

Typehouse

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Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition. To learn more about us, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

Cover Artwork: *Zainab Iliyasu Bobi (See page 44)*

Front Cover: ***A boy searching for his ancestors' star** - A boy searching for his ancestors' star was captured in Usmanu Danfodiyo University in Sokoto, Nigeria, with a smartphone. How lost the boy looks drove me to capture the moment.*

Back Cover: ***Hawking for a golden fruit** - Hawking for a golden fruit was also captured in Usmanu Danfodiyo University in Sokoto, Nigeria, with a smartphone. I was impressed by how the teenager let go of his pride and tried to make a living .*

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Martins Deep (he/him) is an Urhobo poet living in Kaduna, Nigeria. He is a photographer, digital artist, & currently a student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. He is a recipient of the Brigitte Poirson Poetry Prize (August/September, 2020), Ayamba Lit Cast Poetry Contest, 2020, and in 2021, an awardee in the visual art category of COVID in My City Competition organized by the African Youth Network Movement (AYNM). His most recent works have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Lolwe*, 20.35 Africa: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, FIYAH, Cutbank Literary Journal, Brittle Paper, Barren Magazine, Agbowó Magazine, & elsewhere. He tweets @martinsdeep1.



sister, sister

The imagery here is a portrait of two sisters feeling deeply nostalgic. They have been separated by the scythe of the Grim Reaper, yet must keep in touch via memory. The gulf between them— the grave— disappears, and a playground— filled with petrichor, laughter, & birdsong—comes alive by pattering feet playing in the rain.

Valerie A. Smith speaks on behalf of those who do not have a voice. She earned the MA in Professional Writing at Kennesaw State University and is currently completing the PhD in Poetry at Georgia State University.

The Sugar Shack

Valerie A. Smith

Ernie Barnes, 1971

Ernie says, *Eyes closed.*

Feel this funky bass bottom blue
Big Daddy Rucker on that sway belly sax
Two-Hands Trumpet blowin the air out this joint
Preacher Man got the spirit leaned back on the mic
Ol' Pop Porter sittin by his bottle thinkin on ways
He used to grab them gals by the hips same old news

Sophisticated White Dress sings the blues
Lean in Red Dress lean out breathe
Denim Slacks Derby Hat moan and groan
Not one square foot without an upturned foot
Not one plankboard without a pump
All this brown skin moving brown fingers feeling
All this electric light shining

Bald heads, says Ernie.

Let us be	thinking	skeletal	human	heads high
Let us be	open	&close-	mouthed	ecstasy&existential
Let us be	bountiful	doubleround	bottom	yellow daisy
Let us be	bosom	&blackbone	womb	&man
Let us	take	each	other	one-handed

Ernie says, *All my muscles necessary:*

sinews stretch	&bend past	workworkwork	all weekweekweek
show more of us	&our shirt sleeves	limp with sweat	
snap&tap	rise&dip	&if you can feel it	you know
Fat Mamma up there givin Shady Slim the <i>you know what about it</i>			
& if you don't know what we doin you ain't grown enough to get in			

Celebrate her thighs, Ernie says.

We

Are

The

Black

Arts

Moving

These are the rules on your weekend home from the psych ward:

1. i don't\understand
 how you can be\sad
 for more than one\day

2. back then was simple
no one seemed to hear me\\
screaming

3. my best friend found out\
i am\black

4. that guy only wanted me\for blood
dripping down the hall
head against the mirror\\
whites of his eyes sugaring the dark

5. for a while i\locked\my\doors\a lot

6. how poor was i\then
how poor am i\still
i give you all\i have

7. nothing\but space
to shatter you\\
princess of the tiny box we share

here\where i have the answers for your rage

Friday Faraday (they/them) is a non-binary, Black queer native of Chicago, IL, earning an MFA in English from Southern New Hampshire University. Friday has been published in such publications as The Paragon Journal, Literary Orphans, OUT/CAST, The Nabu Review, and Lucky Jefferson.

Swimming Pool

Friday Faraday

The phone jostles, bright white light awakens the midnight drape bedroom.

Q: Code-847.

KT: Shit...not again. It's the second one this week. Video?

Q: Yeah, the link should pop-up soon.

A shaky thumb hovers — another murder by the cops — not just two in one week but too many to count over a lifetime.

KT pressed the square box in the chat. The video played in the confines of its tiny prison. KT wondered if there was a need to expand it to full size — see it as it was meant to be, but what does voyeurism mean when it's your actual reality.

KT: HOW THEY CONFUSE A SANDWICH FOR A GUN!!!!

Q: The same way they make us the fucking boogeyman because we got melanin. Shit ain't stopping.

KT: ...

Q: U good?

KT played it again. The gunshots were like firecrackers coming out of the speakers of the phone — less jarring for the ears, but not the soul. Neither one could know that the other watched it again, but their hearts stopped simultaneously when seven shots for the second time raged into a black body.

KT: Fuck no...everything's all ramped up. They just want to erase us all and get away with it.

KT: THEY ALWAYS GET AWAY WITH IT.

Q: No body-cams and always “fear for their life.”

KT: Yup...our breathing makes them afraid.

Q: ... I was supposed to do so much shit today, but I couldn't go outside. Too scared, ice in my blood.

KT: I haven't been out since the last one. Had all my stuff delivered.

Q: Mf's want to go protest...

KT: U going????

Q: Idk.

KT: They kill us and make us afraid to stand up.

Q: Big ass circle of history.

KT: What's the fucking answer...I'm tired of slogans...crying...my chest feeling crushed when I walk near a group of white folks, wondering if they gonna do something and call the cops. Wondering if this is the day.

Q: Wondering if I'm gonna catch a bullet for just living while black.

KT: Gotta be calm 24/7.

Q: Can't look like a threat.

KT: Keep those eyes straight ahead, don't make any sudden movements.

Q: Don't be a fucking human being.

KT: Or get lynched.

Q: For all our families to see.

KT: Be that nigga on the news before they cut to a feel good story.

The room grew a chill — almost an unnatural one for a summer night, and it couldn't be cured with ordinary means. KT's eyes looked around the darkened space; window facing an alley so no sky could be seen.

It was the city. No it was the forgotten south side, waiting for the cycle to begin again.

Q: What's the use if nobody believes us when we cry out...cry out just to live.

KT: Just want them to believe us.

Q: Don't want to be a 847.

KT: ...another one just happened.

Ailish Annie James (she/her) is twenty-four years old and from a small town by the sea in North Wales. She's currently far from home and teaching English in a preschool in Japan. When she's not "shh-ing" four-year-olds she's scribbling down stories when she should be studying Japanese.

A Floating World

Ailish Annie James

I am
I am
I am

my hates, my thoughts, my desires

The memory of a coffee shop barista I liked when I was still a spotty hormonal teenager.

the first kiss

She tasted of lipstick,

cigarette smoke

and the subtle hint of peppermint toothpaste.

I am

I am

I am all those nights men gave me money to crawl into their beds.

I am

I am

My world.

I am slowly crumbling.

When I lie next to someone they'd part with something.

I am

u

n

r

a

v

e

l

l

i

n

g

and unravelling s l o w l y each time I take that parted *thing*. ~~I absorb it through my skin.~~
I am

I met Cora when I was in a coffee shop, five in the morning. It was open all night. Normally there would be three or four other people huddled around steaming cups, normally people wearing suits. She approached me that morning, very slowly and gently, and she smiled the whole time I spoke to her.

“What are you doing here so early in the morning?” she asked clutching a paper cup and pulling up the chair opposite me to sit on.

“I could say the same to you.” I said coolly.

Her eyes were a soft blue. Watery and almost transparent. She kept them on me at all times.

Things that happened this early in the morning were on the edge- just before dawn. A dream- as watery as Cora’s eyes, ^{I’d look through the whole scene with a blurred gaze it} was as thin and as fragile as mist.

One touch and it would all fall
apart.
I am

“Are you a call girl?” She whispered.

“are you?”

She chuckled softly, “No I’ve just run away.”

“from what?”

“everything.” She said dramatically.

I gave her a small smile, “aren’t we all running away from everything?”

My answer didn’t amuse her, for a second her smile faded-

~~“I sleep with people for money.”~~

“Sleep?” she questioned.

“Yes, sleep.”

“Why would anyone need someone to sleep with them?”

“Loneliness.”

“I’ll pay you to sleep with me.”

“You can lay beside me and hold my hand.”

“Do you need that?”

“Why else would I be here so ridiculously early in the morning? I can’t sleep”

“If we share a bed. You’ll leave a part of you behind.”

“Yes, my money.”

“I mean you. A part of you.”

“You can have **all** of me if you ask.” She said slowly.

I am

This is my body in parts. I think people would like their parts back.

“You have pieces of others tucked away in your pockets, what’s good about a piece when I’m offering you my entirety?”

“I can’t take it.”

“I think you could.”

“I don’t want that.”

“I’m wondering if you have a choice?”

She could t e l l.

She
where
she
sat.
blonde hair
and
blue eyes

fingered my heartstrings with her words.

She knew
She was tugging
me apart
flicking through the pieces.
I was scared.
For the first time a client was frightening me,
I didn’t think
I could have taken all of her and survived.

“You have too many people, don’t you? You barely know **who you are** any more?”

“And do you? Do you know **who you are**?”

Shrugging she tucked a curl behind her ear.

“That’s our only job on this planet, to know who we are. I’m doing such a bad job that most nights I contemplate my death, I dream it up as if it was a story - I imagine all my family, my friends, my partner at my funeral. I imagine all their reactions, I see my body being bought in, limp and lifeless.”

“How morbid”

“You think so? I think it’s poetic.” I laughed and she smiled.

“I can do tomorrow.” I breathed

“Perfect!”

We agreed on a time and it was set, she would meet me outside the apartment that my boss owned. It was only used to meet clients, a short walk from here. She was very pleased at our arrangement. Before we briefly parted ways she reached out her hand and touched my cheek, my heart fluttered.

even in
our first
encounter Cora
had instead
taken a
part of
me and
she was
immensely satisfied
with her
takings.

The next night. While we were together in the apartment. She asked if she should shed her clothes. I shrugged.

“some people want to.”

I went to the small bathroom that smelt musty and unpleasant to change into my pyjamas. When I came back into the bedroom, she was in an oversized band t-shirt with small shorts.

“How does this work?” I shrugged.

We shared the bed together,
once under the sheets I noticed how small she was

she slipped underneath my arm and held me softly
like she was holding a new-born child.

Cora was as ^{fragile} as porcelain. Fingering her shoulders her body felt
somewhere else. I leaned to turn the lamp off and she nestled into me.
She embodied all of it.

The entire planet in her pale skin.

In the **darkness** I saw **nothing**.

“When I’m this close to you I can hear your heart. It reminds me of how alive
we both are, how terribly alive we are.”

It was in this thick unseeing darkness that the truth revealed itself in flickers
of light, but only when you closed your eyes and watched the insides of your
eyelids move.

“It’s best if we don’t talk for a bit.”

She scoffed, and I offered her my hand to hold. She took it.
“Will I really sleep?”

“I can make you sleep.”

“I won’t pay you if I don’t sleep.”

Breathing hands fingers skin waves gentle streams holding pieces someone
dreaming noises rustling sheets stomach loins heart toes trees thirsty dry lost
lonely nothing nothing nothing thoughts cars work art boyfriend love sex him
her trust tablets pills prescriptions doctor’s music singing softly silk nothing
nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing

the room this time was something like a fancy hotel, fancy chairs, and a fancy king-sized bed, a
window with a view.

Cora was standing looking out of the window with the view and sketching the
scene before her on a small notebook, lakes and mountains. She glanced over
to me and smiled,

“You should pour yourself a drink.”

She gestured to the drink’s cabinet. I nodded but went into the mini fridge and
took out a bottle of water, she eyed me as I twisted the lid and drank a large
mouthful.

“I’ve just had a baileys and ice.” She continued to sketch, and we stood in
silence for what felt like many minutes.

“Is this where you normally do it then?”

“If that’s what you want, you can have sex with me. I can even look like someone else if it helps you. Maybe you’d prefer me to be a man?”

“Do you do it here, so you don’t feel like a prostitute?”

“Sex here is still sex. Men still ejaculate, and I pretend to cum. It’s not much different from the other world.”

“Is that the usual?”

“It depends on the person. Sometimes I just sit here next to someone else.
What would you like to do?”

She shrugged and shut the notebook. “Who knows, I’m amazed I’m even sleeping.” She sat down on the bed and patted the empty spot beside her- I joined her.

“If you had to, would you be able to destroy your everything? Everything you knew about yourself in order to find out who you really are?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have to do that, so it’s irrelevant.”

“Can we have music?”

“What?”

“Music? Can we play some music?”

I remember reaching into my back pocket and fumbling for my phone. I passed it to her. She bit her lip while pressing her fingers against the screen.

She played something I didn’t recognise. It had a heavy beat, there was drums and strange electronic sounds, the voice that sang was slurring seemingly meaningful words.

She stood up and ran her fingers through her dirty blonde hair and began to dance. She had absolutely no control over her body, she just swung her weight around the room, twirling wildly and in her eyes, was a look of madness. I felt that she would easily swallow me whole if I let down my guard even once. The music never seemed to end. She wriggled her hips and stretched her arms above her head. She had no rhythm but with each tilt of her head, shake of her legs, her fingers she was painting a picture.

I sat there trembling.

In her movement she gave me a glimpse of herself.
The section
she would offer to me when the night was through.

If this time is all I had I would take it. There was comfort in her dancing.
“this world floats,” she said to me through her jagged breathes.

“what?”

“This world it’s floating.” She was smiling.

“this is a world of darkness and devils. The underbelly of that apartment we left behind”

“I can’t come here alone.”

“You’re not alone.”

“What type of people do you take here?”

“All sorts of people.”

“Is there anything that brings us all together?”

“Loneliness I suppose. If I had to say anything.”

“Is this really dream?”

“No more a dream than anything else. Let’s call it a dream”

“We can act out them, our dreams that is. You should always do that, act out on your dreams.”

Something rested in my mouth, but I couldn’t verbalise it. It felt real, all those pieces those desperate fingers grasping for meaning.

Who am I?

I wondered if I could ever leave.

Now that I started something if I could ever stop.

Cora danced the rest of the night, I lay on the bed and listened to the music I could never place and occasionally we would share something between us. Only words. Words that I wrung from the pit of my stomach. She chose to paint me slowly. I knew she wasn’t mine, but it felt fucking great when I thought she was.

I awoke around noon the next day, Cora was gone and on the bed, was an envelope with money inside.

Catlin Thomson (she/her) failed the second grade; two children rely on her anyways. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and literary journals including *The Adroit Journal*, *The Penn Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Wraparound South*, and *Radar Poetry*. You can learn more about her writing at www.caitlinthomson.com.

Nine Facts I Rarely Reduce to Words

Catlin Thomson

1. I was taken away from the other children.
The teacher watched me leave,
a burden that was no longer hers.
2. The answer to the question *what is wrong with me*,
is something I learned it at a young age.
3. A childhood friend of my husband's
shakes her head, when she hears
their third-grade teacher thought he had
a disability. *He was always smart*, she says, laughing.
It feels like paper slicing into the skin
at the tip of a finger, not a deep cut, but
a reminder of what a cut feels like.
4. There were always separate classes
for students like me. Sometimes separate
classes are not enough.
5. My mother taught me at home,
and when I tell people this
they think it means we were religious.
6. We were religious.

7. Disabilities are separate from
intelligence, but they are hard to separate,
like the film that clings to the shells
of eggs when you boil them.

8. I have been told that the mistakes
I make while writing, render my opinions less valid.

9. I know the answer
to the question *what is wrong with me*.
You don't have to tell me it again.

Jude-Marie Green (she/her) has edited for *Abyss&Apex*, *Noctem Aeternus*, and *10Flash Quarterly*. She attended *Clarion West*, is a member of *Codex*, and won the *Speculative Literature Foundation's Older Writer's Grant*. Her fiction has been published in *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Colored Lens*, and *Electric Spec*. She has a collection of short fiction, *Glorious Madness*, available on Amazon. Her website is judemarie.wordpress.com.

Stone Soup

Jude-Marie Green

That ridiculous woman approached me again over my daughter's body.

"Raleigh, please, we need your help," she said.

"I'm not a thief," I snapped. I reacted more to her tattered uniform than to her words. How did she deserve the ship's uniform, much-mended though it was? I'd been scrupulously honest and hard-working since being cast outside onto this world. All I rated was undyed linen, passably sewn into a tunic and culottes. The rough cloth irritated my skin as much as the woman's voice rubbed at my conscience.

She murmured quietly, "Of course not, I never thought that."

"I'm a cook," I whispered. "That's what I do best."

"You're a chef," she said. The woman, whose name always escaped me, continued, "You know we represent the people. Those of us on the outside. We're trying to find a way to survive."

My eyes wandered to the hand-stitched badge that decorated the uniform's left shoulder. The ship's name, *Hemingway*, had been picked out and replaced with the words, "Science Lights the Way."

"Yeah, scientists, right," I sneered. "All you so-called scientists didn't save my child's life."

The woman didn't speak. She stood next to me, her hands buried in her pockets, frowning. I resented her damp eyes. What right did she have to cry? She'd failed to cure my daughter. How dare she share my grief now? I laid my head on my daughter's chest and listened to her silent heart. My perfect eight year old child, killed by this world and the ship's indifference.

Even though trees were plentiful outside, even though we could have constructed a coffin for Gaia, I hadn't boxed her body. My friends and I had washed her, then laid her on the shabby sweat-stained sofa for the wake and viewing. Later tonight we would wrap her in a shroud made from her favorite blanket. We'd lay her on the community pyre in a lovely field of this planet's

gray grasses. We'd cremate her body to prevent anyone from digging her up and consuming her. Such things were known to happen here in the woods.

The familiar room was made strange with the presence of so many neighbors. The short whitewashed walls, smoke-stained by my fireplace's clay-pipe chimney, closed in on me.

I grasped Gaia's cold hand, unmindful of the glistening sores. Eight years of built-up immunity had failed her in one short hour. The cascade of symptoms took her consciousness first, a small mercy. In quick order her liver released its store of accumulated poison. Her kidneys rotted. Her skin erupted as the poisons sought to leave her body by the most direct route. The weeping sickness, this was called, and sooner or later everyone outside got it.

From the first meal I'd eaten in this community, pregnant with my child and miserable with fear, to the last meal I prepared for Gaia an hour before her death, this world's treacherous food poisoned us. I'd prepared the meals and nourished her on corrupted nature. I'd known the dangers. I'd killed her.

Friends and strangers flowed around us, touching Gaia's cold forehead or arm to say goodbye. My friend Miguel paused.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "We'll miss her."

His arm bore sores worse than Gaia's, weeping even as he stroked her hair, yet he still lived. I looked away from him, looked down, looked at Gaia's face which would never emerge from its childhood angles.

Voices blurred into a soft murmur as people spoke condolences but my world contained only Gaia and the woman who stood at my elbow, persistent and demanding in her silence. Demanding an answer, demanding my compliance.

"The spaceship will announce a party tomorrow. You're a great chef, they'll ask for you." She spoke without any sarcasm that I could detect.

The hush of the room faded as she spoke, outlining the plan.

"They're having a nanobread feast," she said. "You have to volunteer. You're the last one we've approached, the most important one. Everyone else has already agreed."

"I am not a thief," I said one last time. But I could be.

#

As she predicted, within a day the pretty pink LED words above the spaceship's main entrance winked with a message announcing a banquet and a need for ten workers. They especially needed a cook to make the smells. I fit that category neatly, again as she predicted. With luck, I'd be able to steal the three things she wanted: a plate, a stone, some coal.

The woman swore these three things could change the lives of everyone outside. If her people, her gang of scientists, could reverse-engineer the items, and then manufacture them, then, yes, I suppose our lives would change. We'd defy the weeping sickness. Cheat this world's Mother Nature.

We might even survive. Pretty big ifs, though, especially the one where I succeeded in removing those items from the spaceship.

We couldn't just ask the spaceship for these things. We were all rejects from the spaceship's safety. Of course they knew we would die in the world outside. They sent us out here anyway. One nasty death at a time we obliged.

My friends and I gathered outside the main entrance. They had also pledged to help steal. They waved me up to be first in line. I placed my hand against the cool unbreakable glass.

The stark lobby ended five feet in at a solid plastic wall. Glorious artworks, digitized and enhanced, flashed down the length of the wall, lasting five seconds then gone, replaced by another work. I knew that if I put my hand on the wall, on one of the digitals as it flashed briefly to life, a text description would pop up, along with a voiceover reading the article.

Once I had spent an entire day following the pictures and listening to the articles. My lover, Peter, had joined me that day. Peter knew the old masters' work, memorized the catalog brought along from the home world. Every artist did, even me. But he'd never studied them. The intense emotions evoked by the masters' use of technique and color did not interest him. His specialty involved calm sculpture. Even then, Peter's skill at manipulating nanobread into artistic designs impressed the right people. My lover was destined to be a great nanobread artist.

I pushed the thought of him out of my mind. Right now, I needed to concentrate on the problems ahead of me.

We stood for a long time, waiting in line. My crew killed time by crouching and playing dice, singing old rowdy songs. They were careful not to lean against the spaceship's curving walls which were electrified at night to discourage loitering. Even this late in the morning, they could still be electrified. No reason to take chances.

After mid-day, guards I did not know emerged from the airlock. In space this had been an emergency hatch, inconveniently placed to prevent accidents. Here on land it was at the perfect level.

One of the guards called for me by name.

"Raleigh? Welcome back. You're in. Lady Joanne hoped you'd show up."

I forced a smile. Maybe that was freckle-faced Joanie, a classmate nine years ago.

The guards scowled at us, my crew and I, the only volunteers to show up this time. They grumbled about the lack of choice but allowed all of us into the spaceship. We were shunted away from a wall which gleamed with an ancient impressionist's dream of water lilies.

One after another we stuck our thumbs into the taster, a machine that painlessly extracted a bit of blood then analyzed the chemistry for disease and

nutrition. One after another our stats popped up on displays. The guards scowled theatrically at the results but waved us forward nonetheless.

They herded us into a communal shower. Jets doused us with hot sprays of potable water. First a cleansing shower then disposable uniforms that we would take with us when we were escorted out in the morning. I stole sips of the water as it gushed from the pipe over my head. Others around me did the same. Miguel slurped the water. More got into his mouth than on his skin. Perhaps he thought the clean water would wash away the poisons. Perhaps he was just satisfying his thirst. A small sore wept at the corner of his lips. I turned away.

We had water outside. This planet had plenty of water, fresh, lovely, poisonous water. A creek ran behind our settlement. We strained and cured it before we could safely drink it. The supply was as limited as our chemicals and we never had enough of those. Too often we drank this world's pure poisonous offerings and damned the consequences.

My belly tightened and I stopped drinking.

