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## Writing Sample

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## Antoinette Tidjani Alou

### Gardening the Sahel

*boas dancing in my garden  
arcing into rainbows*

Olive Senior

In 1995, I started gardening, in the Sahel, with no previous interest in this activity. I kept my fingernails long and found the idea of dirt on my hands, of dirt under my nails, quite distasteful. I am not from a gardening tribe, either. My father had planted a few trees in his yard: mango, guinea, ackee, lime, coconut, almond, Seville orange, banana, plantain, sour sop — useful trees — and had put in a few shrubs of croton for decoration. I don't know who planted the spider lilies I found so fascinating when they awoke each year with the rains. Was it he or my mother?

The crotons, which come back with memories of rain, were of different kinds: largish leaves with warm brown, deep red splashes, with a touch of yellow, edges cut out like a dressmaker's design on a fancy collar; smaller leaves in tones of yellow and green with straight, sensible edges to their oval form. My favourites were the "cigarette" crotons, with straight slender leaves, the size and shape of a diminutive little finger, sometimes longer, speckled leaves, with yellow dots on a green background. These were the ones I liked to pluck, stretching through the window on rainy days, when water from the sky would begin by hitting the earth in fat drops, waking up a primordial fragrance I found tantalizing.

This aroma of earth invariably made me want to run outside and lick the ground, a geophagic temptation I rarely resisted. I loved everything about the rain: the noise it made on the zinc roof, the lovely mud for sliding it created, the streams that gurgled in the roadside gutters that were wonderful for racing paper boats and match sticks with my brother Barry and the boys from our street.

Following the first fat drops, answering to a call from high up in the sky, the sound of the heavens opening, more rain drops would race each other down to the parched earth. The rain a thick sheath now, no longer slanting on the wind, coming down straight and hard; heavy, white rain. I loved to watch it coming down, shivering by the window, never mind that I would soon be coughing from the chill and humidity entering my frail body. It amused me no end to observe the raindrops hitting the drenched earth then jumping up again out of the puddle, boiling like a pot of red pea soup, vainly attempting to re-ascend into the sky. It was funny in a sad kind of way.

This meditative atmosphere made me want to smoke. I would pluck me a "cigarette" croton and stick it into my mouth, savouring the bitter sap.

We didn't have much of a garden at home, but during the good days there I recall that my mother planted three kinds of plants. Mint, not the peppermint Mama liked especially, but a round, hairy leafed variety she called Colon mint. For years there was a hardy shrub growing by the right side of the house, my parents' side. Pepper, country pepper, maybe bud pepper too. The third plant was a frivolous affair with a story. Mr. Johnny, my

grandmother's husband, Mama's stepfather, had brought a dead-looking thing to Mama. It was supposed to awake once planted, grow and bloom into bright flowers. Mama had set it aside for ages before putting it to rest in a hole dug with the aid of Daddy's famous cutlass.

For a long time, the thing just sat there, silent under the earth. Then one day, when I had forgotten about it, it sprang into visible life. I don't recall the appearance of the bush, but when it finally blossomed the flowers it produced on its thorny stem were large yellows blooms of exceptional beauty. Was it a rose bush? Even now, a stubborn remnant of childish fantasy refuses to believe such a thing. Besides, for me, then, roses were red, or at the worse pink, surely not yellow. And a rose was somehow too ordinary, though seldom seen except in plastic, but in our mouths every day, cliché-red, cliché-sweet, cliché-love. The bloom of *this* plant was so precious that Miss Simms' stoosh daughter, Beverly soon came simpering up to ask if Miss Queenie would please give her a cutting. Miss Queenie did, of course. I wish she hadn't, not to Bev.

We didn't have a garden like the Simms or Miss Nettie, or Miss Stewart, or the Cummings or Mr. Mitchell did, we had a yard with a few things growing in it and when we finally had a garden, it wasn't a decorative venture and it wasn't ours. Before Daddy rented out the back yard to Mr. Vinnie for his workshop (or was it at the same time?) there had been a flirtation with planting leafy green callaloo for sale. Not Daddy's initiative, but that of a man whose name I don't recall. His slender frame, yellow-brown skin, dark lips, cigarette breath and pleasant manners I remember distinctly, however. A country man, it had bothered him to see fat land lying waste and he had negotiated a deal.

