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“LOST IN SUBDIVISION”

ALI ZNAIDI

The sun’s rays seem faint. A series of squiggles. Slanted news coverage. Crude reconfigurations. Attempts to index the rusty glows. Partition of light. True nature or gloss? Lost in subdivision. Two categories of everything: High & low. Two falsities. Two maps tossed in the wind. Why all this compartmentalization? Why all these storage compartments of fear, bias and phobias? No doubt, behind the gloss of champagne there are protocols of trauma and pain. In this post-modern age the tyrants’ champagne glasses still abound with spiritual immaturity. They still subdivide. They still pour falsity. Closed prisons with several entrances, but no exit. Just suffocating air, whines and a cacophony of paroles. Words are the releasing power. Words are the exits. I can hear George Orwell hollering, “If there is hope ... it lies in the proles.”

“MOTHER, WHERE DID I COME FROM?”

KEILY BLAIR

My mother hands my six-year-old self a book, and her explanation is pregnant with an expectation that I won't understand for many years to come. I take the book, flipping through the funny cartoons to the couple making love. The image comes right after the detailed, nude cartoons of a man and a woman. The image will inspire many years of mimicking with Barbie dolls.

She wants me to understand, she says. Her voice drips like honey, a sweet mother's voice thick with purpose, though she doesn't tell me it's because she didn't understand when she was my age.

Later, I will understand. A boy will reach for me while we swim in the Tennessee River, attempting to force a kiss, and I will know that is not love. He will chase me, and I will swim away, kicking him in the face by happy accident as I attempt to slow him down with splashes of water the color of pickle juice. He will climb onto the boat, panting and red-faced, but my mother will smile because she'll know I understood the difference.

My biological father will show me comic books depicting rape and a signed picture of a naked stripper he met once while on the road, and I will know that is not what sex is supposed to be. My first image of sex was the overweight mom and dad from the book, rolling around with cartoon hearts over their heads and their mouths melded together.

The book also won't help when I'm drowning in hormones at age fifteen, where I lose my virginity to a guy I barely know who is nothing like the loving cartoon husband and has wicked eyes that haunt me for years. The book taught me consent, but not how to heal from heartbreak.

The book won't help me when I make out with a girl for the first time, feel a familiar heat between my legs, and don't understand how our bodies can properly mesh. It won't tell me how to lie to her face that there's no attraction to save the embarrassment of not understanding the mechanics of the situation. The book taught me that love was between a man and a woman.

The book leaves out a lot of things, holes that my mother is not equipped to handle, holes that I am too young to understand.

So, at this moment, I have to learn. I have to grow up fast in my own way because she grew up fast, and it's the only way to keep me safe. She didn't understand the things her uncle did to her, the things her aunt covered up. She didn't know how to put his actions into words, words that the book is supposed to help me understand and spit back out to her if someone ever attempts to touch me in ways I don't like.

I giggle at the words and images because it seems silly, unreal that anyone would do something like that with another human. My mother watches me, hoping I latch onto every word. Sex is an act of love, the book says. It is not supposed to be scary, my mother does not add.

There's a book in my hand, and I am too young to understand how heavy the weight of the short paperback is, though I am old enough to see the fear in my mother's eyes.

“Syrian Grandmother”

Cassandra Windwalker

there is a body lying in the corner
of the tent, a body still alive
in all the ways we measure animus:
air proceeds in and out of the lungs
with a terrible regularity,
the heart trudges on as if it will never stop,
eyelids water the orbs that have long since
ceased their weeping,
but still, it is only a body
the soul, a mother’s soul, is out wandering
her son believes it is because
his brother is dead, erased in prison,
but it is because she has learned
they are all dead
she used to be like her son,
used to be desperate and determined
to save her babies, to save them all.
but today, as cold rattles the tent walls
and the booming sounds
two hills away
one hill away
she only hopes she is wandering
and not awake when the booming strikes
this hill, and her last son

and his three daughters aren't desperate anymore.

“Holding Hands”

Stuthi Iyer

holding hands

she and him interlocked fingers in a strange way: more like his fingers were between hers

[she was married off to a man.]

and then he'd twisted her wrist over so he had the power. it seemed justified because her fingers weren't as thick as his,

[her father couldn't afford to pay the dowry the man's family wanted.]

so she couldn't provide the strength she needed to be his equal. it also seemed justified then that he could keep twisting

[she was tortured—beaten, forced to drink poison.]

and she couldn't win because he had the upper hand.

[her father, who kept visiting and felt something was off, but couldn't ask.]

so eventually, the hand was left mangled and useless,

[left to die and then the ambulance was called]

too late to fix. he was no longer twisting her wrist,

[went to jail for a bit with his live-in parents]

but he was still capable of twisting another's wrist

[and they were released eventually to do so.]

these hands showed their palms to me—interlocked with this secret—much too late.

[why didn't I know about my mother's older cousin who died in her twenties and is the “poster child” of dowry-related abuse]

until i too had the chance to interlock my fingers with a man?

The Space Between Two Hands About to Clap

Recipe for divorce:

1. Hate cooking
2. Wish you could use the fewest ingredients to make something amazing but can't.
3. Don't talk, just listen when Mummy teaches you how to cook.
4. Find a husband who will throw a tantrum about washing the dishes.
5. Imagine all the better uses of time.

L for Loss

Got handed a girl child

And you didn't want the frills

Or the giggles that would remind you

Of water lapping on lilies

Cuz then you'd liken them

to the memory of a lost livelihood

so like everyone else in that lackluster place

you called yourself unlucky and let yourself justify

letting go and lynching your baby girl

“They Put Me In a Box”

RL Bartlett

I was born, and they put me in a box.

It was ornate with detailed carvings

Of people who have used this box before,

And their achievements and their dreams,

But it was not who I wanted to be,

But I pretended to like it anyway.

Quietly, I dreamed of different decor.

I dated men, and they redecorated my box,

They used beautiful colors that you might like,

Beiges and pinks that relaxed the eyes,

And patterns that brought attention away from my faults,

But it was not how I wanted to look,

But I pretended to like it anyway.

Secretly, when no one looked, I scratched away at the paint.

But lately I've been hearing whispers of encouragement,

Stories of people who tore down wallpaper,

Stories of people who put up their own paintings,

I had new lovers who each asked me

“What color palettes do you prefer?”

I didn't know how to answer then.

I think I'm ready to answer.

“Sitting in Active Silence”

Mark Tulin

I meditated with eyes closed
in a small, narrow bedroom
with a rotating fan
that circulated hot air
I knelt on a cracked, linoleum floor
with paint chips
on the windowsill

In my humble voice,
I asked for peace,
for the safety
of suffering children,
a worldwide transformation,
a new alignment,
a government which embraced compassion,
not just a word in Webster’s
dictionary

I sent out my support
to the vulnerable people,
manipulated by corporate strangers
and corrupt politicians,
that babies would no longer starve
and have fresh water

that flowed without
obstruction

I asked for wisdom
to help vulnerable young girls,
awkward in their bodies,
to know that one style
isn't right for everyone,
and that body shaming
does more harm than good

I sat in silence for those who died
in the genocide
and the little boys
who were lost,
and the soldiers
who listened blindly
to their fascist leaders,
who stoked the fires of hate,
and who acted-out
their haunting nightmares

I meditated with a dim street light
shining through my window
I had an old, lumpy comforter,
bedsheets needing to be replaced
I sent out strength to the families

who lost their jobs,
to get through our current crisis,
to put food on our tables,
for everyone to have a shelter,
and for the sky not to fall.

“Let Your Uglies Take Root”

Leah Sackett

You know that house on your street? The one with too much honeysuckle upfront. Pushed too far back with a worn privacy fence. The windows are always closed, and blinds are drawn. Even now, as I describe it, you can't quite picture it. You think it's asymmetrical, and not in a hipster way, just an awkward, monstrous form of architecture. In fact, it looks like it has seen more than its share of architectural visits from hacks. Old men trying to forge on in a young man's world. A heart attack is a risk every day they heft a hammer. If this house were to need repair, out of complete necessity, these grizzled, dirty macks would be what the budget called for.

This is the house I live in.

I share the aloofness of my cat, Kafka. We peek out the side of the blinds. But we could be bold and push those blinds wide. There is no one to notice. There are plenty of people passing. It is a moderately trafficked street, but we are hidden, foul, given a blind eye. It is beauty's thorny habit to wrought out the ugly. The beautiful feel courageous; however, they are in constant sway of danger, losing their quality that makes them more so. Their shallow beauty offers illusions of deep, meaningful reaches into life, but there hangs a foreboding of a fall from grace when the awful are looked upon. What once looked deep has been made shallow, lifting something hidden and disfigured to the surface of Sweetgum County. The beautiful shivered when their paths crossed the unfortunate and frightful, less it be contagious. True, some people are born ugly, but you can usually see that coming based on the pedigree. Others are the victim of misfortune, like me.

When I was four, there was a fire in our house. It wasn't so bad that we couldn't rebuild the house's left side, but it was a tragedy how I had been burned. My big brother, Kelly, and I were playing hide-n-seek. Mom was cooking on the stovetop. She was distracted by Days of Our Lives on the TV in the living room. It was a grease fire. Kelly had been seeking, which made it easy for my mom to usher him out of the house. She could not find me so quickly. The firefighters removed her from the edge of the flames. Finally, a Sweetgum firefighter found me under my bed, which was on fire as it shared a wall with the kitchen. The whole wall had been engulfed, and this is where I was sheltered under the flame. As far as burn victims go, I'm a beauty queen. But I'm not a beauty queen, I'm just the kind of awful that can be passed over, shunted to the shadows. Mom homeschooled me most of my life. I tried public school once in third grade, it was a day of taunting and revulsion from students and teachers. The entire student body communicated a close-knit communiqué, "Go away, Ugly." No one wanted to be reminded of their vulnerability to life's whims—the quick passing of fate's hand. After one day of the jeers and fears when I walked down the hall, walked the perimeter of the cafeteria and the schoolyard, I decided it was best to stay home. Mom and I were both much more comfortable with this decision. Even though I was more at ease of hiding at home, I resented the lingering smell of smoke. At least public school didn't smell like your own flesh melting off. But that smell was always going to be with me, infiltrating my nostrils with every breath, a fatal blow to any healing and overcoming I may have been capable of. When I was little, I blew my nose a lot, trying to evacuate that burnt smell. You can avoid looking in a mirror, but you can't escape your nose.

Then it was time for high school, and again I wanted to go. I was tired of living like Boo Radley. When I arrived on Sweetgum High campus, I came armed with years of therapy with Dr. Stan and Kelly. Kelly was a Senior when I was a Freshmen. I think my presence brought out an aspect of self-consciousness for Kelly and the other kids. Kelly was on a downgrade of guilt. I was the whispers of the corridors, the ugly thing to be ignored, but for Kelly, I was the constant burden he had to defend.

The most annoying part of my concealment was ordering a pizza. After a while, I paid over the phone and gave my neighbors address. This did result in not a few pizzas being claimed by my asshole neighbor. I changed addresses to the widow across the street. Her visibility was waning. No one in this town wants to be reminded of death. This is why no one ever visits Sweetgum cemetery. It stinks. I don't think the flood plain this town was built on is the right soil for the dead. I am the only one, except for the very recently aggrieved, that walks the cemetery. I am committing the names of the burial inhabitants to mind because someone must remember them.

Lately, I've felt oppressed by my forced solitude. After deep strides of soul searching, I've decided to make them look at me. I plan to make a total eclipse of the glinting spectacle of prom. I've watched YouTube videos on how to do my makeup, which is difficult to do since I have trouble viewing myself in the mirror. I have to concentrate. The night before prom, I go to bed with a cucumber eye mask. In the late morning, I can't remove it. I put steaming cloths to my eyes and try to peel the mask away. It is a slow, tedious process. I cry, and this helps. Two hours later, my face is puffy and red, in addition to the smooth, glossiness of the burns on my face's left side. But I am free of the eye mask, and you can definitely see me. I'm not a pretty girl, but I am not without my charms. Rather than being off-putting, I think my one tooth out of step with the rest of my teeth is endearing. I do my best to paint my face into something acceptable, if not beautiful.

My dress is from Amazon, so it looks incredible, but it is total crap. I was able to get a full-blown puffy, '80s gown in silver, and I added my deceased older brother, Kelly's, denim jacket. At the dance, I am a wallflower until I make a one-woman parade in the direction of the stage, and some of them are forced to look at the hidden, at the repugnant that passes by. I am the ugly, making unforgiving cuts on the dance floor. I climb the stage as the live band plays through two cover tunes from Prince. I stand there, anew no one sees me. No one can show empathy because no one has felt a communion of compressed grief, which I carry every day. I cross to center stage and whisper in the singer's ear.

Together we sing Nirvana's Lithium. I am hot with rage. The floor is flooded with dancers. Once I exit the stage, my death tinged breath heavy, I find I am invisible again.

In the days after the dance, I sit in the shadows and wither. I think of Kelly. I want to make him a memorial that will last, unlike the plastic flowers people put on graves or the grossly inflated price of a tombstone, but something full of life. Mom has left me on my own. She takes every shift she can get at the Sweetgum grocery, it's been 3 days since I've had anything to eat or drink. I force my parched throat to summon his name, all my life, I've carried the heat of that day, but I was never alone. My Mom and Kelly carried the burns, too, even though it was my countenance that bore the visible scars. While I wore my pain on my face, Kelly bore his pain deep inside, it pushed him deeper into his sin of being saved, of being 7, of being angry for all of the guilt my face evoked in him. It was his prom night when he was having a good time filled with music, dancing,

quiet drinking, and making easy time in the backseat with Vanessa Lane. It was at the end of that night of fun and celebration, by all accounts from his friends, he removed an antique Winchester from the hall closet and placed it between his knees pointed to the underside of his chin. Now, I know what it is to stand-by with guilt.

I move to the front yard. I pace in a circle, reciting Kelly and drawing his ashes. I fold my knees and get comfortable. Time can wear on to decay, but time can also open its arms to love. All of our classmates have moved on to college. I am planted in the front yard. My legs have taken root in the wet earth. My arms spread wide as branches. The leaves, woven into my crown, are slightly bruised, leaving a soft perfume hanging in the air. I am a small tree, not yet a climbing tree, with hanging spiky balls of fruit. I am beautiful, and all those that pass me smile at my living beauty, my glorious pledge of love.

“Mother Duck”

Charles Venable

Easter is a time for birth and rebirth,
But not resurrection.
Jesus Christ, what false hope
Waits between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.
There will never be a funeral for you, sister;
There will never be a glorious rising from the dead.
So, I buy a little duckling, instead;
I hope it survives until next spring.

She lays a dozen eggs each year, the mother duck—
Why does she only have one duckling this spring?
Oh, little duckling, oh, only child, holding his mother close,
There is no telling when the storms will return.

Little duckling, black and yellow.
It was your idea, sister, it was you
Who loved animals, all animals;
No, it is me. I am the duckling in your wake.
How many are adopted each Easter?
How many are abandoned in ponds and tepid pools?
Never knowing, when the spring rain ends,
There is no telling when the waters will dry-up.

When all the mother duck’s eggs were broken
Did she mourn for them or move on?

Will she die from the sadness and sorrow?
The world will be so much less without her.

A child will forget their pets;
A mother will forget their child.
Sister, did you feel forgotten too?
Did our mother mourn for you or move on?
Did you die from sadness and sorrow?
But come next spring, our mother remains
Somedays, she asks if it was her fault.
Somedays, she asks if I think you are in heaven.

The geese migrate. The herons roost in the cypress.
The little duckling is dead. Only the mother duck remains
With one remaining child resting in her wing,
But he too will someday leave her. I'm sorry.

Are you in heaven, sister? Are you in hell?
Someday, will you be resurrected as a mother duck?
Jesus Christ, what false hope.
There is no telling when the storms will return.
There is no telling when the waters will dry-up.
The world is burning, and you are not in it.
So, I release a little duckling, instead;
I hope it survives until next spring.

“The Plight of the Girl-Child in Society”

Oluwaleye Adedoyin Grace

Do you agree with me that a girl-child is exposed to different hazards in the society?

Yes, the rights and privileges of a girl-child are restricted in terms of so many benefits like education, politics, freedom... However, high percentage of them are exposed to numerous dangers in the society. Some believe education isn't meant for them. Is it as a result of the old doctrine that is still practiced even to the 21st century?

Let me go down to memory lane. When the colonial masters introduced the education pattern, our forefathers believe educating a girl-child is a waste of money and resources. However, some 'sees' it as a taboo or better still, an abomination because they have a strong notion that she will end up in a man's abode and spend all her life in the kitchen. Funny enough, some cultures, up till now, believe the old doctrine. Should I call this ignorance or a culture that should be eradicated? Looking at the political aspect, the society has turned politics to 'a-man-job' restricting females. Thanks to the new generation that are making great changes.

Join me, let's see the pain a girl-child is afflicted with in the society.

WHO IS A GIRL-CHILD?

A girl-child is a biological female offspring from birth to the age of eighteen (18) years. This is the age before one becomes a young adult. This period covers the crèche, nursery or early childhood (0 – 5years), primary (6 – 12years) During these period, the child is under the care of an adult who may be her parents or guidance and 'older sibling(s)' it is made up of infancy, childhood, early and late stage of adolescence. During these period, the child is malleable. she tends to develop her personality and character, she is very dependent on others; these on whom she models her behaviour through observation, repetition and imitation. Her physical, mental, social, spiritual and emotional developments start and progress to get to the peak at the young adult stage.

