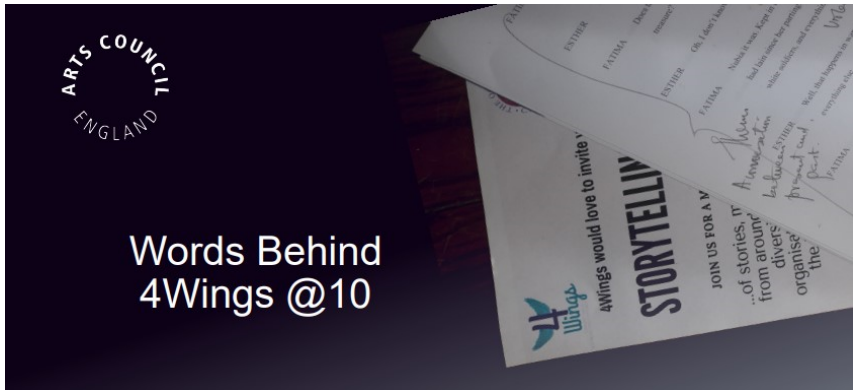


**4Wings**  
**In Association with**  
**St. George's Hall Events**  
**And**  
**Tayo Aluko & Friends**  
**Present**



**St. George's Hall, Liverpool**  
**Wednesday, 25 October, 2023**

## A Note From the Scribe

When, despite my expressing doubts about my suitability for the task (I am just a man), a group of women (mostly African too) determined that I write for them in celebration of 4Wings's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I assumed that collectively, they definitely have infinitely more wisdom than I do, so I accepted. The fee helped too..

It has been an honour and privilege to sit with such a disparate group of women over the last few months, and listen to them talk, and tell stories. I have learned a great deal, and have been inspired and humbled by the things I have heard. I am grateful to both staff and members of 4Wings for allowing me, welcoming me, into their midst, and for making me feel comfortable (eventually) among them. I would like to think that the smoothness with which the project went is partly due to my suppressing the natural male instinct of bringing machismo into the gathering. To me, not doing so is only good common sense when one finds oneself in a minority of one, called into the service of, and by, many.

Would it that our politicians adopted the same attitude, for there are so many thousands, nay, millions, screaming at the top of their voices, saying that what is being done by the tiny group of people (overwhelmingly men) in positions of power around the world is just plain wrong and evil. As has been shown time and again, however, these so-called world leaders just do not listen.

It is simplistic, though, to assume that if all those men were replaced by "the gentler sex," things would automatically be much better. There are enough powerful women parading the world stage at present (as have done in the past) proving themselves just about as evil as the worst of men, to disabuse us of that notion.

The denial of "others" of basic humanity, dignity and basic human rights not only causes suffering and conflict, it diminishes the soul and spirit of the oppressor or aggressor. This applies regardless of whether the oppression is based on gender, sexuality, race, religion or other characteristics. By beautiful contrast, one is totally enriched and energised when finding oneself among a group of women on the margins of society in a city like Liverpool, demonised and ignored equal measure by the majority, but still able to demonstrate and give the best that humanity has to offer.

I am sure that many a woman would have done a much better job than I have, but I remain grateful for the good fortune of the opportunity I have been given by 4Wings to receive and share some of their stories with you.

In peace,

Tayo Aluko

Liverpool, 25 October 2023

# 1. Departure Lounge/Welcome

Company, Dana, Nawal

Not safe, for me, my family.  
Not safe in my family, for my child in his family,  
My family is not safe here  
We are not safe.  
Kenya, Iraq; Democratic Republic of Congo; India  
Not safe with my husband, not safe from the skies.  
Bombs are falling, we don't know why!  
We are not safe under our government  
There are predators

Not safe as a woman.  
Pakistan; Zimbabwe; Afghanistan; Liberia; Albania; Mozambique.

