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*The Lebs*

*The Lebs* by Michael Mohammed Ahmad is published by Hachette Australia, RRP \$27.99

When Abu and X return, all six of us sit in a circle in the centre of the rehearsal studio, surrounded by the graffiti quotes on the walls. I try to forget that the quote about Muhammad is up there too, but to me it sticks out and throbs like a cold sore. Jo stands and slips her hands into her pockets. She's put her casual voice back on, the one that makes her sound like a Black boy from Redfern, and she says, 'So, yeah, um, hope you enjoyed lunch. Here's what we've got planned for the afternoon . . .' She instructs each of us to take one of the cameras she's lined up and go out onto the plaza pretending to be a character from a movie or book or a story we've made up. She'd like us to film our character's interactions with the community. I want to know what's the point of this but it seems that every time I ask a question I reveal my ignorance and simply get a scoff or a wince or a sarcastic remark in return. I blame Punchbowl Boys – how uncivilised that place made me. If only I'd gone to a school in Newtown or in North Sydney, then I'd understand art. Maybe Jo wants video footage that explains how mundane interactions escalate into violence, which always seems to happen on the streets of Bankstown.

I wait for the others to collect their cameras and then I walk over and pick up the last one, a small black Sony. I pop open the side monitor and turn the camera on and then through the screen I see a wall with the words, 'Black Fucks'. Just as I hit record a man's deep voice screams out, 'Cunt!'

I snap back startled. Abu has taken off his singlet and is jumping up and down, eyes blazing as he looks around like some kind of dog on its hind legs with a camera flailing between its paws. His chest is broad and patched with thick, dark hair and I see the bones at the bottom of his ribcage contract as he tenses his flat, hairless stomach. He screams again, 'Cunt!' Momentarily I think he has got into a fight with one of the women but then I realise he has simply started his improvisation. I point the camera at his Adam's apple, waiting for it to move, but it just sits there poised like the head of a cobra peering through bushes. 'Cunt!' I watch carefully through the monitor at the long, brown hairs cluttered around his throat. The front of his jaw drops into my

screen. ‘Cunt!’ And again, ‘Cunt!’ And again, ‘Cunt!’ Then he sprints from the studio and into the corridor, and I hear him screaming, ‘Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!’ as his voice disappears into the street. I wonder what character from which book or movie he’s pretending to be.

I know who I’m going to impersonate – last year Ms Lion took me and the two other Punchbowl Boys who passed their half-yearly exams on an excursion to the Dendy Cinema in Newtown. We watched a film called *Bowling for Columbine*, which she told us was about guns in America. I was shocked when it turned out to be a documentary: *The movies are supposed to be for movies!* I thought. And: *How am I supposed to take a fat shit like Michael Moore seriously?* But all my pretensions change as soon as I’m out on the Bankstown Plaza with a camera in my hands – now I am the fat shit documentary filmmaker and this is *Brawling for Bankstown*. I lie across the red brick tiles of the plaza and film the first person who enters my shot – Jesse. She has placed her camera on the ground and is sprinting back and forth towards it, her toes halting in front of the lens. Suddenly she turns and I see her dark eyes lock on me from inside the lens of my own camera. She charges forward and becomes a blur. Her toes land right where my legs are crossed and she stops there and huffs down at me. I stare at her feet, which look like burned wood. Her toenails are crooked and yellow and there are long, fine hairs on her big toes. The sides of her feet are smeared with dust and charcoal but the tops are smooth and shiny, with a big lumpy vein running down the centre of each. Jesse holds her position like this for another ten seconds and then she moves again, running around in circles while Bankstown Plaza stops and watches.

She throws some giant kicks into the air and finally knocks over her camera. I stand as she goes down to the ground, rolling her arms and legs until she finds herself face-flat on the bricks staring into her lens. ‘Yeah, yeah, Bani Adam’s in da house!’

