

THROUGH MY EYES
series editor Lyn White

Amina

J.L. POWERS


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Map of Somalia by Guy Holt

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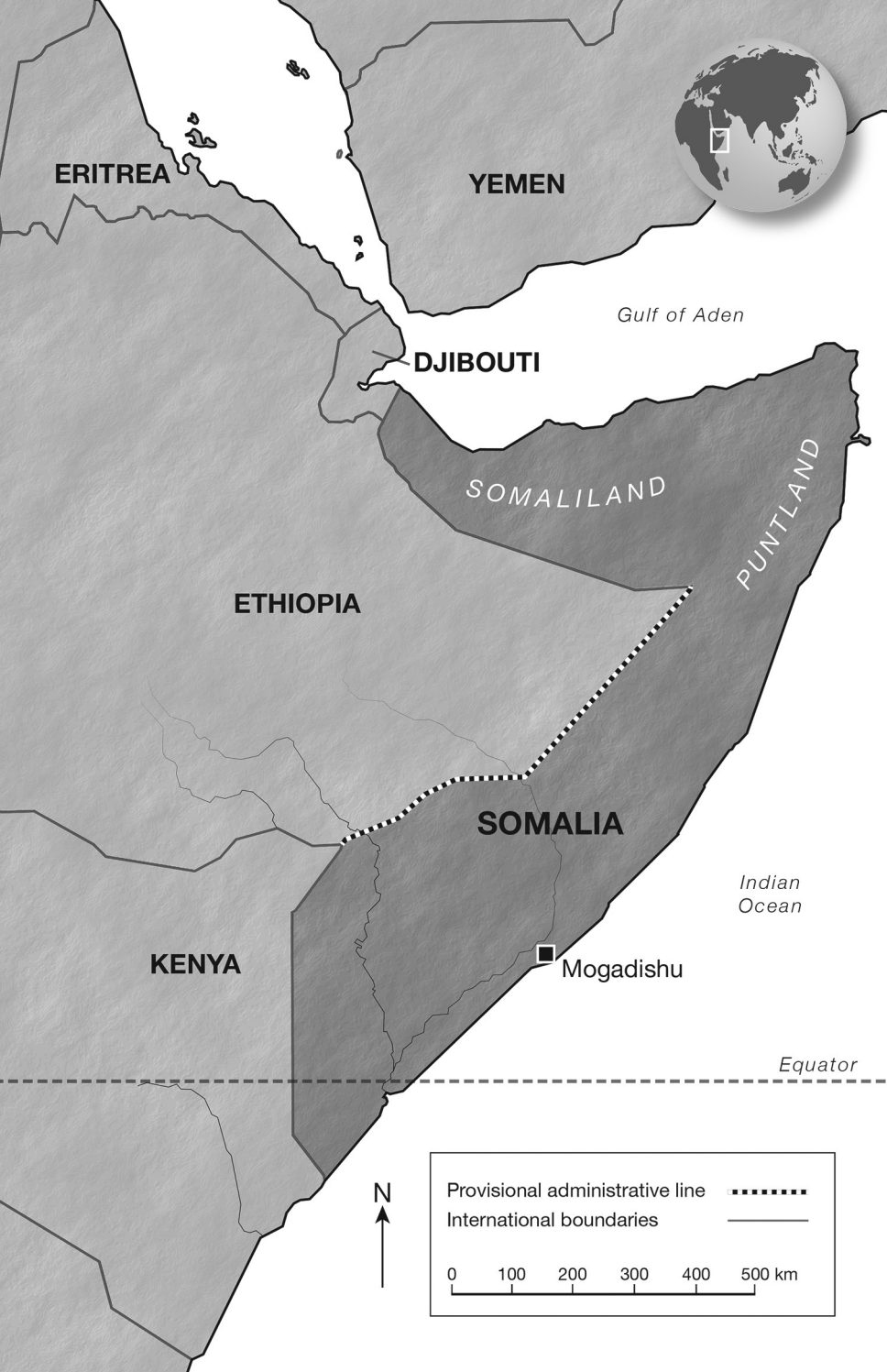


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For the gracious Somalis
I met on my journey
writing this book
and for children growing up
in conflict zones
in all parts of the world.