Nothing left for us here  
Our army and police are dangerous  
Soldiers, politicians, dangerous

Nigeria; Gambia

Must leave,  
Rwanda; Germany, Germany??  
Malawi; Ghana  
Get out quick  
Get on the plane, quick  
Quick, quick  
Get on the boat, on the road.  
Get out now,  
Leave now  
Peace and safety  
Peace and safety.

Welcome to Words Behind 4Wings at 10. We are a group of women from all over the world, who find ourselves in Liverpool. Some of us have lost families, but all of us have found a new family, in 4Wings.

4Wings is ten years old. Ten. Years. Old. Ten years helping women from everywhere. Ten years helping us not be isolated, not be alone. Ten years helping us when we are lost, or confused, or in danger.

Today, we are women from  
Kenya; Iraq; Democratic Republic of Congo; India; Pakistan; Zimbabwe; Afghanistan; Liberia;  
Rwanda; Albania; Mozambique; Bangladesh; Nigeria; Gambia; Germany; Malawi; Chile; Mexico  
From all those countries, we have come to Liverpool, and we have brought with us many stories. Too many to tell you today, but we will share a few.

They are mostly true, but some of them have changed a little bit. That's what storytellers do. They add a little something here, leave out a little something there. That's what families do too, often. They keep secrets, for the sake of Peace, for the sake of Safety.

## 2. Walking

Inass, Anna

I come from Liberia. There was a civil war there over thirty years ago. I was just a girl. I remember we had to walk for days and days to find safety. We kept hiding. But I didn't tell that story. I remembered it when another woman told the story of her uncle, who died a few months ago. He was old. 94 years old.

My uncle was German. He was a soldier in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. He was captured in France, and became a prisoner of war. He escaped. He had seen terrible things in the war. Maybe he had done terrible things too. We don't know, because he never said. He walked back to Germany. All the way back, from France.

It took him one year.

He hid from the French. He hid from the Germans.

Enough fighting. Enough killing.

If the French caught him, they would imprison him.

If the Germans caught him, they would shoot him. Because he didn't want to fight, to kill.

So, he hid from the French. He hid from the Germans.

We don't know how he did it, but he did.

How did he eat?

How did he clean himself?

Who helped him?

There must have been people who helped him along the way?

He never said.

By the time he got back home, the war was over. He had escaped the war by walking. And Uncle Hans never stopped walking. He never had a car. He always walked. Sometimes, he travelled long distances by bus, or by train.

He never spoke about the war. He just kept walking.

Until he was 93. Then he stopped walking.

His sister, my mother, ended up in Merseyside. She came to the country that bombed her home city, Berlin, for two weeks. I never understood why. Everybody knew she was German, because of her accent. At school, they called me a Nazi.

### 3. Shadows

Farah, Marie-Claire

**INTERVIEWER:** Good evening. Welcome to “Meet the Refugee” on ITN news. Today, we are in Liverpool, meeting a lady who is a member of a little organisation known as, er, 4Wings.

We are in a little bedroom in a house owned by BENCO, the company whose director went to school with the Immigration Secretary, and has an exclusive contract to house refugees, both in detention centres and in houses like this one on Lodge Lane. According to BENCO, our refugee has been given a nice room with a unique, original piece of art on one of the walls. Ms. N, please describe your luxury accommodation.

**MS. N:** Yes, welcome to my home. It is so nice to be able to sleep indoors, and not on the streets, or in the cemetery like I used to last year. Or in detention in Yarlswood the previous year. This is my bedroom, and there are eight of us in this house altogether. This here is my brown wall.

**INTERVIEWER:** Your brown wall?

**MS. N:** Yes, brown. Mostly brown. A little green, a little yellow as you can see. My landlords describe it as a piece of dynamic, living art. Every time the toilet is flushed upstairs, I get a random new coat of brown paint. Oh, look, it’s happening now.....

**INTERVIEWER:** Ah, yes. I see. It’s like sh-, sh-, shadows of leaves on a wall in the moonlight.

**MS. N:** Yes, sh- sh- shadows, like the news. And I like it. I like how people above me keep giving me sh-, sh-, shadows.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you say it’s much better than Yarlswood.