For a while the venture worked. I got caught up in what seemed an adventure, in the whole business of vegetal life, in the magic of transplanted droopy seedlings standing up straight and tall after a few days, then growing and growing. I loved watering them — a job with which I was not trusted initially — a delicate spray for the seedlings, a stronger one for the well-rooted plants. Pearls of water would roll off the green leaves. If you cut the stems properly, at the joints, preparing bunches of greens for sale, the plant would sprout many times again before growing old. Still, I myself had never planted anything except kidney beans on cotton wool in a glass jar for the science class.

Then suddenly, in the most unlikely place, in the thirsty climate of the Sahel, I became a gardener. The gardener of a rude soil; a gardener to save myself and maybe to settle. I gardened with my hands and my spirit. Gardener: this is what I became, in Niamey where no one understood why anyone who was not white, thus from another planet where things stood on their heads, would waste time and water for nothing. Yet in my garden in Niamey life—Sahelian life— entered me, teaching me lessons that I would otherwise have missed.

While I gardened publicly, I wrote in private. Although I became aware of this only years later, metaphors of garden peopled my imagination. They coloured my writing for an audience of one, my secret garden that none could visit. Simultaneously, the work that maintaining a garden in the Sahel demands absorbed much of my free time; it developed bulging muscles on my arms and procured countless hours of exercise and pleasure.

This is the genesis.

One afternoon in June 1996, when the worst of the season's heat had subsided, before the rains, I stirred from my lethargy and took a good look at the front yard of our rented house in the Terminus neighbourhood that was really above our means. The canna lilies my husband had planted were in a frightful condition: overgrown, leaves burnt by the sun, a riot. I who had previously done nothing in this embryo of a garden except hold the hose while it leaked out a pathetic trickle, like an old man with stoppage of water, decided to fix things. The result was uprooted canna lilies laying everywhere and a discovery about the

soil in our yard. It sheltered the life of dark cockroach-like insects, not just earthworms and lizards' eggs.

Uprooting is one thing, planting another. After hours of backbreaking work I managed to replant some cannas in two straight rows around the verandah wall. 'Straight' describes the rows, not the cannas themselves. They bowed sorrowful heads, for I was totally ignorant of the rudiments of cutting, selecting bulbs or choosing young shoots. I simply replanted plants that seemed healthy. Mercifully, they obliged me and grew. A passion was born.

The beginning of my garden copied the rhythm of our life in 1996 and as it progressed over several years: a painstaking enterprise. I bought plants and pots in ones or twos, transported them to the house on the back of a brother-in-law's motorbike, in a communal taxi, in a colleague's car, in our Citroen 2CV with my husband driving, or in our neighbour, Ali Talba's car. Ali, a gardener, could always be inveigled into a group or a two-family walk by the nearby river. Buying plants was inevitably on my agenda. A few of my colleagues, foolish enough to offer to drive me home from the university, can recall being enticed into a detour via the riverside nursery. I would return with a new set of plants for potting. I begged for bulbs and cuttings, extra plants and advice from the neighbours in front of our house, a Vietnamese woman and her French husband. They were ardent and highly successful gardeners, a saving grace in their otherwise peculiar characters. Enthusiasm helped me to learn fast, a taste for physical exercise and a need for meditation and mediation did the rest.

Making a garden of our front yard was not easy. It was not that the soil was hard to till. It is almost pure sand, an incredible phenomenon when compared to the heavy, fat soil of our yard at home, in Jamaica. I had turned *that* soil with a pitchfork more than once, for the fun of it, and had experienced with my arms and back and legs the weight of clay and humus, yielding rich clods. The soil in our yard in Niamey is a light, wasted thing, in constant need of truckloads of manure. And you would be surprised at the cost of manure in a country with so much cattle. My daughter Sarah's explanation, when she was small, was that our cattle were probably constipated.