I wasn't immune. I just hadn't gotten sick yet. The people in the spaceship weren't immune either. They just found a way to circumvent this planet's revenge.

The ship's scientists developed an artificial foodstuff during their experiments with nanotechnology. Charge particles instructed the tiny machines to build complete nutritious food from coal. Or any organic material, but coal was best. Most concentrated. The drawback? This food, nanobread, had all the flavor and texture of unsalted gruel. Artists and scientists together figured out how to keep the nanobread stiff but once the charge particles digested the bread it devolved into wet gray pottage.

They never got the odors right. The organic chemistry of scents somehow ran counter to the electronic programming of the charge particles. The nanobread could smell great and sicken eaters, or smell so disgusting that no one wanted to eat it.

The eye won over the tongue. Artists settled on visually stunning, nutritious nanobread sculptures with no flavor or scent.

That's why the spaceship needed me. I walked into the kitchen, a long narrow space reminiscent of train cars. The artists' stations took up most of the space. The oven and stovetop and the vent hoods stood against the far wall, the wall separating the kitchen from the dining hall.

The crew piled food on the work table, augmenting the offerings already left by the spaceship. Some ship's scientists practiced hydroculture and grew natural foods that they contributed to the kitchen. This food suffered from the same problem as food grown outside: the genes of the vegetables embraced the poisons inherent in this world's soil and water.

Ah, this was a lovely planet that the spaceship stood sealed against. Mostly this world was fine, clean air, quiet beauty. Left-handed chirality,

proteins growing in the wrong direction, were in all the growing things, flora and fauna, and kept us from eating anything here. That of course was the easy answer, the first thing we'd found. But all this world's resources had incompatibilities with human life and not all had been discovered.

Though we did eat the planet's offerings, those of us on the outside, and we suffered for it.

"You have two hours," the guard said.

My lips flirted with a smile. I stared at the pile of foodstuffs, washed and heaped and ready. I touched the crisp greens with my pointer finger and ran my hand over the furred body of the possum. The fruits overwhelmed the other odors with that heavy muskmelon scent.

The crew whispered behind me.

"She's good, I tell ya, she'll make something great for us," and "I had some of her last meal, I still can taste those flavors!" and "I heard she was trained here in the academy."

That last voice was shushed down by the others. They all knew my story. I took a deep breath. The kitchen smelled like bleach and lettuce.

"Country menu," I announced. "Nothing fancy, strong odors. Stew, bread, vegetables. We'll eat well tonight, and there may be some left over, to take home."

I hesitated. We'd have plenty, all right, of food that at the best would sustain us, and at worst would kill us. I closed my eyes and swept the doubts aside. If I accomplished the theft I'd never have to worry about poisoned food again. None of us would.

I spread my hands over the table of goods, not in blessing but in concentration, the way a maestro will ready his hands before conducting a symphony.

"All right," I said. "Let's begin."

My friends puttered about the kitchen helping me with the meal preparations and preparing for their own serving tasks.

I made the bread dough first, using up the last of my scant supply of flour and yeast.

The kitchen supplied a sharp knife for dressing the possum. I skinned the creature then set the pelt aside to serve as a kerchief to hold the inedible bits, bones and such. I'd take those back home for soup stock. No sense wasting it.

The nanobread artists arrived as I disjointed the meat. I recognized Robert, James, and my own Peter.

He ignored me, my so-important Peter. We hadn't spoken in nine years. Had he changed even a trifle since I'd last seen him? Had I changed so much he no longer recognized me? He met my eyes for the briefest moment. He knew me. He turned his back.

The snub hurt. I jabbed a knife at the meat and managed to cut my thumb. Not deep, just bloody.

The three of them staked out counters on the other side of the kitchen, away from us common meal-preparers. They inspected the drawers and pulled out supplies to begin their art. The status of these artists, the most accomplished in the spaceship, indicated how important this party was. At last my too-quiet nerves jangled and I struggled to not think about my reasons for being here.

Their familiar talk, as they inspected the kitchen and split up the chores, relaxed me again. I knew this ritual. After all, I had trained to do this too. I felt at home.

These nanobread artists played against each other like guitars, tuning their collaborative work into perfections suitable for service to the guests.

Robert groused about his task, making the soup sculpture.

“Lady Joanne should have hired John, he’s the best at rock gardens.”

Robert patted out disks of nanobread and surfaced them to look like pristine white sand. He used a miniature metal rake, heated just enough to make the nanobread react, and scored designs into the disks. I stole glances at his work and saw his signature swooping rake lines, concentric circles, paths leading off the bowl. Robert was a genius.

“John makes boulders and shatters off the perfect pieces for the rock gardens,” Robert said.

James snorted. “Yes, he wastes huge amounts of nanobread. With your modest approach you design perfected gardens.”

Peter agreed. “John doesn’t kiss the hem of your ability. Even thinking of him wastes our time.”

Robert glowed under the praise of the artists and renewed his efforts to create the perfect miniature rocks for the gardens.

I wondered what John had done to upset these artists. The top-level artists lived in a suite of compartments. They all knew each other and paid close attention to each other’s works. My earliest memories began in that community. I had trained to be an artist.

My last night in the spaceship, nine years before, I had spent warm and happy in my lover’s arms.

In our bed together, Peter kissed me, a big wet buss that tickled. I laughed and pushed him away. He laughed too.

Nestled against my back, he stroked my skin with slow sweeps of his delicate hands.

“Tell me,” he whispered. “You stole that design.”

I moved against his encircling arms. We fit so well together, same height, same curly hair. Different eyes.

“No, that was my design,” I lied. Help on the final project was forbidden. I hadn’t gotten help, I had found it. The ship’s enormous catalog

had hidden secrets and I knew some of them. Not my work, exactly, but enough mine, I'd thought, to bypass the rules.

"I passed the exam," I said. "I can stay." I moved his hand to a warmer place on my body.

In the morning I woke alone. On the pillow a message from the committee waited.

"... reconsidered ... insufficient artistic ability ... dismissed."

Unfriendly guards, unknown to me, closed the hatch of the spaceship behind me before the midday meal break. My stolen design almost earned me a place as an artist. Instead, I'd been condemned to life—and death—outside.

One of my people, Rafe, brought me back to the present.

"How do you want the potatoes cut?" he said. He tapped my arm.

"Boil them in salt water and mash them with some garlic," I said.

"Nothing subtle tonight, we want some serious stink."

#

Lady Joanne, the hostess, hovered behind the kitchen door peering through the etched-glass pane while we worked. I glanced at her, glanced at the artists, glanced at the cabinets. It was red-headed Joanie, my friend a decade ago. Her reputation depended on how well her chosen artists managed to present the sculptures, and how well the servants performed, and how well the scents of food sharpened her guests' appetites. Her guests, a dozen diners from the leaders of the Hemingway's government, would assess her advancement based on this party. And her success was in our hands.

Robert greeted her.

"Lady Joanne! Come in, get the plates. We're ready to begin."

She ignored the open front cabinet that held stoneware and glasses. She had a key for the locked cabinet, of course, and pulled out a stack of the special ceramic plates. No one moved to help her. She would not have let them. The plates were precious and personal and so very valuable.

She set them next to the sculptures.

"These are very nice. You've followed the theme well." Faint praise I thought, but the artists smiled. Perhaps they were used to her sparseness.

"Who is serving?"

Ana and Rafe stepped forward. They'd done this before; they knew the process.

She set a plate on the sideboard. Robert slid a sculpture onto the plate. Lady Joanne used the vial of charging particles to inoculate the plate. Like that, the dinner was ready to serve.

Ana held the plate from beneath, not from its edges. She went through the kitchen door to set the plate on the dinner table.

Lady Joanne repeated the process with the dozen sculptures, Ana and Rafe carefully handling the plates from below as they took them from kitchen to dining room. None of the sculptures, delicate as they looked, broke or fell.

At the end of the process when all the sculptures had been charged and placed, the artists sighed with relief.

“Who is ringing the bell?” Lady Joanne asked the artists.

They looked around at each other, coming to a decision.

“Robert hasn’t done the honors in a while,” James said finally. Lady Joanne nodded.

We weren’t allowed to eat the nanobread sculptures, of course. We the service staff, that is. The artists would take the first taste at the head of the banquet table. After one of them rang the bell.

Robert stood next to the crystal xylophone, strategically placed on a buffet near the dining table. His tongue poked from the corner of his mouth as he concentrated on the different stones suspended from the copper frame. He grasped the silver mallet and tapped the long amethyst stone into the first note of the dinner carillon.

At the sound of the crystalline chimes, the guests placed their fingers on their plates’ depressions. The sculptures colored from the base upwards. The nanobread radiated heat that warmed the diners’ fingers and brought flushes to their faces. I heard some nervous giggling, but mostly the dining table was quiet as the sculptures started to melt. In a short time, the lovely artworks puddled into the plates.

I pulled away from the kitchen door’s window and returned to the food bubbling away on the stoves. I set the first course of food, curried steamed vegetables, under the vent hoods. The steam flowed into the dining hall and dispersed around the table. Nostrils flared at the thick odor of spiced cooked meat and tender aromatic vegetables. The guests dug into the gruel, fueled into an appetite by the scents of my cooking.

I didn’t notice that Peter, rather than sitting next to an honored guest, had returned to the kitchen, until he touched my shoulder.

I dropped a spoon into the stew. Some of it splashed onto my hand. I raised my finger to my mouth and licked it clean.

My crew bustled from the kitchen to the dining room. They cast nervous glances at Peter and me. Strange enough for an artist to talk with an outsider, but if I was late placing food under the vents, we’d all be punished.

I put the fresh-cut loaf of dark bread weeping golden butter under a vent hood.

“I’m allowed an assistant,” he said.

So what, I thought. I stirred the stew, agitated the steamed vegetables.

“You didn’t have to leave,” he said.

That’s not what the guards had said, I thought. I adjusted a bowl, wiped the counter with a towel.

“Why haven’t you been back?” he said. He put his hand on my shoulder. I shrugged him off.

“Our last night together we made a child,” I said.

His eyes lit with joy. His hazel eyes, so different from mine. Gaia's eyes. I could almost hear the dreams in his mind.

"Her name was Gaia. She was a splendid artist." I smiled. "Though not much of a cook." I eyed him. "We don't have much to work with. Maybe you could help?"

He put a hand on the counter and shifted away from me.

"I would like to see her."

The words, the way he stood suddenly, tighter, taller, let me know he would kidnap her into the ship. And a wave of horror slashed through my body, freezing every atom. A thought that had never occurred to me in nine years. What if I had brought her to him, to the ship, any time before the disease erupted? Their science could not cure the disease but it would not have developed with the ship's clean food. She might have thrived.

In my selfishness I'd never considered the option.

He grew impatient with waiting.

"Where is she?"

I hated him so much. He had turned me in, arranged my removal. Condemned me to death. And instead his own daughter had died.

"The weeping sickness. Three days ago."

I cut open a strawberry and pulped its flesh with my thumb. The vent hood sucked the scent away.

Peter shrank away from me. I caught his eye before he turned away. Contempt. All I saw was his disgust about a situation he arranged. And his back as he left the kitchen.

I wanted to follow him, tell him everything I'd held in for so long, share the stories of our child, her beauty and playfulness. But I didn't. It was too late.

I breathed deeply. No tears, damn it. I had a job to do.

"Rafe," I said. "Talk to me."

"I paid attention to the plates," he said. "They're very plain, no designs painted on them, standard size." He held out his hands in a circular diameter, ten inches across. I nodded.

Lady Joanne's lack of imagination made my task easier.

Ana shook her head. "The plates are thicker than standard, and there's a design etched on the edges," she said. "I made a copy." She gave me a square of tissue stained with a brown sauce. I examined the stain. It spelled out the first line of an ancient poem. "Women whose lives are food, breaking the eggs with care." I knew it, of course.

"Good job," I said. "Now, back to work, quick."

I modeled a mock plate out of salt and plastic and vegetable dyes. Fear of being caught at this made my hands tremble, and I had to redo my effort once when the kitchen door opened unexpectedly: just a guest using the

wrong exit. The second mock shaped up and I placed it in the oven, safe from prying eyes, so it would harden and glaze.

The crew worked steadily to clean the dining hall. They scrubbed the plates and stacked them on the counter. Maru slid a cleaned plate into the pot of stew I'd left on the stove. Ana, hands deep in a sink full of wash water, pulled the mock plate up out of the suds. Rafe added the mock to the stack of true plates on the counter. The next cleaned plate covered the mock. Soon it was hidden.

Lady Joanne counted the plates, of course, but she didn't examine them. When the mock was discovered, she'd be dismissed. Kicked outside, just like I had been. We'd need to be ready to welcome her into our life.

#

My crew slept in a spare room near the showers. Unable to sleep, I slipped through the corridor to the kitchen. Being in the kitchen off-hours was only a minor infraction. For me, perhaps not an infraction at all. I poured a glass of juice and warmed up a slice of bread.

The boy shoved the door open and stepped through. He stood taller than my daughter had been but not as tall as me. He put his hands on his hips and wrinkled his nose.

"That smells very good," he said. "I'm hungry. Feed me." Imperative words, but delivered sweetly, as if he thought I'd deny him. I stared at him. My expression might have scared an older child. A younger child wouldn't have trespassed into the kitchen. This child was the perfect age, the age my Gaia would be forever.

"Feed me," he said again.

Privilege, I thought, and custom. He expected to be obeyed.

I hesitated. The smell of a bowl of warm stew woke the senses, slapped the brain into reaction, stimulated the appetite. Hot buttered bread satisfied the mouth and filled the stomach, filled the place in the ancient drive to assure food, clothing, shelter, the most important being food.

I started the burner under the pot of stew and collected a common stoneware bowl from the shelf.

The boy stood quietly by the butcher block table, waiting. One bowl couldn't hurt him. I ladled some stew, brimming with chunks of meat and carrots and thick gravy, into the bowl. Perhaps he'd gain an appreciation for wild natural food. Perhaps he'd spend his life sneaking meals of true food. Someday he might pay the penalty and explode with the weeping sickness, but of course that wasn't certain. For now, he'd just consume a satisfying meal.

It wasn't my responsibility.

I stopped, the bowl inches from his hands. Yes, of course it was my responsibility.

I emptied the bowl of stew back into the pot and folded my arms.

"No."

The boy's mouth dropped open. After a stunned moment he screamed. He fell to the kitchen floor and kicked with his heels and pounded with his fists.

I'd forgotten that children in the throes of temper tantrums could make that much noise. I grimaced and put my hands over my ears.

"Shut up," I yelled.

I should have known that the yelling would bring people into the kitchen. The crew stumbled into the kitchen, owl-eyed and scared. Then the door slammed opened and Lady Joanne darted in, switching on the light as she entered.

"What is happening here?" she shouted.

I pointed to the boy.

"Stop that!" She shook the boy's shoulder. He quieted immediately.

"What happened?" She wasn't talking to me.

"She won't feed me!"

Lady Joanne's face turned pale.

"What? Were you giving that filth to my child?" This time she was talking to me.

"No, of course not," I said.

Lady Joanne saw the dirty bowl I'd just emptied. She picked it up, careful not to touch the rim of food. Her face turned even more pale.

"You fed him this?" She stood over the stewpot.

"No," I said again.

She dashed the stewpot to the floor.

I gasped.

"That's our food, it's all we have!" I said. I bent to collect the pot before it spilled our secrets.

"No! It's filth!" she screamed, then kicked the pot across the kitchen.

She probably did not recognize the nanobread stone that landed in a puddle of stew. The tube of charge particles could pass for a pale root. She may not have realized what it was. But the plate spun out and rolled to a clattering stop at the woman's feet.

The panic drained from her face. She didn't reach for the plate. Instead, she held my eyes with her stare.

"Out," she said. "All of you. Out of here now."

She sent the boy to fetch the guards while the crew dressed. She wouldn't let us touch anything in the kitchen.

The guards escorted us through the corridors of the spaceship, a forced march that we made with an unnerving lack of conversation. Our footsteps rattled in the silence.

The guards opened the hatchway. My friends exited but the guards held me back. I couldn't see my friends in the darkness outside.

“Raleigh,” one guard said, the same man who had greeted me. “Here.” He flung a pack at me. “From Peter. He said to give it to you in the morning. He said to send him a picture of the child.”

“Have someone else bring it,” the other guard said, “Don’t come back.”

#

The woman, still nameless to me, waited in my kitchen, seated at my table. She may have not moved in the last twenty-four hours. A half-filled cup of water sat before her on the table. She stared at the cup as if she could see her future in the transparent depths.

I settled into the chair across from her and started laughing. After a moment she joined in.

“So?” She leaned forward.

“Your plan worked perfectly until we were discovered. The guards tossed us out like the trash we are.” I laughed again.

Her face took on hard contemptuous lines, much like Lady Joanne in the spaceship’s kitchen.

“You failed, then.” She pushed back from the table with so much force that the cup of water overturned, spilling onto the floor.

I laughed again. “Oh, relax.”

I swung the pack Peter had given me onto the table.

The parcel opened under my gentle tugging. I found an artist’s palette, caked with dried oil, a small canvas with the work in progress roughed in and partially painted, and tubes of oil pigments. The unfinished portrait was of me, when I had longer hair. I smiled in the portrait and echoed that smile in real life.

The paint-daubed paper cover slipped off the palette in one piece. It revealed the plate, older in style than the one I tried to steal but functional, I was certain.

“I bet you scientists know how to filter the nanobread out of the oil,” I said, indicating the tubes. “You’ll probably find the charge particles in this picture, suspended in the dried paint.” I hated to give up the portrait. Peter had never drawn me while we were together. I loved my reflection in his eyes.

The woman sputtered a bit then sat back down. The art supplies remained within arm’s reach but she didn’t grab for them.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Before I tell you,” I said, “I want to ask you. I want to join your group, you scientists.” I licked my lips. “How can I help?”

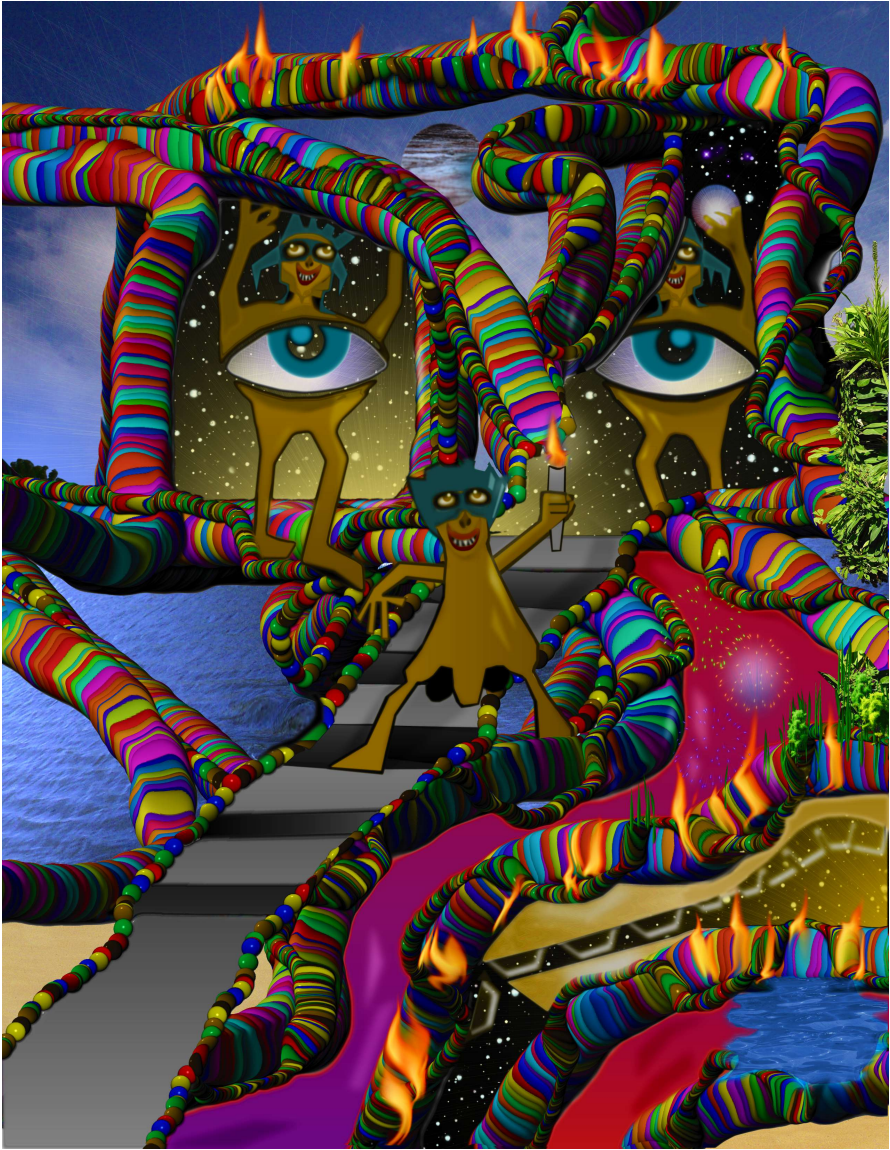
The woman’s eyes narrowed, calculating, assessing, exposing my flaws. But what of my strengths: art, cooking? Not much but surely I could help somehow.

“If you’ll have me.”

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published. One recent credit is the cover in *Society Of Misfit Stories* June 2021. See more at www.dennymarshall.com.



Robot Telescope



Isle of Dream Spirits

Heavenly but Earthbound

Henry Cherry

My body is a homemade dress
Saved from freefall by
Two clothespins and a long
Elasticized line.

The wind, the chives, the
Basil planted below
Make for a well patterned
Inheritance of will,

Where slender movements
Prick at blotched skin
Where youth looses the latch
On the window screen and is gone

Into the wavering swarm
Of identity that
Perfects the present tense
Unleashing specters of then

On the fearfulness of the future.
I am a rag, a silken strand,
A hemmed seam waiting
To fold against unprotected skin.

Stalled by humidity,
Cares discarded like
Plastic cups of beer.
This now is cloth.

All knowledge, thread.
All paradox, embroidery.
Each kiss an alteration.
All sound, a color.

Wrinkled breath of air
Lazily hibernating
In thermometer mercury,
Heavenly, but earthbound.

Danielle Davies (she/her) is a freelance writer with a degree from Villanova University. She lives with her husband, two children, and two dogs in South Jersey.

Last

Danielle Davies

The first chicken we ever had was a runaway.

Her previous home was in a chicken coop built by my next-door neighbor. A man's man with a penchant for showing off his handyman skills, he built the coop after rescuing this chicken and her sisters from a truly awful man my husband knew. When my neighbor heard about the mistreatment of the chickens—neglect really, the way horrible men neglect things they are supposed to be caring for—he piped in.

"I'll take 'em," he said.

He wasn't being altruistic. Rather, it was the hunter/gatherer in him. The chickens produced eggs. The man ate eggs. It was a matter of practicality.