However, back then in history, even up till today in some cultures, a girl-child is seen as nothing. Our forefathers wanted a son and not a daughter which contributes to the rate at which polygamous marriage increased in the past. Then, men married more than one wife just to 'produce' a male child. Some women are called names because of their inability to produce a male child. Tell me, are they God?

The society has placed so much pain on a girl-child which includes:

1. EDUCATION:

What Is Education?

Education is a process of providing information to an inexperienced person to help him/her develop physically, mentally, socially, spiritually, politically and economically.

It is also seen as the process through which an individual is made functional members of the society. It is a process which an individual acquire knowledge and realises his/her potentialities to be useful for his/her self and others.

Education is a fundamental human right which should be enjoyed irrespective of the gender. Women in Nigeria have various challenges in obtaining equal education in all forms of formal education. Education is a basic human right and has been recognized as such since the 1948 adoption of the universal declaration on human right whereas, rapid socioeconomic development of a nation has been observed to depend on the calibre of women and their education in that country. There are lot of human right instruments that provide for education as a fundamental right (1948)

However, the importance of education in the life of a girl-child cannot be overemphasized. Many girls today do not have adequate education. In some region where girls are at the range of 12-14years, the elders in the community presumes that 'she is ripe for marriage' and their words are LAW; so, tell me what worth are her words when the elders have spoken? Thus, depriving her of her freedom of expression as embedded in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 section 39(1).

The nature traditional philosophy is that a woman's place is in her husband kitchen and her primary role centres on her home. This belief has kept many girls away from education. When a girl is given out at a very tender age to a man old enough to be her grandfather, her right as a woman has been abused as most Nigerian would say 'she don marry her grandpa.' Also, her right of being educated has been deprived and would be doomed to be an illiterate forever if her husband does not give her the opportunity to be educated after the union. Female education serves as an investment that will help facilitate the achievement of family planning objectives and production of healthier children.

Educating a girl-child translates to better health of the future generation. Also, Education bestows on women (is) a disposition of a lifelong acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes, competence and skills. Reduction in child's mobility and mortality thus triggering a snowball effect of achieving all other sustainable development goals in a viable manner. The girl-child needs to be educated to acquire knowledge and skills needed to advance her social status for social interaction and self-improvement. Investing in a girl-child education is vital to driving human capital development in the country. Think about great professionals like Dr(Mrs) Eniola Fadayomi, Prof. Bolanle Awe, Dr Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Dr Obiageli Ezekwesi, Mrs Omobola Johnson, Dr Sarah Alade and many more are products of great investments in girl-child education.

1. CHILD ABUSE:

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) (42 U.S.C.A. § 5106g), as amended by the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010, defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum:

"Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation"; or

"An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm."

child abuse can be seen in two forms in this article which are:

1. EARLY MARRIAGE.

This is another danger a girl-child is exposed to in the society.

Under the Child Rights Act 2003, the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years. Also, in African Children's charter under section 21(2) which states:

'child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years and make registration of all marriages in an official registry compulsory.'

However, the Child Rights Act prohibits both the marriage of those considered to be children and betrothal of children. In relations to child marriages part iii section 21 states:

'no person under the age of 18 years is capable of contracting a valid marriage, and accordingly a marriage so contracted is null and void and of no effect whatsoever.'

Under the marriage act 1990, the minimum legal age of marriage is 21 years for girls, although they are able to marry before the age with the consent of a parent or guardian.

Early marriage is mostly practiced in the northern part of Nigeria. In the northern part of Nigeria, 48% of hausa-fulani are married by age 15 and 78% are married off at the age of 18. This appalling statistics led Elizabeth to describe the life of a girl-child in northern Nigeria as 'pathetic.' However, to buttress her assertion, she maintained that while the ideal marriage of women, although it varies between 20 and 26 years old. In the northern part, where children who have started menstruating are considered mature for marriage and the case of menstruation varies as a girl of 12 years can be given out of marriage based on the fact that she has started menstruating.

In the precolonial era, rigid ideas on gender were impulse on African mind. The women's role was mainly for sexual and commercial labour, satisfying the sexual needs of her man, working on the field, tending the babies and preparing food. How can a girl who is not up to 18 years be able to do all these and look after her so called family?

A girl given out at a tender age is placed at a very high risk. Do you want to tell me a 13 years old is ready to be a mother? What does she know about family life? Obviously the skills that she should have learnt to be a better mother isn't there.

Nigeria has signed and ratified international and instrument which regulate the rights of children. Nigeria ratified the Convention of the Right of a Child (CRC) on 16th of April 1991, and the African charter on the right and welfare of the child (African Children's Charter) on 12th July 2001. Additionally, Nigeria took steps to domesticate both instrument in the form of the Child Right Act (CRA) but despite these, early marriage is still seen as a legal act in some communities.

An important clause which can be invoked against child marriage is section 24(3) of CRC, which states:

'state parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children'

The provision is perhaps the most relevant clause against child marriage, given that the hausa-fulani practice of child marriage is part of their tradition as this traditional practice is detrimental to the health of the girl.

Also, under section 21(18) of the African children's charter, states parties are urged to

'...take all appropriate measures to eliminates harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child in particular:

1. Those customs and practices prejudicial to the health or life of the child; and
2. Those customs and practices discriminatory to the child on the ground of sex or other status.

Early marriage should be outlawed, and parents should be educated about the benefits of later marriage. a national children's commission should be set up for defending the rights of girl child in an educational, social, cultural, political and economic context. The commission should maintain statistics of a child survival and other socioeconomic factors. Parent have an important role to fulfil in helping female children achieving the basic necessities of survival, development and in learning about the fundamental rights of child development and care. Also, teachers have an important role to play in teaching about early marriage.

(2) Rape

Rape can be define using the following references:

Under the Criminal Code of Nigeria (Section 357 & 358), Rape is defined as

'having unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl, without her consent, or with her consent if the consent is obtained by force or by means of threats or intimidation of any kind, or by fear of harm, or by means of false act, or, in case of a married woman, be personating her husband.' This offence is punishable by imprisonment for life, with or without caning.'

Under the Penal Code of Nigeria (Section 282),

"A man is said to commit rape when he has sexual intercourse with a woman in any of the following circumstance: against her will; without her consent; with her consent, when the consent is obtained by putting her in fear of death or of hurt."

Under the Criminal Laws of Lagos State (Section 258) which states,

“Any man who has unlawful sexual intercourse with a woman or girl without her consent, is guilty of the offence of rape”

Under the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (Section 1)

“A person commits the offence of rape if he or she intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus or mouth of another person with any other part of his/her body or anything else without consent, or the consent is obtained by force”

Rape and sexual assault are serious crimes against the dignity and sexual autonomy of the next person. Every individual has the right and choice to make informed decisions about their sexual conduct and also to respect the rights and dignity of others. We can see from the legislations above that consent is a predominant factor when it comes to offences of rape and sexual assault.

We can also note that the VAPPA (Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act) is quite progressive as it makes provisions for both male and female sexual offenders. It also takes into consideration in another section the rape of a person by a group of people which is the first of its kind in Nigerian laws.

With regards to the prosecution and conviction of sexual offenders, it is unbelievable that despite the prevalence of rape and sexual violence in our society, there have been only 18 reported convictions in Nigeria till date. It goes to show that a lot of people are ignorant of the law, it shows that rape has become normalized to the point that survivors do not feel the need to report. It also shows that there is little or no belief in the justice system.

On November 17th 2014, a four-year-old girl was ganged-raped by her school staff. The gruesome incident goes to highlight the suffering of girl child. According to recent report by a child right NGO, sexual abuse against the child surpasses that against the male one, a fact which relegate the former as the more socially disadvantaged member in the society.

In order for us to have an increase in the rate of prosecution and convictions of sexual offenders there needs to be an increase in advocacy. Survivors especially the females need to be aware of their rights as citizens, they need to know that justice can be achieved and that the perpetrator can be punished for this crime. It is important to note that rape can happen to anyone but it is never the fault of the survivor. It does not matter what she was wearing, where she was or what she was doing – it is always the fault of the perpetrator/rapist as rape is a conscious decision. I know a girl raped at the age of ten when she was still a kid; tell me what might have attracted the perpetrator to her if not for the devilish desire.

A girl child is exposed to this life especially those from broken homes. When a girl is raped, it can lead to so many effects which can be sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/aids, syphilis, gonorrhoea etc. It can also lead to unwanted pregnancies which can cause emotional trauma or worse to the victim.

(c) Child trafficking

Trafficking in children is a form of human trafficking and is defined by The United Nations as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring and/or receipt kidnapping a child for the purpose of slavery, forced labour and exploitation for the purpose of prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery servitude or removal of organ which goes against the law.

Section 34(1) of the federal republic of Nigeria 1999 states:

1. Every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly
2. No person shall be subject to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment:
3. No person shall be held in slavery or servitude; and
4. No person shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour.

Human trafficking has been described as a modern day form of slavery. Trafficking involves the transport or trade of people within and across borders for the purpose of forcing them into slavery conditions.

The effect and consequences of child trafficking in Nigeria is still having its toll in children especially the girl-child who are indeed the leader of their family and the society at large despite the domestic laws enacted by the government to fight the practice. However, the causes of child trafficking are nothing but poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, unemployment, corruption, greed, peer group pressure, broken homes, family size and many more. These factors make children to migrate elsewhere for better opportunities. It usually drives people to leave a region in search for better life elsewhere. The destination of the migrant is usually at bigger cities. Sometimes the economic situation is such that most parents are unable to care and properly feed their family; in the process, some fall a victim to the bogus promises of a good time abroad with the prospect of earning foreign exchange that will be converted into tons of naira in Nigeria and because of that, some have sold their child especially their girl-child to unknown slavery or prostitution. Although Nigeria has enormous human and natural resources as well as the largest oil producer in Africa and the eleventh largest in the world, It is related as one of the poorest country in the world with GDP per capital of about US\$150 million with about two-third of the population living in rural areas without basic amenities such as electricity, hospital, school, poor drinking water etc. and earning less than \$1 per day so due to this, they subject their children especially the girl child to various forms of labour including trafficking for economic gain.

Girl trafficking is one of the dangerous illegal practice which should be totally eradicated.

CONCLUSION

The society have placed so many plight on the girl-child which some are explained in the above article. The girl-child faced so many dangers in the society which ranges from the family and down to the society; these have make them vulnerable to Poor nutrition, vulnerability to diseases, poor physical and mental development, inferiority complex, fear, emotional trauma just to mention but few. However, these hazards should be looked into and more governmental forces should be empowered to fight against such act. Let's note that Investing in girl's education transforms the communities, countries and the entire world; Girls who are educated are more likely to (live)

heathy and productive lives. Early marriage is never a way out and obviously a culture that should be eradicated. Rape, 'the culture of today,' should be stopped! Beliefs must be changed about the value of girl-child education. There should be elimination of gender bias!

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“Whose is He”

Isaac Kilibwa

Once in the heat of a heady and borderline volatile argument on an African writer's whatsapp group, a Nigerian lady asked me a question that gave me pause. See, here I was, spewing hard line theology, regurgitating ideas I had been made to internalise, in all the passion and fervour of an ardent fanatic. I still am a fanatic, mark you, something of an undecided sober radical. Someone told me that that is what one should feel, undecided, when they fully, (or partially? I don't know, see the dilemma?) grasp the idea of how vast knowledge is, how stretching it stretches, and how insane, and uncertain the pursuit of it can get one. The key to self peace is contentment. And now to sate your curiosity, which I know is approaching a somewhat keen level of frustration, the question the good lady sought from me was, What is the difference between a Christian and a moralist?

I remember telling her that the only difference was that one had Christ and the other had some other ideal on which they based their self-righteousness. I realise now that that must have been quite the evasive answer. Quite binding if not incriminating too when one is trying to maintain a strong stand because the 'self-righteousness' term sure does bear unpleasant connotations. At the time though, it seemed such an apt and smug remark. Truth is, there is a difference between true Christians and hard line moralists, and the harder we scream at those we deem weak people, the keener we are to note their misdemeanours, the more it tells of what kind of people we are. People poor of the strength of love. So the difference is grace.

When the rapper Lecrae felt like he was being boxed into a tight space for the kind of music he did, he said in Believe that he wouldn't call his music gospel music but he is Christian, and his music was or is what happens when a Christian flows. Same scenario with a Christian writer writing his poetry. Normally, they would not be expected to write about love in a boy-girl relationship setting lest they be accused of being immoral, nor would it be deemed proper for them to write about crime for fear of being misunderstood as glorifying crime. Yet these people are simply society's mirror and are sometimes, most times, even speaking against wrongs in their art, if one has an ear that can really listen. Even when an artist may not be speaking against some morally improper idea they have included in their work, if the audience is in the right perspective with its beliefs, it will benefit. Dan Brown's, The Da Vinci Code spoke to me in a way I'm quite sure it did not speak to a group of Christians, The Lost Symbol finished the cementing of my conviction. I found that I was a better Christian after reading the two books.

One might write a poem for his wife or his sister. If one is quick to judge, they would jump to the wrong conclusion if they did not know that the artist was married or had a sister. This the reason deacons ought to be sober people, not flighty and having the mystery of the faith. In history, lynchings and other forms of persecution have been delt on people who may or may not have been in opposition of the faith. All we did, we did in the name of doing God a service. When one objectively observes some cases, one is bound to discover that most of the injustice committed was in fact a ruse for dishonest men to further their own devious agenda while hiding behind the banner of Christianity, religion as a whole. Kings have murdered and plundered, priests have

manipulated governments for their own gain, political moves have been played, all in the name of God. Which begs the question, whose is He?

Whose?

Whose is He that cannot be bribed

By words and gestures and coins guiled,

Who is it that shall have Him tied

In his own debt for favour owed?

Who?

What is the truth? The truth is that the Christian has been called to live a morally upright life, free of any appearance of sin. The truth is that he should shun evil and walk in the light. He should be an example of perfection. Sanctified lips, pure of heart and intention, guileless life. The truth is that a Christian should be one who is bathed in the fragrance of sobriety, doused in the flame of consecration, contrite.

But God is rich in mercy. I while yet a novice, sometimes expected and prayed for God to rain down fire and brimstone on a wicked generation but He never did. I often ended up disappointed, of course, just like Jonah after Nineveh was spared. I forgot that God wills that none should be lost. His love is all encompassing, it is all suffering, it bears all and forgives all. Then and only then does He have the right to be just when He decides to judge. The Christian should be most humane of all creatures, loving even his enemies, for that is the only way he would find it in himself to send a sincere petition for the world. Exemplary in humility, selflessness, brotherly kindness and mercy, the wars among our churches should not even be hearsay mentioned about us. Righteousness is of God, He is the one that purges, cleanses, sanctifies. And instead of us standing on pedestals to condemn and curse, we should seek to nurse, and to heal, and to bless. Judgement starts in the house of the Lord. Judge your temple first.

Whose is Jesus? Is He for the 'self-righteous' or is He for the sinner? In JIFE, the rapper, Da TRUTH says that when he looks to the world, he finds it with guns aiming at him. They claim that he loves the church and cares not for the streets, something he says is far from the truth. On the other hand, when he looks to the church, they are aiming automatic weapons at him, saying he is preaching to the choir while the same people don't listen and continue dying in the streets. The creative is then lost, in a predicament where both the church and the world disown and judge him. He then keeps telling them that Jesus is for everybody because, truly, He is.

“With Deep Regrets”

Martha Patterson

You can hardly imagine.

You're a journalist

With a good career.

And you come here

To interview me on my father.

Well, why wouldn't you?

People wonder what a life

Like mine is like. I'll tell you.

Yes, have a drink of water.

I'm sorry, I've run out of coffee.

He was a serial murderer.

From the age of eleven

I lived with this knowledge.

And then when I got older,

I watched friends walk down the aisle

To get married, holding Daddy's arm.

I knew I would never

Have that moment come.

My father was in jail,

For all the rest of life.

I lived like an ostrich,
With my head down –
How could I live with
What my father did?
-- The callousness.

One victim
Was a textile worker –
Employed in a factory,
Nothing greater, nothing more
Than that.

He was found, his skull smashed,
Arms tied behind his back,
And he'd had a family of his own.
An innocent who worked
And did nothing to provoke my father.

I have received great love
From friends who seem to
Understand my shame.
They tell me I'm upstanding,
A good and worthy person.

They tell me I bring light
To ordinary lives
And not to be afraid.

They tell me I'm a star
Shining in the dark.

Does that sound naïve?
Now, I hope I'll do good deeds
One day for all Dad's victims –
Give a speech to people,
Or write a worthwhile book.

Listen. I felt shame.
When I was eleven,
My mother told me Daddy
Was very sick and weary
And was going to prison.

I felt that I'd been struck
With an angry hammer.
People asked where Daddy was --
I said he left to fight a war.
How does one broach this topic?

With fear and caution, shame.
A memory...my father holding me
On his big lap, when I was three.
The loud TV was on and
He laughed at the actors.

A hard, coarse laugh –
He didn't like these TV folk.
Did I feel danger in his arms? No.
Just wonder that he held me,
Feeding me a cookie.

I saw him twice in prison...
Because I was still a child
And I always wondered.
Why he did it -- rage?
He felt righteous and so fair –

They had “betrayed” him,
Exposed his low place in the world.
His anger at other people
Was always justified, to him.
I stopped answering his letters.

You see me in this suit,
My styled hair, nice shoes?
I'm an attorney now,
Because I want some purpose
And I'm an advocate for children.

I'm a realist. Trauma never ends,

But maybe I'm a very little star,

Emitting beams of hope

With my tiny fistful

Of optimistic light.