**MS. N:** Oh yes, much better. You see over there it would be so noisy at night.

*(crying, shouting)*

**MS. N:** In Yarlswood, you couldn’t sleep. And you know what? So many of the women there were pregnant. Even when they’d been there for over a year.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did their husbands visit them?

**MS. N:** Their husbands? Their husbands? Visit them? They are alone in this country. No, the only men around are the detention officers.

**INTERVIEWER:** Detention officers?

**MS. N:** Yes, the detention officers.

**INTERVIEWER:** No! Shadows! But our asylum system, like our prison system, like the police and the army, are the best, the most decent, the most professional in the world.

**MS. N:** Once, I was due to be deported back to my country, and a detention officer said he could help me not get deported. He said that if I had a baby, I would be able to stay in the country. He said he would be happy to father my child. He would do it because he was a very kind, very generous, very nice man. Like the country.

## 4. The White Handkerchief

Anna, Sahnaz

It was not he who sucked her dry  
That drained her of her milk  
It was them.  
They, who decided that  
Bombs should fall like rain,  
That the ground should be soaked  
With the blood of children  
And that the only growth, for generations,  
Must be resentment, anger and hate

No place for her, or her baby,  
Whose cries now filled the carriage  
As the train slid through the countryside  
Like a tired, pregnant snake  
Looking for a new hiding place

In its womb  
The moist breath of her cargo  
Became liquid on its cold roof  
And dripped softly onto their heads  
A few drops would wet his throat, she thought

Just in time  
A manly hand clasped her wrist  
Coal dust and oil, he said.  
From his breast pocket  
Came a clean white handkerchief  
And he held it outside the window  
In the cold night air

His freezing hand returned  
Into the smelly warmth of the moving coffin  
The snow melted into the cloth  
And the crying stopped  
As the baby sucked  
And survived on a few hours of snow

He remembered nothing of the bombs  
Was too young to be poisoned  
By anger, resentment or hate  
Coal dust, or oil.  
He took his chance and grew  
To be a good man  
To become my father

His gift to my daughter,  
Along with the story  
Of the kindness of a stranger  
Was his small, clean  
white handkerchief.

## 5. Half A Minute

Yinka, Kathrin

It was no longer than half a minute, but it seemed like years. She stared into his eyes. In her gaze was fear. Her face and her body silently pleaded for her life, for her family's lives.

His own eyes were soulless, empty, blank.

She wondered whether he saw her – actually *saw* the woman he should have recognised as the only one in the whole village to ever show him kindness, who had let him eat, and sleep in the backyard, when he returned from the city. The money he had stolen from his grandmother, again wasted, on drink, drugs, and women.

She had died less than two years before, and had left everything to him, and not to the girls, her granddaughters, because it was tradition.

The girls had gone to the city too, with fruits from the same tree. They had planted the seeds and harvested knowledge, a handful of qualifications, and between them, three businesses of their own.

Keeping her eyes on him, she counted them in her head. Six of them. Among them, three women.

They surrounded her, staring blankly, empty, waiting for his order. Because of the land he had inherited unjustly, leaving its crops rotting, and being consumed by the wild bushes and animals, they saw him as their leader.

The cutlasses hung in their hands, still dripping with the blood of her neighbours.

Their empty minds waited, not hearing the breeze in the trees or seeing the vultures circling overhead. All other birds maintained a stunned, puzzled silence.

She too waited, her own mind filled with years of stories, of the names of grandchildren yet unborn, unmet. Unmet in this life, anyway, because she might soon meet them again in the next. Again, for they are there, as ancestors.

All this went through her mind in that year-long half minute.

Finally, the words came, quietly, in a low growl: Leave her.

Somewhere in the darkness behind those eyes, a dim light glimmered, and he knew that their cutlasses could not slash through the simple weapons of kindness and humanity.

## 6. I JUST WANTED TO REST

Patricia, Lydia

My friend lives in London. We went to the same school at home, and our families have known each other for many, many years. One weekend last year, I went to visit her, with my daughter and my son. It was so nice being with her. Her daughter and my daughter are the same age. My son is disabled, and has a special place in the nursery here, and I had to come back with him after the weekend.