My husband helped him get the chickens, drove them to the back of the neighbors yard, and watched with an earnest smile on his face as the chickens acclimated to their new space. He saw the chickens every day—he drives a big rig that he parked right near that chicken coop—and every day he would tell us tales of their antics.

The red one was chasing the yellow one today.

Or

The spotted one laid two eggs.

Our children occasionally visited the coop too, despite having to walk through the woods and wave away cobwebs.

"I'm naming this one Michonne," my son said, owing to his fascination with *The Walking Dead*.

"This one is Chickadee," said my daughter, not wanting to be outdone.

So that's what we called them. Our neighbor never gave them any names.

The chickens were more than a backyard spectacle—they were food. The neighbor's wife made it her mission to pamper us with eggs, perhaps out of a sense of obligation. These were eight healthy, laying hens we had helped them get, after all. While they could have been purchased for less than twenty dollars as chicks, our neighbors got to avoid all the work that goes into raising them from infancy. A real bargain.

We were happy to eat the eggs, and eat them we did. Scrambled, fried, hard-boiled, in salads and on sandwiches. It was our ongoing connection to the chickens, which were not ours but not entirely out of our minds.

Eventually, the chickens began to die.

Two neighborhood Jack Russell terriers climbed the chain-link fence—they're amazing climbers—and got into a breach in the coop, killing a number of the girls.

Another one disappeared completely.

The neighbor was nonplussed.

"It's nature," he said, though I believe he was frustrated that something was besting him.

My husband went over and fixed the breach. He told us more stories.

They're scared now.

And

They hide whenever they hear anything.

Eventually, the neighbor was down to two chickens. Michonne and Chickadee long gone.

The chickens, however, had stopped laying eggs.

When my husband came home and told us that the neighbor stopped feeding the remaining chickens, that he had left the gate to the coop open so the chickens could just fend for themselves, we were furious. He explained to my husband that he couldn't justify paying to feed something that wasn't feeding him. He was practical, but seemed cold. While our hearts bled.

Again, my husband came home with stories.

I saw one of them near that mound of dirt where I used to dump the lawn clippings.

And

There's a hawk circling out there.

One day, one of the chickens made it to our front yard. My son, then nine, saw her instantly for what she was...unwanted and alone.

I told him to let her be. She didn't belong to us. He named her anyway: Happy Pappy.

Another neighbor also made sightings. Her son had his own name for the chicken. He called her Beatrice.

After a few days of this, my son could take it no more.

He ran out the front door and shooed her into our fenced backyard. He shooed her into his little playhouse. She made no attempt to leave.

That afternoon, she laid an egg.

She was a runaway foster chicken, being moved from place to place without ever really finding a home, and we were the newest in a line of potential parents, willing to give it a go.

The neighbor said he didn't care if we kept her, so we did.

My husband built a coop around the playhouse. My children checked on her every day. We never found out what happened to her last coop mate out there in the woods, but we assume she was eaten by something. Unless she was adopted by another family like ours.

We called the chicken Happy Pappy Beatrice, all the names we knew she had. We had no idea what her first name might have been, or if she ever had a name at all.

She laid eggs almost every day. We never told that to the neighbor.

Within a few weeks, we figured we should get her some friends.

Chickens are social. So we did our research and ordered six baby chicks from a hatchery—two Barred Plymouth Rocks, two Rhode Island Reds, and two Buff Orpingtons—and were thrilled when we picked them up at the post office that all six were still alive and cheeping. We also found out Happy Pappy Beatrice was called a Speckled Sussex Chicken.

The six little chicks were all named: Alpha, Bravo, Rosie, Elvis, Piggy and Macaroon. We could not wait to introduce them to their big sister, Happy Pappy Beatrice. Alone as she was, we assumed she would revel in the company.

One can never know how people feel about sharing space with strangers, or even family, and it turns out, the same can be said for chickens.

Once the chicks were big enough—a process that takes weeks and weeks of heat lamps and special food and lots of cleaning chicken poop—we introduced them to Happy.

She was not impressed.

She chased them. Screamed at them. Took their food. Bossed them around. In short, she treated them like a mean big sister, one who was used to being an only child and did not care for company.

As the chicks got bigger, they overtook Happy. They were young, vibrant, and a flock. She had no choice but to acclimate.

But like all things Happy Pappy Beatrice, she did it her way.

Chicken behavior is at the root of so much of human language and description. Pecking order. Ruling the roost. Being chicken. And all of these idioms related to Happy.

She was the mean hen, top of the pecking order, ruling the roost with her iron beak. The other chickens, next to her, were chicken. Afraid. Though they were big enough and united enough to exist with her, it was never harmonious.

We grew to hate her.

She pecked us. Stole the treats. She was afraid of nothing, and that made us a little afraid of her.

Unlike the rest of the chickens, she wouldn't let us hold her, not that we would have wanted to. Her tail feathers had residual chicken poop on them and it seemed like she liked it. She flaunted her filth.

We didn't like her. We comforted ourselves by the fact that we were her third known owners and that she could not live forever. Like all things, chickens die.

And chickens did die. First Rosie and Elvis, who were attacked within weeks of each other by a hawk. My daughter had a funeral and read a eulogy while standing on a tree stump in her little black dress coat, tears streaming down her face.

The next year we said goodbye to Alpha, who was murdered by a raccoon. Alpha was unceremoniously buried.

The following summer, we walked over to the coop to see Piggy hanging upside down, dead from a tree branch we had put in the corner of the coop for them to have some outside seating. She had been a friendly Barred Plymouth Rock. My husband and I were sad, but our kids shrugged.

"It's the circle of life," they said.

Only Macaroon, Bravo, and Happy Pappy—who was not remotely happy—remained. It was bizarre to us that Happy Pappy could still be alive, outliving these chickens that had been protected and fed all their lives, which had youth and vitality on their side. This chicken had lived in the woods for days at one point . . . we began to see her as resilient. A bitch yes, but a resilient bitch nonetheless.

This past spring, I went to the chicken coop to find only two chickens, Happy Pappy and Bravo.

Macaroon had flown the coop.

We looked for her in the woods. We looked for hawks, who might have been feeding on her remains, but never found a thing.

Our theory was that she could no longer tolerate living with Happy. She'd rather take her chances in the wild.

Our last nice chicken was Bravo, who was the most chicken of all the chickens. How she managed the horror of living with Happy Pappy we'll never know, but she managed. She was the peacekeeper. When Happy Pappy wanted the watermelon, or the fruit cup, or the tortilla chips we brought out, Bravo conceded. When Happy Pappy wanted a certain laying box, Bravo conceded. She did nothing to ruffle Happy's feathers.

Then Bravo got sick. I saw her stumbling around the coop and then staying perfectly still for periods of time.

Chickens are at risk from other chickens when they are weak or bleeding, so we paid special attention. We didn't want Happy Pappy to hurt Bravo, though part of us hoped this was when she would prove us wrong with some hidden, surprising, maternal kindness.

She did not.

When we went in the coop to lift up Bravo and check her belly, Happy Pappy attacked.

When we tried to take Bravo out of the coop, Happy Pappy attacked.

Our daughter screamed, “You bitch!”

No one corrected her.

We brought Bravo into the porch, put her in a dog crate, and hand fed her for days. On the mend, we put her back in the coop.

The next day, we found her dead, her belly torn open and feathers everywhere.

At first, we thought Happy Pappy might have killed her, so intent we were to hate our ungrateful, mean, and ancient chicken.

Later my husband found a breach in the coop and repaired it. Even though we believe something else killed Bravo, it doesn’t lessen our rage at Happy Pappy.

And yet,

She is now, all these years later, our only chicken.

We still give her food, water, and treats. She still lays us eggs.

Lately, I’ve taken to calling her endearing terms.

How’s my strong girl?

Or

There’s our resilient lady.

We have wondered if she may be hundreds of years old, outliving flocks and families across the state, somehow continuing to survive. To thrive.

Happy Pappy lets me pet her now. It’s just the two of us, my children having lost interest years ago. I bring her watermelon and she shakes her tail feathers like she’s annoyed but she takes the treat and stands nearby and lets me stroke her back.

Ours is an uneasy truce. She is always ready to take flight, as am I. The trust we have built is fragile. And I am not certain that I even like her.

But we are in this for keeps now. Unless she outlives me—which isn’t out of the question—this will be Happy Pappy’s last home. We have a relationship built on my admiration for her. She is strong and resilient and a survivor.

She is the last.

How could I not be in awe of that?

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We Only Speak Well of the Dead

Lisa Mottolo

My mother was a pond of shade,
a green and grey, like the blur of a chalkboard

to a kid without glasses.
She knew the big cows we saw on trips

I did not actually see.
She knew I pushed my face up against the car window,

trying to read the street signs.
My nerves grow into a flaming, flying yellow,

like I am a flock of burning canaries
when I think of everything I was supposed to learn

and didn't, but I can't tell you this story
because we only speak well of the dead.

YJ has previously been published in Sci-Fi Lampoon. She lives on the East Coast with her wife, their cat, and their dog. You can find more of her writing at <https://yjjun-reads.medium.com>.

Where We're From

YJ Jun

Garlic. Cabbage. Onion. Salt. Red chili flakes. My hands turn bright red as I mix the ingredients for kimchi, my mother and the other camp ladies doing the same. We squat in the hard-packed dirt outside our tents, preparing it all for the final ingredient: time.

The ladies lift a heavy metal lid off the ground. I pinch my nose, but the stink bites my tongue as I breathe through my mouth. The ladies frown and wrap another tattered bag around the beaten metal containers before burying them.

Mother tells me she used to season kimchi with tiny shrimp. “Too bad they stopped importing that into America.” I ask her what shrimp are. I ask her why the Nice Men can’t bring her some, the way they bring us the other ingredients for a lock of hair, or a used sock, or whatever else the ladies are selling. She sighs and turns away.

#

When the kimchi is ready, we pass it around in stolen bowls, behind the Devils’ backs, so that they can pretend they can’t see us.

Mother says we are lucky. In some camps they have no bowls. In others they barely have food.

A smile blooms across each face as the kimchi makes its way through the Yellow Camp. The Filipinos make great crunching sounds as they chew the spicy, pickled vegetable, grinning as if they were enjoying their own national food. Mother tells me kimchi used to last for days, when we could store it in large metal boxes that kept it cool. Now we eat it as soon as it is ready, before fermentation makes it unbearable.

Mother says the guards are White Devils, but that some of them are Nice. Some of them even like kimchi and will take little bites, hand-fed to them by mothers when the other Devils aren’t looking. Most of them are Bad; some of them are Very Bad. The women smear too-ripened kimchi on their necks and thighs to ward them off. Some of them daub their children, too. It seems to work. Bad Men sniff loudly and step away whenever we pass, but I still hear screaming sometimes at night.

#

We have neighbors outside the fence. They look like White Devils but younger, or rounder, or grayer. The ones who used to talk to us are in their own Camp, Mother tells me. The ones who pass by now mostly draw away when we approach. Some of them run up to the fence screaming and hurling rocks or spitting.

The guards have stopped shoos us away from the fence. They no longer have to, because we know we must not speak. “The last time someone spoke beyond the fence,” Father says, “I realized how much we are made of blood.” He tells Mother, when he thinks I’m not around, that he still dreams of the spillage that night, the red against the orange dirt.

#

I used to ask my parents, “Why are we here?”

“The people out there, the guards that we call Devils, they’re all just doing what they think is best for their families. For their sisters and their brothers, their mothers and fathers. For their sweet little children,” Father would say as he stroked my hair.

Mother only ever gave one answer. “They put us in here because they don’t know how to share.”

#

Some evenings, while the guards are changing posts, The Lady stops by to feed me. She brings a boy with her, a head taller than me. He has a nose, like I do, and two ears like mine. But his limbs are thin, his cheekbones like razors, and his hands like stones, balled up and tucked away. When he reaches up to fix his cap, I can see his hands are like my father’s—his fingers long and skinny, knuckles too big for the bones they connect, just like his knees.

His eyes, though, feel foreign: hooded, dark, sunken into his face, and always, *always* narrowed. I try to smile, close-lipped, but he won’t stop staring at me the way Bad Man do, like they’re waiting for me to trip or slow down the food line. I ask my mother if our eyes can shape the way we view the world. “Maybe everything looks big and scary to him, because his eyes are so far back into his head,” I say.

She won’t look at me when she answers. “Maybe the way he sees the world changes the shape of his eyes.” She won’t answer when I ask her to explain.

#

I like to watch the kimchi with my arms around my knees. From above ground I can only see the unmoving face of the metal lid, but underneath, I imagine bundles of cabbage nestled inside their dark containers, sighing as they dream, their breath bubbling and consuming them, turning them sour and acidic, more resilient than what went into the ground.

Children have gotten in trouble for digging up the containers before the kimchi was ready. Children like me. “How do we know it takes that

long?” Mother huffed as she dragged the metal lid; it landed shut with a dull ring.

“You must *wait*,” she told me.

“But why?”

“Because that is what Koreans do. We bury things and we wait. Everything has its time.” Her voice trailed off as her shoulders slumped. “We must have faith.”

I followed her gaze down the rows of white tents, towards the sun setting behind the towering fence.

“What if we wait too long?”

She was silent so long I wondered if I had asked the question out loud. Then she huffed and straightened her back. “Then don’t wait too long.”

#

The camp ladies crow as they gnaw: “Our best batch in months.” Fathers kiss their proud wives. The kimchi passes from Koreans to Filipinos, from the Chinese to Laotians, to the Japanese who used to keep Koreans in Korea in camps and who used to be kept in camps here in America.

They don’t know how to share. But that doesn’t seem right. The Lady, after all, brings me crackers. The boy, though he never hands me anything, shares his time. When the kimchi reaches my bowl, the riddle solves itself. It takes two to share.

I try to ignore Mother’s gaze when I take an extra pinch. She sighs when I don’t eat, but hands me an old plastic bag she found caught on the outside of the fence last week. “Don’t be too disappointed if they don’t like it,” she says.

The bag crinkled in my hands. “Don’t worry, umma. They’re my friends.”

#

The Lady doesn’t come that night so I have to wait. Mother helps me hide it somewhere cool, to prevent it from fermenting more. “The smell is already too strong for most foreigners,” she says.

As the sun begins to set, the Lady and the boy approach the fence. I twirl a loose piece of plastic between my fingers as I step towards them.

Staring at his narrowed eyes, I realize maybe he just has to squint to see properly, or maybe his eyes are so big he has to keep them half-shut to keep out all the dust. I smile, teeth showing, and wave. He scoffs and looks away.

“She smells like *shit*,” he says.

His mother smiles sympathetically. “That’s just how her people smell.”

My head rings with their words but I try to smile. My mouth feels dry, but I push through, trying to be as brave as the Lady who brings me snacks. I check again for guards. “Here, have some kimchi.”

They stare at me, mouths open. Mother says that sometimes they forget we speak English.

“What?”

“Kimchi. It’s our national dish.” The plastic seems to shiver as I unwrap the bowl. “We make it here, inside the camp. The White Devils help us collect the ingredients—” I wonder if I shouldn’t have used the term “White Devil” in front of them. I hold out the bowl, with one hand cupped around the opposite elbow in a sign of respect. The widest part of the metal brim just barely fits between the bars.

“Oh god, what the *fuck* is that?” The Boy squints harder as his mouth stretches open, like someone’s pulling apart both sides of his face. “It smells like *death*.” He grips his nose as he groans, sputtering and spewing as if it’s already in his mouth.

Then, something happens. I mistake it for heaving at first. Water starts to leak from the corner of his eyes. “The White Devils can’t handle spice,” Mother always tells me. Some of the Good Men had nearly choked when they first tried it.

Then, his mouth tears apart; his tongue lolls out. He doubles over—he’s laughing.

“This is *horrible*.” His hand darts; kimchi splatters to the ground.

The stain glows angry red against the orange dirt. My hands feel heavy; my shoulders, too. My chest feels heavy. My head feels heavy. I could scoop up the kimchi and eat it still, but even as my body drags me down, my legs seem too numb to kneel.

I stare after his lanky frame; his mother wraps an arm around his shoulder, and he hugs her back. They erupt in laughter, loud and sharp. He starts to turn his head but snaps back around when he sees me staring.

With the smell of death crawling into my nose, I imagine them across the fence, their faces kind and curious.

I came from here, I want to say, same as you.

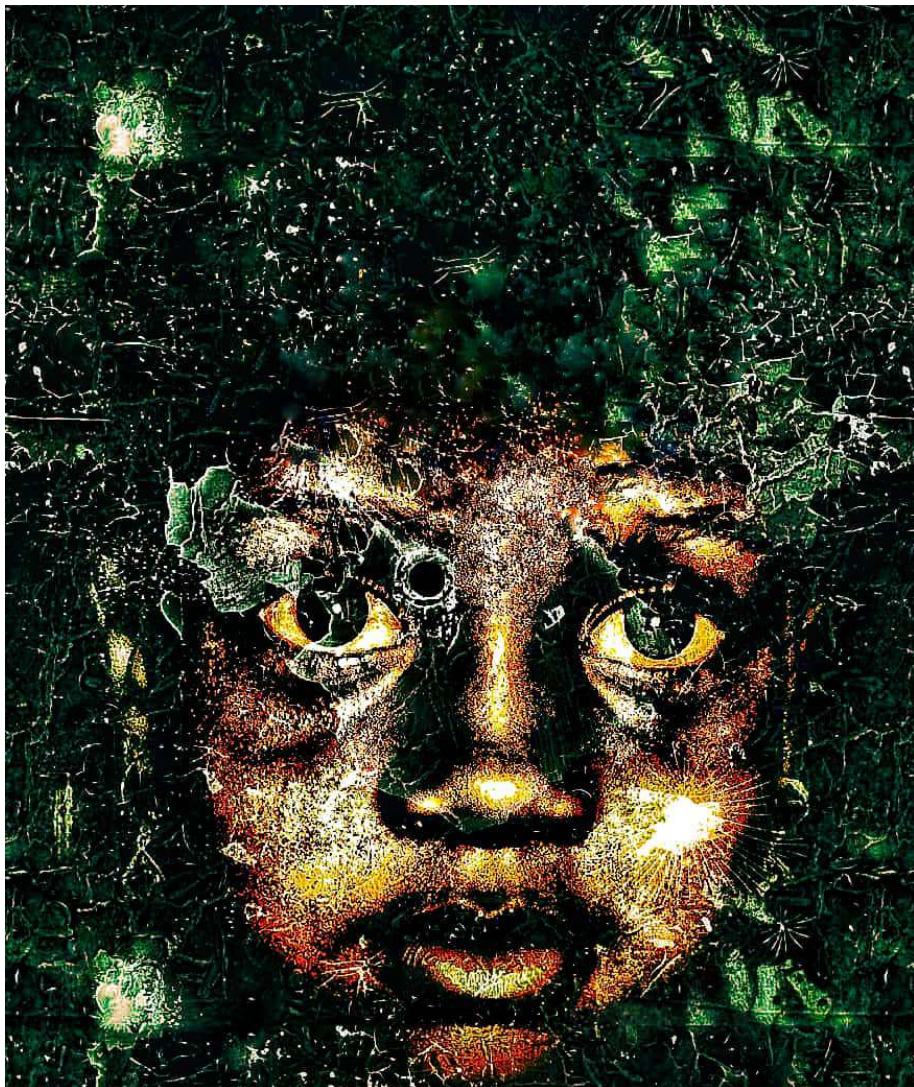
The only thing that separates us is a fence.

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Strike of fear

I created and titled this artwork 'Strike of fear' to show a little bit of what women are facing nowadays. How they clutch on fear like a handbag at home, at their working places, on the street, and any other place where they don't feel safe.



Mace

Mace means 'Woman' in Hausa language. The picture is of a little girl whose eyes quest for answers the same way a woman strive to be heard.

***Marcy Dilworth** (she/her) lives in Virginia with her husband where they serve their precocious rescue pup, Kirby. Her fiction is forthcoming or published in FlashFlood Journal, Janus Literary, the This is What America Looks Like anthology by the Washington Writers' Publishing House, Blink-Ink, and elsewhere. You can follow her on Twitter @MarcyDilworth.*

Excerpt from the Glossary of The Department of Defense Conflict Manual, 1969 – Dwayne's Version

Marcy Dilworth

Danger. Items to which those Drafted may be exposed: bayonets, biological weapons, blades (dagger, knife, sword, etc.), bombs, bullets, disease, dysentery, “friendly fire,” landmines, lethal gas, missiles, PTSD. ⁽¹⁾ See *Death, Duncan*.

Data Analyst. Professional in a secure, suburban office whose mission, as established by those in command and for their benefit, is to configure data to demonstrate that war is essential, an unequivocal national duty.

Death. An irreparable outcome of war. See *Danger, Demise, Duncan*.

Deferment. The optimal defense against Danger and Death; difficult to obtain without substantial familial assets and/or influential connections.

Demise. Preferred and ostensibly less distressing term for Death when corresponding with next of kin, aka loved ones. See *Duncan*.

Draft. A chill that slips in through the mailbox and engenders great fear in men (boys) of a certain age. Supported by findings of Data Analyst. Note: Data Analyst is never subject to Draft. See *Duncan*.

Draftee. A young man, a son, issued a governmental summons to execute said government's war while subjecting himself to Danger, Death. May circumvent summons with Deferment. See *Duncan*.

Draft Dodger. To outrun Danger and Death, a Draftee becomes a Draft Dodger by fleeing the country and hiding from its government for an indeterminate period. ⁽²⁾

Duncan. Dwayne and Deb's dear, devoted, deceased son. See *Danger*, *Death*, *Demise* (exactly as devastating as *Death*), *Draft*, *Draftee*.

Dwayne. Duncan's dad. Despairs that he couldn't afford to save his son, see *Deferment*. Disgusted with himself for not encouraging Duncan to depart for Canada, see *Draft Dodger*. See *Duncan*. If only.

⁽¹⁾ List not comprehensive.

⁽²⁾ No guarantees that *Draft Dodger* status will eliminate the risks of *Danger*, *Death*.

*Seven-time Pushcart Prize nominee **Russell Rowland** writes from New Hampshire's Lakes Region, where he has judged high-school Poetry Out Loud competitions. His work appears in Except for Love: New England Poets Inspired by Donald Hall (Encircle Publications) and Covid Spring, Vol. 2 (Hobblebush Books). His latest poetry book, Wooden Nutmegs, is available from Encircle Publications.*

Crow, Sparrow

Russell Rowland

A crow fought the wind today
up in the Ossipees where I was walking.
But that wind held him like string

holds a kite. Made a still photo
of a crow out of him, in its willfulness.
I could count feathers overhead.

The crow either found a way
against it, or else made different plans,
involving the opposite direction.

When Mary said she was moving
to Texas, where she has nobody, we
didn't know how to answer—

didn't realize what winds Mary
had fought in New Hampshire. Here
you go where the forecast tells you.

We all signed a card, then Mary
took her cigarettes and unpaid tickets
west, the way the wind blew.