Chapter 1



Amina inched down the broken concrete steps and skirted the rubble in her yard as she walked from the house to her father's studio. She knocked gently.

'Aabbe,' she whispered. 'Aabbe.'

He opened the door. Even though he was frowning, Amina laughed at the streak of green paint smeared across his cheek and his blue lips. He sometimes sucked a paintbrush while deep in thought.

'Sorry to disturb you, Aabbe,' she said. 'Hooyo says you've been working too long and need to eat something.'

It was true, Aabbe had been in his studio since last night after Maghrib prayers. He kept a sijaayad rolled up under his table, which he unfurled and kneeled upon for prayers whenever he didn't go to mosque. No matter how hard he worked, he always prayed five times a day, like a devout Muslim should.

Aabbe glanced at his paintbrush. He looked lost.

Amina put her hand on her father's shoulder, knowing

that sometimes human touch was all he needed to come back to the real world.

It worked instantly. Light returned to his eyes. ‘Amina,’ he said.

‘Can I see your painting?’

‘Yes. Yes, of course.’ He stepped aside and Amina ducked her head to pass through the low doorway.

A clutter of art materials and blank canvases lay scattered in piles all around the room. These days, the materials were too expensive for Aabbe to share with Amina the way he sometimes used to, back when the two of them would paint together. He still let her use black and white acrylics and charcoal, but she had given up colour and canvases.

Now Amina was no longer sure what she would paint if her father presented her with a perfectly blank, white canvas. She had learned to use the ruins of her city to create art. She drew pictures and wrote poems on the fragments of walls left standing after bomb and grenade attacks; she hoarded strips of cloth, broken glass and the wreckage of buildings for other projects she planned in secret at home. The debris *was* her canvas, the detritus of war her personal collection of art materials. And the itch in her fingertips drove her to keep creating, no matter how dangerous it was to do it.

‘Ohhhhhh.’ Amina sucked in her breath when she saw her father’s latest painting, an unfurling of grey-green, white-capped waves rolling far from shore. Only the ocean and the sky. No land, no boats, no people – not his usual paintings of Mogadishu’s bombed-out buildings

and abandoned streets, displaced people squatting with their goats in the city's ruins, or grim battle scenes. It was so realistic, it looked like a photograph.

'You were inspired,' she said. 'It's *beautiful*.'

'Yes, Allah willed it,' he agreed. 'But its beauty is an illusion. An entire world exists underneath the ocean's surface – a world of life and death and blood. Predators killing those who are weaker and smaller.'

Amina thought about all that lay below the waves. Sharks and whales and jellyfish. All the things that hunted and stung and devoured other fish.

Of course, even though it looked like a simple ocean scene, to Aabbe it meant much more. He always had a deeper meaning in mind; he always intended his paintings to comment on life in Somalia. For this reason, a painting by Samatar Khalid was dangerous and sold only on the black market. From there, it made its way to the far-flung corners of the world, wherever the Somali diaspora had found a home.

'Let's go,' Aabbe said. 'Your mother is waiting.'

He fumbled underneath a cabinet, knocking down a roll of drawings as he retrieved his slippers. He sighed, then held the door open for Amina.

Amina squinted at the hot sun as a large black stork took flight from the wall surrounding the house, one claw scabbling against the bright blue shards of glass cemented to the top to keep people from climbing over.

She shivered, hoping the bird wasn't a sign of death.

Amina had never known her city without war. Somalia had descended into civil war several years

before she was born. Though there had been many attempts to create a stable, strong government, none had succeeded. Instead, the city's neighbourhoods had become war strips between rival war lords. A few years ago, a group of Islamic courts had united to oppose the government and wrest power from the war lords. Then, with the support of Ethiopian and African Union soldiers – a coalition of soldiers from other African nations who were backed by the United Nations – the government returned to power and the Islamic Courts Union fled the city. For a very short time, it had seemed as though Mogadishu might have finally found peace. Instead, a militant group calling itself al-Shabaab splintered off from the Islamic Courts Union and started fighting the government.