I spin around to find X pointing his camera in my face before he skips past me and approaches two chubby Fobs in baggy T-shirts. ‘Yo, yo, ma brothers!’ he hollers, raising the camera up in their faces. I wonder if those Fobs already know X. He starts to talk at them and though I can’t hear exactly what he’s saying it all seems too casual for him to be a character from a book or a movie. Then again, isn’t Arab X already playing a character, like Malcolm X? Maybe Professor X? I don’t think anybody’s doing this activity the way we were instructed; Jo told us to choose a character from a book or movie or to make one up but X is just being himself and the others are acting like junkies. I point the camera towards X, whose long frame is positioned in front of the two Fobs like a pine tree between two bears, and I make my way towards him.

X moves on and both the Fobs are grinning when they spot me approaching. That’s what I love about Fobs in Bankstown – they don’t take anything too seriously. ‘Yo, brotha rappers, I’m Michael Moore,’ I say putting on an American accent – pronouncing all my Rs like a pirate saying, Argh! ‘Are you men aware that multinational corporations are exploiting you?’

On the garden in the centre of the plaza are three Leb chicks sitting cross-legged. They’re in school uniform, in short-sleeve button-up shirts, two in tight navy-blue pants and the one in the middle in a navy-blue skirt flopped over her crotch. The chicks slant their heads at me as I advance with the camera. The last time I approached a girl this way was two years ago at the Easter Show, except I wasn’t hiding behind a lens. ‘Excuse me, ladies,’ I say in my American

accent, lowering the camera towards the girl in the skirt. Her top button is undone and her collar is up. Her lifeless hair falls from her head and her mascara-filled gaze bats at me from the side monitor. I straighten the camera so that it's perfectly aligned with her long thin nose and thin cleavage.

'Do you know what a corporation is?' The three girls look at each other and giggle like Betty and Wilma from *The Flintstones*. 'Why are you talking like that?' the middle one in the skirt asks. 'Are you from Campbelltown?' Her voice is cute and bubbly and nothing like the other Bankstown girls, who all say *Oh my god* like they are gurgling. I start to wonder if maybe I should break character and get the girl's number when all of a sudden Addison and Abu slouch past, swinging their cameras from side to side. Addison says, 'I just wanna fucken cigarette, mate, gimme a fucken cigarette,' and Abu – who is still topless and turning moist from the torso up – is saying back in a tight nasal voice, 'Get yer own cigarettes, cunt.' Arabs and Indians and Africans and Asians in the plaza watch them as Addison screams, 'What's everyone lookin' at?'

The three Leb chicks in the garden giggle again and I swing the camera back down at the middle one. Her enormous eyelashes flap and she says, 'Aussies, man.' Now she sounds like a typical Lebo.

'They're just acting,' I respond, like she's a dumb cunt.

She rears her plucked eyebrows and says again, 'Yeah, Aussies, man . . .'

*I am the dumb cunt.*

I wander the plaza searching for more interviewees and the whole time I feel the Leb chick in the skirt follow me with her eyes while she shares a cigarette with her friends. It's sad the way Lebs from Wiley Park Girls and Bankstown Girls and Auburn Girls trust Lebs from Punchbowl Boys and Birrong Boys and Belmore Boys. No Leb at Punchbowl ever wanted to marry a girl that put out in high school. Osama used to say it all the time: 'Leb chicks are dumb – they think we're gonna marry 'em but as if I'm gonna marry some Muslim who played with my cock.' Then Mahmoud Mahmoud asked, 'Would you use your wife's arse as a pillow and sleep on it, bro?'

'Every night,' Osama replied.

'Would you let your wife sleep on your arse?' I asked.

And Osama said, 'I'll fart on her head, bro.'

I steer clear of Lebo boys because they remind me of Osama and Mahmoud Mahmoud, and I steer clear of old Wogs because they can't speak English, and I steer clear of old Whities because they don't trust Lebs. Instead I interview two Indian boys in button-up shirts and jeans and two Indian girls in tight, short dresses. 'Are you aware that multinational corporations are exploiting you?' Straightaway one of the boys, in a pink shirt and gelled black hair, looks dead into the eye of the camera and responds, 'Well, basically all this funding goes into generating a consumerist ideology so that half a billion dollars goes into brainwashing people.'