Watering was a challenge. The rotten main pipes supplying our yard and many others on our street meant that water did not run; it trickled, it peed pathetically, and continued to do so for a good fifteen years: the rhythms of improvement in Niger. When one tap was on, the others were dry. Desperate cries for water from the bathroom were the norm. In the garden, watering was an ordeal requiring hours of patience or loads of elbow grease if one was not patient. I preferred the elbow grease and opted for a garden with hardy hedges and terracotta pots of varying sizes.

I worked out a routine with two watering cans, one filling while I emptied the other. My arms and shoulders grew muscles. They surprise folks who are used to seeing me in the sleeved garments we usually wear in public — folks familiar only with the sight of my slender wrists and ankles. Bulk is a gift of my garden.

Its growth mimicked the rhythm of our lives: a step-by-step process, a difficult one, a matter of choice. We chose a relatively large water bill and forwent other expenses. When our finances were tight, as they were for many years, the garden grew inch by inch. It sprinted into more elaborate life with the improvement of our financial situation, after 2005. By then I had hundreds of potted plants and a micro ecosystem. For a long time this betterment did not come from our salaries. We worked at our main jobs unstintingly, but during almost all of what should have been our spare time, our leisure time, our vacation, we engaged in other gainful activities in our areas competence. We have rarely gone on vacation together. I went once with the children to Jamaica, the result of a huge sacrifice on

our part. And Mahaman and I took holidays together once, largely as a gift from wonderful friends, as I have said.

Even then, my husband was in a hurry to leave the heaving bosom of the Caribbean Sea and the fascinating greenery of Martinican vegetation (it gave him haunting jungle dreams). He was anxious to return to his desk, to his computer in Niamey. It is true that missing the rainy season was something; it is the most pleasant time of the year in the Sahel, but for me it could not compare with the bounties of the Caribbean of which I had been deprived. But my husband could not be persuaded, peacefully, to allow me an extra week, without him, to lap up the milk of the almost-home that Martinique represented. I could have stayed, but knowing that he was unhappy would have spoiled the extra time I would have gained, so I returned to Niamey, bearing a grudge, not yet brave enough for a fight added to all the others that our lives — and our cultural differences — imposed. We returned home to the last weeks of rain and the glory of our garden and, soon, of the Sahelian harvest time.

I had lost and gained. The garden was spectacularly beautiful that year, as I remember.

As our finances improved, the garden started progressing by leaps and bounds — it was my creative project and my little luxury and, as with all my other attachments, I let myself be carried away. This new love gave my husband nightmares. He dreamt that I had planted lawns on every square centimetre of space in our yard. Green invasion. Wifely takeover. Luxury-loving woman. I never discussed with him the territorial meaning I perceived behind this dream.

Atavistic rationalities flourished, apparently. But they were strange. We were tenants. I was gardening land that was not his, that was not our property. But it was ours to enjoy, for the time being. Way back in the day, in the Sahel, the traditional laws had allowed the occupation of virgin land, but land was still a male domain. In a way, I was trespassing.

My mother, by contrast, had been at once freer and less free than me. She had never had to worry about taking over. She had never possessed either house or garden and was told so at least once a week, at the weekend, in no uncertain terms, and in the hearing of many a neighbouring witness. She had never owned anything much really, one or two pieces of furniture, a little money that she lent at a fee in the early days, through the intermediary of my father, who took more than could be considered a fair commission, to put the matter politely. Still, she had been free to plant whatever she wanted and to use her money to buy whatever she wished for our home without consultation or protocol. I, on the hand, had had to deal with a domestic authority, albeit a lenient one, for as soon as our relationship became serious my laid-back boyfriend metamorphosed, in a few respects, into a Sahelian pater familias. The respects were few, but I had, and still have, a problem with relations of hierarchy and authority, and dealing with even a little of that was new, confusing and unwelcome. But whether I liked it or not, some domestic matters had to be negotiated in our home. I was not used to that. Although, she was an abused wife, paradoxically, my mother had still been *the* authority in the everyday aspects of family life, when it was not breached by a huge disagreement and our forced or peevish removal to my grandmother's house, situated at a stone's throw away.