“As Seeing is a Kind of Brightness”

Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto

– Nigeria-Biafra War in retrospect, 1967-1970

a. remembrances are sometimes like lilies dazed by mudstones;
sometimes like laughter and smiles, stretching
along the face for the memories of the years past.
and sometimes are like regrets and losses, scary to forget.
remembrances are salt and sweet.

b. on an armchair rocking it back and forth, with
waves and tides of remembrances matching into your head.
you dream and see field flowers in drowning sepia.
you feel hostilities in the eyes of those you brought
here and in the hearts of those they brought here too.

c. remembrances can be of sentences in reverse,
stringed together by missiles and grenades and tanks.
remembrances can be of sears and magmas. name places:
Borno, Benue, Niger-Delta, Mpumalanga, Somalia, Egypt, Dafur.
it wakes fathers every morning with fear and retribution.
it sings lullabies to mothers every night with losses and terror.

d. one, I remember, was the day your school shut down:
you were eight in years, and hurried home through warring crowds;
through burning and smoking streets; through blistered walls
and still bodies to find it bowing in atrophies and ruins.
you met your father at a corner staring at you with closed eyes,
he was clothed in a pool of his red, with a knife glued to his head.
at another corner was your mother with her tummy wide open,
and your brother, no, your sister slipped out, still corded to her.
you ran off, cursing here till there were no more words left in your voice.

e. as seeing is a kind of brightness,
you wonder how you have lived all these years
saying, never again to fire, never again to blood and deaths;
how fiercely you adore; how bravely you
preach tolerance and love
as it has been between shores and seas.

“George Floyd is Dead”

Robin Talbert

I.

I planned to write about people who had made a strong impression on me,
but who when I ran into them years later, had no memory of me.

I planned to write about missing potluck dinners due to the Covid lockdown.

I planned to write about the importance of women supporting political candidates,
to say that 42 million women are unregistered, and we have to fix that.

But then,

George Floyd was murdered,
and I couldn't write about any of that.

II.

An African American friend cancelled a meet up.

She already worried about her two adult sons,

one married to a white woman.

And now George Floyd was dead.

My friend from Gambia wrote me.

I feel like I have been naïve about the US, he said.

That my experience there was a sham.

George Floyd. Ahmaud Arbery. The Coopers.

I want to grab every white person who

says they are not racist

by the shoulders and shout

Yes you are! We all are!

So long as we accept the status quo of our white privilege,

we are the problem.

The collective knee on the neck of George Floyd.

The collective institutionalized entitled voice of Amy Cooper on that phone.

III.

My life goes on.

I have a glass of wine with dinner.

I watch Netflix with my husband.

I listen to the birds as I sit at my desk.

I read to my granddaughter on Facetime.

I wake up at 1:00 at 2:00 at 3:00 am

and read news about the virus

and the protests and the locusts and the despots.

I worry about harsh words I say when I am tired.

I worry about pains in my chest and knees.

I worry about worrying.

I yell at my computer when it makes assumptions about my intent.

I worry about not doing enough.

Voters to call.

Letters to write.

Contributions to make.

Donald Trump is still President.

George Floyd is dead.

IV.

We went for a hike on the C & O Canal,
along an isolated stretch by McCoy's Ferry and Four Locks.

The canal was built before the Civil War.

We walked by the lockkeeper's cottage and
saw a recently shed snakeskin by the stone walls.

We greeted a Mennonite family riding bicycles,
the mother in a pale blue muslin dress and simple white cap.

As we were leaving, I worried
about some African American children

playing too close to the cars.

Later we stopped at Jimmy Joy's Log Cabin for take out.

Bruce went in, wearing his mask, to pick up our food.

As I waited in the car,

two women emerged from a car parked near us.

Middle aged, one white, one black.

Giggling, they danced in the parking lot

to music on the car radio.

I was happy to see them,

a multi-racial, perhaps lesbian, couple,

or just two friends.

But didn't they know, I wondered.

Didn't they know?

Didn't they know,

that George Floyd is dead.

“What Can Save Us”

Gurupreet K. Khalsa

“Hell is empty; all the devils are here.” Shakespeare

Here we are, buried in inanities,
enemies wanded into existence for no purpose,
laughter vaguely remembered,
love wisped away by fear.

In the hardened wrong of power,
shielding lies they plot and pander.
Enraged, I watch the cracking structure.
My despair sizzles in wrathful heat.

Puffed and preening,
the lords of nothing
yowl their snarling hate.

Bandersnatchitty,

in a cage if they breathe brown

Frumiosity,

sick discombobulation,

warlords on the loose again.

And so we look to real and human,

laughter froths in hopeful song,

love abloom in pulsing purpose.

Today the heart lifts in delight.

Healing, we find footing, know to mend what has been split,

embrace the many: joyous tapestry of brilliant threads.

Down the way my brother sings, my sister hums,

each my family, tribe, my own,

voicing need to be each other.

I say we lead, we hold, we link hands:

lift our hands, lift our voice, lift our soul.

Saving, John Lewis said, means to be the headlights:

algorithmic integrity, the body politic of truth;
right here is the alliance
evoking warrior determination.

Here we stand, just ordinary people,
endeavoring as allies to be the new:
rock-strong, the bedrock,
eternal space for all who come.

“On Sacred Grounds”

Hardarshan Singh Valia

Rabbi

Reverend

Imam

Sikh Preacher

after the massacre caressed

the departed souls wiped

their own tears washed

bloodstained floors cleansed

the walls and, together, covered

the spot on the door

where the

bullet had pierced through, the sign

“Safe Place.”

“The Cross and the Crescent”

Nwaeze God’stime

The problem of humanity is that we can be sick in two places- the body and the mind. And the latter is the worst tragedy on earth. It is the source of our problems.

My country is a war zone where leaders sit on high sofas tossing glasses of wine as they watch the inaccurate statistics of the dead and the injured. They decide with greed, turn armed forces to armed friends and take crowns by false. They are power-failures who sit in solar-powered homes and offices where they share the proceeds from our bills. While this could readily be christened ‘corruption,’ still it has proven to be the greatest challenge to our collective security and progress. What else could be worse a negligence of humanity as displayed by myopic leaders who impoverish the masses to enrich themselves?

We have been made one by the Maker but the Made allow the elements of our beauty to divide us into oxymoronic twos: the freeborn and the slave, the Black and the White, the despotic rulers and the ruled, the rich and the struggling poor. This division is characterized by incessant killings and oppression. In the words of the British Lawyer and interfaith activist, Jasvir Singh, “there have been great cruelties and persecution in the world in the name of religion, nation, race and caste. Innocent people have been tortured and maimed. Even little children and women have not been spared.” Boko Haram, a terrorist group which has a religious undertone has caused more harm than words can express. The reek of the corpse of George Floyd has not evaporated- a Black American who was murdered by a White police officer in Minnesota by kneeling on his neck for about eight minutes. His last word “I can’t breath” is a dirge that incarnates the ordeals of many Black people in the face of racial discrimination. Southern Kaduna is helplessly becoming a graveless necropolis. These give an ageless relevance to the words of Mother Theresa of Calcutta who said that “if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” I am because you are.

As our common bond as human beings is being threatened by hate crimes, it is important that we realize that wherever anyone falls is not quite their reckoning. You did not choose to be White or Black, Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba, therefore, it is only reasonable that we embrace our differences as a harmonizing force against walls of segregation.

“I’m not concerned with your liking or disliking me...all I ask is that you respect me as a human being,” said Jackie Robinson. It is a natural tendency to have predilection for your race, religion or tribe but the choice to behave respectfully towards others is discretionally yours. Thus, you may like White more than Black or Christianity more than Islam, but you have a moral obligation to treat others with respect. The consummate reggae artist, Lucky Dube in his song 'Respect,' lends credence to the importance of respect as an effective tool for harmony. Like what you are but respect what you are not. “Do to others what you would have them do to you.”

It is true that human origin and evolution is a victim of different theories but regardless of whatever perspective appeals to you, common sense requires that we ought to realize that we could not have originated from different sources. We have a common origin regardless of race or

religion. We are all human, and what follows is the popular saying, “the next evolutionary step for humankind is to move from man to kind.”

The humility and works of Mother Theresa especially to the poor is an indelible expression of I am because you are. Professor Wole Soyinka's lionhearted criticisms of class oppression, prejudice and bad governance also highlight the fact that we belong to one another. His poem 'Telephone Conversation' extensively borders against racial discrimination. In the circumstance, the world has been left astounded by Marcus Rashford, a twenty-two year old Black boy who plays football for England and Manchester United. Through his efforts, over 3.7 million meals per week are supplied to vulnerable people across the UK to alleviate the impacts of Covid-19. He has also influenced the government to revoke their decision to cancel food voucher this summer for vulnerable school children. There is also Ahmed Isah, popularly known as Ordinary Ahmed. His foundation 'Brekete Family' in partnership with Human Rights Radio, 101.1, Abuja, continues to leave tears of awestruck joy in the eyes of many daily. He fights for every violated rights and renders help to every need. This is the only job he does daily. These good works and many others are inspired by the knowledge that we are one humanity.

The knowledge and acceptance of our common bond is the very first step to making our world a better place for us all. In this line of thought, Nelson Mandela said that,

“Our human compassion binds us the one to the other, not in pity or patronizingly but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.”

The walls that separate and imprison us are largely mental. Thus, we react (love or hate,) not to the essence of a person but to ideas in our heads. As our world is being deformed by prejudice, let us configure our minds to accept that we are one. This would help us overwhelm unnecessary divisions and refocus our aspiration to making the society a better place. Being objective in national matters in Nigeria grows harder everyday among the political class and the masses. Every issue is tribalized or received with religious bigotry, and daily, it feels like my country is closer to a break-up. It is doing more harm to our national unity than we have realized.

The last end of everyone regardless of age, race, religion or tribe is death. What then could be the benefit of divisions since we have a common end, grave- where neither our religion nor race can be differentiated? This should disabuse sectionalism and allow for unity to work and leave this world a better place for us and the next generations. This is because, as the Igbo say, “igwe bu ike” - multitude is might.

I am because you are. Leah Sharibu could have been my sister. George Floyd could have been your brother or even yourself. “We must learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools...,” Martin Luther King Jr admonished. In her song 'We are here,' Alicia Keys reverberates, “We are here for all of us.” As for me, I am with Thomas Paine, “my country is the world and my religion is to do good.”

“Kelly”

Mark Leflar

Over a year ago she began her transition from 53 years of Christopher to Kelly. She quit her job as a technician developing cockpit multi-server dashboards to set her mind west. Go west young woman and grow within yourself. The “boys” she worked with would not handle her coming out all too well, so she quit without notice and never spoke to her best friends again. No more fishing trips, card games, Sunday’s drinking beer debating which over/under is worth parlaying, no more discounted Monday evening nine, nor was there a confidant to complain about the wife and kids.

There is an ineluctable arousal, maybe not with uncertainty, but escaping the facts of familiarity. I made acquaintance with Kelly Hines on the Southwest Chief, indulging in drink and brief participation in one another’s life through the middle of Nebraska until we shared a jubilantly tearful farewell in Flagstaff where she set off to restart her life somewhere in the desert.

We spoke of her gender dysphoria, her transition in less than a year from being a man of 53 years to a woman, and the sacrifices one makes for their own happiness. She touched in me the human interest by calling into the wild that exists in every individual. I think of Kelly as a tame hero, an exaltation in order for those around her to question in quiet deliberation one’s own life. Or, at least fumble with their buttons. Where denizens of the gelded eye, molded by particular and somewhat peculiar upbringings, call her, and those like her, a sort of protest of civility, I think of her as the definition of our terrible obscure humanity. A spiritual house cleaning of the Gordon Lish decor. We all eventually end up naked cadavers that have been obstinately scrutinized for an impulse to happiness. Kelly’s anxieties were not caused by impending death, but a growing splinter, an intrigue for life.

“You know what I like about the moon?” She asked in a brandy covered basque baritone voice without drifting an eye from the window to give me the once over.

“That it can change without us even noticing?” I hoped to impress in my reply.

“No.” She gives a soft curious exhale. “It is that the moon is always present. Always fucking present. In the daylight, there. In the afternoon, there. In the night,” she turned to look me in the eye and to donate a tentative stoic grin, “there. The moon is a loyal friend. Stars are a bunch of frauds that steal all the good quotes.”

If Billy Conn left the blonde, while subsequently fancying a hairstyle resembling a post-Gainsbourg France Gall, changed his name to Kelly and the certain surgeries that go along with it, yet kept the punchy combative moniker, I would find myself sitting before the latter part of a middle aged wonder, staring out Southwest Chief’s observatory car over afternoon’s immense ripe yellow plains that stretched as much ahead as behind on the Nebraska-Kansas border. I traced the imperfections of her face. She had a visible hairline, but just barely, foundation that resembled tattered clouds on an idle Tuesday morning covering the furrows of worry. Her eyes were, as one thinks of Scandinavia, iconically dark, or perhaps understood Das Nichts, and filled with a Pedro Paramo kind of exuberant secret. White bristly whiskers germinating down her blousy cheeks and jawline towards a noticeable change in pigment of her upper lip. She stood a corn fed 17 hands and six inches, but her Pascale floral midi dress kept the Falstaffian frame deceived.

She stretched her hand out, calloused iron Vienna sausages kept together firm, like in the tin. “Kelly.”

“A pleasure.” I noticed her scratched off pink fingernail polish.

“Mon Vieux.”

“Oh, you know French?”

“I figured it is time to start doing things for myself.” Arthritically adjusting herself.

Less than a week ago she began teaching herself how to sew because it was “the mother” in her. A month before that she took tap dancing lessons along with a ceramic class. Prior to that, she found classes to learn how to paint, play bridge, develop her knife skills in the kitchen, all while reading a book every two days, in which she claims philosophers only tell us what we blanket from ourselves, and that the layman has a far more understanding about the proper calculations (the understanding of the commonness of life) toward the formation of art than those claiming themselves supercilious artists. She did drop her guard of the misgivings of art and go ahead and tell me Borges, Joyce, De Assis, and Thompson were among her favorites. The wife and kids. The wife and kids. Damn. “Fuck” is probably a better reaction. Yes, agreed.

“I think they thought it a midlife crisis when I began wearing earrings around the house. But, after I applied the lipstick, blouses, a discussion needed to be had.”

“What brought on this decision at this point in your life?” I asked.

“Why would I want to keep holding on to this burden. Besides,” I watched her reflection lighten through the balmy interior window, “I gave my children all they really needed from me. I do not mind if they will not come back into my life.”

“But, what about not speaking to your family?”

“What about it?” She asked back uncut, unhomogenized, unpasteurized, looking in my eyes with a frankness that carried over from Christopher.

“Don’t you feel guilt?”

“Not a little. But, I sure I will miss my boys later in life, but I hope they come to find some understanding in their heart when they grow. Even if it is after I am dead.”

“Isn’t there a sort of moral obligation?” I continued with my questioning.

“There is a moral obligation within myself. Again. I am sure there will be a moment or two I will have to myself when I look at something that reminds me of a nice moment we spent as a family. But, it will remind me of the unpleasantness I had in that moment. The lie I lived was always on my mind.” She replied.

“And your wife?”

“I would give her a good recommendation to any man.” She chuckled.

She did tell me me it was very heart wrenching for her wife of 22 years and her two sons (20 and 17). She had been living with this secret all her life. Shortly after, her wife and children packed a few belongings and drove off to her mother. Kelly Stuck in the house for a week longer, but then moved in with another woman, a former coworker, who worked the night shift, before heading to Arizona without any detestation in her own character as a parent.

“There are two lives we all lead,” she began as she leaned in towards me taking my hand into hers, “The life you lead the life you yearn to lead. Sure, I am unapologetic. But, you can either sacrifice your own life for those around you, perhaps live miserably, or you can cut out, sacrifice others in search of the things that bring you joy.”

I do not know which is right or wrong. I think the easy thing to say is, “you never leave your children.” I also believe that there is no afterlife, and that the gap between who we are now and whom we aspire to be needs to be filled with an extreme urgency. Kelly is a reminder that we are, briefly, human beings.

“Javert Is Evil—He Must Be Stopped, He Must Be Killed”

R. J. Keeler

Javert Is Evil—He Must Be Stopped, He Must Be Killed

Les Misérables

—Victor Hugo

Javert, why do you pursue me so?

In his heart, Javert knows he’s right, right up to the hour he doesn’t.

What does it matter why?

A twig breaks or a twig bends is why.

But time goes on apace, as always.

Roosters out in the pasture accept an uprising sun—a new day to crow.

Hell if anyone anywhere knows what or how they actually think;

like using a teaspoon to count an ocean without any spillage.

What an artist dies in me! he says.

Even this uneasy universe seems to be conflicted.

Javert, if you ask, God could touch your brow to remove a suffering.

That blue and white flower next to me as I sat in prayer this morning is unconflicted.

A dog's soul either is or isn't—no secular debate.

Your best child has died; then, after all, it did not, so returned scarred but whole.

The supple bough bends with the wind.

Even continents slide and occasionally kick up unhappily.

Is an I love you static or conditional, or neither?

Light of goodness burns Valjean's eyes.

“Farewell, Border”

Andy Marie Perry

I kicked the invisible line
that divided our countries
discovered it to be oxygen, carbon dioxide
a plume of road dust thrown up
by passing vehicles, by foot, hoof traffic—
not even close to impermeable
that line.

My sneak sailed right through it
like a diplomat’s loafer, no!
Like a tourist’s rough-treaded hiking boot, no!
Like the forward movement of a human being
walking on earth.