‘Okay, so why aren’t you kids in school?’ I ask. They’re clearly too smart to be the kind of students that truant.

‘Sports carnival,’ says one of the girls.

Next I interview a short, fat Aussie named Dillan who has Down syndrome. His beard is patchy and he tells me he’s thirty but I think he’s lying. A large group of Fobs standing against the railway fence listen in on our conversation, and they make their grins obvious to me as Dillan goes on about being a professional rapper. I ask, ‘Are these guys your friends?’ turning the camera towards them.

‘Yeah,’ replies Dillan.

‘Which one?’ I ask.

Dillan points at a Fob in a Bob Marley T-shirt and says, ‘Him, the fat one.’ Then all the other Fobs belly-laugh at their colossal friend, because only the disabled can get away with such remarks.

I return to the Bankstown Arts Service, where Jesse is lying in front of the entrance, arms above her head, armpithair flaming, camera tucked under her singlet pointing up at her chin from between her breasts. I think she’s attempting to sneak footage of people walking past – maybe she’s trying to make a point about how rich people don’t care about poor people. I could have told her that no one here gives a shit about bums, but these people are poor, not rich, so I don’t really know what she’s actually trying to prove. I consider taking her arm and dragging her out of the way, but I’m scared to touch her. She might have a problem with a Leb putting his hand on her without permission. One time, the Punchbowl Boy nicknamed Eggplant got expelled for deliberately elbowing the boob of a student teacher who was doing her work placement in the Visual-Arts faculty. ‘That’s bullshit, Miss!’ Mahmoud Mahmoud shouted at the head teacher of Art, Mrs Capsi. ‘How can you get expelled for your elbow touching someone’s tits?’ Mrs Capsi exploded, screaming at our entire class, ‘You don’t touch women, do you understand? *You don’t ever touch women!*’

I carefully step over Jesse’s small frame, push open the glass door to the arts service and fall in. Then I keep my camera rolling as I walk up the stairs, watching through the side monitor. I take my time, pressing my feet hard against the yellow wood of each step and forcing them to creak, and I make loud huffs and grunts as I climb, as if I am the size and weight of Michael Moore.

As usual the BTC door is closed and the BMA door is open. I take slow steps through the meeting room, slanting the camera up from the lounge made of dust to the poster of Condoman on the wall. I zoom in on the speech bubble blasting from his mouth, ‘Don’t Be Shame, Be Game’. Then I move through the meeting room towards the office door. Beyond the laminated news headline ‘Arts King Celebrates 20 Years’ is the long, narrow office of Mr Guy Law and Bucky, decorated with little Buddhas and old computers. A bright white light shoots in from the window overlooking the plaza at the other end. This is where Bucky sits – his back arched and

his big head fixed on a monitor. I walk slowly with the camera pointed towards him, the floor creaking like a seesaw with each step I take, but he doesn't turn. He doesn't even flinch. I film his flat hairy stomach and chest through the gaps between the buttons on his shirt. On my monitor the profile of his head keeps expanding until I'm so close that his thick black hair and smooth white skin fill the entire screen. Putting on my American accent, I say, 'Excuse me, sir, are you aware that multinational corporations are exploiting you?'

Bucky's glare remains on the computer screen and he keeps typing. His fingers move rapidly across the keyboard until finally he presses down heavily on the enter key. Suddenly he twists his large head and gawks into the lens of my camera. His eyes are like clumps of silver sand and the hairs between his eyebrows are thickening until he bears a classic Greek monobrow. With a bored tone of voice he says, 'Are you aware that the White people in your development are exploiting you?' Then he turns back to the computer and continues typing, and I am wandering out of his office like a total gronk.