Before the house in Niamey became our property, the garden was mine in the eyes of all, Antoinette's garden. The garden and even the house, sometimes, before my husband's rise to territorial interest and domestic power, because I was the one who was present

there and my husband had not yet become a public personality. When he did, it because Mahaman's house for almost everyone. It was strange and kind of shocking, but I, too, had moved on. The children had grown and I was increasingly immersed in professional projects that put an end to my days of predominant housewifery.

However, that I was a force to be reckoned with in our home did not go without saying for one or two in-laws. Foreign or not, I was a woman and this was the Sahel. For them, I had had set the record straight. No, this was *my* home not just their brother's. No, this was not quite Niger here but an international space in which I enjoyed self-styled diplomatic immunity. No, I was not sitting on one buttock in my marriage but quite squarely on both. My responsibility and my authority had to be respected in this space. For the more adventurous I made these statements or similar ones in the presence of "their brother" so they would get the message. He allowed it. Delivered with a laugh, my remarks deluded no one.

Now, this was serious. The Jamaican woman worked powerful voodoo. "Not voodoo", I corrected: "obeah; we don't do voodoo in Jamaica".

To tell the truth, before putting my foot down, I had tried to be nice and accommodating. I had not always succeeded. I was too territorial and too outspoken. Putting my foot down came later, after the gardening began. It was as if I had to wake up. I was humbled into revival by the soil of the Sahel. True, I apostrophized it in tropes of doubt and derision, but had to concede finally that it was stronger than me. And it was very real and often repulsive. Comforting Sahelian images are rare in my writing. I was "back in Africa" and it wasn't pretty. It had nothing to do with the alluring images that the black American poets of the 1920s in Harlem had etched on my imagination.

The 'Africa' I had 'seen' from Jamaica was generous and luxuriant. And liberally, and innocently, laced with Western clichés. Africa to me could only be a jungle landscape, Edenic, fragrant, wild, throbbing with energy. Fertile. Sensuous. Royal. A place to which you rode, crossing a sea of dreams. At any rate, that is how I depicted it in an English assignment in high school, complete with drums beating and me loosing it, having become a leaping stranger whose heart was rhythm and dance. My lack of mastery aside, when I look back, this was also the 'Africa' of the great poets of the Harlem Renaissance who had fed my soul with the beauty of words and visions of another, lost world, originally mine. I learned their 'conscious' poems by heart. I learned a lot of poetry by heart. Poetry was all around me when I was growing up, in school and out of school.

I had lived in books. In school, at home. I cared less for authors than for the worlds they created, but some authors became special, persons with a name, because of the way their work touched me. My all-time favourite among the Harlem Renaissance poets was Countee Cullen. I loved his music. I *adored* his provocative naughtiness, a quality that later endeared me to Shakespeare's bawdiness, Byron's mock epic and to Voltaire in his philosophical heyday. Voltaire mocked the Church, I was a pious Catholic but I loved Voltaire as one might love a naughty child. And given the father I had, I was used to transgression. I had lived with it on a daily basis. I had not learned it through books. My favourite Cullen poem was and remains "Heritage", though I really love Langston Hughes' "The Negro speaks of Rivers" and James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation", as well. I would recite "Heritage" aloud once I had learnt it by heart and let it take me away, rock me. Of course, it evoked a very un-Sahelian Africa, an unreal Africa, without diversity and without

history, but awesome and magnetic all the same. It spoke of the jungle. It spoke to me. There was a power there. A power that released me from my island reality where I lived cooped up in a small house with too many people. It took me far, far away. I would return, blinking.

The final years of high school and my undergraduate years at university took me further and further from the two match boxes that had housed me at first. Other writers gave me courage. They imparted the power to be boundless in a small place. Other writers like Césaire, Damas, Glissant. They wrote of pain and loss, and striving; they wrote of return to the self and to the island and to success. What they brought was not simply a matter of formal education. I took their work to heart. It was about me. Because of these writers and others like them, the small island spaces became immense with subterranean possibility; they became important links in the chain of the world. It may be owing to the literature and politics of my formative years that I had never considered permanent migration away from the Caribbean as an option. Ironically, I was never to live there as an adult, instead I became a gardener of the Sahel. And of myself.

