



Gabriella Ghermandi

The Neighborhood Phone

Link to Text: <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-neighborhood-phone>

Author Biography:

Ghermandi is an Italian-Ethiopian writer, singer and performer. She was born in Addis Ababa in 1965 and moved to Italy in 1979. For many years she has lived in Bologna, which is also where her father was born. In 1999 she won the Eks&Tra association and Fara Editore's competition for immigrant writers. She founded El Ghibli, which is an Italian literary review of immigrant writing. Her 2007 novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* has been translated into English as *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* by Giovanna Bellesia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto. A lot of her work focuses on immigrant experiences, multiple identities and on writing. She is also a singer and she considers her musical career of equal importance to her writing.

During the 'Scramble for Africa' in the late 1800s, Italy vied with other European countries for influence in Ethiopia and in 1895 tried unsuccessfully to occupy the country. The Second Italo-Abyssinian War was launched by Mussolini in October 1935, and this time the Italians succeeded in conquering Ethiopia, which was at the time one of the few independent states in Africa. Italy occupied Ethiopia, which became part of Italian East Africa from 1936-1941. During this period a population of Italians moved to Ethiopia. *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* is about a young Ethiopian girl during the Italian occupation. During WW2, forces led by Haile Selassie, the exiled emperor and assisted by the British defeated the Italians. The Italian population was granted pardon by Haile Selassie after the war, although when he fell and the Ethiopian Civil War began in 1974 many of these Italians returned to Italy. Ghermandi's Italian father did not return to Italy, though Ghermandi herself moved to Italy after his death. More recently some Italian companies have returned to Ethiopia and there is a small Italian population in Addis Ababa. There is also a small population of Ethiopians resident in Italy.

Questions:

- What does the story suggest about the concept of 'home'?
- What is the difference between Italy and Ethiopia in terms of their understanding of time? What might this suggest about the society?
- What is the role of the medicine woman in the community?
- How do you interpret the ending? Do you think Gennet will be able to preserve the 'peace inside' that she found in Ethiopia in her life in Italy? Both 'A Bedtime Story for Eid' and 'Falling Down Politely' open with questions. Questions are repeatedly raised within, as well as by, them. To what extent do these narratives offer a sense of resolution?
- What do you think are the gifts mentioned here?
- In what ways do you think that the reality of Kechenè differed from the narrator's expectations?

- Do you think anything has been lost in the translation of this story?
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Discuss the story's opening lines:

'As often happens in my life, gifts, the things I wish for, always materialize when I am thinking of throwing in the towel, when I give up and let life pass through me. For seventeen years I had dreamed of what my return to my country would be like, the places I would visit, the people I would meet, how I would feel, and certainly that indescribable smell of home that would sweep through me.' **Instead, nothing was as I had imagined it would be.'**
