

Ubah Cristina ALI FARAH

The Hibiscus Hedge

I was born in Italy, and my parents were students when they first met. My mother was from Verona, in Italy's north, and my father from Eyl, a small village on Somalia's northern coast. He'd received a scholarship from the Italian government to conclude his studies at the university in Verona. When he graduated, my father decided to go back to his country, and my mother and I were to follow him one year later.

The first time I saw Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, the city where I grew up, I was three—it was the summer of 1976. To be honest, I cannot remember anything about my mother's feelings on that occasion—but she must have been very excited, because it was also her first time in Mogadishu; I cannot remember anything about my father, who must have been excited as well, since he had not seen us for over one year; finally, I cannot remember anything about my impression of the language, which must have seemed so different to me.

In the years following, my mother told me many times about that day. In the Italian we shared she talked about the language, maybe because she hoped her memories were similar to mine. Indeed, neither of us understood Somali then. My father, on the contrary, never spoke to me about that time, maybe because he knew that his memories couldn't be similar.

Somalia was the country where my father was born and raised, whereas to my mother and me, the surroundings appeared new and luminescent. Since my mother never learned Somali, I would later act as her loyal translator. Reflecting on my life between these two languages now, my ear for language developed in a domestic setting with its daily life and small intimacies.

I said that I don't remember anything about my arrival, but there is something that happened afterwards which was like a tiny ripple in my memory, something about the moment in which my first language mixed with the new language. They mixed so well that, were it not for this vague memory, I would think that the two languages had been born together inside me like a single bush springing from two roots: *iskadhal*, born together, this is what they call people like me in Somalia.

In this memory, there is a small hedge, a hibiscus hedge that I am hiding behind, alone in the house of my uncle Cali and my aunt Khadija. Alone—without my mother, I mean, and without my father, the only ones who could understand me. In the house there were not only my uncle and aunt, but also their six children and my grandmother Barni Xassan, and many others. My cousins were laughing; but I didn't feel like laughing. I didn't want to laugh, so I ran behind the hedge.

They said “come here” and, almost shouting in my mother's, not my father's language, I answered *Non capisco niente* “I understand nothing.” They were all laughing except me.

My grandmother, there that evening, sent for me to console me with a new name solely for me, Ubax, a word that means flower in Somali, like the hibiscus of the hedge.

So it's no coincidence this is the only thing I can remember, like a ripple in my mind, the only memory I possess in which the two languages are separated: I can understand one, I cannot understand the other, I cry out using one, I'm silent in the other. A single memory in which there is a small hedge, a hibiscus hedge I hide behind.

Since that day these two languages have lived together inside me. In Somali, home is *guri* from the verb 'guur,' 'to move.' Many years later, in January 1991, at the outbreak of the civil war, I had to flee the country. On arrival in Italy, I sought out songs, texts, any form of material from Somalia that made it possible to keep my country alive. I enjoy making use of Somali songs, fables, and tales in my work. Writing for me is a way to put together two worlds that were separated; it is my attempt to harmonize two coexisting cultural landscapes.