The Sahel bears no resemblance the dreams in the books I had read when I was in the Caribbean. I have yet to see a jungle. I live in a semi-arid region where people are Muslims without totally discarding traditional religion, though Muslim and Christian preachers and teachers seem hell-bent on this objective. Sahelians, knowledgeable in the science of dealing with extreme heat, are disinclined to leap as they move about. The women especially have perfected the art of elegant nonchalant perambulation. Only the heart/drum metaphor still rings true. In Africa, drums beat, cutting to the heart of the matter.

I am not sure for how much longer when I think of the new fundamentalisms and their theologies of "purity".

I did not always rise easily to the challenges that Sahelian extremes impose. What bothered me most was the place. It was hard to see it and to hear it. Socially too, I found it voracious, demanding my presence at endless ceremonies and for endless visits given and received. I decided that I was not going to be easy meat. I was hospitable. I was hostile. It all depended.

Internally, and sometimes vocally, I lashed out against the land that fed me. The soil, I fulminated in my writing, was "bad", "sandy" and porous, incapable of capturing life-sustaining moisture. Once in a while, I had the occasion to travel to Burkina Faso or Benin, countries that were greener. Mahaman and I usually went with Hervé, his longtime buddy. It was never about us taking a break; we were invariably on some social mission; going to a friend's wedding, taking visiting friends on a tour. Hervé and Mahaman were always so happy to point out tufts of green or a little rise in the land. They tried hard to cheer me up. It rarely worked. The hills, pointed out to me through the window of a moving car, eating space between Niamey and Ougadougou, or Niamey and Cotonou, were mere knolls, I scoffed. Ah, but there were real mountains in the north. Yes, but these were the portals of hell, nude, afire with the explosion of rock, splintered, surrendering to the extremes of the desert. Yes, but what about the Great River Niger? It too had few graces. Its greatness was depleted, on the Nigérien side that I could see, by hydroelectric dams installed upriver in Mali. There, I was told, the Great One, the Joliba, was so wide you could not see from one bank to another! Its greatness on the Nigérien side was arrested by silting-up of the riverbed in the environs of Niamey and maybe further afield. It wasn't lovely.

Non-riparians were in awe of the river. The pervading conception is that you have no right of entry or passage if your ancestors are not *sorkos*, priests of the water deities and of the River Goddess, Harakoy Dicko. If initiated forebears have not equipped you with the appropriate charms, keep away! One needs protection from water spirits, from the most redoubtable among them, the *gorou gondi*, the river snake whose victims, ostensibly dead from drowning, show traces of blood from the nostrils where the vampire genie drinks, leaving the body ashen. I was warned not to enter the river, to prevent my daughters from touching even the shallow water of the riverbank, from riding out in canoes. The girls and I had been confided to the river at birth. We had not been placed in a calabash and left in the care of the spirits for eight days, then collected safe and sound, proof that we were our fathers' children. Nonetheless I disobeyed these rules. We enjoyed the water. Once, it even cured our first-born, Maryam, of incipient malaria. The fever simply disappeared after a boat ride on the river.

The dunes and the desert are another story, one of sour grapes. I have never been there. The dunes are alluring, they say. Certainly treacherous in their beauty, too; the awe of immensity, the fascination of hell. But recently, in my first trip to the north, beyond Tahaou, I discovered the majesty of Mount Bagzam chain. Real mountains! Blue Mountains! Blue Mountains in the Sahel. Stark, magnificent before my eyes, still those of an island girl, for whom Blue Mountains once meant Jamaica and green and mist and one of the finest Arabica's in the world. And there I was amazingly in love with the *land* of Niger for the very first time, twenty-two years later.

The Sahel is no tourist paradise. I knew that before I came to settle. Before I decided to marry a man who wanted to go home to help build the nation, I had come to visit, invited by him, to see the lay of the land, during the rainy season. No well-meaning Sahelian would have invited a stranger to visit during the months of fire: March, April, May and even part of June. On settlement, my first months of fire, heightened by the last term of pregnancy, made me bitter against the land of my trials. *The dry places just dry. Fire burning down the land and it fuming without boiling. Real dry rock. Nothing will come of it now. The children of disobedience wuz basically meant to catch hell. So everything's zall right*, I mused.