We stay put, more like sparrows
in our trees: out-sung by the weather,
holding on too tight to fly.

Geologist

I'll guess your age in mere minutes—
could do it at a carnival for a living.
While this rock in the second growth
gives nothing away, years bouncing off
like raindrops, I can still total it up.

It has a history. Came out molten
from its Mother. Cooled and cracked
into siblings. A slow glacier dispersed
the family, orphaned them miles apart.

Next a farmer tried moving it, threw
his back out for his trouble. Too big
to coexist in a level wall; the farmer
plowed around it. The farmer's age
I can give you in a flash: it's engraved

on another stone nearby, one of six.
And how will I tell *your* age? I'll read
striations etched as you left the womb,
as you solidified. Where you cracked.

Where your Ice Age deposited you.
How the rain seeped in. It's all writ
for me, after a lifetime reading rocks.
Some resent my bullseyes. They say
their earth is still young: that dogma.

***Makana Kuon** (they/them) is an avid reader, writer, and lover of all things creative. You might find them watching Minecraft videos on YouTube, or trying (and mostly failing) to create spell jars in their kitchen.*

Somewhere In The Middle

Makana Kuon

Girl. Girly. Female. Woman. She. It never felt completely right to me. Like those words were made for a person who is similar but not the same as me. It's always been my little secret. I've been wondering for so long who or what I am. But it's been a crazy school year, and I think I know now . . . just who *I* want to be.

#

I hear my mom call to me from the kitchen.

“Makayla! Come and get your breakfast, or you’ll be late for your first day of high school!”

I sigh. That name—*my* name—never felt quite right to me. I would much rather be called Moss, it's less girly and rolls off the tongue quite nicely. I've also found that the name Moss is easier to make moodboards for: finding greenish cozy pictures is easier than finding images on google that relate to “Makayla.” Oh well. I could never tell my mom; she'd think I'm just going through a phase. I get dressed and head downstairs.

Despite my mother not being able to understand some parts of me, she always understands what I love to eat. Today it's my favorite cheap ramen with a can of Costco chicken, with a perfectly fried egg adorning it like a crown. She knows this is my favorite food, no matter how much she detests the poor quality of the bio-engineered strings that look like pieces of grey matter someone decided to call ramen. Thousands of times, she's asked me just to try the traditional ramen from our local noodle house. I gave into her once, and I really didn't like it. It's not the same without the packet of yellow chemicals called “chicken flavor.”

“You do know that one packet of that flavoring probably takes half a day off your life, right?”

“Yeah. And by the way, I looked it up. It only takes a quarter of a day off.”

She laughs at that. I finish off my portion, and grab my things. My backpack is heavier than expected, probably because my mom found ten more “important” school supplies she just had to shove into my backpack. I sigh. I want to get out of here.

#

My first class is homeroom. We are supposed to be doing an icebreaker activity, but everyone is on their phones, even our teacher. She looks relatively young, and introduces herself as Ms. Darren, but she says we can call her Kat. Kat Darren is a nice name.

“Ok class! I know, I know, you would rather be watching TikTok than here, but you need to at least do something that's not online.”

My teacher.

“But weren't you just on your phone, Ms. Darren?”

Oh. I guess that was me. I hate when my mouth moves without my permission.

“You would be correct by saying that, Makayla,” Ms. Darren says.

“I guess the void we call phones has consumed us all,” says a classmate.

Ms. Darren laughs.

“Alright then, let's get started! Out of all the days you will be here, this is the only one which is entirely homeroom. We'll play a couple games, get to know each other, and if you guys are good, I'll let you go on your phones.”

That sparks many yays, a lot of cheers, and a couple of stray “pog”s or “poggers.” This teacher seems great. The first part of class goes well, everyone is introducing themselves, getting each other's numbers, and sharing summer stories. This girl walks up to me.

“Hi! I'm Nina. One of my friends brought a Nintendo switch. I'm not sure how, but do you wanna come play on it?”

“Sure,” I say.

I don't really know anyone here, so I take what I can get. She seems nice, which is a good sign.

“Hey, What are you thinking about? Let's go already.”

She takes me to a group of people and has me introduce myself. And then I see her. At least, I think that person's a girl. She introduces herself and further clarifies my thoughts. I learn her name. Luna. I sit down by her. She looks so pretty. Her name fits perfectly, she glows like the moon on a winter night. Someone makes a joke and she laughs. It's like a twinkle. The sound a sparkle would make if it weren't mute. She's . . . meeting these new people and being friendly seems worth it, if she's here. We play for a bit on the switch, and I find out that Luna is amazing at Mario Kart. She's pretty and good at video games. Sticking around these new people doesn't seem entirely bad.

#

It's been a couple of weeks at my new school, and, for the first time, I think I'm settling in a little bit. I'm starting to get to know Nina and her friends a little more, especially Luna. We hang out sometimes, just the two of us. We lie on the floor in my room, put on a vibe playlist and just talk. I trust her.

More than I've ever trusted anyone before. The hours we spend on my floor are the hours I feel most comfortable. But this—*friends*—scares me. What if I mess up? What if I say the wrong thing? What if they discover the person beyond the mask and don't like me? What if, what if, what if. I start to spiral. I need to stop being so destructive. So, I decide to text the group chat.

MossyMakayla:

Hey guys

Anyone free to hang out today?

NinaMina:

I am!

I was just about to go get ice cream from that little shop on 3rd st
Anyone wanna come???

LunaLemon

Yeah, sure. I've got nothing better to do

LilyNotFound

Sorry!! I can't today, stuck at a family thing :(

AlexaWasTaken

Shut up Lily, we both know your just watching Tubbo build a PC with

Ranboo

You're literally in my room watching YouTube with me.

GJIHGYUGhupewedhpw THIS IS LILY, DON'T BELIEVE HER

VILE AND

ODIOUS LIES heksdoswsik!@#&^*VLndc;

I'm sorry, we still can't come, I have to kill Lily :)

LunaLemon

Well, have fun Alexa

I guess it'll just be me, Nina, and Makayla

See you guys in 15 min

I get dressed. I tell my mom where I'm going. And for the first time in a while, when I leave the house, I smile.

#

"The bus ride here sucked. I mean like the driver clearly didn't know what he was doing, and he almost hit a person walking on the crosswalk. So much for the saying that boys can drive better. Makayla? Earth to Makayla?"

"Hm? Sorry, I guess I must've tuned out."

"Oh well," Nina says.

“My crazy bus stories aren't for everyone.”

“Haha. Can we go now? I'm hungry.”

We walk downtown a little more and finally reach the ice cream cart. Luna practically Anime runs down the sidewalk, bumping into people as she goes. In less than a minute, she has a double scoop cone with mint chip and vanilla. Most of that minute was the rattled employee trying to scoop the ice cream into the cone. Nina and I finally make it there, and she orders chocolate and vanilla. I get caramel vanilla swirl dipped in chocolate. We pay, and find a seat. Everything is going great, but I have a feeling something is about to happen. Then it comes.

“Oh my god, guys, I've been so obsessed with astrology lately,” says Nina. “What about you guys?”

“Same! I was literally reading today's horoscope on the way here,” said Luna.

I knew this would happen. My two new friends connecting over something I have no clue about. But then something unexpected happens.

“Oh.... Makayla, do you know what astrology is?”

I never thought that they'd want to include me.

“Uh, I know that it has something to do with zodiac signs, but not much else. I don't even know what my sign is.”

I sigh. Luna jumps into action. It's a little surprising that she's making such an effort to include me. We've only been good friends for two weeks. She pulls up what I presume is a zodiac chart on her phone, and starts to ask me questions.

“So, what's your birthday?”

“June third.”

“What time were you born?”

“Uh, I don't know for sure, but I think eight at night.”

“Where were you born?”

“Seattle.”

“You weren't born here in Oregon?”

“Nope. My mom lived here, but she was on a business trip in Washington and went into labor.”

“Oh, ok.”

“What are your pronouns? Wait never mind—you're a girl, right?”

Do I tell her? Do I tell her what I've been wondering? What if she hates me after? What if things change between us? But I have to start somewhere.

“I . . . I don't think so, Luna.”

“What do you mean,” she says, as she gives Nina a knowing look.

“I don't know....”

“Are you trans?”

“No.”

“So you don't feel like a girl, but you don't feel like a boy?”

“I think that's right.”

“Ohhhhhhh, I get it. So you're nonbinary?”

“What's that?”

I don't understand. How could they be so accepting about this? Nina is even smiling. I mean, it's better than them not wanting to be my friends anymore, but now that I've said my thoughts out loud, they are real. Now that they've accepted this, we have to talk through this and figure out what this means and who I am. And that scares me. All of it scares me. But it might be my chance to get some clarity, so I can't let it slip by me.

She explains what nonbinary means, and I take mental notes. A nonbinary person is someone who was labeled as a girl or boy at birth, but doesn't feel like either, switches between genders, or feels like both a boy and a girl at the same time. I'm the first option. I've been called a girl all my life, but it never felt right. I've been given a name that never described me. But to have someone recognize that the person others carved out for me isn't who I am? It's exciting that for once, someone actually gives a damn about what *I* want. We discuss my preferences, my pronouns, (they, them), and, suddenly, I find myself wondering how Luna and Nina know all this.

“I've been wondering. How do you guys know all of this stuff? It doesn't seem like the type of thing anyone can just find randomly on google.”

“Oh . . . uh . . .”

They share a look. Then Luna opens her mouth to say something, but Nina says it for her.

“Do you know what the LGBTQ+ community is?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“So, you know how Lily and Alexa are so close?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, they're actually together. They're both lesbians. I'm asexual. I like romantic things, and would love to be in a relationship, but nothing more than that. And it's not that I'm just not ready to have sex, I just don't feel the need and have never wanted to. Luna, she's pansexual. She doesn't care what your gender is, she just cares about your personality, for the most part. Everyone is different, and labels, sexuality, and gender identities change over time. You may feel one way today, and another in a few years. But that doesn't invalidate how you feel now. And if they/them are the words that you feel right with, then anyone who doesn't acknowledge them is an asshole. Ok?”

“Ok.” I've never felt happier in my life.

#

It's been two weeks since I hung out with Luna and Nina and started to really understand myself. Two weeks of gathering up confidence. That day, I realized something: I can't keep letting what I want slip away from me. I

have friends with me now. I've figured out the jumble of feelings tangled in my heart. I have Luna with me. And I think that I like her. Crazy, I know, that a very confused antisocial human being could develop a crush in four weeks. But I genuinely like her. Even the little things. I love how the barrette in her hair changes color every day, going from light red to deep purple over two weeks. I love the sparkle in her eyes when she talks passionately. I love the way she acts when she gets embarrassed. I'm falling hard. So this week is going to be a big one for me. I have two things high on the agenda.

I need to tell my mom that I'm nonbinary. No matter how hard it's going to be, I have to. Having her understand me better would be great, and if she doesn't understand, at least I know how she feels.

I need to tell Luna that I like her. The fall formal is next week, and I really want to go with her. I just have to pray that she likes me back.

#

It's late on Tuesday night when I finally get steeled up enough to talk to my mom.

"Hey mom?"

"Yes, Makayla?"

"I have something important to tell you. You might want to sit down . . ."

"Ok?"

"Mom.... I'm not a girl. I know that my whole life, I've been a girl, but it never felt right. And now, I've figured it out. I'm not a girl, and I'm not a boy. I'm somewhere in the middle. Mom . . . I'm nonbinary."

"Oh, Makayla. I already know."

That's a shock. I never told her anything until now. At least this is a better reaction than her saying that nonbinary doesn't exist. But I want to know how in the nine hells she knew. I thought I kept it a secret pretty well.

"Mom? How did you know?"

"Well, since you started high school, I've been going through your phone to make sure you weren't doing anything really stupid, like hard drugs. I knew that you probably wouldn't, but I wanted to be sure."

I have to gently close my gaping mouth.

"So, one night I noticed your texts with this girl named Luna. You mentioned being thankful for the help figuring out that you were nonbinary, so I did my research, but never said anything. I figured that you would tell me when you were ready. It also gave me time to fully accept it, so that when you did tell me, I wouldn't react badly. I'm sorry for invading your privacy."

I have nothing to say. I can feel happy tears streaming down my face, and even though she invaded my privacy, I know that I have a pretty great mom.

#

It's Friday. It's the last day I can ask Luna to the fall formal and tell her I like her. I'm completely terrified. These past few days have been great. Since I came out to my mom, I feel so much better. It really feels great not having to hide anything from her anymore. Although I have changed my phone password. I need a plan. I mean, I can't just run up to Luna, tell her that I like her, then run away. Oh, I know! In the forest near my house, there's a gazebo nobody ever uses, with a lot of pretty flowers and a river close by. I could decorate it with purple streamers and galaxy-themed stuff, which I know she likes. I don't normally do this, but today, I'm going to skip school. I need to go shopping and decorate the gazebo. But first, I text Nina; she'll understand. I tell her my plan. I tell her to bring Luna to the park at eight pm. I'm going to make this night perfect for Luna.

#

I'm finished decorating the gazebo. How? I don't know. Who knew putting up battery powered string lights was so hard? But it's finished. I even borrowed my mom's friend's canoe so that we could watch the sunset from the river. I used up pretty much all my allowance. I've been saving it for a while in case I needed to run away, but I figured this would be a better use. I sweep out the floor, lay out some pillows and blankets to make the space warm and comfy, and light the fire in the firepit by the gazebo. I set out the purple and black bear by the entrance, and put some food in the rowboat for later. I fill a pitcher with blue raspberry Kool Aid, which is her favorite drink. That's the last of the little touches I have time for. I'm dressed in my nicest clothes: a pair of ripped jeans, an off the shoulder long sleeve yellow top, and a pair of white and black converse. My phone rings. It's Nina.

#

I walk to the edge of the forest. Luna and Nina are there waiting. I have no words. She's . . . Beautiful. Breathtaking. She's wearing a short purple dress with black trim and lace that fits her perfectly, and her strawberry blonde hair is in a high ponytail. Her light green eyes look crystal clear as ever. She has something in her right hand, but she looks like she's trying to hide it. I wonder what that something is.

"Alright guys, this is my cue to leave . . . Good luck Makayla!"

Nina leaves. As I lead Luna down the path, I'm nervous. What if she doesn't like what I did? What if... what if she says no? I guess I'll never know unless I ask. I hear her gasp in amazement.

"Makayla? You, the antisocial enby who never speaks, did this for me?"

I slowly nod my head.

"Wow . . ."

I sit down in the gazebo and pour her a glass of Kool Aid. She walks around for a moment before settling in the spot between me and one of the

walls. We make small talk for a while until I feel ready. The sun is starting to set. It's now or never.

#

I grab the pack of floating lanterns I bought, as well as a lighter. I lead Luna to the row boat, and we both climb inside. I row away from the gazebo. Then I stop. We both light some lanterns and eat our sandwiches. It's time.

"Luna?"

"Hmm?"

"Ever since that day at the ice cream cart, I've known. It's been a long journey for me over these last few months. I've had to accept myself, and that's been hard. But I think now, I can say what I really, really have wanted to say. Luna, I like you—"

She's . . . kissing me? I couldn't say. It's all happening so fast. She's amazing. Her kiss is sugary sweet. Or maybe I'm sugar, because it feels like I'm melting into her. But I can't really breathe? In a good way, but I still can't breathe. Curse my weeb lungs. I break away to breathe for a moment. We ended up rowing back in silence, but this time, love is in the air, and it feels like my heart might burst with joy.

#

I wake up in a place that is definitely not my bedroom. Luna is lying right next to me, asleep. I take a quick look around and realize that I'm still in the gazebo. We both must've fallen asleep when we got back. I gently tap my phone screen to realize I have around 30 missed calls from my mom. Oh shoot. I told her I would be home last night. Well damn. At least when my mom asks why I didn't come home, I can have something remotely un-bad to tell her. I mean, asking your best friend out and having her say yes, but falling asleep is way better than doing hard drugs in an alleyway, right? Luna starts to stir, and I hand her the purple bear that I got her. I lie down. I could stay like this forever.

#

"Makaylaaaaaaaa, come on, I need help!"

It's two days before the essay is due, and Luna and I haven't even started. Well, more so, her. At least I have an idea. I can't believe school is almost out. So much happened. I figured out who I am, got a crush on my best friend, asked out said best friend, got in trouble because of said best friend, went to the Snow Ball, (I couldn't go to the fall formal because I was still very much in trouble), became the partner of said best friend, got swamped by schoolwork, and got dared to do a very cringy TikTok. But now the year is almost over, and all I have is one more essay to do.

This year has had its ups and downs, and highs and lows, but for the most part it was great. The only major problem was kids not using my pronouns, which was easily solved when I threatened to put a curse on them. For the first time, I feel comfortable in my skin, which is something I've been

longing for since I was a kid. I've also become more confident. I'm able to say what I feel, and talk normally, like right now.

"Luna, if I were to give you a topic, you'd have abandoned that within an hour, then found your own amazing topic."

"But I need your ideas to be able to abandon them!" She puts on her puppy eyes. "Pleeeeeeeeeeease?"

"What about 'my growth in academic and emotional areas this year'?"

"Makayla! You're just reading off of the examples list!"

"I gotta go Luna! Good luck!" I hang up. It's time to start writing. Words have always flown pretty naturally to me, so I open my laptop, and start writing.

Girl. Girly. Female. Woman. She. It never felt completely right to me. Like those words were made for a person who is similar but not the same as me. It's always been my little secret. I've been wondering for so long who or what I am. But it's been a crazy school year, and I think I know now . . . just who I want to be.

***Lela** (she/her) holds a BA in Integrative Studies from George Mason University and lives in the Washington, D.C. area. She performs improv with a local indie team and has written and performed sketch comedy at the Drafthouse Comedy Theater in D.C. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading, creating fashion sketches, and cloud gazing, especially at sunset.*

This Medication May Result in

Lela Hannah

mild fever, profuse sweating, irritability,
inability to blink, sleep and operate machinery,
a ravenous appetite, no appetite,
a craving for cherry gummy worms, vomiting and
hypothermia, howling at the moon,
a split spleen and a pressing need
to rewrite the order of the alphabet because
S is closer to Z in shape and personality –
they should be together, they should always
be together
taste aversion to water, scraped skin that only
heals from freshly squeezed lemons,
a desire to talk to everyone about the anatomy
of caterpillars, a disdain toward capers and pillows
because briny foods and comfort suddenly make your
back hurt, a prickly pear tongue, a refined ear to fine tune
your homemade melodies left unsung.

Use as prescribed to reduce anxiety symptoms.
Don't discontinue use for anyone.

Learned Insomnia Feels Like Dancing in a Spacesuit

I sip coffee from the palms of my hands
and wonder how astronauts

drink coffee in space,
how they regulate

their sleep cycles and whether
the moon can hear them humming
a show tune through their spacesuits.

I once read that pouring a cup of coffee
while wearing a spacesuit
is nearly impossible

in the way drunken feet
stumble for their rhythm
in the neediness of the night.

I'd be asleep by now if I remembered how.

The doctor tells me
no coffee after 2:30
no electronics after 10
and I wonder if he means AM or PM.

Lie down
even if you're not tired
even if your mind resists the commands of its motherboard
and squirms in a pan like noodles in Worcestershire sauce.

Dancing in a spacesuit is possible
in the way Time birthed a child
and named him Distraction,
who poses as thought pieces
and pieces of thought so sharp
and fragmented, an urgent puzzle
that slices my fingertips at 3 in the morning.

Learned insomnia is the astronaut with torn ligaments
and strained arches, trying to get the steps right,
perfecting grapevines and pirouettes.
Dancing in a spacesuit is possible
in the way I used to drift to sleep
without worry or regret.

Malina Douglas is inspired by the encounters that shape us. She was nominated as the Gold Writer of the ArtAscent Bliss issue and made the Official Selection for the London Independent Story Prize, Fourth Quarter 2020. Her publications include Wyldblood, Opia, Flash Fiction Online, Consequence Magazine, Sobotka Literary Magazine, Rhythm & Bone, Metamorphose V2, and Because That's Where Your Heart Is from Sans Press. Two of her stories were highly commended in the Michael Terence Summer Short Story Competition and published in their anthologies, When it is Time and All Those Things You Thought Never Mattered. She was a finalist in the Blackwater Press Story Contest and published in their anthology in 2021. She tweets @iridescentwords.

Two Deceptions

Malina Douglas

*Enna lillah wa enna elaihe Rajioun.
To Allah we belong, and to him we will return.*

—Arabic saying spoken on hearing of a death or a terrible loss

#

When A'idah steps out of her new house, blinking in the sunshine, she does not know she will later deceive her mother. The street is strangely silent. She feels both relieved and disturbed. She looks around. The houses are low, one-storied, with walls of cream brick or grey cement. Each occupies a wide space, with its own chunk of lawn and low hedges.

It's all achingly new.

The bomb blasts and the gunfire and the imposing roar of helicopters have disappeared, but they echo in her mind. The damp stench of fear as they hid in the closet, waiting for soldiers to pass, is now a dark splotch on her memory. The frantic rush to grab what they could carry. Days tangled in worry, crossing the dangerous stony ground to Turkey, seem unreal, banished by sunshine.

She doesn't know how, but, praise Allah, their application passed, and they are among the chosen ones, the twelve thousand refugees allowed to pass through the gates of the lucky country, far across the seas.

Bombs are exploding over Homs. Their inland village is yet untouched, but potential threat lies as heavy as a shroud above the homes. Her brother, who was drafted before they could pull him to safety with them, still

endures gunfire. Her father hangs in some uncertain state, between imprisonment and death.

She picks a direction and starts to walk. She looks over a wide field, empty. In the emptiness, there is ache.

Softly and to herself, she sings an old song called *Helwa ya Balady*:

... Oh my beautiful country

My hope has always been—oh my country

That I return to you, oh my country

And stay next to you forever.

She feels like a speck in the vastness. She has never felt so alone, so prone, so separate.

I'll be relieved to press back into the crowd, when I go home.

#

“When will the war be over,” A’idah asks her mother. Every time her mother makes up a different answer. “In three months,” she pronounces, her spine razor straight against the sofa, her face composed.

“Maybe a few weeks, maybe a few months,” her mother says evasively, scrubbing dishes.

“*Allahu A’lam*,” says her mother dreamily, looking out the window and seeing flat cream-coloured rooftops and barren hills in her mind. *Only God knows.*

“I don’t know,” she says, yelling over the noise of the Hoover. “Stop asking me!”

She uses English for everyday things, but when she is emotional she speaks her mother tongue.

#

A’idah’s mother is plump, with pale, doughy skin and a full bosom. She’s worn a hijab, long skirts and trousers, and long sleeves every day of her adult life, and she has no intention of changing just because Australians dress otherwise. She plods her way through life, slowly and stoically, with a slight waddle. To A’idah, lean and pale and restless, her pace is maddening.