Yes, I will come over this evening
breach that sidewalk, white gate,
beauty garden bed of your delineated property;
I’ll enter the front door like:
fresh air into a team of lungs
after dinner slip out the back
as a sly sphincter’s whistle.

Where am I going

if not right

here?

Where have I been if not

every

where?

Please, give me your hand.

Your grubby, chipped nails

I'll give you my hand

dirty, gnawed through—

the only question remaining will be who

is holding on

to who?

Who

is never ever

letting go?

Which one of us is falling?

Which travelling

(important docs in a knapsack)

hand entwined in grimy hand,

the happiest hands, back home

to where we never could

have left?

Impossible!

Invisible!

Complete insurrection!

Who am I at all

if I'm not

you?

“Poem In Which In Contemplating A Scene In The Movie "Where Hands Touch" Wherein A White German Boy Dies Before His Black Lover, I Make Him Survive His Father's Venom”

Hussani Abdulrahim

I rewrite the scene, fill it with love
they say love conquers everything
why then does it have to end in tears

It doesn't have to
they say love conquers everything
so I rewrite the scene

maybe they live forever
where he shows her Nina Simone
maybe the music never ends

maybe their world accepts them as they are
they do not see black and white
but love, at bottom, and nothing more
nothing more except love

except love-- maybe there was never a war
the war--just one big error in our dreams
our dreams should hold light and music

maybe the music never ends

never ends where she twirls to Nina Simone

maybe they live forever in that scene

The scene I rewrite, fill it with love

say love conquers everything

does it have to end in tears

all the tears I give back to the girl

girl learns to train eyes on the light

from the light they have no need to hide

no need to hide all their lives

all their lives was war

maybe there never was

was just one big error in our dreams

our dreams should bear light and music

the music never ends

ends where she twirls to Nina Simone

and they live forever in that scene

“Karim”

Irfan Jeddy

In the streets of Peshawar, in the early morning of the warming sun, a young boy was beginning to work. His name was Karim, and he was a street kid. He had a home, though he hardly spent time there, for he had to work to provide for his parents. His work was similar to that of other street children, where they collected the trash that was left on the street, left by negligent citizens who hadn't a care on how their city looked nor cared about making a change to clean up their city.

There were a number of street children all ranging from the age of seven to fifteen, and Karim was somewhere in the middle at the age of eleven, though he looked around nine due to his malnourished body. Most of them worked from sunrise to sunset, however Karim worked into the late night. He worked hard from the fear of his demanding parents who had no notion to work themselves only to use him as a servant. He was beaten if he had not produced enough money for the day. They had thoroughly beaten him from the time he had started this job which was around six and a half years old. Regardless of the long hours Karim worked, he still received little pay, but it was sufficient enough for his parents. A staggering \$2.00 for a day's collection of coke bottles, and plastic waste. It was their future, they sought no other life, and unfortunately that was the case. All of the street children were uneducated, and the idea of school was nothing more than a dream. All of these boys who work in these streets end up spending their entire lives here, some of which continue this same line of work.

As mentioned before Karim was malnourished and he had developed an underdeveloped body that was of a small and frail frame. He wore a greasy head of hair and his light skin tone was stained with dark blotches of dirt. The white kurta that he wore for such a period of time transitioned to a tan color, where rings of sweat and dirt became one with the fabric. Karim was dirty as dirty could be even for the standards of a child his age. Yet it wasn't for the lack of self care, he hadn't bathed due to not having a chance to, in fact there was nowhere for him to bathe except for the river in the outskirts of the city. There was hardly a chance for him to eat or sleep for that matter. Most of his waking hours was working, collecting trash throughout the city. However, his stench and his attire wasn't seen as anything peculiar. In fact, he blended in quite well amongst the other street children.

There was one thing about Karim that did separate him from the others, and that was he was a great collector of trash, the best among the streets. That was due to how serious he took his job, not out of a duty for his country, but out of fear of what would happen to him if he didn't. Working also allowed for him to take his mind off his situation that he so desperately needed, as when he had nothing to do that was a time of great anxiety, mostly about his future. Collecting trash for him was an odd therapy to his soul, it was even something that he looked forward to.

Rolling up his sleeve and walking with his tarp bag he scavenged the streets for any trash. Karim's bag was always full come evening time, which is now why he started to carry another bag. These two bags would be completely full by the time he would be done for the day. He looked in just about every corner of the streets, mostly trying to stay out of the way of the other children collecting their trash, he didn't want to intrude on their findings. However, the streets had

enough trash that one didn't need to look far to find an abundance of trash. He would take himself and his bag under the bridges where he could see the drugged out boys and men on heroin shooting up heroin, he went through the alleyways where he saw men selling drugs, and around the mosques where those same men went in for prayer. Karim knew the less known about places for trash, at this point he was a veteran of his trade.

His body took a toll from his labor. Since he lacked the proper nutrients or sleep, he developed aches in his joints, that he felt in every movement. His back always gave him the most trouble, so much so when he did have an opportunity to sleep, the pain kept him awake through the entire night. But the boy was strong, he was tough enough to keep persisting, forcing himself to get through each and every day. He never complained and his state of emotional welfare on the outside was quite pleasant, the other children always knew him to have a smile on his face accompanied with a cheerful voice. It was only in the dark of the night when he was concealed from all other eyes and ears, that he would shed the tears of the unbearable pain that grew inside him.

One of the few times in which his job was difficult, was not from the labor itself but rather from the eyes of the other children of Peshawar. Not the other street children, the children mentioned this time come from the privileged position, who have a normal life and childhood. Those children who know how to read and write, those children whose homes have bathtubs and toilets, those children who are well fed, and most of all those children who are happy. Karim dared not look at them for if he did he thought that it would be bad for his soul and may make him foul and bitter. A thought of another life did no good for him, he would rather believe that all children had a similar fate to him. And so, he did his best to move past them as fast as he could, but not before he felt their gaze on him. A gaze that carried with it contempt and humiliation. Every time he felt it it broke him even more. Today, he came across two boys both sons to a well to do doctor of the city. They both were pudgy and ate falooda from bowls that they carried firmly under their left hand. Some of the noodles they managed to miss with their mouth fell on their shirts and syrup could be seen dripping from the corner of their lips. Karim walked past them, to which they stopped their eating, covered their mouths with a sneered look and turned their backs towards him. They could be heard snickering to each other with full mouths of falooda.

What was even worse was that as he moved past the snickering boys he came across the scent of freshly made kabobs one of the street vendors made. The smell flew through the air into the nose of Karim and traveled down into his stomach where it settled for sometime. The scent brought taste along with it. His hunger increased and his stomach broke out in a fit, desperate for just one bite. They sat in stacks on the side of the vendor's cart. They were incredibly affordable, even considered cheap among the working class, but Karim had nothing to spare.

A couple of the vendors did provide him with some of their own trash to which he gladly accepted, and sadly they never once offered him any food in return of his generosity. It was as almost as they expected the boy to take waste from them. The rest of the vendors in the city did not deal with Karim and just saw him as another street kid looking for money to use for heroin. It was true for many of the street children, but not for Karim, he was of a level head. All of the money he earned was for his parents, not a cent went to anything else. He had no concept of his own money. He was just doing what he had to, as to not be harmed. His appearance would state otherwise, as his underdeveloped body and his brown teeth still juvenile began to rot, he looked as if he was a user.

Karim had filled up his first bag just before sunset, it was stuffed and bloated, but light enough to be carried along. He didn't take it to the junk collect as he always waited until his work ended to receive his payment all at once. The junk collector stayed open until the last call of prayer, but that was more than enough time for Karim to get both bags filled.

"Ay bhai!" Naeem called out to Karim. Naeem was a child a few years older than Karim. He knew all the ins and outs of the street, knew all that went on in the streets, and acted sort of like a role model to the younger children. He was decent to the rest of the children, never harmed anyone, and tried to bring the children together once and a while to have some fun. "Salaam" Karim said with a soft tone.

"The boys are going to watch a film, will you come?" He asked

"No, I am sorry I am working now," Karim said, and swung the bloated bag over his shoulder.

"Always working bhai! You should take a break, have some fun you know. Too much work is bad for the heart" Naeem said playfully.

"No it's alright, I have fun doing this" Karim said with a convincing smile. "Okay, suit yourself. I have to go. The film is starting soon. Salaam" Naeem said and approached another group of street children at a distance.

Three hours passed and the night dimmed the sunlit sky. The azan rang out at a local mosque in the city. The men crowded into the bathrooms of the mosque, to prepare their body's for prayer. Karim with the second bag filled decided to take the time to pray. He wanted to be more religious and loved the teachings of the Prophet but he had always been unable to pray as he would always be working. Since he made quicker progress, he decided that nothing wrong would happen if he partook in prayer. He set the bags behind the mosque, resting them against the back wall. Karim made his way to the entrance of the mosque, took off his over worn sandals and went inside. First he made his way into the bathroom to make wudu. He took to a sink and began washing the various body parts required to be cleaned for prayer. By the time he was done scrubbing the accumulated dirt around his body, the sink was painted in a mud like color. Luckily for him the bathroom was empty as prayers had already started. He rinsed off the sink and quickly went to make prayers. Karim took to a spot in the corner of the prayer area away from the rest and made his prayer. He bent over, prostrated, sat on his heels, and did so three times over, all while whispering to himself the verses of the Quran that were recited by the Imam. He turned his head side to side to complete his prayer and whispered more words of the Quran into the palms of his hands, then buried his face into his palms. He got up, collected his shoes and made his way towards the back of the mosque to collect his bags and get his money.

Upon making his way behind the mosque an unfortunate occurrence happened. His bags were gone. He was perfectly still, in complete shock, his heart thumped through his chest. He was in the exact spot where he placed them but they had vanished. He broke his frozen state and began searching all around for his bags. He ran with tears forming around his eyes, and wailed to himself as he searched. With no luck of the bags he searched the rest of the concrete city. He revisited everywhere he went that day. Each place that he revisited, there was no success, and the more steps he retraced the more he began to cry. The tears were endless. He was scared of what was to happen if he didn't bring back any money. He knew what would happen but it had been so long since he'd been beaten that he forgot how much pain it caused him. They were so

used to the money, what were they to do if he didn't bring back anything, maybe something life threatening, he thought.

Exhausted from the search he took a seat against a curbside and wept into the palm of his hands. He couldn't help but make his cries noticeable. A man from one of the buses parked on the side of the road noticed Karim. The man was heading to a regular rest stop for drivers that worked late into the night, a place where beds were set up outside for those to sleep in. The man came approaching in an ordinary way. He wore an untucked button up with the sleeves rolled up. His pants were also rolled up to his calves making his feet clearly visible. Chest hair popped from the midsection of his shirt which it seemed he proudly displayed in plain sight. "Oh! Why are you crying child? The man asked.

"M-M-My" Karim tried getting out his words. "My money is gone sir" he said sniveling and took in gasps of air to calm down.

"Someone stole your money? Oh my! That is shameful!" The man said, shaking his head. "Don't cry, don't cry it will be alright." The man patted Karim. He thought for a second and an idea came to him, which ignited a smile on his face. "Beta, listen I know how you can make some money, lots of money and quickly!" Karim looked up to the man wiping his tears from his face.

"Y-Yo-You do?" Karim replied desperately.

"Yes! I do! Here stand up let me see you" the man said holding out his hand. He brought Karim to his feet and examined him all around. "Hmm, yes you can make money my boy!" The man said, still looking over Karim.

"Please sir, tell me how I can. Please sir I will work for it" Karim said.

"Okay but you have to follow me" the man said.

"Okay sir, I will follow you" Karim replied.

They went over to the rest stop. Many men were there, some were sleeping while others were chatting, smoking, and drinking tea. One of the vendors that catered to the drivers had a small shop with goods that he provided. What the men were smoking and drinking were from his shop and through his own service, of course for a price, but it was discounted just for them. The man took the boy inside the shop.

"Salaam, Rizwan" the man said cheerfully. The owner, Rizwan, was stocking some of his goods behind his counter, when he turned around.

"Salaam, Yousuf," Rizwan said. "And who is this? Ah is this your boy?" "No this isn't my boy, mine is in the bus, I found this boy crying over there on the street. He's in need of some money, someone stole his money, can you believe that? Yousuf said. "Ah that is awful! Very sorry to hear that. These streets are filled with a bunch of no good thieves!" Rizwan replied.

"Do you think you can help him? He said he is willing to work, says he's a good worker too" Yusef remarked.

"Hmm" Rizwan looked him over. "Yes, I think he will do. I know just the right person for him" Rizwan said.

“Please sir, I am willing to work,” Karim said.

“I can tell, you are a good boy, aren’t you?” Rizwan said and pinched the cheeks of Karim. “You both wait here I will be back.”

“The two of them stood in the shop and waited in silence. Yousef looked at his phone ignoring Karim, didn’t even look his way. Karim stood there patiently looking around the trinkets of the shop. Some ten minutes later, Rizwan came back with an older man, who by his appearance could be breaking into his fifties. He was dirty and unkempt, and came in wearing a sweaty tank top, and pajamas. Most of his hair had fallen out a decade ago, and so had some of his teeth. Rizwan pointed at the boy and whispered in the older man’s ears. The older man smiled and bobbed his head back and forth enthusiastically.

“Acha! Acha!” The older man said. The older man took out some money and paid Rizwan who split the money with Yousef.

“Okay boy go with uncle here and he will help you with money” Rizwan said. Karim politely nodded his head, he felt that all was going to be well, and dried his eyes completely. The older man and Karim left Rizwan’s store while he chatted with Yousuf. Contagious grins formed amongst the two of them when they took out and counted their money.

The older man gave out his hand to Karim. “Come this way my sweet boy” he said. Karim took hold of his hand and they walked through the rest stop where some children laid among men, one on top of the other.

“You’re a sweet boy aren’t you?” The man said caressing Karim's hand. “Yes, a very sweet boy, my sweet boy” the man said to himself. Karim stayed silent, hardly keeping pace with the man. They came to the man’s bus, ornaments were decorated upon it, with bright colors to attract all sorts of people, children especially. He opened the back door where some of the seats were removed, replaced by a thin mattress and comforters.

“Come in my sweet boy, I’ll put you to work my sweet boy. The man said, widening his smile, bobbing his head in excitement. Karim hesitated for a second, there was a feeling inside of him telling him to leave, but his desperation for the money led him to his fate. Karim slowly entered the bus, and the man slithered behind him, gently shutting the door and locking it. Just then the final azan rang out through the city. Karim wasn’t to be seen again.

“The Hurricane and the Bucket”

Chad Norman

This is the one...
given a president’s name,
Teddy.

There can be no handshake
in this hurricane,
no one left
watching how the sea
sends its waves
with a size the shore
seems to withstand.

Yet, weeks back now,
a gardener moved to
put his garden to rest,
the annual ending
of his urban crops
what his hands made,
seeds being successful,
all of it once growing
to bring food he trusts.

Yet, one day was different...
when the bucket for watering

contained a drowned sparrow,
inches of rain
sadly forgotten.

Leaving only the question:
"How could those wings
not lift the weightless body
back up to a wind
absolutely able to return it
to partake at the full feeder? "

Today is calmer..
other living sparrows
remind him
how to forget a storm.