For what the hell was I doing here? I was a child of disobedience. I had chosen an uneven yoke with a Muslim man. The biblical flourishing of the steppes prophesied by Isaiah was not about to be fulfilled for me. That I should have remained at home, turning my eyes to the green hills of Jamaica, was not a thought I entertained consciously. I was married, I had followed my husband to Niamey. But in what spiritual wedding had I been wedded to this place? Pray as I might with the prophets, I could not deny that I had been undone.

I called 'nobody' to witness my undoing (since my "élucubrations" - as my husband was later to refer to my writing when he came by accident upon a few sheets of printed text, were not really meant for sharing). *See the rebel woman lying down on the burning rock, her mouth filled with sand. Juicy gone dry. Dry ice can't cool me. Juicy done carbonize; Help me, nuh man. Call in the miracle worker.*

There were no miracle workers to come to my aid. Miracles too belonged to a former age, when the world was young. I had made my bed and now had to lie on it.

But, before my eyes, the vegetal life of the Sahel accomplished the impossible. Seeds put to bed in this thin soil sprouted, grew, flowered, fruited and fed humanity as they could. For all my bitterness, I could not deny this fundamental miracle. Millet grew in a soil that flowed through your fingers and fed the hungry. Decorative plants, with some prompting,



prospered and bloomed in my garden. Could I too assume the challenge of putting down roots and growing where I was planted? I decided to try for all I was worth. And I am worth a great deal when it comes to trying, once I have made up my mind.

No point in belabouring the topic of many years of trials and errors. I won't develop on the effect of habit, on all that even numbing habit cannot accomplish. Habit does a great deal. When you arrive, the sores of the world around you are horrific sights. Lepers extend for charity gnawed, mangled hands, unhealed. You see. You drop a coin. You wonder why. You think of contagion. A dwarf woman passes regularly by Nana's gate chanting for charity in a voice of heart-breaking beauty. Nana, my mother-in-law, is known to have a wide-open hand and a good heart. Too good, given the ways of the world. This beggar woman chants and receives. And I consider the combination of beauty and brokenness. But she at least has something beautiful to offer.

Invariably, endless encounters with broken humanity make you wonder why God should be so ruthless. Why make people both handicapped and ugly? Why must society finish the work with the glaze of poverty? The poor are ugly, often twisted, dirty, derelict; always hungry, never welcome.

Another diminutive woman, almost a dwarf, also comes by, but she does not sing; she cannot. When she speaks, you see her tongue through the jawbone. A gaping hole there, bored by *noma*, a disease affecting only malnourished children; resulting in bone loss, facial deformity. Habit makes it possible to look at her tongue working, visible through the hole in her jaw, but it does not make her deformity less horrible.

Still, the armour of habit makes it possible to go to the market without, suffering week after week. Here and there, a person walking on all fours, mingles with the crowd. Wearing flip flops on their hands, they crawl through the filthy market waste, cross the street, smile, ask for charity, in the name of Allah and of the Prophet. At first sight, you shudder; open your eyes wide, falter, grope for an appropriate reaction. Later, you recognize this man who walks on all fours, that woman who drags herself along on her behind, or yon mother of three or four, squatting in the parking lot of the only supermarket, her offspring hopping a ride on her hand-pedaled tricycle for the handicapped, offered by Handicap International or some other charitable association.

These broken people are not hidden away. Ailments are their sales pitch and their meal ticket, an asset as it were: sightless eyes, an amputated arm or leg, a chronic abscess, twisted rubbery limbs, fingers growing from shoulders or no fingers at all. They are people with their peculiar personalities; they are not always wheedling, are sometimes demanding or otherwise obnoxious. Just people. Less fortunate than others; less fortunate than you. Sometimes a bother, nonetheless.