They are walking through Northbridge. Nazihah makes her way down the footpath, eyes firmly fixed in front of her, while A’idah lopez ahead, pausing, looking back; tapping her foot. Stopping and starting, eyes restless, darting between walls and doors and roofs.

A brass monkey coils above her, leering. There are travel agencies with impossible destinations; mini-marts with red Chinese lettering, vintage clothing shops with polka-dotted dresses that pull her in, but her mother trudges on, regardless.

Such a small thing as a drink from a shop can be a source of great embarrassment.

“I will drink that... *asiir*,” she says, indicating a juice in the cabinet.

“Mother, that’s not how you say it,” hisses A’idah between clenched teeth.

The front of their house in Beeliar has a cropped square of lawn and unimaginative hedges. Limestone paving reaches all the way around to the back patio; a grey fence seals it in.

“This house is so boring,” A’idah complains.

“It’s only temporary,” replies Nazihah, folding laundry.

#

Her new room is a square white box and smells of cleaning solution. A tiny window looks out at pavement and a stone wall. She thinks of home: the comfortable press of cream walled buildings, criss-crossed with cables and laundry hanging. Flat roofs topped with aerials or left skeletal, unfinished. Alive with the dangling hope of what they could become.

The warm hum of chatter, children playing, goats braying; vendors calling out their wares. The sounds of the mosque, and its regular intervals through which A’idah orients her day.

There is a strange unsettling quiet in the suburbs. Sometimes A’idah wakes to birds: warbling magpies, twittering honeyeaters, screeching galahs. Sometimes the low roar of passing cars. In between, nothing.

#

In her mind she is rewinding back to their flat in Hawwarin. The flat with the diamond tiles around the sink and light wood furnishings; third story windows facing the low dry hills. Just as they left it, dishes in the sink, doors half-opened, bed rumpled. Life in progress, interrupted. A brief jaunt to the other side of the world, and then she can walk back up to her room and shut her door. She wishes she’d done that, at least. She uses all the force of her mind to catapult herself back there.

Why didn’t she grab the red hair clip? The pink flowered top or the heart-shaped necklace? She can see the jewellery spread across her dresser, the knot of clothes on the floor, the cartoon-printed cover of the unmade bed. In every shop she’s searched for a similar necklace, but she can’t find its equal.

It will all be there just as I left it, when I go home.

#

Her mother disappears daily through various doors: double doors beneath archways, doors edged by pillars or leading to wide red verandahs. She slides her mop across floors of white marble or tile or jarrah. She scrubs, sweeps, dusts and polishes.

Emily, the contact who helped her get to Australia, found her the work and Nazihah is grateful for anything.

At home, she would talk all day, telling stories, explaining assignments, asking questions, discussing with students. Here, she can barely speak English. She feels her voice is silenced.

She comes home with stories, of a great high entry and a stuffed, glazed-eyed swordfish. Of a pool lined by tropical plants with hanging red flowers, of sparkling white kitchens hung with paint-splattered canvases.

She glares at the mess in her own home, and again begins scrubbing, saying nothing.

#

A'idah is told she will attend Lakelands Senior High, chosen for her because it is the nearest. Her mother is concerned that the sleeves on the jade polo shirts they wear for a uniform are too short. A'idah says, "That's silly," and, "It's fine." Her forearms feel unusually exposed.

The girls at school are mostly blonde and pale as mushrooms. At first A'idah doesn't bother to make friends. *I've got plenty at home*, she tells herself. *I don't need replacements*. Their looks fly past her like fishing nets as she passes and try to ensnare her. She wades through the gazes of their barbed eyes. There are questions.

"Where are you from?"

"Syria."

"Really?" or "Oh," or "I'm sorry," or "Where's that?"

Their comments are as slippery as eels. She cannot always catch them. She went to plenty of English classes in school, but this English is a different sort of beast. These girls disguise words with intonations, slur and blur words, and dice them like onions.

I don't care if I walk alone, A'idah tells herself, holding her head up and quickening her step. Another part of her sees the huddles of people around her and yearns to join them, but feels barred.

She sits on the bus. As always, alone. Immersed in a rising and falling cacophony. Words surge around her. Sometimes she tries to catch them, but like slick glinting fish they slide away.

She feels them staring at her headscarf. Quizzical, curious, darting looks, like a school of fish taking swift nibbles of a dying submerged creature. With each look, A'idah feels something being taken away. She feels like she's swathed in a thick and cottony cocoon, something she's trapped in. She wants to tear it off but it is impossibly pinned in place by her mother's deft fingers. She feels swollen by their looks. A sullen rising dam. Will she burst?

The countless encounters feel like a series of equations:

A'idah + Ellie = Jealousy

A'idah + Lisa = Discomfort

A'idah + Hannah = failed pleasantries, silence and distant looks.

No one adds up to something with her.

She takes lunches alone, and her head feels like an iceberg—bright white and glaringly obvious, subjected to silence but too huge to go unnoticed.

When I go home I'll tell Hanifa all about these silly blondes who mince their words and nibble ham sandwiches for lunch. We'll laugh our heads off.

#

A'idah has boarded the bus. Her mother has waddled away with her heavy steps.

She has positioned herself at the back, away from notice. She looks around. Just the backs of a few heads. She takes a deep breath and unfastens the pin of her headscarf. A few more pins, white fabric unwinding. Her hair spills out, great ebony waves of it. Her eyes dart, wild. No one turns. She feels bare and she also feels emboldened. She braces herself as a stream of Lakeland students board the bus.

"Hello, is that . . . A'idah?" A girl is eyeing her, puzzled.

"Yes," with a giggle.

"Wow, your hair is really nice."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You should wear it down more often. You're in my Algebra class, aren't you?"

"With Mr Worthington?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

A'idah is submerged in a comfortable stream of conversation that lasts for the duration of the ride.

The white barrier gone, she notices an unusual amount of friendliness opening up around her. She feels less stiff and distant. At the end of the bus ride home, she wraps the hijab back around her, sticking in the pins. It must be immaculate, or her mother's sharp eyes will notice. The first deception divides A'idah in two, between A'idah the good Muslim and A'idah the rebel.

#

Two years later.

No sign of the war stopping. Their father and brother are dim, unheard-from figures, slowly shrinking from memory.

Sometime, in between piles of washing, Nazihah has heard news, but decided not to share it.

A'idah has learned her mother's "soon" means months or years. She asks less often, but she does not unpack the suitcase under her bed. She is ready to leave at a moment's notice. She sees the situation in black and white: war, they're away. War over, they're back. She has not yet figured out it's not that simple. She makes friends, but she keeps herself emotionally distant. She makes sure that when she goes home, she will not miss them too much.

Now Nazihah is cleaning offices and schools. She gazes wistfully into classrooms, but she cannot transfer her teaching credentials. She has a car, a nimble red Diatsu.

Her life alternates between cleaning and recuperating. She observes A'idah with growing concern. Her daughter is becoming the woman she secretly hates.

That woman leers at her from advertisements, lips rouged and slightly parted, with a bored gaze. The ubiquitous anorexic with airbrushed skin the white of fluorescent lights. Hair that cascades in creamy rolls of butter, that in the heat of the sun would melt and go limp.

#

A'idah has streaked her hair with highlights and straightens it daily. She has taken to wearing her trousers skin-tight. She paints her toenails fuchsia and studs them with diamantes.

She's grown too loud, too bold, too rude. Nearly everything she does grates on her mother. A'idah knows this, and uses this to her advantage. When she has worn her mother down is when she will most likely give in.

She does not notice that Nazihah constructs her silent mornings like a house of cards, or the disturbance when she crashes in.

Now A'idah's room is pasted all over with starlets. They drape themselves over beds and divans, clad in slight dresses and clinging silks, with full red lips and razor-sharp heels.

Her mother barely goes in there to clean now—those pouting sentinels have kept her at bay. On the inside of the closet door, where, thank Allah, her mother hasn't seen, are the more lascivious pictures—a clean-shaven man with a blank stare and bulging muscles. Teenage girls, bikini-clad, leaping, their bronzed skin free to the air. A brunette in black lace-edged gown with a dangerous look.

#

A'idah comes home to find the curtains drawn, the teapot on the table and the antique wailing of Asmahan wafting through the house. Her mother is seated on the sofa, eyes closed, unmoving.

"Mother!" Calls A'idah, slamming the door shut behind her. "How can you listen to this?"

"I love Asmahan, you know that."

"*Yah habibi, yah habibi*, God I could be sick. You've holed yourself in this room like a beached whale while the whole world goes on without you." She yanks aside the curtains.

Nazihah recoils from the harsh light.

"See? It's sunny outside. Are you hiding or something?"

No answer.

"Yes, you are aren't you? You're closing out the world, pretending you're back in Syria again. That's not going to get you anywhere."

Nazihah's jaw clenches. "How dare you speak to your mother that way! Go to your room!"

A'idah lingers for effect, spins on her heel and stomps away.

#

Her mother is driving her mental. The constant senseless worry. The endless scrutiny. The silent expectation. The stoic way she wades into the sea, fully clothed in billowing black, like a lost penguin. She cringes from the memory of the stares.

And she expects her to do the same. A'idah, stuck on the beach in a hijab and long sleeves, sweating in full sun, thirty-six degrees. She would rather swelter there than join her mother, beneath the needle-glare of four dozen faces.

A few weeks later she buys a bikini in secret. While her mother is at work, she wags school, slips off her hijab, and hops onto the train to Cottesloe. Passes trim white houses with yawning verandahs; anticipation building.

Sandals slap the hot pavement. Cresting a hill, a bright band of ocean spreads out before her. Grass slopes down to white sand, scattered with sunbathers. Norfolk pines tower. The sea foams.

With trembling arms she spreads the towel, her island in the sand. Looks left and right. Slips off her T-shirt. Takes a deep breath. Pulls the jeans off. Tight blue spandex hides and reveals curves in exciting ways.

She walks into the sea, heart hammering, feeling dangerously exposed but wildly free.

#

At home, she feels like she's living under a microscope. The way that Nazihah watches her, eyes narrowed.

"You're chewing your gum too loudly."

"Stop spitting."

Or, "Stop swaying your hips when you walk." She tuts at A'idah's newest outfit, skin-tight trousers to make her legs look lengthy, a rhinestone-studded belt and a sleeveless top.

"Your legs look like chicken legs in those."

"Thanks, mum," says A'idah, rolling her eyes.

"Flaunting yourself like that, you're easy prey."

"It's what all the other girls wear."

"The *other girls* weren't raised with decent morals like you were. Don't forget that."

Nazihah flicks on the CD player until the sweet crooning melodies of Asmahan drown out A'idah's answer.

#

A'idah stretches out on the sofa, resting her black platform heels on a footstool. She leans back.

The door opens and Nazihah bursts through, stinking of chemicals. She looks at A'idah as if she's sprouted tentacles. Something sinister and silver is bulging from her lip.

“What have you done to your face?”

“Oh this?” A’idah indicates the lip-ring, “I got it pierced.” Her words are slightly slurred from her swollen bottom lip.

“How can you ruin your beauty like this? How will you find a decent man to marry with a mouth full of metal?”

A’idah takes secret delight in her mother’s horror. She starts to laugh, but stifles it under her mother’s gorgon gaze.

“It’s just temporary.”

Nazihah raises her hand as if she wants to wipe the smirk off her face with a brillo pad of bleach. Instead, she sighs heavily and pads away.

#

A’idah paces the patio outside, her mobile phone glued to her ear, lips moving rapidly in a muted conversation. She steps idly over the pavement, spins on a high-heeled boot, and struts back again. She pulls a strand of hair loose from her hijab, twirls it around her finger. The tip of her nails are salmon pink, artificially long and studded with glitter. The sparkles catch the sunlight as she paces, like lurid claws. She laughs, throwing back her head in a raucous display.

She catches her mother watching her through the kitchen window, beyond a row of ripening pears. She freezes and drops her voice.

#

Standing in front of the hallway mirror, applying shimmery purple eye shadow, she feels eyes pierce her back. She turns.

Nazihah is gazing at her from the kitchen counter, white sleeves rolled up past her elbows, hands kneading bread.

For a moment, A’idah’s brown cardigan slips open, revealing a top, red, skin-tight and sparkling.

“Where are you going,” demands Nazihah.

“Out.”

“And when are you coming home?”

“Whenever.”

Nazihah clenches the dough until it oozes out from between her fingers.

“You’d better be back by eleven.”

“Fine.” A’idah strides out with a confident step, shuts the door; the lock clicks.

She walks, feeling her hips sway, the cool breath of night on her face. She passes an arched doorway framed by spiky plants, a long low hedge with lollipop bushes behind it; around a corner past a row of slender trees. Between the black branches, the sky is purpling into night.

A’idah reaches the bus stop and sits down. The street light above illuminates her in cold light. She unpins her headscarf and stuffs it into her handbag. Lets the cardigan slip from her shoulders, savouring the breath of air

on her newly bared skin. From the corner of her eye, she catches movement. She turns.

There is Nazihah padding up to her, slow but furious, her face like a storm.

“How dare you go out like that,” she says in Arabic.

“Mother! You actually followed me? How dare *you*.”

“I was concerned.”

“Come *on*. You’re driving yourself mad with worry! Just leave me alone.”

“I can’t. Not when you’re risking your life being silly.”

“How am I risking my life?”

“You’re dressed like a harlot. You’re attracting negative attention from men. If you went out like that in Syria—”

“We’re not in Syria any more! It’s not the same!”

“I know it’s more free here, but still, there are incidents—” she reaches forward to pull the cardigan over A’idah’s shoulders. A’idah pushes her away.

“Stop meddling with me! I want to live my own life. I’m just having a bit of fun until we go home, okay?”

Nazihah steps back. “I can’t believe you would act like this. It’s a disgrace.”

A’idah folds her arms across her chest. “Did you ever think that if you didn’t try so hard to rule how I dress, I wouldn’t try so hard to be the opposite?”

Nazihah frowns. “So you’re blaming *me* now?”

“If your rules weren’t so repressive, I wouldn’t have to rebel so much.”

“You’re being a bad Muslim.”

A’idah hunches forward, her chin in her hands. “What if I don’t *want* to be a Muslim all the time? You don’t know how hard it was to make friends when I first came here. I just want to fit in. At least for a little while.”

Nazihah sighs. “You’re still not at home here? But I thought—”

“Don’t worry,” counters A’idah, “we’ll be going home soon, *In’challah*.” She feels like she is the one comforting her mother.

“There’s something I should tell you—”

“I’ve got to go, mum. The bus—” She flicks an anxious look to the bus pulling up.

Nazihah compresses her lips. “We’ll speak later. Stay safe, don’t talk to strange men, and just—*be careful!*”

“Okay, mum.”

A’idah pulls up her cardigan and steps aboard the bus. It sweeps her away in a great grey-green rush, to some unknown place in the night. She

watches her mother's lone figure depart, stocky feet moving in slow heavy steps.

#

A'idah stretches out on the sofa of the back patio. Beside her is the first friend she has dared invite home, the slight, dark-haired Evie. Evie sits rigid. She looks around with short rapid movements and chews on a fingernail.

"Are you sure it's okay that I'm here?"

"Don't *worry*," says A'idah, expelling hot breath. "My mum won't be home for hours."

"Well . . . okay."

"I hope you don't meet her. She's so embarrassing!"

"How come," asks Evie, blinking her long lashes.

"Like, this one time, we went to the beach, and she walked into the water with all of her clothes on. I wanted to be like *hel-lo*, we're not in Syria anymore, but I know if I said anything, she would, like, *freak out* and that would be it."

"Woah, that's crazy. I thought *my* mum was embarrassing because she knits these humongous Christmas sweaters, and she wears them everywhere, even in July, and I'm like come *on* mum, it's not Christmas." They break into spurts of laughter. Evie flips open a packet of cigarettes.

"Would you like to try one?"

"Um . . ." A'idah hesitates. *If my mother ever found out...*

"Sure." She pulls out a slender white cigarette. Evie lights it. A'idah inhales too fast and erupts in a fit of coughing.

"A'idah Sabirah Halabi! *Haraam alek!*"

A'idah looks up and freezes.

Nazihah has burst out of the back door. In a whirl of motion she faces them, glaring.

Smoke curls up from between A'idah's fingers. Evie cringes and lowers her blue shadowed eyes.

"I'm just... trying something new. It won't be for long. I'll quit when we go home."

Nazihah switches to Arabic.

"We're not going home."

A'idah drops the cigarette. "*What?* I know we can't go *yet*, but once the war stops, we've got our flat and everything there—"

"We don't."

A'idah stares. The other girl is shrinking into the sofa. Staccato sounds of Arabic swirl around her meaninglessly, but she can still hear the intensity in the tones.

"Our village was destroyed."

A'idah stands to face her mother. "*When?*"

Nazihah backs away. "Oh, I don't know... a few weeks ago. Or longer."

"*When was it destroyed?*"

"Maybe it was a few months ago."

A'idah's mouth is open, brow furrowed, eyes accusing. Her face is screaming, *no, this can't be real*. The dark-haired girl mumbles something and disappears out the side gate.

"Have you heard from father?"

Nazihah looks down. "I can't say."

"Tell me!"

"He's dead."

"*Wallah*. And Faizal," she asks, her voice shaking.

"Missing."

"*Yah haraam!* Why didn't you tell me?"

Naziha's eyes fill with anguish. "I wanted you to be happy, my darling."

"But you left me in the dark, not knowing, thinking of home every day. I've kept a packed suitcase under my bed the whole time."

"You have?" Nazihah draws back in surprise. "You never told me that."

"You told me to be ready!"

"How could I tell you our village no longer exists?"

"You just say it. The same as you tell me to cover my shoulders. Where is your strength, mother? The strength you had to gather us up and get us to Turkey." Her dark eyes take on the intensity of fresh shisha coals.

"I thought you'd forgotten all about your homeland."

"No, mum, I haven't. I miss it every day! I'm just doing other things to distract myself from the pain of waiting."

Nazihah crooks a finger at her. "You go on about your pain, but what about *my* pain? You spent sixteen years in Hawwarin. I spent my whole life there. Can you imagine what it's like to find out everything you know and everyone you love—your whole life—has been destroyed? What if *I* couldn't face the truth?"

Some part of A'idah heart crumbles and is lost to the formless emptiness below. She gazes at Nazihah with mute anguish. She wants to breach the space between them but something is holding her back.

"But you deceived me."

Nazihah sighs.

"I had to." Her eyes are glistening. "I'm—sorry." She reaches out a soft hand. A'idah bites her lip, but takes it. They embrace. A'idah breathes in the scent of fresh bread and rose perfume and feels her eyes leaking.

How could it be? Her mother had always been this invincible figure, with the strength to knead dough and wade through crowds and pull her to safety.

"I thought you were so strong," A'idah sniffs. "I thought you didn't feel these things. I thought . . ." She speaks into her mother's grey-streaked hair.

"It's you who makes me strong. You who give me something to fight for. My reason to keep going."

A'idah looks up at her, face shining.

"Really?"

"You are. I'm sorry I lied to you. Please forgive me."

I don't know if I ever can. But A'idah cannot say that.

"All right. I'm sorry I disrespected you." *She will never know how much.*

#

School holidays are approaching. A'idah is surrounded with the chatter of travel plans, but does not know where to go. Slender Evie suggests a camping trip to the Pinnacles. Blonde bubbly Hayley agrees. A'idah offers up her mother's car.

"Can I borrow your car, mum? Please, please, please?"

Nazihah is horrified by the hazards that could leap out at her—kangaroos, road trains, drunk drivers. She draws in a deep breath.

"Okay." She hands A'idah the keys, and gives her the blessing to begin.

"Bismillah."

#

A'idah hauls the suitcase from under her bed and loads it into her mother's red Diatsu.

Reaching the open road, she accelerates. Long buildings disperse. Low scrub whizzes past them. They are gaining space; they are gaining sky. Hayley cracks open a cider and tilts it to her lips. Evie takes a drag on a cigarette.

A familiar melody stirs in A'idah's head.

. . . Oh my beautiful country. She looks out to the spreading desert. *I've been living my life on hold. This is my country.*

Danielle Pieratti's poems have appeared in Boston Review, Mid-American Review, Sixth Finch, Cream City Review, and elsewhere. Her first book, Fugitives (2016, Lost Horse Press), won the 2017 Connecticut Book Award for poetry. She teaches, writes, parents, and gardens in Connecticut.

Woman Planting

Danielle Pieratti

You would covet
more hours of sun
for the garden.

That that vexed
forsythia never raised
her unkempt wiry arms
dry and budless
through here.

You might become
this minted swirl
of fingers and fence,
toil and soil-soaked palm.

Instead, slim penance
for killing off bees: dreams
of plastic owls,
savior bats. This morning

finds you again
on your knees
hanging crystals, alarms,
planting catmint
you paid for—still a union
you favor unruly
and benign.

Wasn't it you who,
just yesterday, upset
a sparrow's nest
among the roses, then waited
behind glass
for its keepers' safe return,
failing to learn
from gardens, birds
not to touch
what isn't yours
to touch? Later

you photographed
their bodies, thinking
they would live,
that you might watch.

Emel Karakozak was born in Mut/Turkey in 1975. Her adventures in photography started in high school, and later matured into participating in many group exhibitions. She has received awards in various national and international competitions, and also was a jury member in many photography competitions. She has works in 2019 Spectrum, Red Dot Miami Art, 2015 Art Ankara Art Fair, and 2012 Art Bosphorus Contemporary Art Fair, among others. Her photography has been shown in many venues, including Hacettepe Art Museum, BAKSI Art Museum, and London Saatchi Gallery. She worked at Artgalerim Nişantası Art Gallery as a photographer for three years, and she continues her career as a photography artist at Artgalerim Bebek Art Gallery and Lust Auf Kuna st Art Gallery.

CHAOSMOS



Karakozak adds an emotional aspect by maintaining a sharp sensitivity against human disorder, and forms pure images reflecting her inner voice. Being . . . in yourself The body is a shelter and the first example of inner world; it is a language. She perceives the uncanny as the alienation of being human from the self. In this sense, she holds both the familiar and the uneasiness arising from the revelation of the hidden.



Karakozak, through the inner patterns inside the whiteness, creates a ghost of what they mean to us, and draws the unheard voices to the mind patterns. The bodies consumed and reshaped in the same place bring out a desperation by alienating to the self with the trauma created by the congestion. Existence of an uneasiness at the center of the artwork crystallizes into a power that can reshape everything.



Karakozak refers to the ghosts of experiences with the lost bodies, and gives a unique incarnation to the uncanny by sculpturing the bodies. She allows the viewer to create their own connections and associations, and gain a new perspective against the images.



Visuality is my predominant side . . I have used photography language, and I love this phrase. Maybe it does not contain letters, brushes and hammer blows, but it has a scene and fiction in its own world . . . Everything is aimed to understand the whole. Life and death, which are described at the same time in my hybrid photography, is integrity and continuity formed by a continuous chain example of my hybrid expression.

