

16

Great Works

Courtney Sina Meredith

She has a top knot of black curls, a 105 trench in charcoal, a white linen tunic stopped at her knees revealing black tights running into dark boots with gold points on the heel. Her moleskin is chocolate brown, she takes it from her handbag and continues quietly the conversation with the deity Nafanua, a waterfall of indecipherable pleas running down the page. Inside the Tate Modern, she walks softly and quickly in search of the Henri Matisse exhibition—‘The Cut-Outs’, a period when Matisse began *cutting* and *carving* into colour.

‘Oh there you are ... great goddess, I’m here, finally, in front of *L’escargot*, The Snail. Yes, the shapes and the colours are nice but what the fuck, I don’t see a snail.’ She urges the goddess to help her understand the importance of the collage. From this angle, she shifts her weight to the left hoping for a better view and even slips the handbag over from her right shoulder into her hands, expecting a miracle.

‘Nope,’ she says under her breath, people close by begin to stare.

‘No damn snail anywhere.’

She thinks back to that day in Albert Park with Jan on the lawn, trying to understand criminal law.

'All of the material facts you have to pick out, the precedent or whatever, it's like freaking soup in my head. How am I supposed to remember all of this stuff?

Why are the criminals always brown? And I mean, the whole idea of justice is just a bit cracked. You have these rich lawyers right? They need crime to have a job, and like the police right—if there were no criminals they'd be out of work and hungry! Or maybe they'd be policing real things like oil rigs in the sea and predators of endangered birds and acid rain on heritage buildings.'

'Stop it, surrender, you're just out of your depth Ake.' That was Jan, laughing carelessly, running a hand through her blonde mane.

'When *I* read a case at home, it's with a krispie and a cup of tea. When *you* read a case at your dad's firm, it's with his partners connecting the dots for you.' Jan had glared back at her but eventually they both laughed and headed for the pub.

'Nafanua, are you still there? I think of all the times you must have felt unsure but you stayed fierce and you kept fighting.' By now there was only a rainbow blob and she'd stopping trying to make out any creature, deciding it was a test.

'There was one paper I took in security studies, for politics, I read about the fear underneath most things that shape very simple things, like the direction I'm writing in (left to right). One tutor made us all wear masks down the main road to see how it felt to be different. It didn't feel any different to walking down the street with my own face.'

She surveys the white walls slowly, admires a blue form, considers the snow flower, absorbing the strange looking bodies brought to life at the edge of death. Plinth after plinth a new definition of living unfurls. Nafanua is nowhere to be seen.

'Am I the negress? That idea of exotica, beautiful, two dimensional. This is important, it was important to Matisse. I mean it might be okay to be a monster, an attraction for a while, but the novelty ... it wouldn't take long to wear off, so if I had to be quoted either way, I would have to stay the path of denouncement. They put us up on walls because we *are* works of art, but it's the wrong way round Nafanua, they think they're looking at us.'

She writes with a sleek new pen given to her the day after she arrived in this huge, strange city. He was Polish, the banker, he opened an account for her on Edgware Road. She didn't feel bad taking it, there were plenty in a glass jar on his desk and she noticed airline tickets.

'Canary Islands,' he said proudly in a thick accent, 'don't worry you'll get used to it here, you miss home at first, then slowly London becomes an even better home.' His teeth were shiny white, like he'd smeared them in vaseline.

Everybody said she had to do the Tate, her boss, her publisher and even her Aunty Sia who jammed her into a booth by the airport departure gate, 'Go to the Tate, especially the show of a master, my mate Emma said it's amazing, the food and the gift shop are really good too, especially the chips and the carrot cake.' Akenese had promised she would go. Everybody looked smaller fanned out in a semicircle waving goodbye, she could see the shared features, how they mirrored each other, wide eyed with excitement. It would've killed her cousin Lisia to know from a distance she looked like she belonged too. A part of her wanted to run back to her grandpa and plead with him not to die while she went off to 'find herself' just like the girls she used to mock at university, especially Jan who had somehow become family. She suddenly wanted to be from that generation before, cheering safely from the sidelines, praying for a future where her daughter or her daughter's daughter would set out into the world all alone. Her uncles didn't cry but her mother was there in the centre shimmering, coming to the fore and disappearing all at once. Akenese remembers the great pang in her chest when she finally walked through to customs, unsure of when she would see them all again.

An intellectual property lawyer enters the Tate Modern to see Kazimir Malevich's first retrospective in 30 years. His thin black glasses give an older appearance but under his arm a lustrous snakeskin folder suggests something else. On the way to contemplate Russian landscapes he takes in the *Blue Nude (II)* observed by a woman 10 metres long, or so she appears in a crisp linen dress not showing her legs, scribbling into a leather journal. He looks at her in profile, considers the difference between women who witness and women who observe, he takes out his phone and taps on the screen.