“Midnight Monologues”

Mbizo Chirasha

(I)

I see blood traces on the death creased face our setting sun

I hear the echo of sighing owls, sirens of rough wind wailing another death,

Another funeral, another wailing,

Another whining of police dogs

Another thud of a bullet grazing another soul

Lives razed down by death spitting rifles like burning grass

Another tinker of a war drum, another

Thuds and throbs of steely boots announcing another funeral

Again -Again - Again

Owls wailing still, hyenas laughing to another death still

I smell heavy scent of the night, a pitch black night

Heavy scent of darkness wafts my land, I can't breathe

I see beautiful souls suffocating under rough rubbles of COVID19 shallow graves,

I can't breathe

Scent of death lingers onto nostrils of my land

Blunt knives of Xenophobia castrated our glory too

Bones of Kgalaladi sweating

Garurep weeping blood

Mapungubwe is no- longer dancing,

Holy tongues of Njelele silenced

Zambezia hippos remote-paused their laughing

Dear Limpopo of crocodiles wash my spirit,
Dear Congo of great tiger fish wash my soul

Namib Desert, the finger of God is shaking

My elephantine Kirinyaga, bring back the sun to the earth sleeping
under darkness

Tanganyika, anthill of great bones, sing the hymn of the great departed
Kilimanjaro, my wonderland, your rock buttocks carry umbilical cords
of Kings and Queens,

Rise Guruuswa, the sacred pastures, sing to us, sacred grasslands of
black elephants

Sing Nyamhita Nehanda and Rise Nyatsimba Mutota

Sing Munhumutapa, the beginning of kindred spirits,

Rise Changamire , Chirisamhuru of Madzimbabwe

Rise Gumboreshumba the tribe of Chimurenga

Chaminuka, the symbol of spiritual martyrdom, let your bones rise

We are drinking from the poisoned chalice of the Pandemic

Mother died coughing, sister died walking, brother died sneezing

Come Murenga Sororenzou, the supreme spirit, God of my father

Matonjeni, the holy mountain of mist and of rain,

bring the breeze of your holiness to this land burnt by disease

Tovela rainmaker spirit, come down my throat is dry

My lips chapped from thirstiness

I can't breathe, the oxygen of life is now a corrupted wind, spoiled by gorgons

Of demise and demons of greed

Devils of negative ambition

Gorongozo , forest of song ,
Gorongozo , suffocating under the scent of the gun,
Spirit forest
Doves migrating backward towards the ocean
Legs of your peace are broken by planted bombs, Gorongozo my land
Povo wailing tough for their lives, harvesting funerals
they can't breathe
I smell the heavy scent of the night, a pitch black night
I can't breathe,
Let the Mighty Gairezi wash your wounded belly
Gorongozo, my beloved gripped by the fart of war and the scent of the gun
Soweto, machetes hacked our freedom story
Gugulethu, spears are mutilating motherhood
On this trumped earth, brother frying brother in ovens of racism
George Floyd, I can't breathe,
Sister roasting sister with charcoal tongs of violence
And Black Lives Matter
And African Lives Matter
And Zimbabweans Lives Matter
And all Lives Matter
Arab -spring mantra, adulterated eulogies, political hoaxes
Another revolution after frail revolutions
Another struggle after another struggle
True or false
Racism is a renewed -old political fart regaining its tired smell
Violence is a decadent wind fanning tongs of retrogression
Earth boiling in pots of terrorism,

We, stewing in hot soup pots of lockdowns
We suffocate inside burning furnaces quarantine,
We lost the salt of morality, I can't breathe,
We wear faces torn by moral decadence,
Our souls weep from rough lashes of the pandemic
The weeping drench the cracked feet of our times
The struggle is not over, the fight is not over
I chant still until the ray of hope shine over hills of life, I chant still

Pitch-black night birthing revolutionary ghosts and ideological imbeciles
Pitch black night ever pregnant with emotion and wrong ambition,
Heartbroken shadows harvesting funerals and plucking grief from
fields of paradox
I drink tears for tea, munching grief -chapped lips for bread,
dry bread to fill up my four-decade aged spiritual torment

I smell the scent of a dying moon, the death the light
Midnight crawls- in with a screech of poverty,
Carrying on its downtrodden -backside a mass of loss
I see traces of freedom leftovers through broken windows of life.
My heart weeps for the death of light
the birthing of doom
stray cockroaches and living shadows feast from hidden treasures,
dancing the corruption jive in cartels polished- pseudo power corridors
In the land where death is commerce,
life is sold in multi-vitamins solutions, mouth-rings,
jugs of clinical alcohol

In the land, COVID 19 rigs elections, birthed dirty gossip
Conspiracy, despondency and dependency
We are living cartoons waiting to join ancestors of pandemic

In this pitch black night

Century old anthills are weeping ,

bones are wincing too ,

Shadows are wailing too,

Mother is no more,

she went away with the moon,

she rode on the wave of the moonlight

, and they buried her with a biblical dirge

Mumurevere mumumrerevere

Kana mabuvuzwa moti ayi namata

Mumurevere mumurevere

Mumurevererere

Kana mabvunzwa moti ainamata mumureverere.

The last spell of dust clung her thick eyelids,

She winked to Heavenly Angels

to announce her journey to the land of her New Canaan,

And we remained in the New Normal.

I shall come to embrace Mama, the same way

I came here, my spirit mother shall wink for her spiritual mates

to welcome me the fruit of her womb back into the veil of heavens,

Spirit-land.

We shall meet again in heaven -land

Singing the new poem , a new sonnet ,

I will sing this eulogy again
And her spiritual mates shall chant a song,
A song of griots,
A song of unsung heroines ,
A pungwe chant,
A song they sang in the struggle for another struggle,
A song that perched black cockerels on the throne
A song that set the sun,
A song that rose the sun
A song that killed the moon,
a song that is a paradox
a song that opened doors and shut them,
a song that polished rejects onto ladders of power,
a song of freedom,
a song of aborted freedom,
a revolutionary song
a recycled song that recycled ideological demagogues,
we are born by the song and we die by the song.
Mama, I never sang the last hymn for you,
I never saw the last wink or the last giggle,
the fall of lioness, mother freedom.
Testimony of the struggle, the sceptre of freedom,
heartbeat from the echo of the yesteryear gunvibes,
raindrop rhythm of struggle songs
pungwe songs
Maruza imi ,maruza imi ,maruza imi
Maruza maruza maruza

Maruza imi, maruza imi

Maruza maruza maruza

Maruza imi, maruza imi , maruza imi

The last spell of dust is still clinging on your thick eyelids.

Hear hear my epitaph verse

‘sleep comfortably in the warm palms of the Lord’

And I sing again the last verse of the pungwe song

Maruza imi ,maruza imi ,maruza imi

Maruza imi, maruza imi

Maruza imi, maruza imi , maruza imi

(ii)

Tyrannical legend died clutching the clay of country in his hard-
clenched right-hand fist.

Soothsayers are talking in sacred tongues

He died chanting another chant,

He died wielding another slogan,

Another clenched fist slogan.

In this pitch-black night,

Obituaries wetted quasi- revolutionary headlines and frail patriotic tabloids,

He died with his Marxist –Leninist doctrine- hardened forehead

Creased with the broken graffiti of a stolen country

The two headed revolutionary legend, a paragon of paradox

He was buried clutching the country in his clenched fist slogan
A country strangled to death, a country that is now a walking ghost.
A country lost in shallow tombs of vendetta and vulgar

Scholarly tyrannical- revolutionary legend,
Munched the all -protein -all vitamin chlorophyll filled bean-leaf
Oxford English dictionary,
Imbibed the red-grape beverages of Latina encyclopedia,
Sanctified by Vatican City Catholic moguls.
The now dead tyrannical,
Revolutionary legendary stalwart carved by ideological recipe
And intellectual concoction of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist- socialist gin,
the Victorian- Elizabethan verbiage,
Peasant-guerrilla-bush struggle for freedom scholarship,
Pan African-Nkrumaist -socialist extremist- ideology
A balanced diet.
An Ideological recipe.
An Intellectual concoction
A paradox

The revolutionary legendary stalwart today snores in salient stone
And that political lashing- tongue with vitriol-chapped lips is sealed
in silent marble
And that Leninist- Stalinist- Marxist- Nkuruma-ist charisma is silent
in the silence of the stone
And that extremism carved propaganda-ist clenched fist slogan
holds the red clay of earth in the silence of the stone

Tonight, this midnight, black pitch midnight
Ideological charlatans sing praise and protest,
The legend went away with the country,
The tyrant went away with the country's sorrow-soaked epitaphs,
grief laden obituaries, tear filled eulogies and our gold in his
fistful slogan.
And zealots and charlatans are singing still
Poets and griots are singing still,
They sing praise and protest for a guerrilla graduated into patriotic
super star,
later an autocratic medalist ,
Oh, revolutionary paradox
Griots and zealots sing protest and praise still
And still they sing to the pitch-black night,
To the death of the death of a legend and to the stolen country
Manyarireiko, manyararirei
Manyararie,manyarariyeko
Manyarariyeiko, Manyarariyeko

The legend stole again consciences of my now vulgar tutored
And vitriol -schooled poverty hardened generations.
generations polarized by political polio.
generation that lost the light of the moon
generation that lost the beautiful blink of the sun

Legendary tyrant died clutching the golden red clay of the country in
his slogan hardened clenched fist

Jongwe raenda

Raenda rakanyarara,raenda rakaguta

Raenda Jongwe

Jongwe rakukurudza,raenda jongwe

Jongwe raenda

Raenda jongwe raenda richidemba

Raenda jongwe

Jongwe raenda nezuva,raenda nomwedzi muchena

Raenda Jongwe

“Stray Dog”

Alexandra Persad

My father is a stray dog, a mutt, an unknown species. The kind that disappears for days at a time and returns only so he is not forgotten.

He sits at the end of the driveway, under the dim illumination of streetlamps, waiting for me to beckon him forward.

I ask my mother for a pile of scraps, the ones left over from dinner. Her hands are wrist-deep in dirty dishwater. She sighs but gives me a ceramic plate of chicken fat and bread crusts with wet and wrinkled hands.

The screen door slams shut behind me and the night is silent and glittery, and my father is an unmoving shadow.

Hesitantly, I approach him. I sit the plate between us, and his paws pat the asphalt, entering the spotlight.

He is mangey but still handsome. His eyes are green, full of knowing and wonder and all the things I have never seen.

I scoot the leftovers toward him, and he devours them in large, lapping bites and slobbery smacks. A string of saliva hangs from his mouth and stretches into a puddle on the ground.

When he is finished, he looks at me for more.

“That’s all I have,” I tell him.

We stare at each other. I kneel, outstretching my hand, and, for a moment, he lowers his head. I imagine what his fur would feel like beneath my fingertips.

When I am just inches away, he snaps. His breath is warm and heavy, filling the air between us. He growls—a low sound he has been waiting to release.

I leave the ring of light, letting him bask in it alone. His teeth are yellow and sharp. He survives well without me.

The growling dies in his throat as I back away. I dust the gravel off my knees and go back inside.

He is still visible from the living room window. I move the curtains aside and sit down, watching my father leave.

“The Guardian”

Bennie Rosa

The concert began at midnight.

Star music pouring down

On lavender

Glistening

moonlight glowing

in premonitions

disappearing

Home.

Jillian harvested music

Walking

Through

Lapses in time

To orphan squalor.

There must be family in Maine

Amid the emerald green splendor

Reflections of beauty

In horrors of truth.

There must be.

The harvest fell
In disposable rhymes
Clamoring
for more foolish ways.

Embrace cold fear
Warm it to fire
Be innocent for courage

A sugar maple
abused in Maine
Cried for Jillian
Every night
Her name was Simana.

I'm coming to you to be with you Simana to protect you whether or not anything I've done comes close to the truth I will now be your guardian and don't worry I won't let them hurt you again as much as I can and if I spill my blood on the ground around you as you reach for the sky and the earth it will be my nourishment for you which isn't much but I love you Simana

Simana wept

Waiting for sound
In deaf night acoustics
pounding pain pulses
Silence

Jillian tied herself to Simana in the dead of winter don't worry Simana don't worry I'm here now to be with you the Maine woods felt safe in her presence and her life passing became music for the living.

“Sermon”

Kalpna Singh-Chitnis

If I die of an assault,
do not file a report.
It isn't the first time.

Do not go to the court
seeking justice.
There is none.

Do not allow politicians to enter
my village or town.
No media, no clowns.

No debauchery of whataboutery.
Do not bother hanging my perpetrators,
they will be born again in a multitude.

Do not imprison them
they can't be restrained.
I'll be violated again, just in another place and time.

If you wish to do anything for change,
write an epic or a tale in my name,
and teach them if you can, in every school on earth.

If you are a woman, tell my story to your sons.

If you are a man, tell it to your daughters.

If you are a preacher, preach it as a sermon to the believers.

“FOR THEY THAT DO NOT WISH TO BE”

Ogah Friday David

the deep scars on my spine/ tower

...like serpentine maps on my wheels/ a desire to plunder the loam of
of my pen's ridges/ parades of

reeky breezes splatter and arrange/ neither there
nor here/ it blitzs and spooks

the napping papers buried on fertile walls/ the teardrops

jab my sick limb/ then prepares/

hour by hour/ a banquet/ a living tombstone of unwritten

dirges/ until my scapel/ collide with the glass screens/

my thirst quenched/ springs of red waters afloat and coffins feed/ the

gazing sheets blink/ its hue become inflicted with shame/ 'a river of ugly poems'/

a festival of elegies/ the rhythmic cascade

of stabbed symphonies/ a

muster of dead pencils/ the apocalypse of lullabies/ the

canopy of epitaph/ the screaming " for they that do not wish to be"/ a timeout/

and a virgin restart of the agony of saints.

“Almajiri”

Ebuka Prince Okoroafor

The woman standing outside under the drizzle without an umbrella is suspect X, and she has been under surveillance a while now. A black leather handbag dangles from her folded left elbow, and a yellow nylon sack juts out from underneath the same arm. Her grey knee-length coat has become soaked, more at the shoulders and down the back, and her short blond wig by now must have taken in much water too but, from where she is standing, just outside the small red umbrella of the cooked-maize seller, I presume she is no longer bothered over this weather.

Above her, flashes of lightening serrate through a fusion of gray clouds, making a sharp crackling noise, then a ferocious rumble follows in consort. Yet she seems unruffled. Instead, she haggles back and forth with the maize seller, peering occasionally into the big cooking pot and pointing at the husked ears of cooked maize that she wants, then say something that makes the maize seller throw her head back and laugh out loud, while packing the edibles in a double fold of cellophane. I watch.

The last cigar from the pack that my younger brother couriers from Italy sticks out from the corner of my mouth, and rolls of smoke exit my nostrils to mix with the smell of dirty bodies, steams from hot pepper-soup, nkwobi, and the pleasant aroma of locally brewed beer that fill the air in Heaven’s bar, where I have sat in most evenings for a cold drink, and to gather information about suspect X. Sometimes I have imagined playing the role of God, I have wondered too, if this is the way He observes us all the time, probably while sipping hallelujah from a stainless steel cup and smoking a wrap of hosanna. But Abdullahi my friend is quick to caution me. He says God does not smoke because it is not written. He says too that it is smoking that will kill me! But this is a joke. We both know that Ada will kill me faster with her nagging. The truth is, I am like a roll of cheap ganja burning from both ends, burning fast.

Across my table, a couple share a bottle of drink, and converse in low voices, leaning towards each other so you would think they want to kiss. The way they shake their heads occasionally, and wag fingers at each other, I conclude it is an argument and the man throws glances at me at intervals, the look in his eyes evident that he disapproved of my public smoking.

Who cares anyway? This place is the slum where the work force of the big city lives. Where everything and anything goes. On the map of this State, you will not find it anywhere because originally, it had been a barren land, until cheap labor started seeping out from the villages and settling here with their make shift tents and sheds made of tarpaulin. Then one day, someone built a permanent residential shack and soon, it became a community of cheap laborers. Here, bars like this built with aluminum roofing sheets, and food Bukas with falling sign posts, where man can go to have a decent plate of meal at an affordable price abound. They cluster amongst several residential shacks that now stretch out on both sides of a wide muddy road. A few block buildings stand prominent and are evident of a 21st century improved housing. Two of such buildings stand side by side, breaking the line of shacks to the right of the road, a little distance away from the bar I sit in. And the rest are situated deep in the settlement. Over the years, there hasn’t been a constant power supply, this is because occasionally there is vandalism of power cables and fittings by hoodlums, and only a handful can afford gasoline generators. However,

despite these setbacks, I have observed with time that almost every walk of life now lives here as there are Engineers, Lawyers, traders, unemployed youths, thieves, a pastor, even prostitutes that offer a quick shag in the back room of most bars, and a Doctor too, who lives off the road, amongst the inner dwellers.

Outside, the rain continues its assault on Suspect X. She pulls out a long black shawl from her handbag and covers her hair, throwing its ends over her shoulders. Then she shreds one maize ear from the pack of its husk, and gnaw at the kernels intently, rolling the sturdy stalk as she eats, almost impatiently, she is hungry.

Soon, the Almajiris will gather around her. They are the homeless kids that beg for alms on the major roads in the big city and here, everyday, in this little community where everybody cares about nobody, they meet. She buys them cooked maize on some days, and then, they go with her to an abandoned Mosque which she has converted to a shelter. There, they sing and clap into the night, and she has been teaching the little girls amongst them how to ululate. Usually their numbers double, and then will begin to reduce, and in a month, the faces I notice when I look out the window are new, their voices angelic and innocent.

My friend Abu will join them soon. He hates to be part of Almajiri but who amongst the kids likes to be? It is fate that does what it does to them. Later I watch him slip into the cluster of kids and laugh as they pat his back. The woman smiles too, rubbing her palm against his kinky hair. Each time, she looks quiet happy to see him and today, I watch her buy him two husks of cooked maize instead.

As the day glides completely underneath a veil of darkness, Suspect X walks into Heaven's bar, and orders a bottle of Heineken, while the kids run off to play under the rain. She takes off her wet coat and drapes it on an empty wooden chair close by, not minding that it is dribbling water. I imagine the bar man squeezing his brow and cursing her under his breath. Then She takes her Heineken halfway and leave the remaining on the table. She never finishes her Heineken. The dull, yellowy light from the kerosene lantern hanging from a clip on the exposed beam of the roof, typical of most homes and establishments here, illuminates her figure where she sits. She has a set of wide eyes that seldom blink, that she keeps low to avoid staring at people in the face, especially in this crowded place. Her lips are small and set in a face with thick jaw lines that look masculine. The shawl wraps around her neck. It is damp, and sticks to her hair and a chocolate colored skin. When she walks, she limps slightly leftwards, and when she has left the bar, out in the open under the rain again, the couple across my table argue louder this time, and the man has drawn a look of displeasure across his face. How can a woman be drinking Heineken in such a rush? I hear him ask, snapping his fingers and shaking his head simultaneously. His woman is visibly riled up by his remark, and asks when women can no longer drink Heineken in peace again. She asks this too loud, and suddenly the atmosphere that was a mere murmur upturns with raucous laughter. Claps erupt from the table at the south end— a group of young men everybody here knows by the name: Equal Rights. Equal Rights argue about everything and anything, from toxic foreign policies and how they restrict international trade— talks that bore out most of the illiterate patrons— to rumors on Facebook about the silicon breasts of an American singer exploding on stage and killing six people in Florida. It is for peddling rumors like this that they get free drinks on most evenings, not speaking big-big foreign policy grammar with their hungry unemployed tongues. They walk up to shake hands with the woman in turns, each exclaiming "Equal Rights!"

Soon, the children gather and walk with Suspect X into the darkness. They clap their hands and sing to Olamide's Wo! that is blasting from the Loudspeakers in another bar close by, with a gasoline generator grinding on the outside.