***Peter E. Murphy** (he/him) was born in Wales and grew up in New York where he managed a night club, operated heavy equipment and drove a taxi. Author of eleven books and chapbooks of poetry and prose, his work has appeared in The Common, Diode, Guernica, Hippocampus, The New Welsh Review, Rattle, and elsewhere. He is the founder of Murphy Writing of Stockton University.*

The Diaspora of Light

Peter E. Murphy

When he saw it shooting from the eyes
of his students, Plato realized that, like imagination,
light must be restrained. So he tried to chain
it in a cave like the wild thing it is
and invented stories to explain the folly
of perception. This light has traveled far
to ignite us. And because it is always moving,
it cannot be held . . . or saved.

You might say its greatest strength
is that it knows it is dying. And when it does,
it breaks into a million colors.
Does it sadden you to learn that goldfish
see more of these colors than you do? Bees,
birds, lizards . . . they too see what you cannot see.

When we were one-celled and luminescent
in the pond that spawned us, there was no space
in our peculiar jelly for doubt to metastasize.
Why then, knowing our brilliance would fade,
did we abandon that world to walk upright?
Our folly is that we believed we would be happy
in exile, far from a homeland
to which we will never return.
Is it a strength for you? Or a weakness,
knowing that you will die? Is this why,
when light ebbs during the cooler months,
you find it difficult to lift your body
from your bed, and you cannot stem the tide
of water leaking from your eyes?

***Jaime Grookett** (she/her) is an American writer and poet. She teaches writing composition at Drexel University where she is earning her MFA in Creative Writing. She serves as Creative Nonfiction Editor at Paper Dragon and is Guest Editor at Valiant Scribe. Her work has been featured in multiple publications and was awarded Best of Fiction 2020 at Across the Margin.*

Retrospection

Jaime Grookett

I recently reread Stevie Smith's perennial poem, "Not Waving, But Drowning," and felt like I read it for the first time. The longing, the regret, gripped me. Having read it for the first time as a teenager, I remembered the cleverness of it, its play with words, the striking image of a lone soul slipping below the surf, his cries unnoticed, or misunderstood, or ignored. Whatever time has passed since I last read it decades ago has softened me to a sort of pulp that drives me into service for others, if not for their benefit, then for proof to myself that goodness still exists in the world if you look for it. Now, I hear those last two lines in my bones: "I was much too far out all my life / And not waving but drowning." They spur a spiral of memories of all the times in my life I saw what I wanted to see, and how others may have paid a price because of it. We've all done it, haven't we? Mistaken waving for drowning. Surely, we must have. But, as proof of the staying power of regret, there was one time, the first time, that still haunts me today.

It was in the nineties, and I was a normal kid who sought popularity and cool friends. My mom, kinder than I, more seasoned in the differences of waving and drowning, forced me to play with quiet, forlorn neighborhood kids. I had no choice in the matter, so I did as I was told with minimal effort. The short summer of my eighth grade year, she organized a day for me to spend time with Stacy, a sixth grade girl who lived down the street. I pleaded she was too young for me to befriend, but my mom wasn't having it. So that balmy summer, I played with Stacy three times. I wonder if I had played with her more, if it would have made a difference.

The first time, I found her at the edge of her driveway with a folding table and a painted *Lemonade Sale* sign, her house hidden behind walls of ivy.

She waved and held up a sticky pitcher.

"You're selling lemonade?" I asked.

"Yeah. Want to help?"

I didn't. But I said yes. We spent a seemingly normal afternoon drinking gallons of sugary lemonade and selling a few cups. I hoped we'd spend the proceeds on Yoo-Hoos at 7-Eleven.

When the pitchers ran dry, she placed the money in a lockbox.

“What’s all that for?” I asked, still hoping for a 7-Eleven run.

“I’m saving to clean up the graveyard.” Her voice held the excitement of a girl squirreling away money for an IOU sweatshirt.

When she called me a week later to help in the graveyard, I said yes more out of curiosity than my desire to be her friend. I wanted to know what kind of eleven-year-old holds lemonade sales to fix up abandoned cemeteries. Interest, not care for another living soul, drove me back to her street that day.

I arrived at the abandoned scrap of ground to find rows of small American flags and fake red carnations stretched along the front of the overgrown plot. I lived in that neighborhood all my life and never realized the patch of land covered with dried leaves, abandoned car tires, and broken tree limbs harbored the long dead.

Stacy had hatched a plan. “Put a flag on every other burial plot. Then stick a flower on the other ones. Except here.” She pointed to a stretch of chipped headstones lined from large to small as if setting up for class picture day.

I crept over to read them, bending down and cupping my hand to shield the light reflecting off of the gray stone, but most engraving had long faded. I could make out the name, though. Stellan. I recognized it as a street on the other side of town. Stellan Avenue. We took it as a back way to the football fields for cheer practice. “I know this name,” I said, the sudden connection between the past and present bubbling in my veins.

“The entire family died of smallpox. They each get a flower.” Her matter-of-fact voice commanded respect for this history.

Despite the heat and dry air, my body shook with a chill. The youngest Smith’s headstone, the size of my pink diary, had a worn inscription of her birth and death date that I could decode. I did the math. Seven months was all she had on this earth.

The next week Stacy called again, and my mom answered.

“Please don’t make me go,” I begged. “I don’t want to go.”

“She’s lonely,” my mom said. And off I went. This time, we went into her house. We walked into her silent kitchen where her mother fixed something on the stove. We moved about like ghosts. I realized that when I was with Stacy, I felt like a ghost, too. I almost said something to her mom, to prove to her, to me, that we existed. But the air had weight. My mouth felt too heavy to move. So I stayed silent.

In her room, I feigned interest in playing Barbies. Stacy’s eyes had a dull shine that always made it look like she was crying. As we both crouched on the floor by her ruffled bed, I remember her holding an adorable Barbie horse while still seeming like the saddest girl in the world. I wanted to reach out and touch her. But she was different from me. And I convinced myself that differences keep people apart. I think now, how I feared if I spent too much

time with her, that I might turn into a ghost, too. So, instead of reaching out to her, I vowed I'd never play with her again. And I didn't.

Two years later, Stacy went missing. The neighborhood panicked. Set up search parties. Went to her house with casseroles and condolences. My father joined the search. I thought of going to her house to see what I could do but stayed home pacing in my bedroom instead. My father finally called to say they found her hanging from a tree. I imagined her arms dropped by her sides, waving in the summer wind. I reread Smith's final lines of her poem now, "I was much too far out all my life / And not waving but drowning" and wonder how I ignored her pain. I realize, too, that the memory of her creeps up on me each time I see someone with sadness painted on their face. The guilt of it. The shame. I like to think I've grown into someone who makes a difference when they can, no matter how small. I like to think we all do.

Matt Cariello's second book of poems, Talk, won the Lauria/Frasca Prize, and was published in the spring of 2019 by Bordighera Press. His first book, A Boat That Can Carry Two, was published in a bilingual edition in 2011. He's had stories, poems and reviews published in Voices in Italian Americana, Ovunque Siamo, Poet Lore, Evening Street Review, Modern Haiku, Heron's Nest, Daily Haiku, Frogpond, Ohioana, The Long Story, Indiana Review, Iron Horse Review, and The Journal, among others. Currently, he's a senior lecturer in the English department at OSU in Columbus.

Nancy & Me & the Men in the Moon, 1969

Matt Cariello

The summer I was ten
I loved Nancy and her
rough round voice
and boy's haircut. She
lived across the street
and her father died
of cancer in the living room
three days after I
watched him eat two
bowls of corn flakes
while me and Nancy
played checkers on the floor.
He even drank the milk
in the bowl and smiled.
He went ahead and died
anyway. Nancy wasn't sad:
her father's pain was done.
We rode our bikes down
the big hill and pushed them
back up. We caught fireflies
and kept them in jars.
She had the only
blue house on the street.
Next door was Mr. B and

his wife Tootie B. They
had no kids, but let us
visit for soda, cookies
and color TV. That day,
Tootie swirled her afternoon
highball while Nancy
and I lay on the couch
in the dark, cool den.
We didn't talk.
We didn't hold hands.
We didn't even touch.
Just sat and stared at
far away ghosts of men
dancing on the silver surface
of some other planet.

The Brick Path

From abandoned homes,
battered warehouses
flattened with fire,
from piles of rubble
on outskirts of cities where
“no dumping allowed” don’t matter,
from the gasoline soaked
garages of immigrants
from the city, the children of
children of immigrants
from Germany, Italy, Ireland,
from broken roadside trucks
left in the Meadowland’s high grass,
from the Turnpike, from Tonnele Avenue,
the Pulaski Skyway to all points west,
from the Hudson to the Delaware,
from get a job to get lost,
my father gleaned bricks,
never bought a single one,
gathered bricks by the bucket,
from Weehawken, Hoboken,
from the Palisades’ shade
to the dockyards of Jersey City,
Paterson Plank Road to Moonachie,
the Chevy wagon bought for a hundred bucks
sagging on its springs,
hauling loads into the new world,
where the piles of bricks grew larger
until one day it stopped,
and he lit a cigarette
and surveyed the mounds,
saw how each brick was just a little different,
burnt clay, sand lime, fly ash, concrete,
each bearing the names of the dead
who made them (Rose, Sage, Shale,
Terry, Toppin, Tuttle, Wall)
cracked red, pocked orange,
and one whole pile stained lavender

by who knows what or who,
and he knew
that rebuilding all that was ruined
was simple work compared to collecting
that which was wrecked,
because once you had it, just lay it flat
in any direction you like,
build a curb, build a wall,
build that path back to the city,
build the city again, and he thought
what's the worst thing could happen?
My father never bought a brick, not one.

David E. Poston's work has appeared in The MacGuffin, Atlanta Review, Ginosko, and Pembroke Magazine, among others. He is the author of three poetry collections, most recently Slow of Study, and a co-editor of Kakalak.

Elements of Fiction

David E. Poston

archetype—at thirteen, I walked into my bedroom after school to find my mother had stacked the *Playboys* from the back of my closet in a neat pile on the neatly made bed where my father would sit during our talk after he got home.

audience—my creative writing professor said to write as if speaking to my peers, who would find this nostalgic story from real life, its painful awkwardness made more vivid when told in first person, to be relatable to their own experience [See *point of view*].

character—when I finally met an attainable girl, she was in a college radio production of *Lord of the Rings*. It was my first time making out with a hobbit.

conflict, external—my best friend Jim, the rugby player, and I were both crazy for her, but when she got totally hammered on PJ at a frat party, guess which one of us carried her home to her roommates after she passed out [Also *conflict, internal*].

foreshadowing—a few months later, as I stood there wondering if he had even heard the speech I'd been rehearsing for days, her father whispered from his hospital bed, "She's a lot like her mother. You know, moody . . ."

irony—when she and I sat down to tell my own parents of her delicate condition, my mother pursed her lips just as she had when I was thirteen. Once again, the admonishing was left to my father, but with my mother remaining in the room this time, he gave us a real talking-to [Also *verbal irony*].

quest—even without a car, I had to make it to that hospital bedside to ask her father’s blessing before his heart gave out, and because I didn’t have bus fare for the return, I had to hitchhike home and ended up walking the last eight miles of country road on a moonless night.

plot—going up, the bus was standing room only when two soldiers got on in Fayetteville, but I gave one of them my seat, which is why, when they got off, he reached out his hand and in it was the joint that I celebrated with on that moonless walk home.

point of view—when a girl driving alone picked me up hitchhiking back, neither of us spoke for the next hour, both of us keeping our eyes on the road. After all, I was taken now, no matter what she feared when we came to the dark and lonely crossroads where she stopped to let me out and we parted ways forever.

setting—As her taillights faded, my head filled the silence around me with sweet soul music from the bus stop in Roanoke Rapids going up. It was a crowded 24-hour diner with those little juke boxes on the counter and, being the only snowflake in the furnace, I used up all my quarters playing Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, the Temptations.

symbolism—that moment, as I imagined everyone’s eyes on me, was the only time I ever wished that I were wearing a uniform.

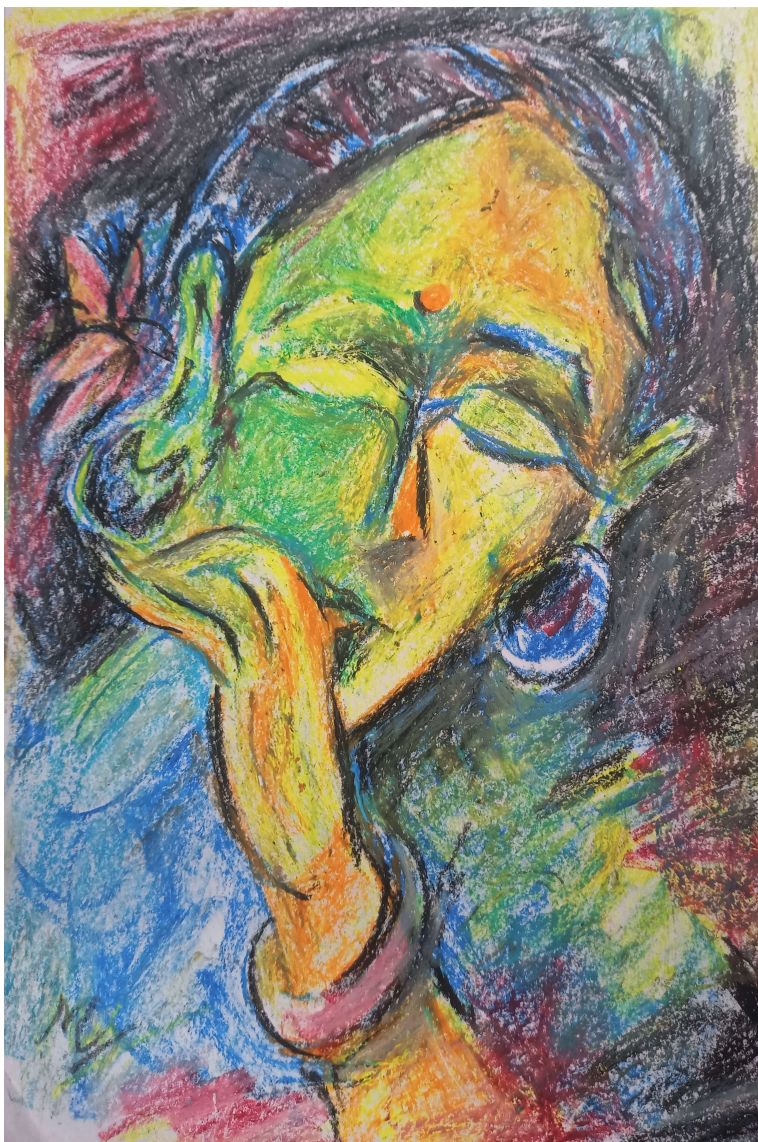
voice—sometimes the eye-rolling of one’s peers is affirmation that a story rings true to shared experience, sometimes not [See *audience*].

Maheshwar N. Sinha, (he/him), a self-taught artist, graduated from Ranchi, Jharkhand in India. "Nature attracts me, because, it's infinite and wild and contains layers of meaning which is never ending. Also, the hard realities of life penetrate into our dreams to create something that is anti-class. Creation of art is like playing with a kite, fly high yet remaining rooted." His artwork has been shown in the places such as Mumbai, Delhi, Jaipur, Bengaluru, Dubai, South Korea, Austria, London, and Venice, as well as published in Indian and overseas literary art journals. Maheshwar writes in both Hindi and English, and his short stories, novels, and articles have been extensively published.



The Lovers (Oil Pastel on paper)

Male and female are a classic subject which I enjoy the most. Hard colors, rough texture and flat, almost straight lines represent male, on the other side females are depicted through curves, soft colors and relatively smooth texture and the delicate gesture. Colors basically, try to show the integrated part of the emotion (love), streaming - entering into each other.



Swinging through Dreams (Oil Pastel on paper)

How one's inner world could dig out to show his or her inner emotions, thoughts etc.? That interests me. I love depicting them through gesture, lines, curves, eyes or faces. Women are closer to nature, hence, I think, they often swing like nature. Dreams and fantasy are real and they love to be drawn into it.

Beth has two fantasy novels published with Flame Tree Press (The Goblets Immortal and Holes in the Veil.) Cats adore her, but she adores them more.

Death Date

Beth Overmyer

Mortal after mortal sped their way past the accident-waiting-to-happen. His name would normally be irrelevant to the job, and I wouldn't take time to memorize it or mourn. But for some reason, the ordinary Evan got trapped in my brain.

I'd already seen the kids knock him off the curb and into the way of a bus running its late morning route. But I had paused at the veil, and Evan had suffered for it. Oh, how he had suffered. Let's just say two collapsed lungs were the least of his problems. I should have paused the moment there and then, collected, and left. But he had seemed so happy on that curb, and I had been so distracted wondering why, that I was now forced to replay the accident.

The split second after the bus hit happy Evan, I paused everything and stepped through the veil. It always tickles. Don't ask me why. But you get used to it.

Evan stood frozen in place, eyes wide, body at an odd angle. I could smell the mixture of joy, confusion, and fear radiating off of him like a cologne. Something prickled in my chest. That is the first feeling I remember experiencing since the dawning of Mankind, and it was an unpleasant one. I wished Heart were there to explain it. Too bad she hates me.

"Hey," I said to Evan, thrusting my hands into my pockets. "So." Everyone around him seemed oblivious to the fact that this man was about to meet his end. It didn't feel right. "You're kind of young for this." And he was. I knew everything about him by looking in his eyes—well, everything about his physical make-up. He was twenty-eight, in the peak of fitness and in the best of health. As I stood there like a fool, I found myself comparing. I was taller, leaner, definitely faster. But he had muscles. I supposed I could get muscles, but did it matter to either of us? He wasn't going to be using his for much longer, and souls aren't that heavy anyway. His hair was dark brown, and mine has always been silver since I was first conceived. And I look like a twenty-something, though I'm really pushing twenty-thousand.

I'm immortal, for Pete's sake! Why was I comparing myself to this speck of dust? This here today and gone tomorrow? I will be here forever. I always win in the end. Time is my greatest ally. And yet . . .

“No offense,” I said as the non-seconds ticked by, “but I think I hate you.” My head jerked to the side, and my brow wrinkled up. Was that the feeling I’d experienced moments before? Hatred? I mean, I could smell emotions from mortals, but I sure couldn’t understand them or feel them myself.

Time may always be on my side, but it wants to keep moving, and I was selfish for making it stay in one place longer than I should have. I should have already gotten along with things. “Come on,” I said to the mortal and, reaching a hand through his chest, I removed his soul.

Every soul has a slightly different feel to it. This one was sticky. “Hey,” I said as a translucent version of Evan stepped out of his shell.

Evan blinked in confusion, something they all do, as he turned to look back at his body.

“Don’t—Ah. You looked.”

“How—what—who . . .”

I gave him a moment to collect himself and his thoughts, but he let them tumble onto the pavement, and they scattered in various directions like a handful of coins. “Here, you want to hold onto these.” I bent over and retrieved the only memorabilia he could carry over from this side. Some were bits of memory, like what he’d had for breakfast—that one was faded, so I let it skitter under a red Toyota. Others, non-memories, like his wits and sense of self almost went down the sewer grate. I hate going down there. Creepy and Squirmy let their children play in the dark places, and are very particular if you step on their tails.

After I collected the memories and the thoughts, I stuffed them into Evan’s breast pocket. “Like I said, you’ll want these.” The guy didn’t seem to be getting what was going on, so I cleared my throat. “Yeah, man, I’m sorry you’re late.”

“Late?” Evan looked down at his watch, which of course wasn’t there. “Where am—who are you? And how?”

“Whoa, buddy. Slow down. I don’t want you to have an aneurysm or anything.” When he reached for his head and his hand passed through, he jumped.

“What—”

“You are on your way to The End. You got hit by a bus and are now being escorted to the destination that you chose in Life.”

“Where’s my hat? I mean, where’s my head?”

I tried not to look back at his head, but Evan instinctively took another peek and would have fainted had he been able to. For a moment, I guess he couldn’t speak or something. That didn’t last long. He started blubbering about wanting a second chance, about spending more time with his parents and less time on his career. You know, the usual stuff that you all think

of when it's almost time to go. All the while, I stared at something shiny lying on the ground near his heel, and frowned.

"I am so sorry," I said. "It's rough. I know." Only I didn't. While Evan went on some more about regrets and time and wishes, I reached down and picked up the shiny object and squinted. It was a promise. "Huh. That's odd."

"W-what's odd? Besides me standing here talking to—to . . .?"

I squinted. "Normally these things are broken. I've never seen a whole one." It weighed nicely in my hand, and I made to toss it up in the air to see if it could float, but decided against it at the last minute. "This is kind of nice. Do you mind if I keep it and show it to my friends?"

Evan stared at me.

I backtracked. "Uh, I mean, I can return it to you if it has some sentimental value."

"I'M DEAD!"

I leaned in. "I know. That's why I'm here." Apparently, we'd reached an impasse with that conversation, so I pocketed the promise and tried changing the subject. "Look, I don't do this for everyone, but you can take a memory shot now, if you'd like." He just stared at me, fists clenched and eyes wide. I guess he wasn't getting it. "You know, one last look at your life. Life flashing before your eyes and all that."

Silence reigned for a short moment, before . . . "I am *dead*. What is *wrong* with you?"

"Ah, that conversation again." I reached over to put a hand on his shoulder, but the guy moved away, and for one panicky moment, I thought I was going to have to chase him in order to collect. But Evan stayed where he was. "I'm sorry. I really am."

"Stop saying that." There was a hysterical edge to his voice, one that I had heard many times before but never knew how to deal with. "I have—okay, *had* a life. Two beautiful nieces, my folks depend on me, and there's this really awesome woman I found on the internet."

The way he said the bit about the woman clued me in. "So, you two were serious?"

Evan blushed. "We've, er, never met." He stomped his foot on the ground once like a petulant child, but stopped mid temper tantrum when I folded my arms across my chest. "She just seems really special, all right? I promised I'd meet her tonight at O'Reilly's Café." Now he approached me and snatched my arm in a vice-like grip. "Please, I need to meet her. J-just give me the rest of the day, then you can take me to the other side or wherever I'm going."

Wincing, I tried twisting away without success. I really did need to work out; souls aren't normally so strong. "I'm sorry, but I can't fix your body. If I even let you re-enter your corpse, your girlfriend will think she's

dating a zombie. Besides, how are you going to walk on two busted legs? And don't get me started on rigor mortis. It just won't work."

Now the guy started crying, and I would've felt bad if he weren't causing me no small amount of physical pain in my arm. "Please, just five more hours. I swear I'll be good."

We both looked over at his corpse. "Uh . . ." I thought for a moment. It was impossible for his body to go on a date, but it wasn't impossible for his *soul* to go on a date. There was a possibility that this could work.

Evan must have seen that I was debating with myself, because he removed his grip from my arm and got to his knees to beg. "Just five more hours. Then you can drag me off to wherever."