One seething March afternoon, a nattily dressed young man with one arm and a thermos flask of cool water on the other gestures with his stump in your direction. He works it frantically so as not to escape your attention. You are hot and in a hurry to get a communal taxi to the other side of the river, to *Haro Banda*, for your 3 p.m. lecture. It's ten to three, you need the taxi to move fast. But it isn't full yet. And to make matters worse, there is that parasite again. It is not going to work today. You avert your head. Why doesn't he get a job as some other handicapped persons do? There is an association just down the street. There are vendors in the market who are more challenged than he is. Why has it never occurred to him to buy and sell? He comes around to the other side of the beat-up taxi

beside you, repeats his pantomime. You threaten, in Hausa, half-bantering, half only, to relieve him of his other arm if he keeps bugging. Then you wonder, appalled, half only, what go into you. Tough joking is permissible. An ordinary relationship on the Sahel, mediating conflict; reducing the bite of anger too. But you feel that this is too may be much integration, a homeness something inside you refuses.

Years later, when your situation improves, you find yourself getting mad at another guy with a wheedling smile who calls you “Auntie” at the market. For why should this imbecile choose to cross the road right in front of *your* car? Can’t he go and get himself killed elsewhere? You have arrived! You are home, despite everything. But habit isn’t everything. It’s still hard to see a child a child of three who weighs only seven kilos. You can’t help quaking at the pinkish blood of an infant somehow alive with three grammes of haemoglobin per litre of blood.

Here, and in most other parts of the world, the poor we have with us always; the poor and the broken. The broken, not necessarily poor, inherit the general indigence of the country, of the environment, from ignorance to poor healthcare structures. Take Hassana, for example. Not so long ago, she was a student in sociology at the University Abdou Moumouni in Niamey. A beautiful young woman with one leg. The other was amputated due to inadequate reeducation of poliomyelitis. A bad job, compounding the first. How to get a prosthesis fitted without the knee joint in a challenged medical system?

Now Hassana is not a familiar face on the street; she is my little sister; the sister of Hawa, my former neighbour. She was a beautiful, high-spirited, witty, vivacious, impertinent young woman when I first met her. A young friend who had braided my hair many a time. Hassana was ordinary when she was present, but when I thought about her in her absence, something stuck in my throat. I hold her inside me till she spills over. I don’t know why she makes me think of my dead father and of still born babies. Or why, when she is not there, funny, alive, teasing me under Hawa’s mango tree, three houses down the road where I still live, her image sticks in my throat. I write a poem for her, but she never sees it her. Writing is my secret garden.

Hassana is smart and beautiful and lame. Hossanah for Hassana, I say! But the pain does not go away. Belief does not save me.

I sink. In secret I fear that there is nothing after. That I will die, like a bee dies, a butterfly, or a leaf.

One day walking in my garden, I stop with my hand on the smooth trunk of the eucalyptus tree with its enormous shade and laugh at my own folly. Of course it is only fitting that I, as a living thing in the realm of nature, should tread the path of all flesh. Flowers bloom and diminish to make room for fruit; fruit must be reduced to seeds for life to rise again from the grave-womb of the earth. The seedpod must become brittle-dry to open, to liberate seeds to the soil. And so, too, my own flesh. In that moment of sagacity wrinkles were the beautiful parchment, the timely unfolding, of life’s mysterious and pragmatic purposes.

Then it appeared that I too must be fertile beyond my three children. There was an urgent signaling that they were not all I had to give. What crop would be mine on the day of reaping? This was a preoccupation, but I postponed it, endlessly waiting for the ‘right’ moment to confront this challenge. The challenge of writing publicly. Of opening my secret garden.

I needed time and proper conditions.  
My rhythms required mature hips to interpret them.  
My beauty was in endless preparation. I was an intended feast in danger of becoming an elaborate hors d'oeuvre.

Then there was the other challenge, that of not totally relinquishing the bond with the community. Of trying once again despite the odds and even the indifference. Of not selfishly doing my own thing. of daring to fight again to make something grow.

I have put down roots in this soil of Niger. I am growing there, but what type of tree have I become? A strange new specie. A thing with thorns. Huge thorns for defense, a rugged bark, a tender core.

And I feel it in my sap that it is time for me to spread my roots now, to spread them far away, again, down and out.

Niger meets Jamaica in the earth of myself. They fight. They rest. Old roots encounter new ones in subterranean secrecy.

They pull me into the deep places of burial and nesting.

I am ready to plant again. I have help to open the country's first programme in Arts and Culture at my university. It's timely and exalting, but it won't be easy.

Still, trees grow year after year. They feed the Sahel.