Akenese can feel his gaze, she continues in her notebook—*writing is a lot of watching*. Her hands flash across the page, giving truth to the notion she can fit into the scene around her if she just keeps herself busy enough, if she can just capture the moment for Auntie Sia. It will be as the polite Polish banker believed, slowly an even better home. It becomes important to detail the artworks separately for the goddess, she arches her feet inside her boots, takes care to keep them flat, the small hole under the right sole lets in a chill from the marble floors.

She ruminates over her mother's warning, 'You have to notice the subtle changes when you get out there, or else you're going to miss it Ake, you'll go all the way to London for nothing. Just stop and you'll see things aren't the same, they're layered, multi-layered. If you keep looking out you'll miss the journey of stepping inside and while you might feel the temperature change between rooms, how can you question what happens if it appears nothing has changed?'

She sits down on one of those predictable leather seats in the middle of the grand hall, completely dwarfed with ideas of how the world could be. Several German tourists in anoraks nearby move in closer, wetting their lips, approaching with soft greetings 'hello' or 'danke' or 'bitte' as though people from outside Britain are encouraged to band together in the middle of the room for safety. Yellow-haired children drag their feet, tired from all the motionlessness, she senses their urge to break free as one of them blows her a kiss.

'Nafanua, that's another thing. They say children are precious, but the ones here have grown from concrete, out of the shadows, towards a grey sky. I haven't seen the sun in weeks and I'm already starting to feel like an extraterrestrial. It seems unfair watching them miss out on grass and fresh air and sunlight, I don't know, maybe they grow up faster here and it makes them superior adults. I might've stayed in law school and come out the other end an actual lawyer, if I'd grown up somewhere like this.'

She sees him again moving between columns, takes care to watch him without being noticed, she imagines a world of trading markets or perhaps finance. He might be a partner with his own legal firm, who else would have the power to stroll around the gallery so casually, so late in the morning? She sends a text to Lisia—*seeing the Tate in 3D!* When she looks up from her phone he catches her off guard, standing

close by gesturing to her notebook, 'Are you in the arts?' This is how you shave a decade off your life, she thinks, or maybe this is how you lose your chances altogether. This must be how easy it is to set out on a new journey that becomes an updated version of the past. Akenese smiles at him, 'The cut-outs were lovely.' She walks out of the Tate with Nafanua assuredly in tow.

Her dark hair catches in the feeble light. Birds overhead are drawn onto the clear sky by hand.

'She's definitely got something, maybe a touch of Arab?' says the older of the men breaking the silence.

'She eats jerk chicken, you can tell by her smile.' Comes the answer. They watch her standing among the flowerbeds, she stares ahead into space. Eating meat pies and drawing on rolled cigarettes, both men slacken their tool belts to relax.

Another cold morning of kerbs and pipes, commuters passing in great hordes. Nobody smiling or saying hello, the usual, the inevitable. Moving each leg slowly as though they have just been discovered, they let out tired sighs, shifting about on the park bench. The younger man opens a can of soda, makes an offering to his workmate who shakes his head with a strong frown. Both pretend to check their phones while keeping watch on the woman across the way, writing beside the sculpture.

More people filter into the square, half expecting rain, desiring sun. At the centre of the garden, the half-timbered hut buzzes with life. A head of golden curls swoops across the lawn, stops in mid-flight, coughs into a sleeve before taking off in a brilliant rush.

'She could be Indian you know?' The younger eager to continue.

'Nice African hips, mind,' he keeps on, 'or she could be some kind of part Chinese, part Japanese, something from that region.'

'I think I might've seen her around here before,' says the older one, his fingers caressing paper around tobacco.

A group of slight women in soft greens sit cross-legged by a great London Plane, under the shadows of leaves they lean into each other with little white notepads. Quarrelling couplings hiss profanities, brilliant shapes of youth, throwing their heads back drinking light, oblivious of their wonder.

'I would introduce her to my mother. I reckon she'd fit right in,' he says watching the plume of smoke rise from his cigarette.

'I would happily take her to my mother's grave.'

'You're sick man.'

'Just the truth.'

Akenese eyes the bronze sculpture, thinks of home and revels in the scene. She takes out her notebook and writes ... 'There is a Plane tree, not an Oak or Kauri or a Pohutakawa but a Plane tree. There are two men mending pipes over by the entrance, the younger of the two talks so loud I can't wait to go home to see if I do look African or like an Indian or even Japanese. You were right Nafanua, there is only me, at the Tate I saw nothing but myself.'

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