

A Real Boy

My name is Kareem and I am 19-years old. For 18 years I didn't know what I looked like. I had never seen my face. I was born in Khartoum. Mama was always superstitious about mirrors—thought it was bad luck to see yourself—so we never had one. In the morning, my sisters and I washed each other's faces and did each other's hair.

After my father went fighting in Darfur and was crucified for doing so, I started going to school with one of my sisters, Aarya.

We had a young white teacher from England named Becky. She embraced each one of us as we walked into the classroom and she smelt like Catalan jasmine and her face made me think of what I wanted, believed I could have it—a green garden, good clothes, a family of beagles, being smart.

There was a bathroom in the school and I heard there was a mirror, so I never went inside. Whenever I really needed to piss, I jumped across the fence and cleaned the shrub from dust. Sometimes I got carried away and thought of Becky Rickshaw as I did so.

For a long time, even after I stopped going to school, I imagined I had a white face. I believed I had Becky's green eyes and hair the colour of gazelles, light as sun fuzz.

When mother got sick, I looked after her. I washed her face once every hour. I looked into her eyes under the light of the night-lamp and listened to her breathing. I made her red lentil soup. I looked at her too fondly, for far too long, so I saw in her eyes my face. I was a Sudanese boy.

The day after she died, I went fighting in Darfur.