

# A place to play

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## Summary

A creative non-fiction work that is based on the author's experience working long-term in orphanages overseas. The work addresses the question, how does a person play in an atmosphere of neglect and trauma? The author explores the importance of play in art-making and her experience of its sacred qualities.

## Keywords

Play, stories, orphanages, healing.

I won't tell you the name of this country, the place where I learned to play. I have grown tired of speaking of her, the country in question. She sits like a weary old woman inside my memories, ragged and unsmiling. I protect her now. I place her between clean bed sheets and make sure that she is warm.

I can tell you some things about her, though, this forgotten country. The truth is, she was heartless and she hated me. In the end she spat me from her borders and told me I didn't belong to her, can you imagine? After eight years of loving her, she said she didn't need my privileged person's charity.

She informed me to take my strange accent and go back where I belonged, except, by that time, I belonged nowhere. I had spent too many hours with her children, in her orphanages.

The world has forgotten this country and this country has forgotten her children. Yet I remember, and I keep these memories protected, sometimes hidden, in the paint of my art-making, a suitable place for their heaviness. I will tell you some things that I have made palatable for your hearing. I assume your ears have not been calloused by the sounds of suffering stemming from institutional abuse and neglect, but if they have, you will know much more than this work can share. You will know the things that have no words at all.

Every village in this country has an orphanage, sometimes two. In the first months of living there, I learned that no-one wanted to go to the orphanages because no-one cared. According to locals, the children emerged from wombs soaked in vodka and would surely become the next generation of alcoholics. 'Social orphans', they called them, their parents still (barely) living. These parents were the ones I saw on the street collecting glass bottles from bins to return for small change, their faces ruddy with cold and drink, eyes vacant. They stumbled across footpaths in the early morning, and the word 'legless' developed a new meaning for me. Not just drunk but immobile, face down, blood running from the head. It was common to see this sight several times a week, perhaps several times a day. How many people I passed by in those first few months of my residence, not knowing if they were dead or alive, not brave enough to check, each time my stomach flipping over, my heart beating faster. Afraid of their strewn-out bodies, and how they may have moaned or shouted if I tapped their shoe with my shoe, to rouse them. I let them sleep, or perhaps, I let them die, I will never know.

In the orphanages, the children from those strewn-out drunks taught me to play. It was important to them, so we made a deal.