My friend said, why don't I leave my daughter with her for the week? You know, it's so hard being a single mother here, especially with a disabled son. I'm always so tired. So, I was happy and said yes, and I came back to Liverpool, with only my son. Monday was so nice. My son was in nursery, and I could rest at home, because my daughter was in London. Oh, I slept! Same on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, I was coming back from the nursery in the morning, and the social worker was waiting for me. She said, where is your daughter? I panicked, and I told her a lie. I said she was with my friend, not far away, here in Liverpool. She said she will come back in 4 hours, and I must go and bring her. Oh my God! I went to the friend, and she said, Why you say I have your daughter? She was scared. I was scared.

I went back home, and when I got near my house, I saw police cars. Two, three, four police cars. Outside my house!

They didn't see me, and I ran back to my friend's house. She said, Oh, my God!

I said, Oh, my God!

I knew a nurse. A very nice lady. English, but very kind. I rang her, and she said to me, don't panic, don't worry. I come. Meet me on the next street, and I come with you. So she came with me. We spoke to the social worker, and to the police. I told the truth. They said they want to talk to my daughter and see her, so we called from my phone, on whatsapp, on video. They saw she was okay, in London.

They sent the police in London to my friend's house. They phoned me by video, that she is my daughter, I am her mother, and the police, they brought her back to me, from London to Liverpool. In a police car.

All I wanted to do was rest, for a few days. But somebody, maybe a neighbour, maybe at the nursery, told Social Services that maybe my daughter was missing. They said they were worried for my child. Maybe that is good. That is kind. But I needed to rest.

Now my daughter is in school, and I can come here to 4Wings. I like it at 4Wings.



## 7. SECRETS

**Yinka, Betty, Ciiku**

I had to leave my country. The problem wasn't work, it wasn't politics. It was family, religion, tradition, and secrets.

I have an aunty. She's my favourite aunty. She understands me, like nobody else. Not even my own mother. Or my grandmother. She is like a big sister, a big friend. She is quiet, but now I know that is because she is always listening, and learning. And sometimes, people don't know she is listening, learning secrets.

She told me something, and I said it could not be true, I didn't believe her. She was trying to warn me, but I didn't believe her. Then she told me her secret. A secret that only she and my grandmother, her mother, knew.

Before I tell you the secret, I must tell you why she told me her secret. Her husband's first wife (she is his second wife, you see) has a younger brother who wanted to marry me. Me! I was only fourteen at the time, and he was 50! An old man! But in my country, that is okay, it is tradition. He is an old man, and not a nice man. In fact, he is horrible, just like my aunty's husband. But it is tradition.

I said my mother wouldn't allow it. But she said my mother was part of the plan. I said no, I wouldn't believe it.

That's when she told me her secret, one that only she and my grandmother knew. When she was my age she got pregnant. She said I didn't need to know who had made her pregnant. But her sister (my mother) knew, and her mother (my grandmother) knew.

They went to see this woman, who could make babies go away before they were born. But this baby didn't go away, and it grew bigger and bigger. And they hid my aunty away. That's why she is so quiet. Then when it was time for her to have the baby, my aunty and my grandmother went to the hospital, which you had to travel for two days to get to. I remember her big belly from when I was a child.

Four days later, they came back. My aunty and my grandmother, but there was no baby. They said the baby had died before it was born, and that the hospital had buried it, because they couldn't bring a dead baby back home all that way, in the heat.

Then, she said (and this is the secret), the baby didn't die before it was born. The baby was killed after it was born, by her mother, my grandmother.

She cried quietly, and I now believed her.

That's why she married her husband, who already had a wife and two children. She never had her own children after that. That is why she is so quiet.

So, she knew of this plan for me to be married to that man. She said she could help me escape. She could sign papers so I could travel out of my country and get to Belgium. A friend of hers, a business man in Belgium, could get me another passport, a fake passport, and I would use that fake passport to get to UK.

