

## **My Mother's First Printed Book**

*'I understand it now, I think. My name in print!'*

*- The author's mother's response on reading the first draft of this pantoum*

I am my mother's first printed book.

I collect every word she ever spoke to me,  
her story in print everywhere I look,  
and I read and read and read.

I collect every word she ever spoke to me,  
whisper justice until it rhymes with her name,  
and I read and read and read,  
I keep her testimony in my body's frame.

Whisper justice until it rhymes with her name:

*Geraine, Geraine, Geraine. Geraine.*

I keep her testimony in my body's frame,  
her laugh my treasured calligraphy, her silence a spine's break.

*Geraine, Geraine, Geraine. Geraine.*

Her story in print everywhere I look,  
her laugh my treasured calligraphy, her silence a spine's break.  
I am my mother's first printed book.

Nadine Aisha Jassat

This work was commissioned by the National Library of Scotland as part of Neu! Treasures!

## Author's Note

My commission was in response to the idea of 'First Printed Books'.

I thought about this a lot – both the act of printing, and the types of books which were first printed (often sacred texts, like The Diamond Sutra or The Gutenberg Bible) - when deciding how to structure the poem. I kept coming back to the form of a pantoum; a Malaysian verse form in which lines are repeated in a set way. It is a form I have loved before for many reasons, and it felt appropriate here for the idea of mirroring the printing process by using the same lines over and over. The way a pantoum can be read – the repetition meaning its movement is slower, and you read at a more considered, meditative pace, perhaps returning to certain lines, perhaps following your finger along the page – made me think of the contemplative and attentive way sacred texts can be read, too, and so seemed like a fitting tribute.

For the content of the poem, I wanted to explore the idea of first printed books in the context of my own life. I thought about my journey as a debut author, and I thought about the stories which I also carry within me and upon me, as if I am a book myself. I thought about my Mother's voice, which has, like the 'illuminated colours and gold' featured in The Gutenberg Bible's description, stayed with me; in my life and in my poetry.<sup>1</sup> I have listened to her words, and her silences, throughout my life, and, as a writer, I have taken it as my duty to honour and mark them. That is what this poem, and the topic of 'First Printed Books', became for me: a story of mothers and daughters, of words printed and treasured.

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<sup>1</sup>From The National Library of Scotland's description of The Gutenberg Bible.