The war lords had been gangsters, Aabbe liked to say. But al-Shabaab soldiers were worse because they pretended that Allah blessed their criminal activities.

Since then, al-Shabaab had taken control of most of the city's neighbourhoods while the government stockaded itself in Villa Somalia, the presidential palace. Recently, some of the men from the Islamic Courts Union had joined with the government; together, they were battling al-Shabaab with the help of African Union soldiers.

It gave Amina a headache just to think about it. The names and identities of the groups battling on Mogadishu's streets were constantly shifting. Only one thing remained certain: the world she lived in was a dangerous and unpredictable place.

Last year, during a four-day skirmish between al-Shabaab and government soldiers, somebody had launched a grenade right onto the roof of their house. The second storey had caved in, collapsing the roof and one of the walls. Their living room had been destroyed along with Amina's and her older brother Roble's bedrooms. The lower level was still intact and that was where the family now lived. Now, Roble slept in the front room, which doubled as their living room, and Amina shared a bedroom with her grandmother, Ayeeyo. Then there was Aabbe and Hooyo's room, the kitchen, the bathroom and the toilet.

Roble had worked with Aabbe to prop up the kitchen ceiling with beams so that it didn't disintegrate from the weight of the rubble above it. Still, Amina couldn't work in the kitchen without worrying that, suddenly and without warning, she would get buried alive.

Even if it was dangerous, she still liked to climb the stairs next to the kitchen at the back of the house to the second storey. An entire wall had toppled over into the yard below, leaving an open space on the top floor where Amina could see the world.

Up there, she liked to watch the ocean. The sun glared back at her from ripples and gentle waves. She sometimes heard the gentle buzzing of drones as they passed overhead, the sounds of BBC Somalia broadcast on a radio at a nearby cafe and the discord of different imams calling the men to prayer, their voices broadcast from loudspeakers at each mosque. She'd watch as men went in twos and threes to the mosques, as soldiers

patrolled the streets, as boys kicked a soccer ball a few blocks away.

Aabbe and Amina walked up the steps and into the house.



‘Hooyo!’ Amina called to her mother from the front room. ‘Aabbe is here!’

Amina’s mother shuffled out of the kitchen. ‘Samatar!’ Her hand rested on her belly, just now beginning to bulge though she was already almost six months with child. ‘I set aside soor with lots of butter, just the way you like it.’

They usually ate maraq with the corn meal but vegetables and meat had become both scarce and expensive due to the drought afflicting the entire region. Saliva gathered in Amina’s mouth just thinking of the salty stew with meat and tomatoes, served over rice. Her mother used to make the dish when they had more money – fresh banana on the side, of course. They ate bananas with everything. Roble joked that it wasn’t a meal without bananas.

Aabbe sat on a mat near the front window and Amina brought water and a towel. She knelt beside him, placing a bowl in front of him. He splashed water on his face and rubbed his hands dry with the towel she handed him, then poured water over his hands, rubbing them vigorously to make them clean.

Hooyo brought a dish piled high with thick soor and sliced banana. Aabbe ate with his right hand, butter

dripping off his fingers and running down his elbow. When he was finished, Amina brought the water again and he washed his hands.

Hooyo sat in a chair nearby and the two of them spoke in quiet voices. Amina liked the way they looked at each other, as though they were still young and in love. But she quickly grew bored of their conversation, and she didn't even realise she was kicking the wall with her heel until Hooyo looked over sharply and said, 'Stop it, Amina. The bombs have done enough damage to our house without you kicking a wall down also.'

Amina shared a secret, guilty smile with her father. Hooyo was always after her to act more like a young woman, but Amina still felt like a little girl. She missed being able to run and play. She missed the easy relationships with her male cousins, suddenly strained, even though she had grown up with them and they were like brothers. Now she had to cover her head and arms, showing only her face, whenever she was around any man besides her father and brother.

