Vignettes Episode 2: Skin - Transcript

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

Hi there!

Welcome to Vignettes: The Emerging Writers Festival Podcast. My name is Ruby and I’m the Artistic Director at EWF. I am coming to you from the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

Today, we have three readings on touch and tenderness - on the things we are made up of, and the adornments we place upon ourselves.

We asked our artists to ponder the theme of Skin, and we’re so lucky to have Julia Rose Bak, Hajer Al-awsi and Dzenana Vucic joining us.

First, we have Julia Rose Bak.

**Julia Bak:**

As a child, I was bound by immunosuppressants not to pierce my skin. Even now I could show you where I scraped my elbows, my knees, how any abrasion would scar. Laying back in the hospital chair, I would watch as the needle punctured my skin and slid neatly into my vein, enamored. Whenever I was dehydrated, a red-wine-eggplant bruise would emerge within the hour. I filed this under *vein: collapsed* and took it to school for show and tell. As soon as I was withdrawn from azathioprine, I chose to pierce my lip. I knew how to withstand a puncture wound, I was well versed in needles, and I was now adorned with a permanent fixture to indicate this. I grew fond of pain as decoration, collecting ornaments with which to adorn my skin. This culminated in a day at school where I walked around at lunchtime asking people to punch me in the upper arm. Unsurprisingly, most said no. Anytime somebody consented, I wore my bruise with pride.

Where the body keeps the score, perhaps the skin acts as a scoreboard. I fell into this idea when I started collecting tattoos. When someone asks, “what does this one mean?” I could choose to tell a tale. I could scan my imagery rolodex and pull out a time when mountain-shapes and river-lines were a central theme: camping at the edge of the Tongariro crossing, traipsing along the sand of Te Whanganui-A-Hei, the moment where the tip of Mount Taranaki peaked over the horizon. I could assemble some gratuitous meaning, or I could simply say: this one represents a two-hour window where I allowed my body to experience the richness -- the rawness -- of pain. This line here? This line was a choice. See here, where it connects to the larger shape? I let this happen.

If someone were to ask about the waratah across my sternum, I could speak to the curious and complex beauty of Australian wildflowers. But the honest to God truth is that my waratah tattoo is a reminder of the three hours I spent in the most excruciating pain I’ve felt to date. Not the irritation of ulcers in my organs, not the dysmenorrhea, not my broken tailbone, but this extraordinary adornment below my chest. The depth in these petals represent the moment I began crying onto the leathered tattoo bed as the needle pricked and re-pricked this thin stretch of skin; a moment that replaced all the pain I never wanted, never asked for.

Growing up as a pained-person in a sick and pained body, it takes time to disentangle your sensations. Taste is intertwined with nausea, touch is a prickle; who knew sounds could be so heavy and sights so tiring? As I began navigating this sensory labyrinth, pulling apart and laying bear each thread, so too did I understand that pain is dynamic. To most, there is an innate, biological instinct to enhance pleasure and avoid pain. But people experiencing chronic pain can -- and do -- occupy the ever-evolving grey area between these seemingly opposite sensations.

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

Next up, we have Hajer Al-awsi …

**Hajer Al-awsi:**

At a bar you pretend not to be lonely.

You hold your drink, sit poised but not too poised, smile when looked at but don’t hold a gaze, you don’t want to seem desperate.

When someone sits next to you, you turn, squint your face in greeting, say hello, and return your concentration to your phone. He says something about the weather, you agree, it’s awkward but you let him drive the interaction. He comes closer, introduces himself.

 ‘Fabian’

‘Zainab’ you reply, shake hands.

He tells you about his growing up in a small town, knowing everyone on his street. It was comfortable, small, confined. He lightly scrunches his nose when he talks about it, looks past you rather than at you then chuckles pulling himself out of his head.

He catches your eyes again, questions you. You are hesitant, unsure how much to tell. Do you tell him you ‘shouldn’t even be here?’ That you are in a place of sin. That if you’re family ever found out, they would disown you *again*.

In the end, you opt for the easy option.

