

Journeys

Athena Gavriel

Poems can send us into our own worlds, evoking memories, images or emotions. They can also connect people with similar experiences or create understanding by opening shafts of light into other worlds. This selection of poems and photographs is inspired by experiences, observations and stories of 'ethnic others' in Aotearoa. A sense of belonging and a positive self-esteem contributes to good mental health. Not being a part of the majority culture, adds another dimension to the often asked question, "Who am I?"

Belonging

To unearth the real,
To know your mountain,
To know you have a history, a home, a place where you are not alone,
To know the stories of your people.

Stories of migration contribute to personal and collective identities and worldviews.

Journey

Plomari clings to the hills above the harbour
Where multi-coloured fishing boats huddle,
Sunning themselves in the afternoon.

From the army of olive trees
High above the village,
I can see the deep blue shape of Turkey,
Only a short boat ride away.

Down the Aegean,
To the oily Mediterranean shores,
The hustle of Port Said,
The hassle of a factory floor in Alexandria,
Where you churn and turn the wood
To make chairs.

Visions of a better life
Draw you across the seas, the oceans...

To a far off shore,
Thousands of miles away in the Pacific.
Light years away from what is known and familiar.

To make a new life,
A better life,
For you and yours...

No longer the olives,
The ouzo,
The ringing of church bells,
The bustle of sheep or goats being herded along dusty village roads.

Somewhere on distant shores,
The olives and pines still stand.
Rooted into the soil of your ancestors' toil,
Calling you home.



Plomarion, Lesvos, Greece*

Refugee's Lament

I did not want to come here!
I did not ask to leave
My home
My family
My friends

In my mind are memories from my youth,
Of happy times, playing on miles of beach, hiding in orange groves...
My friends,
My family,
My home,
My land.

In the darker spaces are memories of the guns,

The shouting and screaming
The terror, the blood, the missing and dead...
My friends,
My family....
Left... not discarded

Expelled from the place I love,
Memories shattered ...
In pieces ...
Left carelessly... here and there...
Seashore, orange grove, playground, home, land...
Fragments remain...
And I am called home... in my dreams, in my memories,
Called home ...
How do I get there?



Walking away, Cyprus*

As a child of immigrants growing up in 1960s and 70s New Zealand, there were expectations within the Greek community to continue cultural practices, whereas outside of it, there were strong societal pressures to conform to the majority culture. Now that New Zealanders are rediscovering their own cultures, their attempts to understand others cultures sometimes lead to stereotypes and prejudices.

What is a Greek?

To say because I am Greek I must have this or that quality, attitude or value,
Is to say that of all the colours of grains of sand on a beach,
Greeks are only the grains of one colour.
The sand has its consistency and colour because of its composition.
To separate the grains makes it something different,
No longer the sand of that beach.

Greeks are Greeks because of each and every one's uniqueness and similarities.
Sand on one beach is different in consistency and colour
To sand on other beaches,
But we are all apart of the ocean of life, and connected to it
Through the grains of our humanness.

Does it matter which beach we belong to or come from?
Yes and no.
To acknowledge my Greekness, is not to deny my humanness,
My Cypriotness, my Kiwiness, my Pacific home.

To acknowledge my humanness, is not to deny my Hellenic roots.

Nothing is straightforward or clear cut,
It is all different and the same.
Hold it together,
Ying and yang,
Soft sand from hard rock.
Stark dry rocky Mediterranean shores
Washed by sapphire blue seas
Tree clad lush Pacific shores
Washed by deep green seas
Hellenes are there too.



We are all different and the same*

Returning to my family's homelands elicited a range of emotions from excitement and joy, to distress about the experience of restricted movement within Cyprus due to the Turks occupying some of the country.

Arriving

We walk along the cobblestones to the kafenio...
In the dark, the golden glow through the doorway welcomes us.

I inhale the secrets of my childhood.
I can smell Yiayia's cooking
Drifting from the houses...

My world has expanded from her house
To a whole village,
A town,
An island.

I smile contented, letting memories flow over me.
Nurturing and washing me
In this new and old familiar world of knowing.

Newcomer's Mystery

Cyprus, I came to explore every inch of you,
But instead, I found a scar... a wall... I could not climb over.
I walked its edge and caressed the tender, rough spots.
The pain of weeping, and bloodshed staining the
Imperfect character of war's jagged edges.

Stories I was told of your beauties remain a mystery to me,
For some are hidden over your walls,
Over that great divide only centimetres thick.
So illusive in its stillness,
So tempting to cross.
If I should touch one inch, one speck,
The monsters of power would rise like an evil cloud,
To shoot me down and trample me to the ground.

So, with your beauty only partly explored,
I mourn the loss of childhood dreams,
Longing for when the wall is down,
The pain has receded,
And the healing complete.



The Green Line, Cyprus*

Some cultures, including Greeks, are reluctant to seek help due to concern about shame or loss of status from their situation, especially if it involves a mental illness or disability. Stigma often affects extended families also.

So, What Is Shame?

The water is muddy and deep,
Churned by the waves of time,
Waves of passion, confusion, despair,
Waves of embarrassment and fear

Sometimes in their white frothy tips
There is a sense of pure logic
Other times in the brown waters, churned and turbulent,
There is a feeling of dirt that just cannot be shaken off.
A want to run and hide.
To curl up, and not face the world,
Nor anyone in it.

Inability to trust strangers can stem from cultural beliefs, stigma or the effects of political unrest, war or abuse. Migrants do not necessarily trust health or helping professions or agencies that New Zealand society generally assumes are trustworthy. They do not always know about professional codes of conduct and confidentiality.

Trusting Others

When trust is betrayed,
And the ground, which you thought was solid,
Turns into quick-sand,
Do you reach out with your hands for your
Enemies to save you?
Or do you call to a friend?

Are you surprised to realize who is who?
Who extends their hand?
Who turns their back?
Do you know?
Can you judge anymore?

Who will walk away,
Watching as you slowly slither into sands, suffocating underground?
Which hands will hold you,
Pulling you out with all the strength they possess?

When you know this, you will know whom you can now trust.

Listening respectfully to people's stories or concerns and acknowledging their worlds can facilitate healing, contribute to emotional wellbeing and a healthy society.

Song

Each bird has its own song
To sing,
Each person their own life
To live,
Each life its own story
To tell.

If I listen,
I may hear
The song of life that is told.

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* Poems and photographs from Gavriel, A.H.M. (2004). We are all different and the same. Culture, identity and mental health worldviews, wellbeing and health-illness experiences of Hellenes in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Athena Gavriel is a New Zealand born Greek and Cypriot, whose mother's parents immigrated in the 1920s from Egypt and Greece, whose Cypriot father immigrated as a young adult in the late 1940s. Athena trained and still works as a psychiatric nurse. Later she attained a BA in anthropology and psychology and recently completed her PhD in nursing in 2005, both from Victoria University of Wellington. Her main practice and interest areas are culture, identity, mental health and wellbeing with a focus on making services more user-friendly and culturally safe for people from different cultural groups. Athena also writes poetry and had several poems published in a nursing journal, an anthology of Cypriot writers, as well as several academic papers and her own thesis. She has three teen children, who are encouraged to know and be proud of the cultures they share with parents including their father's Anglo, Celtic and Swedish origins.