So when I got to Belgium, I had two passports. My real one, and a fake one. It's a long story, and it's complicated. But I had two passports, two tickets, and two identities. It's complicated.

Oh, and two covid certificates.

I waited. I checked in with one name saying I am going back to my country, and then I went into the toilet and when I came out, I was the fake. With my other ticket, my other passport – my fake passport, my fake hair, my fake jacket, and I waited and I waited. There was chaos, and at the last minute, as the Manchester flight was about to board, and the gate was closing, I ran to the gate. The staff were tired. They looked at me and my fake passport and my fake hair and my ticket. And she said, “Have a nice flight!”

That’s how I came to England. I am safer here than in my country, in that family, with its secrets.

I miss my aunty, but I’ll be fine. I have a new family. 4Wings is my family.

## **8. Radio Kharma**

**Celissa, Rahida, Lydia**

My grandparents took me to my father’s village. None of us had been there since my mother died. I was born there, and was eighteen months old when she died, but now I was ten. They said my grandmother was dying, and wanted to see me. They said my aunty had offered to come and take me there. But my grandparents said no. They wouldn’t let me go to my father’s village without them. Over there, they think that all children belong to the father’s family, and my grandparents feared they would kidnap me. It nearly happened to a friend of mine.

My mother had gone to live there, because my father didn’t have enough money get a house in the city. My family was much wealthier than his, but when she went to his village, apart from her clothes, the only thing she wanted, that she needed, was her radio. Nothing like a car or fancy stuff, she just took her radio.

They said my mother was loved by everybody in the village. Everybody except my father’s family. I heard that my grandmother was very wicked to her. One day, when my mother had a fever, my grandmother made her bathe outside in a cold pond, in the winter. She said she must only have herbs – traditional herbs – and not go to a modern doctor. My mother had hepatitis, and she was getting worse, so finally, my grandmother allowed her to come to the city, but it was too late, and she died in the city.

Now, my grandmother was dying, nine years later, and she wanted to see me. By the time we got there, she couldn’t open her eyes, so she couldn’t see me like she wanted, but she knew I was there. She looked very old, and very thin, like a skeleton wrapped in wrinkly grey skin. She looked like she was already dead. When they told her it was me, she smiled, and they told me to hold her hand. I didn’t like it. I remember it was bony and it was cold. I looked in her face. I didn’t remember her. I didn’t even know her.

She died later that night. My other grandparents didn't seem so sad. Everybody came to see us. Actually it was me they wanted to see. This girl who was the baby left behind by a mother who had died much too young, whom they still remembered very fondly. Some said that they called her a saint, because she was always helping people, always being kind to people, even my father's family, even when they were not nice to her. She always remained happy, and wanted other people to be happy too.

When I was much older and I had got a degree from my home country, I wanted to get another degree, in England. To pay for it, I wanted to sell some property that I had inherited from my mother. But one of my uncles who had been taking care of it for me, said that I should sign all the property over to him, and he would give me the money. I didn't want to, and I refused. He tried to force me, and because I was living with him and my grandmother he told the servants not to give me food until I signed all the property to him. Because I was always nice to the servants, they used to sneak food to me. A friend also used to give me food at our work. In the end, another uncle, who was a lawyer, served papers on him, and finally we agreed that I would sell one of the small properties to him. I got some of the money that way, and my father gave me the rest of the money.

That is how I came to England for my second degree.

I went back home when my grandmother was dying. I spent many days with her. I sang to her, I fed her, I told her stories. She died in my arms. I was so glad to have so much time with her.

Some years later, I heard that my uncle (my mother's brother) was also dying. I phoned him. He begged my forgiveness for forcing me to sign over some of my mother's property to him. I too begged his forgiveness for being so stubborn, for causing him stress. I sent some money to his daughter, and I asked her to buy him his favourite Biryani, as my gift to him. He rang me the day he ate it, and thanked me, and said he had been able to eat all of it, and he enjoyed it very much. I was glad.