 ‘I’m boring really, just working at the moment.’

He asks about your music taste, you don’t want to say Umm Kulthum, Abdel Halim and Kadhim Alsaher…

‘I like a bit of everything.’

He smiles, looks at you in a way you haven’t been looked at before. The way your parents told you men look at women. That way you were supposed to protect yourself from.

 He reaches for your hand and asks to dance but before you’ve replied he’s already pulled you up and into the crowd.

Your body is stiff, you move your arms to the beat, quieten your hips. You don’t want to be suggestive.

You feel him eyeing your body.

You become aware that you’ve avoided his eyes too long, lift your head up and laugh. He comes closer, you can smell him, a musky scent with a hint of mint from the gum he is chewing. He senses your hesitance and moves back but not as far as he was before. You feel bad, and take a step closer, catch his eyes more frequently. He lifts his arms, you flinch, he pauses and goes back to dancing.

*This is not a sin, He is not a trial sent by Allah. He is just a guy who is just as insecure as you.*

You watch him, allow yourself to see his body move, the way the muscles in his biceps contort, think about the way they’d look wrapped around your body, the warmth, the smoothness. How his hair settles just above his eyes no matter how much he moves his head. The curves of his lips as he mouths the words to the songs. His nipples are protruding through his fitted t-shirt and you wonder whether it’s because he’s cold or turned on.

A tightness is clustering in your stomach, you take it for a stomachache but it’s lower down.

*Breathe. This is natural, don’t think too much.*

You inch nearer to each other, you know what’s coming and he does it, dips his tongue in slightly. He exchanges the piece of gum with you, you strain against your disgust, let it sit in your mouth for a few moments then push it back into his, gently masking your discomfort.

You are unsure how to kiss him.

Do your lips go around his?

Or on?

Or slightly in?

*Stop thinking!*

He presses his on yours, you respond, he probably knows more, you think, so you follow along.

He arranges your body like Jenga, your arms on his shoulders, legs wrapped around his waist, the hardness of his groin smoothing itself between your legs. You’ve forgotten to breathe, jump down and take a breath.

‘Let’s go somewhere private.' He suggests.

You smirk and entertain the thought. Think about your naked body beside his, the tenderness. But then you’d have to tell him you’re a virgin…

The tightness inside of you is releasing.

It’s one AM.

You don’t want to ruin the experience you’ve just had so you apologise and try to leave.

He is disappointed, asks for your number, your mind jolts, you give him a fake one and escape before he tests it out.

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

Thanks Hajer! And now, here’s Dzenana Vucic.

**Dzenana Vucic:**

Hi there and Salam Ailakum. My name is Dženana Vucic and I’m a Bosnian-Australian writer, editor and PhD student. I moved to so-called-Australia when I was five as a refugee from the Bosnian War and grew up on the unceded lands of the Whadjuk Nyoongar people in Mooroo/Perth and the unceded lands of the Turrbul and Jagera people in Meanjin/Brisbane. I moved to Naarm/Melbourne in 2012 and lived and worked for six years on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people and the Kulin nation. I pay my respect to the First Nations peoples and elders, past, present and emerging upon whose land I was able to make a new life. In 2018, I moved back to Bosnia to meet my biological father and get to know the family that I had been separated from since coming to Australia. This was an incredibly formational experience and has deeply affected my writing since.

I’m speaking to you today from my bedroom in Schöneberg, Berlin. It’s medium sized, with high, smoke stained ceilings. My walls are covered in donated posters, cheap art, and photos from home. My furniture is donated too, an assortment of random items that the other housemates didn’t need but which, coincidentally, seem to match. I have a bookshelf to my right, slowly starting to sag under the weight of the books I’ve so far accumulated. My desk is a plank of wood sitting on two supports. My bed is a mattress on the floor behind me. I am surrounded by plant cuttings given to me by friends, or stolen from commercial spaces. It’s almost winter here and the light coming through the window is grey and damp.

