I was less than content with my African features. Every girl with Afro hair at that time pranced around with a towel on her head and pretended to be a Charlie’s Angel at least once.
lish. Despite my white grandmother's near-black eyes and skin as brown as mine in summer, even her Irish heritage wasn't talked about, let alone who spent much of his time standing by her near-black eyes and skin as brown as mine in summer, even her Irish heritage wasn't talked about, let alone who spent much of his time standing by her. Our mixed-race complexes foiled any attempts to conceal anything about the family that was different and foreign.

I remember feeling coy and apologetic, and relieved to be merely sun-tanned, as my grandmother called me. Not properly black like that boy Darkus in my first primary school, who spent much of his time standing in a bin with his hands on his head. Not properly African like my father, from whom my mother separated when I was very young. But not white, like our cousins living in Surrey, or their Girl's World dolls with the blond hair that grew. Realizing I couldn't live up to any white ideal—though I longed to be Blondie, or Sandy in Grease—being black was also a shaky identity, which could be denied by me or to me at any moment.

In the last year of primary school I joined a gang. The core group was made up of six boys, five African-Caribbean, one Kenyan-Asian, and four girls. There was Martine, who was white; myself, light-skinned but definitely brown; Julia, Indian-Irish, who identified as white (in those days, without today's fashionable status, South-east Asians got more stick than the rest of us); and Sylvia, who was dark-skinned black. Although hard-nut Lewis was leader of the gang, Sylvia was the real boss, because she had brothers who could beat us all up. You'd see them occasionally when we hung round her house at the weekend, where we'd race each other down the road and play football against somebody's wall.

Sylvia was the most physically developed, and could run faster than the fastest boy in the school. I was second to her in both respects. But to the boys, Julia was the prettiest and most desirable—she had that barely detectable exotic look, with green eyes and dark shiny hair, and wasn't playground power. Julia and I posed another kind of threat. Whatever her true feelings about us as friends, it was clear Sylvia felt something had to be done. One day out of nowhere she accused Julia, Martine, and me of laughing at her. She banished us from the gang, forbidding the boys to talk to us, threatening to beat up anyone who defied her. I was bewildered and distraught, and couldn't quite see why I was being punished. At the same time, I had vague feelings of both indignation and guilt. Looking back, I see how all the girls in the gang had been set up against each other—competing across a continuum of skin colour. Within the murky world of sex and race, it was an early taste of things to come.

Arriving at secondary school, my position was still shifting and unstable. I wasn't the Caribbean girl it seemed you had to be if you were black, and being African wasn't even a question; all I had was my father's name, hard for people to spell and even harder to pronounce. Should I be a Casual and wear designer sports-wear or their imitations like a lot of the black kids at school, or dress like a Trendy as the posh white kids with scruffy clothes were called? I couldn't decide. Sometimes I'd wear Casual-style jeans with my top inside out, as a desperate compromise.

One boy suggested I get my hair done like Grace Jones, which I took as an insult. A girl who looked mixed-race but fiercely denied it taunted me with the words: "You think you are white." Rumours went around that my mother was one of the art teachers, a plump brown woman with tight shiny curls, whose real daughter I envied for her smooth, wavy locks and the confident air with which she strode about.

Maybe it wasn't just the hair. But turning 17—the year it grew long enough to scrape back and adorn my face with ringlets—marked the end of my teenage torment as I surely knew it. This Sade-style "exotic" phase in the bloom of youth became a consolation and compromise, pam-
pered by class-ridden pretensions and a few male fantasies. Of course I didn’t think about it quite in that way then, just felt a bit better than before, a bit more accepted. When I did notice, it was because some other mixed-race girl seemed more exotic than me, and I felt the same kind of resentments I seemed to get from girls with darker skin.

When I bumped into Sylvia years later, there seemed to be only a fondness for each other, but something meanwhile had stuck. Was it a fear of retribution for the wrongs I felt I’d committed under a false and privileged light? Privilege is a shifting, slippery thing and, notably between girls and women of colour, attacks and counter-attacks can be made from all sides. Back at primary school, it hadn’t been just Sylvia and I who had parted ways—Julia, Martine and I also blamed each other as the real culprit, true to “mulatto, quadroon and pure whitey” form. We had struggled for positions on a continuum based on racialized images of sexuality and desirability. Who needed the house and the field, as featured in Roots? It was all happening on my front doorstep.

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FEMME

Giliane Obas

Assise sur mon trône
Une douce pluie tombe
Je suis femme
Je suis reine
Je suis femme Africaine

Celle qui règne
Sur les brousses et les plaines
Ma tristesse et mes pleures
Oui j’ai senti la douleur
Dans mon cœur, la fureur
Oui, j’ai surmonté ma peur

Dans mes oreilles
Résonnent toujours
Les cries horibles
Les voix du passé

Mes enfants kidnappés
Si violemment arrachés
De leur mère bien-aimé

Pendant des années
J’ai pleuré
J’ai senti leur souffrance
Cette douleur immence

Agenouillée, j’ai pleuré
Imploiré
Tendu vers le firmament
Mes mains ensanglantées

Dans mes plaines

J’entends toujours leurs chants d’espoir
Emporté par le vent,
Leurs cries de victoires
Mes prières exocées
Nous y sommes arrivés

Avec une rage
J’ai cassé mes chaînes
Et dans mes yeux
Couleur ébène
Ils ont vu ma haine

Les diamants et l’or
Saisis par les voleurs
Ne compareront jamais
Au trésors que j’ai dans le cœur

Alors la tête haute
Devant mon peuple
Je me tiens

Ma couleur bronze
Luisant au soleil
La tête haute
Je me tiens

Admirée par mon peuple
J’aurai toujours ma fierté,

Giliane Obas lives in Montreal.