"I don't know, man. I could get in major trouble..."

"Your boss have you on a tight leash?"

I made a face. I didn't really have a boss. Rules, yes, but a boss? Then I made the mistake of telling him just that, and he got all hopeful on me.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go meet Julia!" Before I could stop him, Evan ran back over to his body and attempted to crawl back inside.

"Dude, it doesn't work like that."

It was then that Time started to whine like a dog waiting to be let outside to do its business. If I didn't move soon, things could get thrown all out of whack.

I threw up my hands. "Fine. But stop trying to crawl back into your shell. It's gross."

Evan stood up. "I'm not sticking."

"Of course you're not. You don't need that body anyway." I reached into my pocket and pulled out Time, which looks just like a watch. Not incredibly creative, I know, but that's how its dad made him. "Good boy. Just a minute."

"What?"

"I wasn't talking to you. Now, get away from your body and follow me. We don't want to be here when I restart Time."

He gave me a confused look before taking a gander at the people and vehicles around him. They hadn't budged an inch since his accident. "How—"

"First rule of reaping," I said, putting an arm around the soul's shoulders, "is to always stop Time before stepping out onto the field. People would freak if they saw me doing my job." I waved a hand in the air, and the veil reappeared. "Come on through. But watch your step, it's a bit messy in there."

Squinting at the threshold, Evan hesitated. "But you said I could go on my date. Five hours, remember?"

"Man, chill out about that. I didn't promise anything." It was kind of true, but I had made up my mind to help him meet this Julia. When Evan

wouldn't budge, I removed my arm from his shoulder. "Look, I will help you go on your date, but before I do, you need to trust me."

"Trust you? I don't even know your name."

I blinked. "Er, um. Okay. My name. Call me . . . Evan."

"You're named Evan, too?"

"No, I just . . . don't really have a name."

Evan shivered. "That's creepy." But he did as I asked and stepped through the threshold between Life and my place. And he started laughing. "That tickled." He looked at me accusingly.

"Hey, don't look at me. I didn't touch you." I ran ahead of him a bit and began picking up half-empty Cherry Coke cans and tossing them into the overflowing recycling bin. "Make yourself at home." I hadn't had company in ages. I mean, who wants to hang around a perpetual bachelor who has virtually no income, and no health insurance? Nada. Not that I need any—you kind of need health in order to get insurance.

"What is this place?" Evan was sifting through one of the boxes on my desk, and accidentally knocked over a stack of Death Certificates that I still needed to fill out.

"Here, let me help you. It takes a while to get used to being bodiless . . . well, I assume." I picked up the stack and threw it on top of my paperclip collection, ignoring it as it slipped off and knocked a box of doorknobs onto the floor.

Eyes wide, Evan looked around at my office, which some might call small and others would say went on forever. Perspective is a funny thing, as I always say. He repeated his question.

I shrugged. "Uh, there's really no name for here. It's just . . . well, it's my work station. That screen . . ." I tapped at the invisible barrier, and the frozen world of Life came into view, ". . . shows goings-on in the mortal world. Ah. I gotta start things up again. You mind having a seat? Last guy I did this in front of fell over and broke my filing cabinet."

Evan raised his eyebrows.

"He was a singer in life. Souls aren't heavy, but this guy had a lot of feelings, which kind of, you know, add some weight...Hang on." I stopped my babbling as Evan finally took a seat on the worn leather couch. And then I pulled out Time and pressed the *GO* button. Time restarted with a lurch, and Evan fell over in his seat. Me? I'm so used to the room swaying that I hardly notice it anymore. "So, I have a few famine victims to reap. Shouldn't take long, they're usually happy to come with me." I gave Evan a pointed look.

He didn't take the bait. "I'm really dead, aren't I?"

I must've made a face, because he started crying. "You're not really dead.. . . yet. I mean, you have to actually reach your final destination. Right now, you're in a transient state that not many people get to enter."

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm lucky?"

Being the sensitive being that I am, I didn't respond to that. It was kind of an honor, getting to delay the big goodbye for a few hours. I didn't break the rules for just anyone, but I don't think he would have understood the significance. Mortals can be so ungrateful. "Time passes differently here," I said instead. "I can do all my reaping for the next five hours, come back in ten minutes, then we can fast forward things so you can meet your girlfriend . . ."

"No!"

"What?"

"Let's not fast forward anything. I want to get as much out of my final five hours as possible."

For a moment I stared Evan down, willing him to be afraid of me and take my job seriously. Didn't work. My reputation is scarier than I am, I guess. I broke eye contact first. "What do you want to do?"

He looked at me like I was a moron. "I want to see my family and— and say goodbye."

I cringed. "Uh, no can do."

"Why not?"

This wasn't going to be easy. "Because you'll be invisible, no one will be able to hear you or touch you."

"They won't? How am I going to go on my date, then?" He seemed truly panicked, and that is when I started to feel really bad for him. "When were you planning on telling me this all was impossible?"

Oops. I shifted my weight from one leg to the other. "Sorry, man, I was just going to let you observe things, I guess."

Evan's shoulders slumped, and a few tears spilled out of his eyes. "It's not fair. I'm too young."

"I know."

He gave me an accusatory look. "Can people see you?"

Reluctant, I nodded. "Yes, that's part of why I have to stop Time in order to collect, but—"

"Then you're going to have to go with me."

Whoa, not what I was expecting to hear. "Uh, Evan. They can see me. I'm not invisible."

Evan wasn't listening. "It'll have to do. You can, I don't know, be my voice."

"Your voice?" Mine was getting high and squeaky.

"My translator."

I did not like where this was going. "Dude, if I tell people that I'm speaking for a dead person, they'll flip out. Believe me, it's a bad idea." He stared at me like a puppy dog. I hate puppy dogs, because they always die too soon. Fortunately, there's a different guy who deals with animal transitions. "No. I can't."

The tears started to spill again.

“Absolutely not.”

#

After ten minutes of reaping the willing souls, I had no choice but to return with them to where Evan was waiting. He sat by the controls, staring at nothing in particular, when I reappeared with the freshly reaped. As expected, there was laughter and gratitude as I processed them.

Evan watched me with apparent curiosity as I pulled a door frame out of my top desk drawer and set it on the floor.

“On you go,” I told the famine victims, and they stepped through the Destination Portal, which made a giant slurping noise.

“That is really creepy,” said Evan as I folded the door and set it back in its drawer. “Does everyone just go and fade like that?”

Half-listening, I nodded. Evan’s promise was burning hot in my pocket, effectively distracting me. I plucked it out and held it up to the light. “What did you promise?”

“Huh?”

“It’s an easy enough question, man. You made a promise, you kept—at least, you’ve kept it to this point. What was it?”

Evan frowned. “I don’t know. I’ve promised a lot of things in my life. Why should I remember them all?”

I shrugged, flipped the promise into the air, palmed and then pocketed it before turning my attention back to the problem soul. “Look, I’ve thought it over, and maybe your idea isn’t too ridiculous.” I held up a finger before he could get too excited. “One hour. That’s all I can give you, otherwise the other dead people start lingering.”

“I take it lingering is bad?”

My cheeks puffed out and I put my hands in my pockets. “Yeah, you might say that. Pain is always lurking, waiting to feast. I don’t like him on my scenes.”

Blinking slowly like a not very bright owl, Evan nodded. “You don’t want people to suffer.”

“Pain is greedy. Look at it this way: I’m putting him on a diet. C’mom.” I held out my hand, and Evan took it with a sour look on his face. “Don’t let go.” Just to make certain he didn’t get any funny ideas, I threaded my arm through his as I again froze Time and we stepped through the veil.

We were back on the street where the accident had happened, now hours later. Things had been cleaned up fast, and no one was near the spot when we emerged. They might not be the brightest creatures, but mortals can sense where I’d been working and stay away from the exact spot for days, weeks even.

There was a faint glow only I could see, the place where I had reaped Evan. It wasn’t even slightly smudged, a sure sign that folks were avoiding it.

“Okay,” said Evan. “Now what?”

Time chirped at me, and I pet its head. “Good boy. You wanna play fetch?”

“Why are you talking to your timepiece?”

I ignored Evan and pulled him to the exact spot he had left his body. “Don’t move.” Then, taking aim, I threw Time ahead of us.

The world passed by in a blur as one hour raced past and then another, whipping our hair and flapping the skin of our jaws, until all five had run by.

Time returned to my hand, panting, and I pulled Evan around a lady in a snakeskin suit, past a man carrying a red umbrella, and into an empty alley. “I’m going to restart Time in a sec here, so just get your bearings and we’ll be on our way.”

Swaying on the spot, Evan asked, “What just happened?”

I grinned. “You time-traveled. How does it feel?”

“Like I’m going to hurl.”

“Nah. You can’t vomit because you don’t really have a stomach. It’s just a psychological thing.”

He looked at me strangely, so I said,

“My friend Mind told me all about it once. You’re a soul and only *think* you still have a stomach.” I paused, and he stared. “You know, because you’re disembodied—Never mind. So, where are we meeting Julia?”

#

After restarting Time, we emerged from the alley, and I could only hope no one had seen me materialize. The café Evan was to meet Julia at was three blocks from here, and we walked them in silence.

For a dead guy, Evan kept up a good pace. Me? I was winded by the time we stood out in front of the cheesy-looking joint with its Irish flag-painted canopy and table umbrellas out front. “So, you haven’t met,” I panted, clutching to a stitch in my side.

Evan stood back and stared at the dining room’s window. “Uh-huh.”

Again the promise grew hot in my pocket, but this time I tried to ignore it. “Has Julia ever seen a picture of you?”

Evan shook his head. “Nothing recent. I’ve lost a lot of weight since we started contacting each other. I guess I never got around to changing my profile picture.”

“Good. Have you ever talked on the phone?”

“No,” Evan replied, this time looking away from the window and at me. “Why?”

But I wasn’t finished. “Do you have any personal effects I should borrow?”

Evan just frowned at me. “What are you talking about? I have nothing. Nothing! You took it all from me.”

I held up my hands, trying to calm him down, and a lady with a poodle glared at me before crossing to the other side of the street. With a

grimace, I took Evan by the elbow and steered him toward the restaurant. “You have your memories, your identity, your feelings, everything that makes you you...well, besides your body. That’s probably in a morgue somewhere.”

Evan snarled at me.

“Easy. Look, just feel in your pockets.” I watched as, warily, Evan did just that. “Feel them? All of the pieces of your essence? Good. Now, if I falter at any point and say, ‘Coke can,’ hand me a memento and I’ll steer the conversation back on track.”

“What? Why would *you* need to steer the conversation?”

“Because I’m not playing a medium, I’m playing *you*.” As his jaw worked furiously, no sound coming out, I dragged him through the front door and peered around for someone, anyone who looked like a Julia. It took me about ten seconds to notice her sitting in a corner of the nearly-empty dining room. “There she is.”

Evan wasn’t moving. “I can’t believe it’s her. I’m here. W-we’re finally going to meet.” He swallowed. Hard.

“Well, you’re not really going to meet-meet. Not officially, anyway.” At this point, the promise nearly burned a hole through my pants and it hurt... a lot. “Man, you should take your promise back. It is burning the dickens out of my leg.” I picked the flaming hot promise out of my pocket and placed it in Evan’s open palm. As I did, Julia noticed me and squinted.

Evan closed his fist around the promise, which blinked and started to dim. “I failed.”

I moved him toward the table, wanting nothing more than to get this all over with. “What? C’mon, she’s waiting.”

“I’m dead.”

“Yes, I realize. And again, I’m sorry but . . .” Then I saw it. Julia stood and came to meet me, her face drawn and pale. She had leukemia. The hair on top of her head? Not really hers. She was in desperate need of something, something that eluded me, and I knew that if she didn’t get it within the month, I would be meeting her again, but in a professional capacity. I cleared my throat. “Julia?”

Her pale lips pulled up in a smile. “Evan? You look great.”

The real Evan next to me stood stock still. “She has cancer.”

“I know,” I answered, before I could remember that Julia couldn’t see or hear the man at my side.

She seemed to find my words amusing, and motioned for me to follow her back to the table. “And you dyed your hair.”

Self-consciously, I ran a hand back through my silver locks, guilt and shame dropping into the pit of my stomach like a lead balloon. “How are you?” How *was* she? We both knew time was short for her. What did she need? I was almost there. I could smell the absence of . . . something, the thing that she needed. Maybe not the absence of it, but the need for it.

The way she looked at me was all wrong. She was full of gratitude and love and . . . what had Evan done to deserve such a look of adoration?

I looked over at the man himself, and he was barely holding back tears. He said nothing but followed, dragging his feet as though they weighed a ton each.

“Pull it together, man,” I hissed, and Julia’s brow creased.

“Are you all right?”

I jumped. “Huh? Oh, yes, I’m fine, thank you.”

She slid into the far side of the booth with some difficulty, and then motioned for me to sit opposite her, which I did. “Order anything you want. It’s on me.”

A menu was already sitting in front of me, and I touched it, if only for something to do with my big, stupid hands. I hadn’t left enough room for Evan, but he wasn’t looking at me. He only had eyes for Julia. I squirmed. “You don’t have to treat me,” I said, hating my scratchy voice and the way it grated at the silence.

But Julia was shaking her head. “After all you’ve done and have promised to do? Come on, Evan, at least let me treat you.” At the word “promise,” Evan’s fist began to glow and Julia gasped.

Thinking she had seen it somehow, I looked at Julia, but her wide eyes were on me. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. Just the usual aches and pains that come with being this way.”

I nodded as though I had firsthand experience. The closest I ever got to cancer was the endgame, clearing the board after the player had called a draw. Suddenly my skin felt too tight. And itchy. Trying to ignore my discomfort, I picked up the menu and absently flipped through it. I sensed rather than saw that Evan’s fist-encased promise had dimmed. “Have you been here before?”

Julia smiled again, and the whole room seemed to light up. “No. What do you usually get?”

I looked at Evan for help, anywhere but at Julia. My feet burned inside my too-small shoes. I had to run. I had to get away. But like a mortal, a fool, I just sat there and said the first thing that came to my mind, “The fish.”

Her smile faltered at that and she paled.

“What? Did I say something wrong?”

Evan spoke up at last. “The smell. It makes her nausea come back, like it was during the chemo.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said to Julia. “I forgot about the smell.”

She nodded. “It’s all right.” But she still looked rather green around the gills.

When the waitress came around, stepping around the invisible Evan with a shudder, she took our drink orders and then bustled back to the kitchen.

It was when I heard the ice dispenser rumbling in the background that I was reminded of the bus, the one that didn't stop in time. The one that got Evan. I stared at Julia, my nostrils flaring as I began to put two and two together.

An internet friendship. The man was healthy. The woman had cancer and needed something. Something Evan had. Something to do with a promise. *What did he promise her?* What *could* he promise her? Money for the treatments?

I looked at Evan. No, he wasn't rolling in dough. I sniffed and again was struck by the absence of health in her frail body—the cancer had eaten away at her, and the chemo and radiation had destroyed her healthy cells. Yes, that's what I was smelling. She needed . . .

"Oh, Evan," I sighed as the promise twinkled for a moment. "You were going to be her marrow donor, weren't you?"

At the words, the promise exploded, forcing Evan's fist open. The force of the explosion shook the building to its core, and people ran screaming for the exit.

"Stop, just stop," I said as the room continued to vibrate. "I don't care about your perfect, stupid hair, your good looks, your stamina. Okay? Evan. I don't care. I'm done." Time quivered in my pocket, and I pulled it out and cradled it in my fist. Then, I stopped him. I stopped Time, I stopped yelling and looking at Evan. But I did not stop feeling. It's strange, being me. I wasn't supposed to feel. I was a ruthless killer, yes. A gentle embrace, sometimes. But an empathetic puddle of feelings on the floor?

Again Evan had to say it. "I failed." Dust particles hung in the air, pieces of what had once been a promise. Now, it was broken.

We watched as they floated up, up and away. I did not like this feeling of helplessness, not one bit.

Evan sank to the floor, his eyes dry, empty. "Take me. Just reap me now. I can't stand any more of this."

Something inside me broke at these words and I found myself shaking my head. "No." Then, before I could change my mind, I broke a rule . . . my third for the day.

I threw Time over my shoulder. Now I did not hold onto Evan. I didn't need to. Hour after hour rushed past me, tearing at my hair and pulling at my skin. It hurt. And for the first time that day, I was glad for the pain.

#

Person after person sped their way past Evan. His heart leapt within his breast as he played through his last online chat with Julia. She was doing well and was excited to see him. And in just a few short hours, they would finally meet.

A few kids passed by, jostling Evan just as a large commuter bus sped toward the crosswalk. One minute Evan was flying in the path of the speeding

vehicle, the next he was being pulled out of harm's way. "Oh!" he shouted, falling over backward and on top of someone.

Honking, the bus zipped by, not even pausing to see if he was all right. And the kids—they seemed to realize what had almost happened and scattered, screaming and laughing as they ran.

Evan rolled off the groaning someone, the person who had saved him, and lay there, realizing how close he had come to meeting the Grim Reaper. "T-thank you. Thank you so much."

"Don't think anything of it," said the young man with silver hair, brushing himself off as though this were an everyday occurrence.

"You just saved my life."

That stranger's lips quirked up in an amused half-smile. "Yeah, well, spend it well."

"I will. I promise."

At that the man's eyes lit up. "Try not to break that one either."

Judith Fox, a writer and fine art photographer, is the author of two photography books; one of which, *I Still Do: Loving and Living with Alzheimer's* was named “one of the best photography books of 2009” by Photo-Eye Magazine. Her photographs are in numerous museums including LACMA and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. She’s working on her first collection of poems.

Declaration

Judith Fox

The stationery was weighty, not creamy
and rich with the linen texture
of an English manor house—but useful
and determined,
like 1938 America.

My father pled his case
with an immigrant’s persistence,
in the learned syntax of Conrad and Poe,
in a missive tucked like a treat
into my mother’s lingerie bag eighty-one years ago—

a letter foretelling a ride on rubberless rims
alongside a man who would hold her
tight while keeping both hands on the wheel,
a man who slid himself inside an envelope
and laid it at her feet.

Pieces go Missing

Memories of him wait
to be invited

lie on the bottom
of a dresser drawer

behind lacy lingerie,
untouched.

Someday I'll request
the pleasure of their company

offer bourbon and peaches.
Listen

and remember when my husband's hair
was black, rewind conversations

of Paris and wines.
I'll recall that my husband

was a man sometimes stubborn
and always kind.

And that, once
upon a time, he knew my name.

*After he was forcibly sent to science class in high-school, it took **Ibrahim** twenty years to find his way back to his passion, in 2019, when he left a successful ten-year career in media & entertainment to become a writer. In that time, his work has been accepted for publication in JMWW, Door is a Jar Magazine, Ake Review, Agbowó Magazine, Landlocked Magazine, the Chaffin Journal, Decolonial Passage, and more. He finished as a finalist in Goge Africa's #GogeAfrica20 Writing Contest, and Ibua Journal's Packlight Series. He was longlisted for the 2020 Dzanc Diverse Voices Prize. He has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Ibrahim's work explores the human experience from an African perspective. He's @heemthewriter across social media.*

Last Flight to Addis Ababa

Ibrahim Babátúndé Ibrahim

A Whatsapp message pops up on my phone-screen. The notification says 'Pendo'; a name that shocks my nerves and raises the hair on my back. The message reads: "Dne shaving bbe. Wulda sent you pic, bt ure on ur way, aint u? I beta let u c fr urself. C u soon *wink* *tongue out*"

A gulp of saliva moves my Adam's apple up and down as I lift one leg over the other to shield the bulge rising in my pants. I swipe to reply, punch in a number of words, shake my head and backspace them all, then adjust in my seat to think of a better response before typing again.

I allow my gaze to roam around the crowded lounge at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. Then I settle it on an idle jet sitting on the tarmac on the other side of the lounge's windows, fixated like I would find answers to send back to Pendo on it. I'm seated in a connected row of lounge chairs, a small Nike backpack at my feet.

My reverie breaks as a shabbily dressed woman settles beside me. An awkward smell suddenly crowds my nose. I think of changing seats but my eagerness deflates as I remember the bulge in my pants. I hiss beneath my breath and turn my whole body to the other side in my seat, cupping a palm around my nose.

I'm reminded that I'm about to get on a flight I shouldn't be getting on. A year ago I had planned a similar trip but I came nowhere close to the airport; in the same breath, that saved my life and then ruined it altogether, making me wish I had indeed taken the flight and perished. And this was all because of that name, Pendo.

#

It was the dusk of the tenth day in March of 2019. A few red dots glowed from phone chargers and electronic plugs. The only real light in the room came from the open doorway of the bathroom. Pendo stood in that space, completely naked. Her curvy silhouette shielded the light and cast a long shadow into the room towards me. She had her shoulders raised and her arms stretched out at her sides.

“But why?” she asked again, turning around in the doorway so I could take in her big behind and her firm breasts—shaped like avocados resting on their sides. “Why would you wanna leave all these?”

I was seated on the edge of the bed, my elbows to my knees and my palms holding my face. My feet were propped firmly against the exotic furry rug on the floor, some of the fur slipping through the spaces between my toes. I had packed up my things and my zipped box was standing beside me.

“You’ve had me for two days, Pendo,” I reminded her. “I have to go home. Besides, you know the ticket is booked.” My voice was so husky I had to clear my throat.

“Tickets get changed all the time! You don’t have to go. You just want to!”

I resisted the urge to respond. Silence killed her and I knew.

She moved slightly into the room and placed her hands on her hips, tapping one foot on the floor. “What is it you’re not telling me, eh?”

I breathed a sigh, loud enough for her to hear. In a slow, calm voice, I said, “It’s our anniversary today.”

I could barely make out her face but it was easy to imagine it wearing a sense of defeat. I knew my words didn’t shock her, but at least they reminded her that even though she had a hold on me, I still belonged to someone else. That was good enough.

She stormed into the bathroom and the door made an excessive bang after her. I didn’t care.

I shut my eyes against the creepy background of the darkness in the room, and once again, allowed myself to drown in the sea of guilt that I had been swimming in all morning, and in fact, all weekend since I had been here.

I’d always known that when a person cheats another, sooner or later they too had one coming. Karma it is called. On the few occasions when I allowed my temptations lead me astray as a kid, Karma didn’t spare me. It has also never ceased to taunt me, throwing its tales in my face at every turn – in books, movies, the news, history, everywhere!

That morning as I sat on the bed of one of the hottest women I had ever seen, thoughts of my pregnant, out-of-shape and effortlessly gross wife, Akinyi, enveloped me in guilt. I had every reason to believe the bitch, Karma was lurking somewhere. My stomach rumbled and I felt a knot tighten in it. My heart was starting to beat so fast. I reached beneath Pendo’s pillow, pulled out her phone and typed ‘Palpitation’ into Google.