I’m currently in Berlin, having gotten somewhat stuck here between Glasgow, where I’m studying and Bosnia. Germany’s in its second lockdown now and I’m lucky to have found an apartment in which I can wait out the virus, and to be able to work as a uni tutor via zoom. Earlier this year, I received a Wheeler Centre Hot Desk fellowship and so I’m spending a lot of my spare time working on my project: an autotheoretical exploration of memory, history and myth-making and identity, through the lens of the 92-96 Bosnian War and my experience as a refugee in so-called Australia.

A lot of my work recently is an exploration of these themes and for my Vignette today, I’m reading a short piece about names, self-erasure and identity. There’s some Bosnian phrases in there, but I think you’ll get the gist. If you want to read more of my work, you can follow me on twitter where I tend to do most of my self-promotion. I’m at @dzenanabanana.

**Moja imena i druge laži / my names and other lies**

I shed names like old skin and leave a trail of dried out selves in my wake. It started as camouflage but we could also call it hiding.

Objasniti ću

For years, nobody—čak ni moja familja—called me by my name. U Brisbane, bila sam jen; u Melbourne people called me ana. It was a neat split, my name folded into a recognisable shape, the unnecessary syllables and foreign letters turned in against themselves and shushed. Neko vrijema, experimenting with androgyny and anonymity, bila sam aeron, and this seemed less a compromise than the others. More choice than awkward compulsion. There was no preceding stumble as my name leapt brashly from roll call, the d and un-caronised z thrown together in a ungainly heap that rendered the whole thing impossible.

In denominative camo, bila sam unmarked and unremarked, slipping through so-called Australia unruffled and belonging. Of course, unmetaphorical skin has more to do with this than any neat pseudonymic slide, as does my uncovered hair, my unsaid prayers, the un-visited mosques I un-claimed. In denominative camo, I was playing dead. We might have escaped the genocide, but I would not escape myself.

Moje ime comes from the Persian for *beloved;* the Arabic for *paradise;* andhints at the Turkish for *soul.* Where I am from, it identifies me: Bosniak; i muslimanka. Na bosanskom, my six letters signal an incontrovertible truth, na engleskom they expand to seven and shrink to convenience. Meaning is lost. Identity and history, too. Truth is inconvenient. The truth is: blood has been spilt over this name, and so many other names marked like it. Istina je: genocide does not end with the killing, it is endless with denial.

Objasniti ću

Half of the history text books u Bosnu do not acknowledge the genocide; Serbian children are taught a different version of the past. They are taught it was *only civil war,* and, it was their land anyway. Most history text books in ‘Australia’ do not acknowledge this genocide. After all, my country is small and strategically unimportant. After all, Australia is bad at seeing things as they are. U Australiji, we are taught that genocide is merely *settlement,* and, that it our land now anyway.

Rekla sam da I shed names like old skin but maybe the truth is: I wore names like masks, because I always gave myself away at the seams. No costume is a perfect fit, least of all those you make yourself. And there are always places where the bodies show.

It is a recent thing to have claimed the full breadth of myself, to have expanded out from jen and ana and untwisted from aeron. I stopped offering the folded envelope of my identity a year ago and yet still, da čujem moje ime said aloud is a particular thrill; almost sensual, like new touch. The intimacy of it takes my breath away; its gentle syncopation, the shallow sigh of its vowels rolling out of mouths as though it were not a burden to carry, marking a moment in this future present where the past is real and so are we.

**Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh:**

You’ve just heard readings from Julia Rose Bak, Hajer Al-awsi and Dzenana Vucic. Thank you so much for listening to *Vignettes: The EWF Podcast.* If you enjoyed this episode, please drop us a review, recommend us to your friends and hit ‘subscribe’ wherever you like to listen. And of course – stay with us for the final ep next week.

This podcast was produced by EWF Program Coordinator Millie Baylis. Our audio producer is Jon Tjhia, and our theme music was created by Thu Care (Thao Ly). You can find out more about the team behind this podcast and the artists featured in this episode on the EWF website.

This podcast was created and edited on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge that First Nations peoples are the first storytellers of this land, and that their sovereignty has never been ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and to the Elders of the lands this podcast reaches. It always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.