The barman and proprietor of Heaven's bar calls them her children. "she picks them off the street and send them to places where they learn trade, so they can be useful" he says. His Igbo accent is thick and laced with a distinctive dialect— like he is rolling some words like balls of amala on his tongue before spilling them. Later he tells me he is from Owerri, a small town in the east.

On days I do not come to the bar, the barman tells me what happens afterwards. One night he told me one of the children died. He heard the children talking about it when he went outside to move some empty crates. He said they were afraid the woman with blond hair may have had something to do with it. As he talked, I pulled out a notepad from my breast pocket and a pen, and immediately he became apprehensive. He waved his hands and drew backwards, looking aghast, then he said, "No, no, no....I no talk again. You reporter or what? See, I don't want trouble, been here twenty six years no wahala cha! cha!" I laughed and told him I meant no harm. Then I won back his trust with a free order of a chilled bottle of Burukutu, and a plate of Shaki Pepper-soup. He smiled and was thankful. He told me he heard rich men come to the old Mosque at night to take the girls away. He still does not believe the story anyway. "They say the men bring them back in the wee hours of the morning and the woman collects money." He was almost talking in whispers as he leaned to place his order on the table. Then he sat, "the only thing I believe is, if what they say is true, then there may be people here who work for her, they feed her information and possibly settle the prying eyes of the public."

Later that day I'd told him: well, you guessed right, I'm just a newspaper reporter and he laughed saying, "All these shitty reporters, you want to win award with this story or what eh?"

I first came to this place three months ago. Here, the road is a mixture of the city's dirt, and muddy soil. Successive governments have avoided working it, so during rainy days inhabitants wrap their shoes in nylons and wear rubber boots instead. During this time, it is usually messy and it is only when they get to their various places of work that they put their shoes back on. Most of the kids are always bare footed, but suspect X, as I have observed has an ankle length rubber boot. The few that have boots are a little older, about ten or eleven years of age and are mostly girls. Abu says they are Madam's special Angels, they work well. Madam is the name everybody knows her by. She commands a calm respect, the barman confirms it, although she usually keeps to herself and drinks alone.

The couple stand to leave. The man is besotted now, he stretches and belches loudly. His woman covers her hair with a lilac hijab and nudges him forward. He mouths a muffled protest in response. When they pass my table, she slips a folded piece of paper under my bottle of beer and smile. The barman will later tell me she has fucked every new comer at the bar and poor Salami, her man, does not know. I unfold the paper and find the address of an abandoned primary school. "Once you have Tusbar kudi, you're good to go" the barman quips.

The rain begins to subside, and as I step out into the night, I observe the fruit and the maize sellers are both closing their make-shift shops for the evening. The naked flames on the wicks of their Otanja dance lazily in the gentle breeze as they beckon on passers by to come buy the remaining perishables at half its original prize. I have been persuaded into buying a globe of

water melon like this, only to get home and find out the inside was rotten. When I went back to the vendor the next day, she said I was unlucky to have picked the bad one. Her water melons don't easily rot! I pull the hood of my jacket over my head and walk into the alley between the two brick buildings. The air as always, is thick with the smell of sewage and urine, and it was here I met Abu.

Just like today, that day it had rained. Only that the rain came and went at hurried intervals, and it was almost nightfall. I'd decided to walk in the dark, and so I was being careful not to step on a heap of fresh excreta when suddenly, someone bumped into me and the collision sent the figure backwards into a pool of urine and semi-solid feces. I felt something splatter on the ankles of my denim jeans when the figure landed. "You don't see fa? You not get eyes? Stupid!" it was the voice of a boy protesting angrily. He scrambled back to his feet and I took a few steps backwards, and offered a quick "I'm sorry", then I flicked the switch of my torch light on and saw his figure clearly. He was not more than ten, or thereabout, and he looked rather too tall for his boyish face. I ran the light over his body, observing the places stained by the murky fluid; it was on his hands, arms, khaki shorts, whole of back maybe. He stood still. The light climbed down to my feet, and glided over my rubber boots and ankles. There was a thick lump of feces on my left foot and a little more on the jeans covering my ankles, and just then the boy giggled. I quickly returned the light to him and he giggled again, raising a hand to shield the rays from his face. He said, "You not expect me to say sorry fa? Is not my fault. Not all anyway. You no get light, me, I was running to see Madam."

I apologized again saying, "Its all my fault son, I'm very sorry. But you have to go home now. Its late eh! And this place is bad at night, go!" I waved him off, and turned back towards the muddy road, hood over my head, flashlight glowing, and stinking like a sewage tank. Soon, I noticed footsteps trotting closely behind me and when I turned around, I realized he had followed me instead. He motioned at me and said, 'Uncle Come, come let me show you.' His voice brimmed with innocence, the kind that propelled every child's adventure, and this urged me to accept the invite. Also, in that instant, it occurred to me that this was an opportunity to establish a rapport with him— someone closer to suspect X— and since luck was in my favor, I went for it. I followed.

A single light bulb flickered on and off at a distance and cats mewed, still, I followed. He led me deep into the settlements to one of the brick structures, a bread factory with a busted overhead water reserve from where water leaked and spurted steadily on the graveled floor. Then he stripped and went under the downpour. "Uncle see? You get dirty, you come here and wash your body of all the shit. No Almajiri know this. Is my little secret." He said, and splattered around happily. I laughed and stood aside to watch him play. When I was sure he was beginning to get exhausted, I asked him, "What's your name?" He parted his lips and licked the water as it trickled into his mouth, "bath and I will tell you" he replied. When I went under the water, clothes on, he laughed and flashed the torch light on my face. It was already night, so his voice unfolded into the darkness, it echoed.

The next day he found me before I did. "What do you have to do with that boy?" the barman had asked me in a whisper.

"Who?"

he threw a quick look around before fixing his gaze on me again. "I mean Abu. Small boy like up to your chest height. He come look for you."

“Nothing” I replied. “Just my friend.”

He sagged the corners of his lips and looked at me in a disproving way, and then said, “better be careful eh! That boy is a bag of trouble. Last year police people look for him well-well. Them say him kill a man.” He looked visibly afraid the moment he said this.

And so, I let Abu seek me out instead, and he did. He came knocking at the door of my shack late that night and when he said “Open sah! Is boy you push down yesterday” I hurried to the door and let him in. The night was becoming cold, so while he warmed his hands over the stove, he said “Uncle, you don’t smell of shit now, you clean.” His blunt remarks appealed effortlessly. It was daring, and yet utterly compelling in a way I could not easily explain. His eyes darted around my little space, and then he ran his fingers on the aluminum walls that rose up on the four sides to meet a roof of the same make, supported by naked beams and rafters. At the shelf, he stopped and observed it. It was a rusting iron furniture with two short rows packed with books and a drawer below. The former occupant of this place left it here. “You keep book, I like book but can’t read.” He said, then he pulled out a magazine volume and sagged his weight on the bed, it squealed. His shadow danced on the opposite wall as the flame of the candle stick on the shelf flickered and burned. He flipped through the pages and paused to stare at pictures. “What does your name Abu mean?” I asked, trying to keep the conversation going. He looked up and said, “I don’t know” and looked down again. The bed was high enough to hang his legs slightly off the ground. I observed his shirtless body closely, it was streaked with dark marks; they were probably marks from whipping, and then a diagonal scar on his right shin. “You work here in the city?” He asked, turning the magazine to show me images of sky reaching office buildings. As he did this, I noticed there were holes in his teeth. “Something close to it.” I replied.

“what you do for a living?”

“I am a reporter”, I replied. He nodded and smiled, and repeated the word Re-por-ta a few times as though he was memorizing it.

“You speak Hausa?” he asked again.

“No.” I replied.

“Baaad.” He said and shook his head, “I not go to school. Never before, though Madam is always promising, promising. So I speak small English.” When he closed the magazine and returned it to the shelf, he looked at me and said again that he didn’t know what his name meant and didn’t know his mother so he could ask her. He looked serious. When I asked him who Madam was, he stood up and ran off into the night.

I call headquarters and a voice deep and commanding picks up, says "yes?"

"Its Rosco" I reply.

"Ah! Rosco! Rosco!!!" the voice softens immediately. It is Abdullahi, and he is the debriefing officer overseeing the progress of my case. "How are you eh! Its been quite long we've almost forgotten you're out in the field." Soon we are laughing and exchanging pleasantries. He says, "007 Rosco, its funny how we quickly forget a case is open oh! The crime rate in this country is too much. The prisons are overflowing eh!, you need to see." I tell him about the boy but he has some reservations. He is afraid too much information is going both ways. He says "You know this trafficking business is a large network Rosco, it is full of dangerous people so you have to be careful. Keep your head low, so suspect X won't be your last job in the field. The Government will forget your family if you die in action." I tell him I trust the boy anyway and before he hangs up, he tells me about his child's christening ceremony and I feel bad telling him I cannot make it.

Later, when I walk into Heaven's bar, Its empty and as hot as a hell fire, with the sun already burning way high up and the aluminum absorbing all the heat and emitting it on the inside. Outside, the shadows of people have disappeared so I assume the day is about half gone. The bar man shoots glances at me as though he has something to say but cannot come over to say it. He does not bring my regular order too because he knows its too early. The old clock hanging over his head says 3'oclock. It whines loudly, distorting the quiet atmosphere and soon the click of bottles and glasses the barman keeps moving around joins in. He smiles and waves before disappearing into the back room with an empty crate.

Today Abu is bringing me Information. Maybe something useful I can relay to headquarters. Maybe something that will make them send a team to crack down on this crime conglomerate and so I can go home to Ada. Forget the nagging, I miss her. I miss her stories about market women and her silly customers. The door of the bar cracks open but it is not Abu, it is the wind. It hollows and clangs back on the frame. Abu has been helping me gather names. In this business, you need names to cripple the trade else, to take out a supplier is like doing only a quarter of the job. Where the money to run the network comes from and who pockets the profits is vital. But progress has been slow. The name of an informant here, and a mole in the immigration office is all I've got so far. Abu cannot get all the information in a day. But because he is Madam's chief errand boy, he is able to eavesdrop on her conversations over the phone and with the big men that come for the girls at night. He says Madam is keeping him because he is one of the oldest boys now, so he commands some respect from the others. He collects all the money they beg from the street everyday and gives it to Madam, she feeds them with some part of it and saves the rest for them and tell them one day they would go to school and those that don't want school, would go to say Libya, or Morrocco or Italy. Abu wants to go to Libya because that is where his sister is. The night he told me this back in my little shack, he pulled out the folded page of a magazine from his shorts pocket and pointed at the picture of a beautiful city with high buildings. Then he said, "Rosco this is Libya." His eyes gleamed with excitement, and his smile stretched ear to ear. Then he put the page down on the bed and asked, "you ever kill a man before?" The directness of this question caught me off guard and I lacked an immediate reply. In that moment, he flicked on the transistor radio he had found tucked in-between pillows at the head of the wooden bed. It made a shhhhhhhhhh sound as if to tell me to keep quiet and say nothing. He

turned the frequency knob and searched for radio signals. I wanted to tell him I have killed men—shot a Kidnapper in the head; a clear shot, but only after he had killed two officers. I have shot a robber dead too, during a bank robbery attack in Enugu. But how was a ten year old boy going to assimilate all that? Wouldn't it open an array of unwanted questions and compromise the whole operation? So I said No. Ed Sheeran's voice suddenly boomed from the radio speakers, and he nodded slightly to the music. "I kill a man for my sister Laila last year" he started, "The police look for me so I run. I come back here in January." As he said this I noticed his voice stiffen, and in successions, the resentment in him bared itself in it. It was so strong and rebellious, I could feel it.

"You see Rosco, I not remember my Mother face well." He dropped the radio on the bed, and continued. "But if you show me picture I will. Leila pick me up on the street, so that is why she is my sister. I am three that year and she is seven. She bring me to Madam and say to her his my bloda! Madam take me in quick-quick. She treat me like son, buy me tiny slippers. I don't know what Leila do for Madam and so one night last year, it is her fourteenth birthday but who cares? Madam send her on job and I sneak out and follow her. Man you need to see! The street is lonely and this man, he keep touching her breasts. Leila don't want but this man push her down and tear her cloth. The street is lonely, she is crying. So I jump on him and hit his head with stone. I hit him again and blood cover Leila's face. She is screaming. I only want to hurt the man small but then he die. I run. I kill for Leila Rosco." He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and fondled with the radio, and I moved closer and wrapped him up into a warm embrace. That night I realized there is something the street does to the spirit of a homeless boy, I realized it teaches boys how to break up their childhood and scatter its fragments on a sea of survival. Ed Sheeran on, mama...mama ay.....gimme looove.

The door of the bar cracks open again, and it is Abu this time. He comes in sweaty and exhausted, breathing hard, as though he is under heavy pursuit. I call out to the barman to bring us Fanta but he replies no! no Fanta here! from the backroom. I almost forget this place is for adults. There is no park for children here. No game center, no ice cream shop. Abu does not like to meet in the open but information is good when you work with time. He goes to the window and looks outside. The maize seller is not out yet, only the fruits woman. He has become more cautious since the night he told me about Leila and I promised to get the police involved so they can stop what she is doing to the other girls, what she did to Leila. He asked me if the police would bring Laila back from Libya and when I said no, he seemed very happy. As he sits across the table, I catch a whiff of the scent of my perfume he had applied yesterday's night on his shirt. "They will move Almajiri tomorrow" he whispers In-between breaths, eyes darting this way and that.

"Do you know where?" I ask. He looks around again, we are the only people in the bar. Outside, a few people, dogs and chicken roam. The city drains this place of life during the day.

"I don't know. But I know Madam say new ones is coming soon. I hear her talk it over the phone."

He pauses to catch his breath and when he does, he begins to cry, "they will move Sheila too Rosco, I like Sheila" he says.

For a moment, I am short of words, then I reach out across the table and hold his hands, then I tell him not to worry, and promise him, she is going to be safe.

She will be safe. I do not know where this sense of surety is coming from, but I remain optimistic nonetheless.

"I won't go back there after tomorrow. I move in with you, read and learn good English." When he says this, I notice the look in his eyes, it is a gleam of hope and a fire I do not wish to extinguish. And as we walk down the road, he tells me he wants to be a reporter in Libya, ride a Ferrari or Lamborghini maybe.

This kind of Operation, you need men, you need ammunition. This is how it should be: Thirty men to form a perimeter outside the settlement before nightfall, two women, young and stunning, they will come to look for settlement. Men will ogle at their beauty and so talk to them. Three men to drink at the bar, they are electricity officials, they will tell the bar man that finally this place will have electricity so he can spread the news. They will have guns, pistols preferably. I will observe the old Mosque from a distance and give the signal when the time came to swing into action. Abu is lying in bed and listening to the news on the radio, and at the same time flipping through pages of George Orwell's Animal Farm. Abdullahi's voice cracks over the phone but I hear him say he will get back to me. Soon, Abu begins to sing along with kids in a noodles advert, he is in a happy spirit and I think of taking him home after today. Him, Sheila, and all the other children too. I think of how different life would be after today, how they will be taken off the streets a while, rehabilitated until they are ready to be reintegrated back into the society.

Just before midday, Abdullahi calls again but he is no longer optimistic. "The Police Commissioner has been in the office with the Senator and it seems they may cancel the operation oh! People are whispering here that they have not been paid and only two vehicles are functional" he says. Immediately, beads of sweat form over my face and I become so disoriented I hardly hear Abdullahi's next words. When he finally ends the call, my mind clogs up with anger and bitterness; perhaps, this how it feels for the force to exanimate the commitment in you. I have only heard of this in pockets of discussions with my colleagues, but have never being in a position to experience it. It hurt me. Imagine going plain cloths for months to uncover a crime syndicate, and when you think its all about to end, in a split second they make you a stranded operator. They make a caricature of your own efforts. For a moment, I feel like a fingerling scooped out of water and left wriggling in a net midair.

Meanwhile, Abu has packed his clothes in a sack bag and he remains optimistic, it still glitters in his behavior. His excitement is more so because Sheila would meet us here soon. I think of how he would feel if I ask him to go back but then I look at him lying there and decide he deserves a better life. He will be a useful witness when I lodge a private complaint at the human rights headquarters. Quickly, I ring my friend at the bus station, Capello is his nickname and when I tell him I need a space for two, he asks, "Ah Rosco! You taking a girl into town?" Capello is that type that believes he is fortunate enough to wriggle out of life in the slum. He used to live in a shack down here until he was elevated to the position of Deputy Officer at the bus station. Then he rented a flat in town and swore nothing could ever drag him back to this place again. But lately I have been seeing him around, he has been coming for the local prostitutes. One night he told me "Rosco them town girls too costly fa! If you talk they tell you economy bad sah!" We have been

good friends and a couple of times we have shared some drinks together. He fixes up two bus tickets for the next hour. Then I call Ada and arrange for her to pick the kids up in town.

Abdullahi would call later to tell me that I have to report back to headquarters on Monday. The case has been closed, “you are not to interfere in what-so-ever way with the activities going down there” is the instruction. He says I would be reassigned upon my return. He thinks the swift turn of events is strongly related to the Senator’s visit but I should not tell anybody what he thinks because he is afraid of loosing his job. His child’s christening ceremony was successful and he will show me pictures later in the week.

