The room swims. *Tried?*

Why isn't he speaking? Is it my turn to speak?

“Did she die?”

Why do I say that?

“Yes. Yes, I'm afraid”... he takes a deep, long breath. “She died at half past one this afternoon.”

Am I supposed to speak?

Is he waiting for me to speak?

“We tried to call you.”

Where was I? At work? Waiting for a bus? On the bus?

“I'm...I'm ever so sorry....”

Something wraps itself around my chest and squeezes...

“...I realise this must be a terrible shock.”

I can't breathe...

“Is there someone we can call?”

I see the phone next to her empty bed. I imagine ringing it, waiting for her to pick up.

The doctor speaks again. This time his voice slices open the silence with confident precision.

“Would you like to see her?”

I am shopping for a pair of gloves for you to wear in your coffin. I have been told they must be white lace to match the dress you will be wearing. A whole host of Sierra Leonean women have mysteriously materialised in response to news of your death. I only know one of them, never met the others, but they are very keen to advise on the funeral etiquette and take care of the catering arrangements on the day. One has donated the dress: peach satin edged with white lace. I know you would never have worn it in life but am unable to say so. I watch the women fuss through a fog. Their voices come to me from far away, the sound carried through deep water.

And now I am alone in a carpeted department store in Oxford Street staring at pairs of gloves. They dangle from the silver rails like lifeless hands. *How do I know the right pair from the wrong pair? How will I make sure they fit? Who will put them on you? What do your hands look like now?* I take a pair from the rail and hold them up. I push my hand into the left one. It feels scratchy against my skin: I suppose that won't matter. The lace is delicately patterned: my skin shows through its miniature windows in tiny brown flecks. I imagine that my hands are yours. I try making the graceful flutters your fingers did when you were talking. I stretch my fingers out as though I am waiting for my nails to dry. Suddenly, a young man is at my shoulder. He smiles like an eager child. "May I help you?" Embarrassed, I tear the glove from my hand. I buy the gloves and deliver them as instructed to the funeral directors.

"Would you like to see her?" the doctor asks me. Of course I want to see you. I have come to see you. I have roses for you. They show me to your bed. The curtains are drawn around it. One bed along, a woman with greasy hair smiles weakly at me, her eyes shining with sympathy. The doctor pulls the curtain around the rail to reveal you: a magic trick gone wrong. You look as though you are lying in state: arms at your sides, palms upwards; fingers gently curled; the nails, ivory-tipped, small like a child's, unpainted. You could be meditating, only as I step up to the edge of the bed, I see that your face is closed too tightly, and your tongue is sticking out from between your lips. *How did that happen? Why did they leave you like that?* I hear the doctor and the nurse talking in hushed voices behind the curtain. I watch you for what seems like hours, half waiting for you to open your eyes. You don't. Hanging limply at my side, the roses drip water all over the floor. Eventually I lean over you and kiss your freckled cheek. Cold, already. *Was I really that late?*

Sitting in the front row of the church at your funeral, I have the best view.

Your coffin is made of a plain, sandy-coloured wood: too light, I realise too late. When asked to pick you one from the catalogue, I had trouble choosing. I wanted to laugh. The coffins had English place names: The Warwick, The Oxford, The Sussex, The Kent. Places I had visited when looking at universities. I opted for The Warwick. Now, looking at the light wood, I know that I made the wrong choice.

I lead the line of mourners towards you. You lie drowning in peach satin. My eyes scan your face, trying to find you there: I cannot. You are, and are not, in that box. Your hair is the wrong shape. Your chin is pushed back into your neck. Your lips are pressed firmly together, secrets locked away forever. I wonder what they did with your tongue. Your slender arms are crossed on your chest: they end in the white gloves. Behind me, I sense shifting, people jostling, wanting to move forward to see you. I want them to disappear, I want to be alone again with you, but suddenly I realise that the white lace gloves look all wrong. Your hands seem to belong to somebody else. My chest feels tight. I'm trying to breathe slowly, trying to catch the right rhythm, catch the rhythm of your breath as I used to, but your mouth is clamped shut. I reach forward and touch the glove closest to me. It feels hard, a mannequin's hand. I want to peel the gloves off. I want to take them off and see your hands. See where the skin is darker in the small wrinkles in your fingers. See your smooth oval nails, small like a child's, still unpainted. See your hands elegantly resting on a wooden spoon, see your hands clutching a cup of hot water, see your hands hailing a bus, see your hands smooth down the skirt of your raincoat, see your hands turn the pages of a magazine, see your hands turn the pages of a photo album, feel your hands stroke the hair from my hot forehead, hear your hands clap as you throw your head back and laugh, hear your hands clap when you're dancing in the kitchen, hear your hands clap when I've finished cooking, hear your hands clap when I've finished singing, hear your hands clap when I've finished dancing, hear your hands clap

when I've finished writing, hear your hands clap when I've finished being because I haven't finished being I haven't finished breathing I haven't finished I haven't finished anything yet but you, you have finished, you have finished and I wasn't there and I wasn't there and you died alone and now your hands are silent and still and still silent and you are there and not there and no longer here and I can't breathe and I can't understand and now someone is leading me away so that everyone else can say goodbye and I can't breathe and I'm at the back of the church and I'm far away from you when they are closing the coffin, they are closing it and covering you forever so that you can't breathe and the coffin is closing and I can't breathe and I can't understand I can't understand I can't understand and I want to ask why why why and the last thing I see is those gloves crossed on your chest and I want to know why you are gone and why you are dead and why why why did they make me clothe and hide and cover forever your beautiful, beautiful hands?

Your beautiful, strong, brown, elegant, eloquent, considerate, compassionate, courageous, marvellous hands.

Years later, a friend tells me I have graceful hands and suddenly my eyes are hot and my heart is squatting in my throat. I swallow a lump of solid air. Through an open window I hear the gentle trilling of birds. *Thank you, I say, after some time. Yes. Yes. I think I have my mother's hands.*

BIOGRAPHY

Raised as an only child, losing her parents young further fuelled obsessive reading and diary writing. A qualified teacher, **JOANNA BROWN** facilitates creative writing workshops. Recent work includes the development of the literary education programme: *Africa Writes: Young Voices*, linking poets with London school students to explore writing from Africa and the diaspora. She is now immersing herself fully in her own writing practice, unearthing her personal family histories to honour and celebrate unsung Black lives in Britain.