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opening extract from

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FOREWORD

Welcome to *Unheard Voices*. This is an anthology of stories and poems about slavery written by those who were themselves slaves, as well as by contemporary writers. Why publish such an anthology in the first place? Slavery is an emotive, painful subject that is often shied away from. But more often than not, the only way to move forward is to first look back and learn the lessons of the past. 2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the British Parliament passing the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807. Although the abduction, transportation and selling of slaves didn't stop immediately, it was an important first step.

And unfortunately, even in the twenty-first century, the subject is still relevant. Nowadays, more often than not, it's called 'human trafficking' but it's the same principle – the principle of one human being denying another human being their right to dignity, freedom and equality. Slavery, in all its forms, is a gross abuse of fundamental human rights.

On 10 December 1948 the General Assembly of the

United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Assembly called upon all member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and 'to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories'.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.'

No definition of slavery can adequately convey the full extent of the damage such a trade causes. In addition, many who have been held in slavery or their descendants are subjected to grave abuses of their right to be free from discrimination. One legacy of slavery is perhaps the way in which those descended from slaves, as well as those descended from slave owners or a slave-owning society, view themselves and each other.

Throughout Western history, only a small number of voices have been allowed to tell their story.

Getting published when your voice was outside the perceived 'norm' was all too often a matter of having the right benefactors and patronage. And for too long, slaves were even forbidden to learn to read and write. Education, and thus knowledge, has always been one of the first rights denied to those in slavery.

From my own point of view, although the voyage through my past may make me weep, I can still draw strength from the fact that my ancestors were slaves in the West Indies. Why? Because they survived the inhuman, barbaric transportation from Africa. They survived the inhuman regime they encountered once they reached the West Indies. They survived. I am descended from survivors. And that thought makes me strong.

With this anthology, each writer pays respects to all those men, women and children who made it and somehow survived – and all the many millions who didn't. It is an anthology of work from those to whom the slaves of the past still whisper. Perhaps they will always whisper until

slavery and injustice are eliminated from every country on our planet. Let us hope that one day, and soon, that time will come.

Peace.



BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH

Civil Lies

Dear Teacher,

When I was born in Ethiopia
Life began,
As I sailed down the Nile civilisation began,
When I stopped to think universities were built,
When I set sail
Asians and true Americans sailed with me.

When we traded nations were built,
We did not have animals,
Animals lived with us,
We had so much time

Thirteen months made our year,
We created social services
And cities that still stand.

So Teacher do not say
Columbus discovered me
Check the great things I was doing
Before I suffered slavery.

Yours truly

Mr Africa

MALORIE BLACKMAN

North

'That child of yours able to breed yet?'

'No, sir.'

'You sure? She started her monthlies?'

'No, sir.' Mama shook her head. 'She's only a baby.'

Best Friend grabbed at my face with one of his pudgy, doughy hands. He squeezed my cheeks together until my eyes started to water. He turned my face this way and that as he looked me up and down.

'She ain't no baby.' Best Friend pushed me away and wiped his hand on his waistcoat. 'The minute she's old enough to breed, I've got someone ready to buy her.'

'Mama—'

'Hush, child.' Mama quietened me down at once.

I glared up at Best Friend. How could he take me from my mama? How would he feel if someone took his own daughter Amelia away from him? But as far as Best Friend and all the other whites up at the house were concerned, us slaves didn't have no feelings. I hated him so much that sometimes I thought I'd fill up the whole world with hate.

Best Friend's eyes began to narrow as he looked at me and I knew my face was showing too much. I blanked my expression and looked down at the dirt.

'I want to know the moment she's got the curse. D'you hear, Abby?'

'Yes, sir,' Mama replied.

Best Friend stomped back to the house. Mama had sure got his name right. He was the best friend of the Devil and no mistake. I waited until he was safely in the house before turning round.

'Mama, you're not going to let him sell me, are you? You can't.'

Mama carried on staring up at the house.

'Mama?'

'Hush, child. Come along now. We've got work to do and I don't fancy no back-whipping just 'cause you've got it in your head to ask questions.'

'I won't go. I won't. He can't make me,' I shouted.