In the evening I walk down to Heaven’s bar and order for Burukutu mixed with gin. I need something strong. Something that can drain anger. The barman is surprised, I see it in his look though he does not bother to start a conversation, me neither. The regular couple are surprised too, today I am not smoking and the woman pouts when our eyes meet. Equal rights are keeping up the spirit of the atmosphere with the story of a senator caught pants down with his cook. The picture has been all over Facebook and now the people are calling on the government to reshuffle its cabinet members. The president is obstinate and Equal rights are irked about his decision, they have been passing around a six paged mock-memorandum for customers to counter-sign and they plan to mail it off to the press by tomorrow. They title it: Pussy or Good Policy? When it comes to my table, I wave it off and they scowl at me.

Outside it is getting dark and suspect X is buying cooked maize. Two lorries with carriages covered with thick canvas lumber past and I know it has begun. The barman brings another cup of Burukutu, and asks if its not enough. There is an expression of concern on his face. In my mind, I pray for the time to run so I can leave tomorrow and force myself to pretend this assignment never happened. The city awaits me. Suspect X comes into the bar and orders her usual. But today, she lingers around the bottle, and drinks until it is almost empty. There is a way her face sags when she is drinking— like a fabric that has lost its color from overuse, pale and empty yet resilient. When the lorries zoom past again, I hear the voices of the children, they are singing Olamide’s Wo! She stands, grabs her handbag and exit the bar, limping on until the darkness swallows her figure.

“Not a Fairy Tale: The Courtroom”

Aamir Habib Soomro

It was 8 O’Clock on a cold morning in December. The chilling gusts crossed the door and windows froze her feet and hands. She was sitting confused and afraid on a wooden chair placed in the corner of the courtroom, so cold that she felt as if she was sitting on an iceberg. In an effort to make them warm she continuously rubbed her trembling frozen hands. Her heart was throbbing inside her chest while thinking that yesterday it was her 18th Birthday and today she finds herself in this courtroom hearing of her parents’ suit to win her final custody.

Her parents’ love for each other could not last for long yet both of them did not deprive her of their love and care. When her mother decided to dissolve her marriage, she was too young to have some reminiscences of how her parents might have lived together? And why did her mother decide to dissolve her marriage with her father, who, for her, was not less than a superhero? The only thing she could recall was her mother’s struggle to raise her and her father’s pulsation for his inability to give her a righteous portion of time and care.

Fifteen years back when she was just three years old, her mother got custody while her father was given meeting rights twice a month within the court premises. She spent most of her time with her mother because she was her custodial parent, yet she could not refute the valued moments she spent with her father in the same courtroom for years. Today she had to decide for herself for the first time and that added to her anxiety and nervousness. Though her mother compelled her to give consent in her favor yet she could not decide what exactly she wants and still find herself in the middle of something.

“Jameela Vs Nazir Hussain!” the out lauded call of the bailiff brought her back to the courtroom, she saw her mother and father approaching the bench of the Judge. This was the first time in the last fifteen years that she was seeing her parents together because she always came to see her father either with grand-Pa or with her maternal uncle and in every other event at school and college she saw her mother beside her.

She found herself nervous and stressed as she could have been called for her statement any time and she could not decide anything for that moment. The memoirs of past days overwhelmed her mind; everything appeared as a spectacle to be recognized. A flash glimpse of her 10th Birthday, when her father got special permission to celebrate it out of court premises and they went to a nearby restaurant where all paternal relatives were waiting for her. There she was a bit reluctant initially but after a while found everyone loving and caring. At night, her mother celebrated her birthday. She evoked how her mother did hide stitching of her special dress for weeks so that to surprise her on her birthday.

She could not chuck herself out of the thoughts of how her mother faced all adversities and hardship to raise her being a lonely woman. Her cheeks were glittering with tears while retaining the day when she broke her hand by slipping from the stairs and her mother could not sleep the whole night for her. The other day when she went to see her father in court, he got angry with her uncle for not informing him. That whole day her father held her in his arms and kissed her more than usual with misty eyes till the end of meeting time.

“Nazneen Nazir!” She heard the bailiff's call once again yet this time she felt as if she lost all her control over her own body. She wanted to stand but a shudder pushed her back to sit every time. Her hands were quivering and her legs were trembling hard. She tried to respond yet felt her throat dried up as if she would have been thirsty for ages.

“Nazneen Nazir!” The bailiff repeated the same more audibly.

“Yeah...! I am coming,” she responded with a weak voice and quavering jaws.

After taking a sigh she shook herself and stood firm and straight, though inside her there was a storm, blustering her soul.

“Please! Come into the witness box.” The bailiff guided her to the witness box.

While approaching the witness box she felt every step heavier than prior to it. After a few steps, she felt tired as if she walked miles without break. It looks as if the witness box would have been in some other world she never wanted to enter. After much effort, she stepped on into the witness box while holding the side rails so tight to restrain herself from falling in there.

“Take an oath from the lady.” The judge ordered the reader.

“Take your hand Ma'am and be witness to God that you shall tell the truth and nothing else.”

Her jaws were still trembling. “I witness to my God that I shall tell the truth and nothing else.” She repeated the same.

“Ms. Nazneen Nazir, Do you know you are here today to give your consent to whether or whom you want to stay now?” The Judge asked her.

Looking at the floor she replied, “Yes, your honor I do.”

“So what have you decided in this regard?” asked the Judge.

“Nothing, Sir,” she Replied.

“But you have to decide something,” said the Judge

“I know your honor, but it's not that simple” she replied. “Can I say something before I tell you my decision?” She asked if she can get permission

There was pin drop silence in the courtroom, she felt her heart beating fast and loud inside her chest.

“Yes! Of course, my child, go ahead” said the Judge

“Your honor! I was three years old when my parents were separated. I never enjoyed a normal life as both of my parents may have pretended to. I never relished moments of joy together with both of them. Although, both of my parents loved me and cared and I'm really thankful to them for that. Yet, whatever I have received from them is broken into pieces that I could not mend even with my tears, my laughter, my joys, and my sadness. All I could collect was divided into pieces with love on the head and hate on the tale. I know what it means to be a beloved child, yet I don't know what parenthood is.”

"I love my Mom and Dad, and yet I hate being alienated from co-parenting. Initially, I thought it may be as decided by fate but now I realize it was not just fate and even if it is so, it is not written by some invisible powers but scripted by both of my parents. My parents were just separated yet I feel divorced in real life. The pains I have gone through have never been noticed by both of my parents because their main focus was on their egocentric battles. They could reconcile for me but they didn't, only to satisfy their ego. Today, standing in this witness box, I am feeling like a commodity that my parents want to get as a reward if they win. But I want to tell them I'm not a commodity. I am not a commodity, Mom. I am not a commodity, Dad. Please do consider me a human being at least once. Her voice now was clear and loud."

"After 15 years they are standing together," she said looking at her parents. Here in this courtroom they are standing to win me yet they never took a simple effort together to let me win their parenthood in the last 15 years. Your honor!"

Her face was now blushing red, with tears running over her cheeks. "But today none of you shall win. She said while looking at her parents with quite an annoyance."

"I wish I could die here before this situation. Maybe then your ego gets satisfied."

"Mom! Dad! I still love you both, yet I hate this moment to choose one of you."

She turned her face to the judge and said, "Your Honor! Since I am 18 years old now and have the full right to whatever I decide for me. I hereby declare that I won't stay with both of my parents because accepting one means rejecting the other. A year ago I did apply for a scholarship to pursue my graduate studies at SOAS London. That application is accepted now, so I would like to proceed with my higher studies in London till then both of them may be restricted to influence my ambitions. I hope maybe then if not for each other, they may start thinking together for me."

“the bobcat” and “the blossoms”

Charles Venable

the bobcat

When he was born,
A cub,
His eyes were blue like the sky,
Like freedom;
He nursed from a bottle,
And his handler wrapped a collar around his neck:
The only mother he ever knew.

The only home he’s ever known:
Milkweed and fennel hide
A chain link fence.
It reaches into the ground,
Imprisoning even the earth herself.

But when he looks up,
He still sees blue like the sky,
Like freedom,

Like the pull of his leash
When mother leads him out
To visit the nature photographer.

He does not realize

Beyond these weeds there is no fence.

He only hears mother's voice

When she tells him to leap,

And his muscles tighten like steel

Beneath his velvet cloak.

He could leap twenty feet into the trees,

Disappear into the branches,

Disappear into the woods.

He could leap upon them, his mother and the photographer,

Tear them limb from sweaty limb,

Tear off his collar with his claws.

He only hears mother's voice

And the click of the camera

And the sweet taste of his favorite, fish-flavored treats.

He will never hear the rustle of the branches

Without the clink of steel.

He will never hear a dying creature's last breath

With the taste of fresh blood.

He will never stretch his lithe neck

Without the touch of oiled leather.

The last pictures clicks like the buckle of his leash.

When he looks up,

He still sees blue like the sky,

Like freedom.

He still sees mother holding his leash,

And he thinks this is joy.

the blossoms

Milkweed blooms on roadsides

Early summer fireworks

The wings of monarchs

Ignite wicks curling up fences

Ending in passion flowers

Captured mid-explosion

By the nature photographer

Kneeling in the ditch,

But these flowers are still weeds

To the farmer on the fence.

His tractor's engine pops,

Scares the photographer

And butterflies away.

“Black History Month” and “Did You Know?”

Queen Ex

I am

Black History Month

365 days out of the year

Made by the hands of God

the earthy tone of my melanin

is moisturized clay and holy water

that is heaven-sent.

It's the same color as my eyes;

you could see the tiger in them

when the Sun behind them shines.

Natural oils in my kinks, curls, and coils

make tangible a fistful of stars

To my afro, braids, and puffs

I am loving, attentive, and loyal

I am

Black History Month

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Ancestral memories keep my pride high

As if angels, though scarred by lies

and marred by hate,

Lift me up to the heavens;

I'm protected.

Spirit man black, brown, and yellow
with that light.
Molecularly structured to hold
Morning Star power like
I got an S on my chest
One with trees, skylines, and oceans
Rainstorms and lightening in my head
I safely rest
In my ancestral faith.

I am
Black History Month
In all 1,440 minutes of every day
Chocolate cities, ghettos, and suburbs birthed me
Jazz sophisticated my class
No Kenny G
Hip-hop and goose downs kept it gutter
And R&B made me into a lover
I am versatile.

I'm funky fresh
dressed to impress
On Friday
Spring clean to James, Rick,
Teena, and Prince on Saturday
Remind myself that I'm God's Property

On Sunday

I can bop to the latest North Cakalack trap beat

And Wind hips to HoodCelebrityy

Sport locks, a wig, weave, or braids, boo

And do it all effortlessly

That swag you borrowed?

Baby, you get it from me.

Cuz I am

Black history

Today right now

I'm legendary

Simply cause of the DNA I carry

I'm iconic, baby

Destined to span beyond life expectancies

Cause while you may kill my flesh

You thrive off simply the idea of me

You looovveeee my brown, my melanin

My blood,

My lips, hips, and follicles be bangin!

That's proolly why half these girls out here doppleganging

Taking Melanotan shots for a permanent tan

Go head with your faux black basic stalker fans

While I bask in your envy for the real McCoy

From Hiawatha to Georgia
Wild winds blow strange fruit,
Loves lost who transformed to stars
this brown baby collects as they fall
I am the culture
I am the virtue of the fallen
I am the audacity, the nerve of my peers
The gall to stand and speak
On how I make Black History
every day
Of every week

I ain't been sleep, I been quiet
Abating your fears;
Don't be foolish enough to believe
I'm only here
For just 28 days out of the year

DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know
that when you kill a black boy, you're wasting unicorn blood?
The killers knew, and in one act following The Grand Ploy, opened the gates for his magic to flood.

Did you know
that the following trial of such a heinous crime is an elaborate ruse?
The judge knew, and on the taxpayers' dime, we get another indictment refused.

Did you know
that killing a unicorn is bad luck that lasts the length of your life?

The Keepers knew, and without giving a fuck, began to plot against the killers and their wives.

Did you know

that upon our souls they gorge and our talents they pillage?

Soon, the killers will overstand that vengeance is the Lord's, but we were also born in God's image.

“Brainzapping on the Metro”

Elaine Chekich

Damn, jamming on a skateboard in Hollywood is an obstacle course. Trash, traffic and homeless dudes fallen over like chess pieces. I'd had a car but it's gone somehow. At least, I can skateboard to the metro, the Hollywood/Vine station. I teeter the nose at the top and then plunge down the ravine of stairs to the humming cars. The air is metallic, a smell of sizzle and grease.

I'm super dizzy. Lots of people get this when they come off antidepressants. I look drunk, but I'm not. I'm brainzapping. That's what people online call it, weird shocks and jolts. I bite my tongue in a gritty smile. I'm not going insane, even though I look it.

My Cymbalta dose was super high when the Army brought me home. I had to forget, and I had to sleep to forget. They said serotonin would do the trick. Except after months, I am groggy all day, and I have a hard time remembering. I mean, I have to remember where I put my keys and where I live, right? That's kind of how I lost my car. And, it made me put on weight. What girl likes that?

I jam and dodge my skateboard. Electrodes pop in my brain, zzzt! I hear doorbells ringing, glass breaking. Somebody's calling my name, and then weird, I'm outside calling my own name.

Mom sat at the table with coffee. I was back after my first tour. She smoothed the placemat with her palm over and over. She was underweight and tired. I sat at the table with short, short hair. “I don't know who you are,” she said.

“I'm the same. I grew up, Mom.”

“You think so,” she said with scare-crow eyes.

I've got to get there. They called me. The Covid doesn't make it easy. Wear a mask, don't breathe. It's like we're geared up to commit crimes. Wear gloves. Don't leave fingerprints. My mask flies off as I drop over a dozen steps.

I hop a metro car, and the train slides away. Maybe I can make it on time. There's a station near the hospital. Most passengers wear masks. They stare at me, help flatten the curve, punk.

A teenage black boy looks at me. “You can't wear a mask? We're gonna die if people keep spreading this shit.”

I plop on a seat. “I had a mask. It blew off.”

“Pick it up, princess.”

“I couldn't see where. My mom has Covid. I'm not into spreading it.”

He thinks behind his mask. “If moms has it, you're not in quarantine?”

“I haven't seen her. She's in the hospital. They called. I'm trying to get there.” 3

When I was little, she'd turn the hose on me in the summer, and I'd run through, back and forth, rainbow droplets spinning off my shoulders. She'd wrap a towel around me and rub my hair dry and hug me all over so tight, I could feel the skin of her love.

"I gotta extra mask," the boy says and pulls something mauled and dirty out of his pocket. Should I wear his mask splashed with microbes? "Thanks, dude," and I put it on. I got nothing else.

"They won't let you in the hospital. You gotta look at folks through windows."

"I'm not looking at my mom like she's in the zoo."

"They're afraid of people spreading it."

Out of the station, I run as hard as I ever have. Not in a straight line. Breathing so fast, I'm almost not breathing. ding-dong, Mom's voice, "Think serious now. If you like girls, how's that work?"

I push the skateboard up an incline to the old hospital and lunge for the doors. But a Latina woman wearing a mask and face shield blocks me. She scans my forehead with a thermometer. "Do you have a cough or dizziness?" I'm dizzy, but I'm not telling her.

"My mom is sick with the virus."

"Sorry, visitors cannot enter the Covid wing. It has to be virtual. You can facetime on your phone."

"I don't have a phone."

Her eyes focus on me for the first time. "Here, use the hospital tablet. I'll set you up with nurses in the wing. How about a fresh mask?"

Images pop on the tablet. My mother lays wispy in twisted sheets. She's on a respirator, and lots of lines map her little body. A nurse holds a tablet in front of her. She looks shocked to see me, sort of embarrassed. I press my face into the screen. "Hi, Mom."

It takes all her strength to bridge time and our mistakes. She says through the mic, "Never mind what I told you...do what's best for you." She starts coughing, the color drains out of her face, and she falls back against the pillow.

I'm crying so hard, they allow me into the lobby and tell me to wait. It's one of the first times in my life I'm crying when I should. They're not saying anything. CPR was going on with other patients in that room. I've seen dead people; I've seen dead friends...I didn't want to leave them.

A few other people in the lobby sit six feet apart with masked faces, their eyes sore and sad. So much sadness out of those eyes. We're the same. Waiting. Nothing to do. But I know I showed up. I take a deep breath I haven't in days and days. I taste the oxygen. I can feel where I am. The doorbell isn't ringing. I hope Mom can feel me. I'm still here. I made it in time. I kept my word, I did, and, in a strange way, my warm tears feel like reward.

“Rings”

Meghan Cavanaugh

It's not ladylike to leave the house naked
Society taught me at an impressionable age
I was born to cover up
So I drape my petite frame in potato sacks
The curves that could drop a jaw to the floor
Hills and valleys that wouldn't dare to be conquered
Now concealed as a dull Midwestern plain
Much better

The frayed fibers are not meant to catch the eye
Their bland pattern is woven together to take the focus off of my torso
And redirect it to my fingers
They are not meant to be bare
Their slender figure should be decorated
I celebrate their ability to write
Touch
Pleasure
Graze
With unrelenting metals
Engraved in intricate patterns
I see the world through ten ghostly pale knuckles
And ten chewed nail beds
Dressed in the finest rings

It's not ladylike to leave the house naked
I remind myself as I glance down at my phalanges
Enveloped in merely flesh and blood
Oh darling that's not enough
You'll be a laughing stock
A fool amongst royalty
So I crawl back into bed
And hide my hands from the world

They were a gift from my mother
With hands like mine
Fragile but sturdy
Layered with callouses
They've seen so much
And still remain by my sides
Man's best friend is no match for their loyalty
However when it comes to noses
The dog will win every time

I use her prominent sniffing skills to my advantage
My nude fingers intertwined as one
A futile symbol of my doubted faith
Praying she tracks a scent in the fresh snow
Her golden fur glistens in the January sun
As she treks through the driveway
Tattooed in tire tracks from past journeys
They have to be here somewhere

A gift from my mother
I feel the panic swell in my lungs
It's not ladylike to leave the house naked

My brother observes the hunt through the window panes
He sports a perplexed expression on his face
I don't have time for this
The sun is setting
I have to find them
It will get dark any moment now
He wouldn't understand anyway
He was never taught the same rules I was
He wakes and rests with his fingers exposed
Lacking any desire to fit a mold
Expressing his disapproval through the glass
As he watches my pitiful attempt
To uncover my own self imposed mold
One small enough for only a single finger

A peculiar way to live I suppose
A life unbound by sterling silver shackles
But he isn't the one with his nose inches from the ground
Scanning every square inch
Salty tears leaving craters in the snow
Moisture seeps into the knees and elbows of the drab sack
And begins to outline my form in a darker shade of brown
I choke on desperation and fear

If I am finally emancipated from these shackles

Why do I keep searching for them?

