

Dear Reader,

My name is Thanula. I was born in Botswana, which is in Africa, it's the place of the Tswana people. My parents are Sri Lankan; they're from Dehiwala, that's south of Colombo. They moved to Botswana because the country found a lot of diamonds in the ground and then became quite wealthy overnight. Skilled migrants from around the world were invited there, temporarily, to work and upskill folks in professional fields. My parents are both accountants and were married for just over a year before they moved.

I lived in Botswana until I was 7 and I loved it there. Living in Botswana felt to me and my sister like being in a kind of utopia, a multicultural one. I wondered why we ever left. My parents always said we left so my sister and I could access better education. I think the secondary and tertiary school options there probably weren't competitive in the early 90's. But I've learnt recently that we also came here seeking permanence; contracts in Botswana were only offered for two-years at a time. So there was a sense of uncertainty about working and living there, but still my parents described it as a wonderful time. There was a small Sri Lankan diaspora community there that was cohesive and inviting. People would come to the airport when a new Sri Lankan person arrived, and collect them and bring them in. It felt like you were really welcomed into that community. But it didn't make sense for my parents to stay long term.

We left in 1995 to come to Australia. My parents chose to come to Brisbane because we had an aunt who lived here. When we migrated to Brisbane was when I started to notice discomfort. First from misunderstanding the Australian vernacular – I didn't know it at the time, but I can describe it now as culture shock.

I went to a state school in Brisbane's southside. It felt homogenous and white compared to what I'd known, but there were actually a few Greek and Italian kids that went there too. They had elaborate last names, which were unfamiliar to see, but comforting to hear. When I came over here in grade three, I introduced myself as Thanula and discovered this was quite difficult for a lot of people to pronounce. Then in grade four, I reintroduced myself as Don. I felt like I made the call on the spot. Don is a part of my name - it's an inherited title for the men on my dad's side of the family. It's an artefact of the Portuguese colonisation of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan names can be quite long, sometimes 50 characters. Some Sri Lankan names include a *Gae* name, and it speaks to what your family did and to where they're from. So my inherited *Gae* name would be *Kahavitu Apuhame La Gae*, but no one's going to call you Kahavitu — that's a place name. The *Gae* name is a prefix that comes before your personal name. My dad dropped his *Gae* name when he came here, which was quite a good idea. It made life easier. I guess it's quite complicated, the Sri Lankan naming system, but if you look at the whole name you would be able to track people back many, many generations. So Don was my first name on my birth certificate, and on my passport. I was curious about it. Don is a very Anglo sounding name, and too many folks just couldn't really pronounce Thanula, so calling myself Don was an easier way to start the next year.

Later on my older sister also shortened her name, so we both went through a similar transition. I also remember very specifically that the way we both spoke changed. I can almost pinpoint the moment when I heard my sister's sounds and accent shift. I realised that we'd both made the same decision, but we didn't really talk about it. Our parents didn't oppose any of this, they were just like, "Do what you need to do." They were preoccupied with studies, recertifying as



accountants. At the time Australian companies didn't recognise the qualifications they'd earned in Sri Lanka. But my sister and I felt they'd made a decision to raise us as more Australian than Sri Lankan, and I think I probably would have done the same thing if I was in their position. Especially being removed from culture; it just made sense to accept the new status quo.

It was probably during this time when my sister and I started drifting away from the broader Sri Lankan community and we stopped going to the big Sri Lankan events. This was made worse by the fact that we couldn't speak Sinhala. There was a Sinhala school that my parents tried to put us into so we could learn the language, but it was on a Friday night, and that didn't stick for us. We had more friends here, but we didn't have relatives and cousins and extended family around. For whatever reason, it was too hard, so we went the other way.