#

The sun had risen from its sleep and was slowly making its way across the sky, sprouting life into activities on the busy streets of Nairobi. I had a flight booked this morning, from Addis Ababa to Nairobi, but that was only wool over Akinyi's eyes. I wasn't in Addis Ababa, so I wasn't making my way to the airport to catch the flight. Instead, I was riding at the back of a Uber from one end of Nairobi to another.

The car was a clean Toyota Corolla with leather interior; the seats beginning to peel at the threaded edges. The driver seemed tall from behind the wheel, thin and middle-aged with shiny black skin. His long fingers, scarred, circled the steering wheel loosely as he weaved his way through traffic, dodging matatus and their insane driving. He tried unsuccessfully to make conversation, then sighed, shrugged, and focused on driving.

I can smell the dying scent of a used air freshener in the car. I shut my eyes and pull in a deep breath to get more of it. I was so sunk in thoughts I didn't hear him the first two times until he turned and asked again, "Would you like the radio on sir?"

"No radio," I tried hard to keep myself from snarling. Looking back now, I should have said yes. I probably would have heard what had happened on the radio, and I would have been prepared for what was coming. But I said no, so the man faced his front and with his scarred long fingers playing around the throat of the steering wheel, we continued in silence.

As I rode at the back of cab, I went over my lie for the umpteenth time: I had just touched down at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport from a two-hour flight from Addis Ababa.

I frowned at the thought of such a huge lie. I lied every now and then, but the little casual lies were okay for me. Pendo, however, was not like me. She was an ex-beauty queen and was used to doing things the big way.

"Tell her you have a client to meet in Addis Ababa," she had said. "If you're far away in Ethiopia, she and her emergencies can't get you to go home in the middle of the weekend."

I didn't like the idea, but I knew she was right. Other times when I had lied that I had weekend meetings even as far as Nakuru or Kisumu, Akinyi had made sure she invented emergencies to get me home when she needed me. Things like that are not hard for a pregnant woman. Sometimes it was not made up. Sometimes the *toto* in her belly made things very hard for her and I won't have a choice but to go and be with her.

I had left the planning to Pendo and she handled it brilliantly. She asked me to make Akinyi book the return ticket for the trip herself. "If she books the flight, she would swear to anyone that you spent your weekend in Addis Ababa," she said.

I knew that not having the stamps on my passport was no problem. Akinyi might be a handful when she wanted to be, but she was not the type to

go sniffing to see if I actually got stamped in and out of Kenya. She didn't even know where I kept my passport, or hers for that matter.

So I had thrown about KSh20,000 down the drain for empty seats aboard Ethiopian Airlines flights to and from Addis Ababa this weekend. Pendo wanted me to have a refund but I would never take money from her.

The flight this morning was to land at about ten-fifty am. Since the distance from the airport to our home in Karen is almost equal to the distance from Pendo's plush condo on Thika Road to same, I had waited until around eleven am before kissing her goodbye. It seemed like we had everything planned out, but my conscience was having a crisis this morning.

Pendo had called the Uber, reluctantly so. It was her idea that I left my phone at home, so she didn't have much of a choice. She was cold and hard as a kernel nut, but I didn't care. I just wanted to get away to Akinyi, bearing my guilt in my heart and the torturous thoughts of Karma in my belly.

#

In the university, I studied law. I was bright and one of the best in the faculty, but people didn't really think much of *Gospel Boy*—as I was called then. I had friends, of course, but only ones who invited me to reading groups, gospel fellowships, and prayer meetings.

A lot of the boys who came to me to help them with their course works visited the girls' hostel regularly, hung out at drinking joints and threw house parties, but they never invited me so I didn't think of them as my friends. They were just users, or perhaps they thought it disrespectful to indulge me in their ways.

There were also the girls, with their fine hair, fixed nails and long lashes. I found myself working more on other people's work than mine, but I didn't mind. These girls would flock around me, say nice things to me, sometimes bring a snack or a drink, or even give me a side-hug when they were leaving. For the first time in my life, I felt relevant and the feeling was great.

But the girls never invited me anywhere either, not even to see them off to their hostel. After I helped with their course work, some of them had their boyfriends pick them up and the rest went away on their own, their backsides swaying behind them and their scents lingering in the air where they left me. I never invited myself to go with them because most of the time, *Gospel Boy* had an erection under the desk.

Then sometime in my third year, I met a girl that was very different from the others—Akinyi. She was plump with a round, full-cheeked face. Her lips were full and so were her breasts. She had shiny skin like polished leather and her hair was always worn in braids. There was something about her eyes, distant as though she had her mind some place else. Sometimes, long after the other girls had gone, I'd see her with her head still resting on the desk, sleeping.

Most times during night class, I was the last to leave. One night, however, I stood to pack up when I noticed her in a far corner of the class. She had her head on a desk, faced to one side. There was a dried patch of saliva on one corner of her mouth, and her breasts drooped towards the floor in her top like she had no bra on holding them in place.

I stared at her for a while, marvelling at her innocence. Seeing no other option, I tapped her gently and asked her if I should walk her to her hostel. I had thought she would be embarrassed, but she moved aside the book I held up against my crotch to reveal my erection and I was the one to hide my gaze.

That's one night I can't shake off my memory. I had my first true fun in school, and maybe in life.

We left the class together but we did not head in the direction of her hostel. A sense of bliss walked with us. A full moon shone down, brightening up our path. We went on a journey and the destination was each other's company. For the first time, I saw Akinyi smile and for the first time I saw her dimples. They dug deep into her succulent cheeks. With every minute we spent together, she became more and more beautiful in my eyes, much more than I had ever imagined her to be.

We had sat on the steps of the sports pavilion, melting into each other with the stories we shared about ourselves. At some point, she began to cry and I pulled her into an embrace to calm her down before she could continue. Sweat built up between our palms as we held hands and my heart thumped so loudly I was sure she could hear. Her face was in mine, her breath soft on my skin. I'm not sure who moved first but our lips locked and a million sensations danced around in my body.

I remember we slept on the cold and cracked steps of the pavilion. We had curled up against each other under the shed and woken up when the joggers started to arrive around five am. As they circled the faintly marked race tracks in their sport wears and running shoes, I kissed her again, and then I walked her to her hostel before making my way to mine, playing back the events of the night we just shared—especially my first kiss—every step of the way.

Our stories had showed us that we were so different in our backgrounds, but so similar in the realities of our lives. We were both loners, but from then on, loneliness became locked in the past. We were made for each other; we were both sure of that. The year was 2015.

Some three years later one fine Saturday morning, on the tenth day of March in 2018—a few months shy of her graduation—we were joined in holy matrimony and she was since then my *mke*, and I, her *mume*.

#

One year had rushed past and climaxed into an anniversary today. As I sat at the back of the air-conditioned, smooth-driving Uber, my mind juggled

series of events that have happened in that time and my conscience pricked with more vigour. Thoughts of my infidelity had me so ashamed I made conscious efforts to avoid mirrors and reflections of myself.

I could have stayed another day with Pendo, but I thought the best I could do was to dust up whatever dignity I had left and at least be there with Akinyi on such a significant day. Maybe we would go out on a romantic date. I could not remember the last time we did anything like that. August of 2018, perhaps?

I shuddered at the thought.

My uneasiness grew and I started to feel choked. I made to roll down the window but stopped because there was a street *chokoraa* woman already trying to reach her open palms into the car.

“*Saidia maskini*,” she sang.

“Get away from here!” I screamed at her. “Thief!”

“Is you be thief,” she screamed back as the car swept past her.

The driver let out a muffled laugh. I was very much tempted to look into the mirror hanging down from his side to see his face as he laughed. But I didn’t. So I couldn’t tell whom he laughed at; the *chokoraa* woman or me.

My Nigerian mother used to say a proverb: no matter how smart a thief is, one day he would make a mistake and the farmer would catch him. My mistake on this trip was my phone. It wasn’t all the many issues that having it with me could have raised – like having to call home with it from time to time, or having to take pictures of myself at the places I purportedly visited in Addis Ababa. The mistake was not having the phone on me at all.

I had intentionally switched it off and left it sitting on the wash hand basin in the bathroom on Friday afternoon. Then I pretended to search for it before giving up and rushing off when Akinyi warned that I could be late for my flight. It was Pendo’s idea and it seemed brilliant at the time.

The time now was a little after midday. For someone as big on current affairs as I was—with my Flipboard app almost always throwing up breaking news before the headlines even made it to TV—it was funny how when it mattered most, I was the last to know that at that time, the world was already weeping with Ethiopia, Kenya, and 33 other nations. No doubt, this was Karma at work.

#

Our area of Karen was a serene and reserved, upscale neighbourhood. The entrance to the street had overreaching greenery covering both sides of the road, offering a welcome. It didn’t quite feel welcoming this noon. The shrubs swayed and whirled wildly, and the intensity seemed like an awareness of my guilt.

I suddenly was scared to see anyone I knew. I slipped my tall frame further down into my seat, keeping my head out of view as we rode deeper into the street. The Uber driver stared into the hanging mirror and started to

ask a question, paused, and then decided against it. He wrapped his fingers tighter around the wheel until his knuckles shone and continued down the road.

I hadn't even seen Akinyi yet, but already, I was suffocating in my guilt.

No one called me *Gospel Boy* anymore, but I knew that everyone still held me to standards higher than even they would ever attempt to live up to. I wondered if their standards permitted them to masturbate sometimes. I wondered if they would forgive me if they knew that was my first true pleasure before I met Akinyi. Wouldn't their genitals have tingled if they suddenly met the same hottie they jerked off to in real life? Would they turn away if all that hotness threw itself at them? No they couldn't resist that, no one could. Why would anybody expect me to?

I juggled the thoughts until the Uber pulled up in front of our sprawling home. I propped myself back up in my seat, pulled the silver shutter on the door and stepped out onto the tarred road. A gust of wind blew past, stopping briefly to dance on my face.

The driver had alighted too and was fetching my box from the trunk. He announced the fair as he came to drop it at my feet. I dug into my wallet, pulled out a few notes and squeezed them into his palm. The long scarred fingers wrapped round the cash and he bowed slightly in gratitude.

The houses here were massive, lining windily along either sides of the road in perfect alignment. Most of them had lawns in front and pools at the back, just like ours. The wives could never be able to maintain the houses on their own, so they got maids, *chinebos*, just like us.

As the Uber drove off, I took in our home and breathed a sigh. Realistically, we couldn't afford to live here. We had been here for much longer, but when Akinyi lost her father six months earlier, the house was her sole inheritance. This was thanks to the new inheritance laws that allowed female children the right to inherit properties of their fathers.

I had shared news of the new laws with the old man just days before he died. To my shock, he sent his entire legal team packing and replaced them with me. I was even more shocked when I took over his Will and found his entire estate was to go to the hot, beauty-queen wife he married two weeks after our wedding.

The rumours had floated around the neighbourhood, so my discovery was only a confirmation. It made me develop a healthy fear for the people here. They gossiped about everything and everyone, spreading news both true and untrue. Akinyi and I tried to keep to ourselves as much as we could. So when I alighted that afternoon and people stared like they had seen a ghost, I turned and dragged my luggage up the lawn like I hadn't seen them, feeling their eyes bore into my back as I went along.

I wondered what rumours they had on their lips today. Then, I wondered just how much of a story it would make if they ever found out about my little secret. I felt my heart jump a beat and the knot in my belly tighten even harder

When I got married to Akinyi, I had every intention of staying faithful for life. But I soon found temptation seducing not my heart, or my head, but my heel—the Achilles—in the form of a woman I fantasized about for years. For a brief moment, I forgot about Karma and gave in to the bulge in my pants. That erection would change my life forever.

#

The lawn was untrimmed and its green carpet was starting to encroach on the pathway. I was sure it could wait another day because today was all about Akinyi and I. I lifted my box as I approached the front porch and ran up the steps. I paused, drew in a deep breath, then turned the handle on the door to open it to a house that seemed eerily quiet.

I stood at the door and observed the expansive living area.

The walls were high and of polished stone. A huge diamond-shaped chandelier reached down from the ceiling. On the wall to my left was the TV and a framed portrait of Akinyi and I, clinging to each other and smiling sheepishly in our wedding clothes. A cabinet housing other electronics and some DVDs sat on the floor beneath the TV. Directly under the chandelier was a glass coffee table, littered with remote controls. A leather settee surrounded the table, forming an arc that faced the TV.

Akinyi hardly ever went anywhere; where was she? Where was the *chinebo*? Why was the TV off?

I advanced towards the table and picked up two of the remote controls lying on it. I pressed on one to spurt the TV to life, and pressed a combination of numbers on the other to tune the cable to CNN. That was when Karma finally reared its ugly head and pulled the knot in my tummy around my throat.

There had been a plane crash and it was unbelievably the same Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 Akinyi had booked for my return! It never made it out of Ethiopia, and none of the people on board survived.

I snapped the TV off and was going to slump into the nearest chair, but there was loud wailing just outside the house. I wanted to peep, but also wanted to hide my head in whatever I could turn to sand. Then the wailing turned to screams of my name: “Kijana! Come out here! Come out and face me you this wicked man!”

Before I could think, the command had propelled me outside.

There stood several of our neighbours, some of whom had seen me arrive. Some of them pointed at me, others snapped their fingers at me, all looking bewildered. Akinyi had flung herself on the lawn and with her pregnancy, was rolling among the grass and weeds in back and forth motion. I

ran towards her but a burly guy stood in my way, before several others joined him in keeping me away from her.

Akinyi sprawled in full stretch, looking like a mad woman. Her eyes were bloodshot and her face glistened. She had grass in her braids, and a little patch of it was glued to one cheek. Her long floral gown hung awkwardly on her body, barely covering her up. The *chinebo* stood a few metres away from her, clutching my phone.

My phone? An alarm went off in my head.

“So you really are not dead,” Akinyi muttered between sobs, pulling herself to a sitting position. “It was supposed to be good news when we couldn’t find your name on the flight manifest. But you left your phone, Kijana... You left your phone . . . You left your phone and I saw messages.”

Her sobs grew.

“Messages from your lover, my shameless whore of a step-mother, warning you that the flight had crashed, Kijana . . .”

I was transfixed.

They say time flies when you’re having fun. So it must crawl slower than an aged tortoise when the ground beneath you transform to embers, and the air you’re breathing turns spiky. I felt like a rat, caught in the unforgiving grip of a rattrap.

This wasn’t death, but my whole life flashed before my eyes. The flashes that haunted the most were all of Pendo.

When I saw her on my father-in-law’s arm at our wedding, he wearing a tux and her dressed like she was in competition with Nicki Minaj, I thought someone found out about my guilty pleasures and was playing a prank. It turned out the old man wanted to take a new wife after ten years of losing Akinyi’s mother, and whom better can a man of his wealth pick? Had to be Miss Kenya.

I remembered how she always looked at me, as if from her pictures saved on my phone, she could tell what I did behind the closed bathroom doors.

One time, my phone rang and it was her. She wanted to find out if girls could inherit properties of their fathers by Kenyan Law. I told her a law had just been passed to give equal inheritance rights to sons and daughters alike. I had wondered why she asked, but mentioned it neither to Akinyi nor to my father-in-law. She asked me to tell him about it and pretend like she knew nothing. The next day, he called me to say he wanted me to represent him henceforth.

He wanted to amend his Will and so I went to see him. Neither Akinyi nor I had seen him in months. I was surprised to see him looking frail and withered in his giant Italian bed. His wife pranced around, looking the opposite.

He was propped up against the decorated headboard, a teacup and saucer in his shaky, wrinkled hands. He sipped the tea quietly as she rubbed his hairless head, urging him to drink a little more, a mischievous grin dancing on her face.

“I was going to will everything to my wife, but this your new law, *eh*.” He paused to clear his clogged throat.

His voice was so weak and low, I had to strain my ears to pick his words.

“Akinyi loves the house in Karen, the one you live in. She grew up in it. She should have it...”

That was all he could manage. The tea had kicked in before he could say anything else. With his mouth open, he slumped to one side in possessed slumber, snorting and snoring.

I wanted to leave, but there was an intoxicating look in Pendo’s eyes. She told me the man had written down the will and she would just recite it to me. My spirit objected but my mouth couldn’t make the words. She came to stand a few feet from where I sat, her long legs bare almost to the buttocks and her breasts poking carelessly at me.

This was no picture or a magazine cut-out. The only thing I could feel was the throb threatening to tear open my chinos trousers. She knew she had me, and when she sat on the bed and spread her legs apart, there was no pantie covering the wetness in-between.

I made love to her there and then while the old man snored. Then I took the version of the Will she read out to me, and was her slave ever since. It was never supposed to become routine, but Pendo was addictive and I wanted her high all the time. When the old man passed, she became more demanding. Each time I packed up for a weekend away with her, I told myself it would be the last, knowing I would soon be off to her again.

It all came rushing back as I stood there, tall and lanky. My broad shoulders drooped like the two sides of a hanger as my shadow hid itself behind my frame. I stood there like a thief before this proverbial crowd of farmers who had caught me today, lost in a daze and submerged in so much shame I would trade there for a seat on the crashed flight.

#

It’s 2020 and I’m in the departure lounge at the airport, shifting my gaze from the idle jet on the other side of the lounge window back to my phone screen, still trying hard to come up with a response to Pendo’s Whatsapp message.

The shabby woman with the awkward smell has left her seat beside me, but in her place is still her stuffed handbag and a faded purple veil.

The announcer’s voice soars over the ensemble of murmurs in the lounge, announcing my flight.

Doubts creep in and a voice in my head tells me I'm stupid to let Pendo in again. It's been saying things like this since her first message on Facebook after eight months of vanishing into thin air. It's been reminding me of how angry I was for facing the storm alone and losing everything, including a son that now calls someone else daddy.

"Im nt comin" I typed and sent.

I see the shabby woman approaching, a half-full bottle of water in hand, and I tell myself it is time to go. But before I can rise, my phone beeps and it is messages from Pendo; a picture that made the bulge in my pant grow bigger and throb with more intent, followed by: *"yes u r bbe"*

I stared long and hard at her clean-shaved and wet pubic, and I knew she was right. But for my oiled palm and her saved pictures, I've been celibate since that last weekend on Thika Road.

It seemed ironic when she invited me over and the destination was Addis Ababa. So sure of herself, she booked the ticket before even asking me at all. Perhaps this would be my last flight to Addis Ababa, but Karma was no longer on my trail, so I guess I'll lock the memories up this one time, keep an open mind and make the best of the trip.

Shutta Crum's (she/her) poems are in *Typehouse*, *Stoneboat*, *Nostos*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Beyond Words* and *3rd Wednesday*. Forthcoming: *Main Street Rag*. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Typehouse* in 2020. Her chapbook *When You Get Here* (Kelsay Books, 2020) won a gold Royal Palm Literary Award. For more info or to book as a speaker: www.shutta.com.

The Pittance

Shutta Crum

His son was born in the middle of a thunderstorm,
on the seat of his '41 Mercury. The river so high
it spat whole trees up from its churning gut.
No way to get to the hospital.

He stood in the rain, waiting for someone—
anyone—to tell him what he already knew.
She was dead. *What a waste of a good woman.*
And now, him with a baby he'd not wanted.

The Big Sandy chomped at his feet, chewing its way
up to the road. He thought about driving the Merc in.
Wondered what it'd feel like—swallowing
that muddy water—that dirt he dug his hands into every day.
Wondered if she'd already be there when he passed from this life—
waiting—hang-dog look and all.

He pulled at his wet hair, swiped the water from the window,
and stared in at his dead woman and at that pittance of a thing
wrapped in her old sweater—its tiny face red with rage.

Baptized at the Creek

All us kids stood—wide-eyed. Cousin Billy
stuck his thumb in his mouth, as they laid Aunt Gertie backward
under the brown waters of the creek.

Right then and there, sacredness came floating ‘round us.
The holler got so warm and holy I could hardly breathe.
I reached out and squeezed Sissy’s hand.

Aunts and uncles, standing witness, shouted *Hallelujah!*
and raised their arms to heaven. Billy peed on a tree.
We giggled. Uncle Winn snagged him with his arm.
Grandpa prayed.

Praise the Lord!

When they helped Aunt Gertie up the bank of the creek
her clothes clung sopping over her rounder parts,
the way honey clings to a biscuit. I tried not to look.

We ate corn bread, fried chicken, green beans and ham hocks,
homemade rolls, canned peaches and Grandma’s pies.
Billy wiggled, corralled between Uncle Winn and Grandpa.

Cousin Louann played the guitar. Her boyfriend, the harmonica.
Sissy swung Billy round and round. Aunt Dixie and Uncle Walter Lee sang—
their mournful voices rising and then swooping deep, flowing into us.

Praise the Lord!

Later, in the cool dew-fall hour we went back to the creek.
We chased fireflies and threw stones into the water. Too dark to see
the ripples widen. But they lapped ashore—washing away our sins.

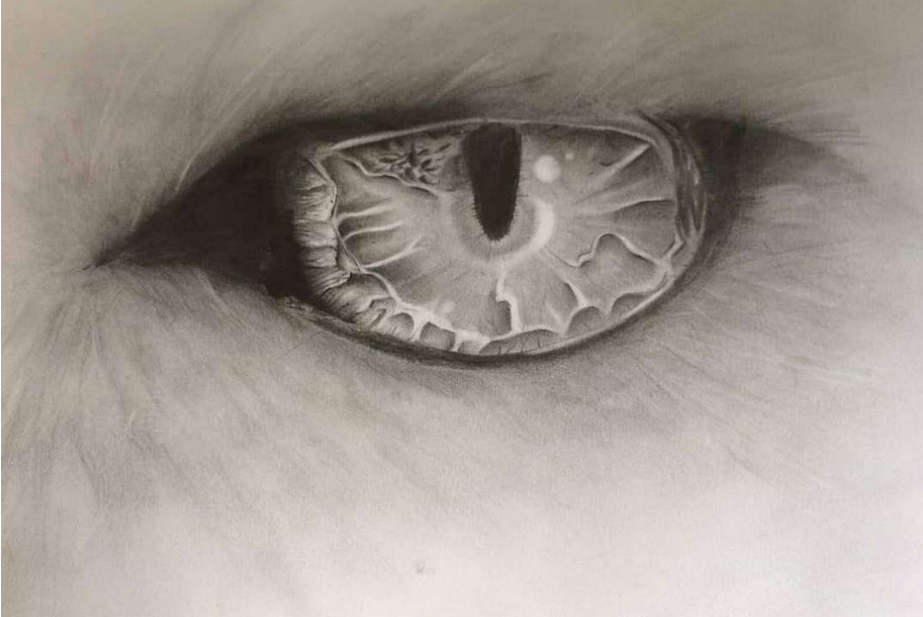
Andre Lim (he/him) is a 20-year-old student from Singapore who is currently serving compulsory military service and will be enrolling in college in America in the fall of 2022.



Parallel World



Solitary House



Eye of a Predator



Alone



Elfland



Hidden

#BlackLivesMatter