'Child, hold your noise,' Mama warned.

'I won't go, d'you hear? And if you let him take me then you're . . . you're nothing but a coward and a—'

Mama slapped me so hard, my head snapped back.

'That's enough of your foolishness,' she hissed. 'Now get back to work on those vegetables, you hear?'

Mama moved off towards the side of the house. Tears swam into my eyes and down my cheeks as I watched her move away. And just at that moment, I hated her. I hated her for giving in, for saying 'Yes, sir' and 'No, sir' all the time. I hated her for being a slave. I hated her because I was her daughter and that made me a slave too and I would've chosen to be any number of other things – even Best Friend's worst kept dog – before I was a slave.

I went to work tending to the vegetables, wondering what I should do. Best Friend didn't know it yet but I was already seeing the curse. I'd had the curse for almost three months now. It was only a matter of time before he got to find out and then I'd be sold to the highest bidder faster than I could spit. But what could I do? As I dug around the carrots and potatoes, I turned over and over in my mind all the things I could do to get away. I turned my head this way and that, wondering which way I'd have to go to be free. Which was the right direction? All the ways looked the same. There were no paths leading away. Each road just led back to Best Friend's door.

A cool, hard hand clamped over my mouth. My eyes opened that same second.

'Hhmmm! Ugghh!' I struggled against the hand. My hands flew upwards to pull it off my mouth.

'Shush!' Mama's voice barely a whisper. 'Shush! We're going north.'

We're going north.

You can have no idea what those few words did

to me. I was that instant awake, as if a bucket of winter water had been tipped all over me. I was scared. More than scared. Terrified. But I was happy. Fiercely, raging happy. We were leaving. We were going to run away. And where were we going?

North.

North meant freedom. North was the closest thing on God's earth to Heaven. My eyes were getting used to the moonlit darkness. I smiled at Mama. She didn't smile back. Instead her eyes burned into mine, shining hot and bright as the very sun itself.

Mama took hold of my hand as I sat up and we tiptoed past the others in our shack who lay on sacking on the floor. I could hear folks sighing and some were even crying in their sleep. As we approached, Old John, who lay in the middle of the shack, started coughing, that terrible hacking, bone-shaking cough of his. I'm used to him coughing himself to sleep and then coughing himself awake again, but at that moment I was terrified he was going to wake up the whole world. Mama led the way towards the door. Old John hacked so bad, he started

to sit up. Mama froze, her grip on my hand tightening. I didn't even dare to breathe. Old John didn't hold with folks running off. He said it was useless, a waste of time and just made life harder for everyone else.

As if life could get any harder.

Old John gave one final cough and collapsed back down onto his bedding. Immediately Mama pulled me towards the door. I almost stepped on Old John's foot – more in spite than anything else – but I wanted to go north more than I wanted to get back at him for almost ruining our escape.

At last we were at the door. Mama opened it and for once it didn't squeak.

'Mama . . . ?'

'I oiled it. Shush!'

And then we were outside. In the warm, night-time air. It had never felt so good on my face. The full moon shone like new money, but beneath the trees, where the moonlight didn't reach, there was pure darkness. I mean, darkness thick enough to almost drink.

'Sit.' Mama pushed down on one of my shoulders.

I sat down with a bump. After another quick glance

around, then up at the house, Mama dug into her sack and took out two rolled-up squares of rawhide and tied them to my feet using some rope. There was something slippy in the raw hide that made my toes curl. Then Mama sat and tied two larger squares of rawhide onto her own feet. She jumped up, pulling me up after her. Across the way I could see Best Friend's house. A single light shone in an upstairs window. Mama looked at it too, a cold, hard look on her face. She pulled me in the opposite direction, towards the trees. And we started running.

We ran and ran and ran until I thought I was going to throw up my whole insides all over my rawhide shoes.

'Mama, can we stop?' I panted.

'No, child. Not yet.'

We ran and ran and ran some more. My legs felt burning hot, melting my bones away to nothing.

'Mama, I need to stop. My legs hurt. My chest is burning.'

'No, child. Not yet.'

We ran until I fell to the ground, weeping.