Aabbe and Hooyo returned to their conversation. Whatever they were discussing so intently, it seemed important.

When Roble came inside, sweaty from playing soccer, Aabbe and Hooyo glanced up.

'How was the game?' Hooyo asked.

Roble grinned. 'I scored a goal.'

'It is a big risk you take, son,' Hooyo said.

Al-Shabaab had outlawed soccer. One of Aabbe's colleagues at the university had been arrested and

thrown into jail just for *talking* about soccer! They claimed soccer kept people from prayer – though Amina had seen all the boys pause in the middle of a game and go to the mosque to pray. Despite the danger, Roble and Keinan loved soccer. Al-Shabaab regularly swept their block. Who knew what they would do if they found boys playing the game?

Roble deflected Hooyo's warning with his infectious grin. She smiled back – she couldn't help herself – and all was well.

Amina wished that her mother loved her the way she loved Roble. She sometimes felt like there was a thick rope tensed between her and Hooyo and they were both pulling as hard as they could in opposite directions.

But she and Aabbe had always had a special relationship, similar to Fatima's warm relationship with *her* father, the prophet Mohammed. Whenever Hooyo would scold her, Aabbe would come to her rescue. Together, they shared the love of creating, which Aabbe said was close to the heart of Allah. 'Allah is the great creator,' he liked to tell Amina, 'and we are participating in his work when we make art.'

The itch crept up her fingers. She needed to get out of the house and draw on some walls. It had been several weeks since she'd finished her last work.

That was how she thought of it. *Work*. She wasn't sure if she dared to call it art. It wasn't anything like what Aabbe created. Some people, of course, would call it graffiti. But it wasn't graffiti. It wasn't random and

it wasn't vandalism. It took skill and care and thought.

'Roble, will you go out and buy some vegetables so I can cook?' Hooyo asked.

'Yes, Hooyo,' Roble said. He smiled at Amina, as if to invite her along.

'Can I go, too?' Amina asked.

Hooyo and Aabbe glanced at each other. They preferred her to stay home, to leave only when she had to for school. But they were conflicted. They also wanted her to live like young women were supposed to, as they had, growing up before Somalia was plunged into perpetual war.

'Amina, it's better if you stay home,' Aabbe said.

'Where it's safe,' Hooyo added. It had been a long time since Hooyo or Ayeeyo had left the house. Ayeeyo had lived with the family all Amina's life, since Amina's grandfather had been killed when he accidentally stepped on an unexploded landmine. They hadn't even gone to mosque for several years. They had become prisoners, unwilling to leave and face the danger outside if they didn't need to.

Amina bit her lip to keep herself from protesting. She wanted to say that they weren't safe even here – wasn't the grenade that destroyed half their house proof of that? She wanted to remind them that she left the house to attend school all week long. Why was visiting the market different?

But of course she said nothing. She would save her words for the next time her schoolfriends wanted to get together.

‘Let her come,’ Roble said. ‘Keinan will go with us and we will make sure nothing happens to her.’

Amina jumped up before her parents could say no. She grabbed a purple, floral headscarf and looked in the mirror over the front entrance. Her fingers feverish, she placed the long piece of cloth over her hair and softly folded it back, then forwards, then back again so that it looked more stylish. Keinan always looked so sharp...so cool...She tied it tightly and slipped pins on either side so that it would stay on.

Together, she and Roble stepped outside, then through the gate, stopping abruptly to let a goat walk past. It bleated weakly. A woman with a black khimar covering her head and neck nodded to greet them, then followed the goat, a long stick in her hand to keep it in line.

Amina sighed. The conflict that she always felt tugged her in different directions – the safety of home was confining, while the freedom of the streets was dangerous. She wanted both freedom and safety but she knew that was impossible.

And so she risked everything, not just to breathe the air outside of the four walls that kept her in day and night, but to use her hands to do what she knew Allah had created her to do. There was something deep inside her that needed to come out, needed to be expressed.

She had charcoal hidden in her pockets and was already thinking about how she could convince the two boys to keep watch so she could run inside one of the abandoned buildings.