Feeling different to the people around me made me hyper-aware of my image early on. It's one of the first ways I could see a difference in how people reacted toward me. If I presented myself a certain way I could manage how people treated me. First through dress, then later with hair. My parents always dressed well and presented themselves in beautiful ways. I love their style but it probably didn't feel as vital for them though. Dressing in my own way became a way I could still display individuality without being too vocal about it. I didn't have to communicate directly. I could just wear something different, which felt like a passive way of being authentic. I think about this interface a lot because it informs how I feel. Both how the clothes feel on my body, and also how they communicate outwards to others. I learnt that there's definitely a connection to how you present yourself and how you're received. This interest in dress first started playfully, but has probably become a bit neurotic now. I'm always metering and managing how I present myself. I feel like if I present myself as dishevelled or messy then folks are more likely to double check my grocery bags.

In high school my email address was "boat_monkey_3". I think this was an early attempt to own and accept the uncomfortable associations I was getting at the time. It felt good to take these terms back to some degree. It's like, I already get it, I already understand the joke. After high school, the labelling escalated and things felt a bit more serious. I had grown a beard. It was after September 11 and terrorism was still in the media cycle. Casual comments came from people I didn't know, became more abrasive, and seemed to correlate with the length of my beard. That was when my thinking started to change and I realised, wow, this doesn't feel like a joke anymore. The ease in which people throw labels around and the casualness of it. It seems superficial, even playful at the start, but then the persistence, accumulation and one-sidedness of it starts to feel extreme over time. I'm quite protected and privileged in so many ways and imagine I've had a very different experience from other folks who share my skin tone, but we likely share a tenderness and fatigue around this.

My mum persisted with calling me Thanula, I think because she loved it; she thought it was a beautiful name, and my parents chose it based on a Sri Lankan reading of my natal astrology chart. I'd still love to learn more about this. They told me Thanula means 'golden thread'. I've returned to it because I also think it's a really beautiful name and I like why they chose it. I started using Thanula again in 2014 or 2015, well after high school and after I started working. I'm still Don at work, but I have a name badge with Thanula on it. This feels a bit aspirational, and maybe while I'm still working there, I'll change to that name. I'm not there just yet. I don't have the heart or energy to rebrand myself in a corporate setting right now. In terms of pulling the thread of identity, going back to Thanula was probably the start of it. I don't mind if people still call me Don, but I feel Thanula resonates.

My dad's family is over in Sri Lanka and my mum's family is spread around America and Europe. I've probably been to Sri Lanka four or five times in my life. The last time was in 2013 and I went by myself. I definitely did the trip like a Westerner, which I only realised on reflection. I

guess I wouldn't even know how to approach going there and acting like a local because I'm not meaningfully connected to Sri Lankan culture. I've attempted to reconnect with the culture by joining a Sri Lankan cricket team here in Brisbane. I'm playing with guys who have migrated to Australia more recently than me, and prefer speaking Sinhala over English. So, in lieu of connecting through language, I tried cooking them a few curries for our lunch break. This didn't work out like I hoped. I don't think they were into it, it was probably a bit mild for their tastes. My aspirations were tempered after that. So yeah, going back to Sri Lanka, I'd definitely feel like an "outsider" when I go there. I'd have to think about how to make the most of that experience.

My parents and I have had quite different experiences of migration. They love it here, whereas I'm still working out how to belong. There are definitely spaces where I feel more comfortable, but I don't think I could point to a fixed tribe, or a fixed location. Right now, I think I'm still navigating between cultures and I haven't arrived at the point where I feel comfortable with the in-between.

Making friends with people in the art community was a really important step for me because I was being introduced to new ways of interacting with the world. I really like the way artists think. Unlocking that thinking helped me privately parse through matters around identity. It's a productive way to engage with these issues. It's really nice to meet people in the arts who get it. I wasn't really having those conversations before becoming friends with artists, so that unravelling and understanding of identity started with that group of friends. I'm so grateful for that. I couldn't imagine before how to unpack these things with others and understand what it means to be a migrant. I hadn't even thought of my experience as a migration experience before this project. I've always framed it as "otherness". Through the framework of "otherness" I'm always on the outside, always different. So to frame my experience as migration is actually more empowering and natural. Birds migrate.

Thanula