He said I was so much like my mother, that I was always helping people.

He died the next day.

It's a shame. He took the property from me, but he was too ill to enjoy it. I believe in Karma. I think it's the same when you take other people's property, or land. You will never know peace.

I don't remember my mother at all. I was only eighteen months old when she died. To me, helping people is natural. Why doesn't everybody help people? I don't know.

I'm glad my mother was like that. I am sure she was much nicer than me. The way that I am sure I am like her is that I too like to listen to the radio. I feel she is with me when I listen to the radio.

## 9. His Father's Eyes

Inass, Nawal, Manono

He was handsome and charming,  
Polite and thoughtful  
He spoke like a poet  
Wrote like an artist  
He opened doors for me  
He picked me up and carried me  
When my legs grew weak  
And I fell for him.

When our son arrived  
We saw that his eyes were his father's eyes  
Like the eyes of his own father, he said,  
The father he had not seen  
Since he was sixteen.  
The father who would beat his mother  
And him,  
Like fathers have done for generations  
Until the sons grew too big.

He hit me only once  
One time, because of the drink  
And the frustrations of life  
He was mortified  
He prayed, and fasted  
Down on his knees  
He begged and pleaded.  
It would never happen again, he said  
It never did.  
Because I left him.

It is good for a son to know his father  
Even when living  
With his single mother  
It is good to have a strong father figure  
Good for son and father to have the bond  
That son and mother can never know.

Mother's house and father's house  
Were positioned on the street  
Like bookends on a shelf marked  
"Romantic Fiction"  
We would blow kisses as he  
Skipped through his father's doorway.  
We blew the same kisses into the screens  
As our homes were shifted  
to opposite shores of the Atlantic.

A year passed, and like  
Footprints in the sand  
Fingerprints would dent his face, then disappear  
His eyes spoke the language  
Understood only by a mother:  
The deep sea monster had risen again  
It had him by the feet and was  
Dragging him under.

Another year, and an epic voyage later  
My son was back in his mother's home.  
At sixteen, he is handsome, and charming  
He is polite and thoughtful

When he looks through the screen  
Into his father's eyes  
He sees the last of a disappearing species  
For his own heart and hands are strong,  
Yet, they are tender,  
Nurtured in the loving home  
Of a mother and grandmother  
Who taught a boy  
How to grow up  
A gentle man.

## 10. RUSHING TO LEAVE

Dana, Farah

We heard that the Taliban were coming. Our family is mostly women: my grandmother, my mother and father, four of us girls – me and my sisters, and our youngest, our brother. My oldest sister also has a daughter. Her husband died four years ago.

They say the Taliban will stop us going to school, to university. Stop us leaving the house, even. We all decided to leave. We would stay together.

They said the Americans, the British, the Germans and the French, were helping people to escape. We just had to get to the airport. My uncle drove us. We were all together.

So many cars, buses, motorcycles, all going to the airport. It was getting slow and congested. So much traffic, so much noise. But we were together, it would be alright.

About two miles from the airport, the traffic stopped. It just stopped. We didn't know what to do. People were walking, with their bags, their suitcases on their heads. Some were carrying children or grandparents on their backs, because they didn't know if it would be too late if we waited for the traffic to move again.

So we got down. We left my uncle. He would stay and come later. We were together. We walked through the crowds, but we stayed together, holding hands. All eight of us. We kept going, and then we got to the airport gate. There were so many people. We were squeezed together tight. The noise. So much noise.

We could hear American voices, British voices, shouting on speakers, that we should get our papers ready. I let go of my sister's hand so I could take my bag off my back for my papers. Then, all of a sudden, the crowd pushed toward the checkpoint, and I was separated from my sister, from my family.

I ended up on a plane coming to England. Alone. None of my family were on that flight. They are in Pakistan. All of them. They are all together, but they are not welcome there. Meanwhile, I am here, alone. And I am not welcome here. But I have found a new family here. 4Wings. I see them two times a week. I am not so alone anymore. 4Wings is my family.

## READERS

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