I didn't care to know the answer

I didn't care and I didn't want to

I take off my sack

And wave it in the air

A makeshift white flag

It's soaking wet from melted snow

Battered from the pavement

It will do

A pathetic surrender to my demise

Without these rings

I no longer need a figure to sport them

The bones splinter between the porcelain that lines my gums

My teeth shatter as I bite down

The beauty that once lay within the raised grooves of my fingertips

Bleeds out onto the pavement

I should've called an ambulance

I call a taxi instead

And demand he takes me to the mall

Fingers that cannot be shrouded in elegant steel

Cannot grip a steering wheel

The wet potato sack sits in my lap in the backseat

Outlining my hips that are forbidden to see the world
I empty my savings
Tip my driver extra for not asking questions
And buy out every store
If I mustn't coat my soul in the sleekest gold and silver
I will decorate the home that fosters it

This body looks different
Once confined to a burlap prison cell
Now displayed in an array of flashy form fitting threads
Is this cashmere?
The empty fireplace I call my soul used to lay cold
Though is reignited by this new wardrobe
The fire in my belly kindles my temporary confidence
I feel internal beauty in every organ I possess
It stares back as I glance at my reflection
I think to pick up my camera
Take a photograph for my lover
Imagine him gazing at how the blouse
Rests delicately on my sunken collarbone
Then he'll want me

I glance down at the sleeve of my new jacket
Only to discover the end saturated with blood
The fireplace grows cold again
Don't think about the rings please

Your new clothes are enough

Don't think about the rings

It's too late

The dam in my mind collapses

Flooding through are the visions of the shiny metals

Studded with vibrant crystals and delicate carvings

Without fingers to wrap themselves around

There is no longer a method to the madness

I start to cry again

I knew it all along

But it's too late

The beauty lies within the beholder

But it's too late

My fireplace burns on materialistic fuel

I am naked to the touch

Because my barren insides have dried up

My soul is smothered by bling and designer brands

But my skin is still patchy from the coarse twine I once sported

How could I be so naive?

It's not ladylike to leave the house naked

I dressed myself in leather and wrapped my fingers in thick metals

Unbeknownst to the idea that it was my soul that needed accessorizing

“BAR ITALIA”

Laneikka Denne

I can see the fettuccine in his teeth.

Bit of meat.

Maybe that's-

Do you think it's odd?

I do.

I am.

Odd.

HAHAH.

Or maybe.

Fuck.

That's what he pours

you a glass

Of lemonade.

A little Italy in the middle of Sydney.

He's white.

White like my-

I can't eat.

I can't swallow, it stays

like-

A slice of ricotta cake hits our table.

He bites right into it.

I cry internally,

Externally I glow.

Not odd, quirky.

He drops me off.

1 am: "Let's just be friends"

Sorry.

1pm: "I'll always be your friend"

I wish there was vodka in that lemonade.

Like last time.

And

And

And

He...

He just drives off.

It's nighttime and daytime at once.

Residue in my mouth of

Cock

or

Cake?

Who knows.

He does.

“An auld lad and a young lad”

Neasa Murphy

Cigarette ash drifted slowly onto his lap.

A beautiful grey sheen to it.

Stared at the ash smouldering on his trousers.

A premonition of the fate awaiting him maybe.

Never get any recognition, the poor auld cancer sticks.

God love them, most hated yokes in Ireland.

He caught himself,

stop feelin sorry for the fags.

Nobody feels sorry for you.

His legs were stiff.

Creaking.

Wasn't sure was it the chair or was it him.

Thank God for that Supervalu delivery.

Put a bit of craic in the week.

Nobody botherin' him-

the Guinness was anonymous.

The dinners were lovely too, spuds and all.

Butter, another thing to be grateful for.

How could ya be down on yerself with butter in the world.

Grinned to himself. The young lad would be calling soon.

Someone to torment.

He whistled, his gums hurting.

Wondered how the rest of the world was coping with this yoke.

virus.

He saw it on the news, but sure the loneliness was killing people too.

At least they were talking about it now. That disease was there long before corona.

Sad though, thinking of a lone cup of tea going cold on a table.

He wasn't too bad. He had a few people.

To share the tea with.

That'd be shockin depressin, to be drinkin the tea on your own.

Ah, here.

Feeling sorry for the mugs of tay now.

The door slammed.

Only young people slammed doors like that. Like they needed to break it a small bit every time.

He loved hearing that door slam.

The energy of it revived him.

The young lad sloped in, bringing in the fresh air with him. Taller the whole time.

Howiya.

Howiyah yerself.

His nephew was a grand chap.

No sign of a woman though.

He made sure to mention it to him.

Tea?

Yeah go on.

“Trilogy of Dystopian Contemporaneous Suffering Selfdom Illuminating Hope”

Anastasia Christou

Glimpse of Void

Contours of stark divides.

On pause, standstill in isolation.

The promise of hail cathartic, a glimpse of void.

They said summer will return and the hazy afternoons would silence the noise.

Obliterate the mood and the glimpse of void will prevail.

Nightmares have evaporated, there will be a new constellation of dreams.

Asymptomatic epoch of numbness, a glimpse of void, whispers in yellow fields.

Emptiness adjusted to balance the ruins scattered through the scrutiny in memories of touch.

Contours of stark divides.

On hold, waiting to exhale, and the glimpse of void peering through the window.

Nothingness unconstrained shaped by the idle.

Predictably agonistic of differential forms, set in the skepticism of illusions and persistent in denial.

Contours of stark divides.

Curtains drawn and darkness falls, they promised the dawn will come again.

Silent Spring.

Entangled pandemics with the patriarchy we would dismantle.

Drowning in the complicity of corrosive secrets, deception in the glimpse of void.

Discomfort as Grief

Tumultuous the dispossession of dignity in the ecology of quicksands.

Liquefied in the saturation of the self is the bottomless pit of their necropolitics.

They feasted on the grapes of wrath and thought that the rusty silos were empty of tears and toil.

Lament the birdsong of their mourning translucent in the wind of change.

I have captured the light from a million candles in your eyes.

They will not grieve the symphony of clouds piercing the dark purple sky.

Nearing the peak of despair, let me be your sanctuary from the tide of times.

The ambience as soundscape negating the scale of senses through the transience of fugitive domains. Carceral minds floating the sonic realm in a gesture of deliverance.

My Sisters of solitude beyond the flesh, I have cursed the bitter milk and brought you strawberries from fields of bronze your ancestors left behind. The specter of their absurd and epic failure have led the dragonflies away and the meadows have melted.

Nearing the apex of discomfort, let my sorrow surround your nights when the graceful snowy owl calls to you.

Dystopian suffering selfdom of contemporaneous tribes by the rivers of Babylon, I have wept again, longing to remember the zeal of your embrace.

Solidarity in Solitude

Communities of crisis and the phone is ringing again.

Ex-lovers and distant neighbors uttered whispers and smashed the silence.

Birds of prey scattered the dust, limbs that sparkle.

Sirens razor sharp. Grasp the futurity and incarcerate the dread in their gaze.

The borders have been remade, give me your sick in the brazen city of Croesus and the Jester will bury them. Your wretched in crowded shores, send them as goats to slaughter and the interlude will shine a light.

Sirens razor sharp. Carceral capitalisms with every breath, predatory lives.

The divide in the cracks and the despicables at stake, the root of all truth.

Restless lockdown diaries in the quarantine of minds: decluttering the hate, social distancing the poverty and giving solidarity a home.

Communities of crisis and we will decimate the ruins to heal again.

“A Voice of Reason”

Bhuvan Thapaliya

The silence, it seems, cannot win.

The other voice is more rancorous and political.

Silence as many of the indigenous languages
and folk arts is slowly fading out.

But when silence finally feels, a sense of isolation
and exclusion from the political and economic
power assemblies of the country and
gradually transforms into a voice of reason,
and speaks against injustice, racism, and asks for
dignity, inclusion, participation, liberty,
universal values and human rights,
it always wins. It always rewrites history.

Silence always inspires us to find our own voice.

The sound of silence echoes in the distance.

I can sense it flying towards us.

I feel like talking with it
without uttering a single word.

I feel like plucking a beautiful pink lotus
from an immaculate lotus farm
and present it to the silence
without clouding
the heart of the pond.

Yes, the silence always wins
when it metamorphosis
into a voice of reason.

A short collection of poems by Fadrian Bartley

MID SUMMER NIGHT DREAM

Like magic,
Our kiss drained the stars of their energy,
Giving us the ability to glow in darkness.
We linger in our flames on balcony,
Playing with your windy mermaid hair,
Where snow-flakes descended like immortality in flowing gowns
of mid-summer night dream.
Winter kiss below moonlight bliss
Chills the momentum of our sapphire gasp,
When giving our breath a break
From the craving toxicity of our feeding.
Our togetherness sprinkles sparkle dust of forever
Before we met this moment I treasure
Snowflakes owl slept in the trembled chills of their windy plumage,
Observing our rapture through their dreamy pupils.

STRIPES

Inauguration asked Angel's to open their sores,
And scratches the maggots out of history.
So their wounds can heal.
A national voice makes us stand like soldiers
Watching political mediocre goes down in history.

There's a foreign land that stand still on a certain day,
A specific moment where nobody moves.
It is the first I see some stars scattered just few inches above heads,
Carried up there on Aladdin old cloth,
Made out of history,
By its stripes some people are healed.
But what about the others who never heal to forgive and forget.
When an apple is that big,
It supposed to be shared for different teeth and tongues,
But some people want even the seed.
And if they can't get it to swallow they try to cut down the tree.
Claiming that it was planted by their mothers and fathers,
Who stayed up overnight and gave birth while using their bare hands to prevent the rain from washing away the root of their history.

HOUSE OF THE EAGLE

The great wing of liberation dances
Upon the mighty wind.
Carrying nations in its claw,
And releases them below the ground of opportunity.

Some will fall at the border,
So they have to climb over.
Plumage of hidden opportunity,
Volumize with ethnocentrism.

The racial echoes of an eagle's cry,
Is loud enough to be heard from the womb.
And the platelets of a descendants
Protested when the great bird pitched on lands owned by the blacks.

Throwing rocks,
And using placards to confuse the children.
Using modernized justification can actually blind an eagle,
So, it will unable to find back itself to the truth of the white house.
The true origin of the wind and its strength.
The stars are not the only one who knew how they themselves
Scattered on a flag,
But was it blood that was used to create its stripes?

FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE INTO THE OFFICE OF PUNCTUALITY

The crewing in the blossoms
ushered the dawn,
and stretched their quills
at the fading fog.

Impatient squeal
grunted and snort,
to pulls attention at their
stinky sty,

Little tweet
flavoured the early morning sun,
with doctor bird kisses
on the moist petals,

To celebrate their festival
of blossom fresh,
And butterflies invitation
in colourful hues.

Mary Poppin's dog
wagged its tail
beneath the kitchen window,
for the taste of another day.

Kettle disturb
the slumbering lids,
that the bus stop
awaited in anticipation.

The hallway
smell of hard pressed
cotton dress,
from the surface of a
pressing iron overworked.

And still;

her nappy afro need to let go
off the mess it is carrying,
and put itself together for
a trendy pursuit.

The adrenaline headed
down the hurry lane,
with the smell of Cocoa
settled smoothly above
the rim of a chalk cup,

But then embrace swiftly
with the sound of a
clock on the wall.

In a drift the front door
slammed with noisy
little keys,
thrown into a leather hand bag.

With the screech of
tyres
swiftly rushed from the
wooden gate,

And left a chard

of milk frame on the dog's
mouth,
Without even say goodbye.

CONCRETED WORDS

The metal door slams constantly
with noisy keys jingled through
tiny holes.

Behind the door of hades
heartbeats linger with despair,
and held on to memories they once had
to catch the morning sun,

Wretched state behind redemption,
and sorrowful thought sits
beside a bucket contain
their own uric acid.

waited shamefully for expulsion
of colon loose canal which stinks the air,
Orange suits unable to warms the heart
from inside the confine
state of cold emptiness.

Only disturb nights

with cries of the broken
at the hours after eleven,
but bless the hand sit hourly
and write poetry.

Only those who visit
will know hell's identity.
Eyes of hate and fear
with no love inside share.

Minds of hurtful thoughts
and hearts cold as Antarctica.
all without warmth,
The only hell exist without fire.

“I'm a soldier wounded so I must give up this fight?”

Daniëlle Siegelaar

It's been so long ... There's nothing left of me Nothing worth saving anyway. Just the empty remains of a warrior battered and bruised beyond comprehension.

Wounds and gashes littered all over once delicate skin. A festering, pestering gaping wound. Puss oozing out of every corner, stopping only long enough to reveal the barely inaudible beat of an infected heart, hardly functioning properly if so at all.

Wounds and gashes layered upon each other Some twisted and crooked and some jagged with rigid edges with knife fragments and bullets still lodged firmly within them.

Putrid and infected turning black at the core revealing much larger wounds and even bigger ones layered beneath the others. Puss oozing out of rotting flesh, falling from a rotting corpse like sawdust from wooden frame. Blood and filth intermingling until the steady flow of blood pooling around this body turns black and fowl from decay and infection.

Just. How. Are. You. Still. Alive?

Whatever atrocious hand is at play here, to force such a body to stay alive, and in such a state... Is an act of raw barbarism.

Preexisting wounds that never managed to heal properly before sporting newer fresher wounds just recently acquired, layered upon each other. Blood drenched, clinging to this body like a second color. Wounds bursting open bright red from the slightest movement Black gunk oozing out of every inch.

A muted warrior too far gone to care about pain. To cry out in agony...or just not willing?

Nails ripped clean from bloody finger beds scraped raw from exertion permanently engraved into the wooden floorboards the door and even the walls. Telltale claw marks permanently engraved into the room. Tel horrendous tales of countless attempts at escape.

Blood spatter on the ceiling... Against the walls sloshed all over the floor.... tells tales of violent battles fought time in and out again. Dark deep circles surrounding a pair of lifeless eyes dictates the tell-tale signs of persistent weeping.

Eyes that hold not even the faintest glimmer of life or hope Just a rotting corpse sitting quietly in the dark..... Although your heart beats your soul has died a long time ago...

Oh, my little warrior.... What you mustn't have gone through to survive ... What horrors did you endure to end up in such a futile state...?

“The migrants: a photo album”

Bennie Rosa

“Come to think of it, I’ve never seen her wear makeup either.” Said Lois speaking loudly through her right index knuckle.

“Have you ever seen her with a guy?” Asked Valerie.

“Nope, or a woman, for that matter.” Lois cackled loud enough so Priscilla could hear her over her shoulder.

Priscilla was a born migrant, only she didn’t know it at the time. This photo shows her approving forms. Notice the fist. This photo shows her being humiliated by co-workers and covering her face. This next photo shows her quitting her job. Notice the expression on her face. Wistful, not serene. Serenity for lonely women cannot be understood.

The caption on the postcard read ‘Michoacán in November’. There was no one to send it to, so she pressed it softly to her lips instead.

Migration Directions: Turn inside out, climb a wall, drink brook water and return it with tears, free climb a dream, jump regrets, repel hate, tempt fate (in case your life depends on it) because there is no way back. Last Step: Debate consequences with any fool you encounter and then count backwards to zero and you’re there!

Priscilla arrived, as a Monarch landed like painted air in her hand.

This next photo shows Priscilla and the Monarch exiting the airplane. Engine trouble usually ends on weed-tangled runways. Small towns in Mexico have a way of fooling you with their quaint ways. Do yourself a favor, see small towns as they really are and just be done with them.

She rented a small car. The little Monarch rested on her shoulder and fluttered with anticipation. Priscilla smiled at her co-migrant. This photo captures the exact moment Priscilla decided to name her Beauty.

They were driving along a mountain road, as a farm truck came barreling toward them, forcing her to the right. Her rental bounced off the side of the hill throwing her out over her heels and into a ditch filled with multi-colored snakes. The car drove on by itself.

Priscilla pulled herself out of the ditch and back up to the road, broken leg and all. The snakes ignored her, knowing her loneliness would do the job for them. Beauty stayed with her all the way.

As she crawled and limped along the road, dragging her leg behind, she found her rental. It was now a roadside flower stand selling pre-fabricated vigils.

This photo shows Priscilla and Beauty with nothing to lose.

To Monarchs, dead flowers are a repulse. Priscilla closed her eyes as Beauty rested motionless on her wrist.

A gentle breeze carried Beauty up to the fir trees on the horizon. It wasn't long before a kaleidoscope of Monarchs came to Priscilla. They covered her from head to toe. This last photo shows Beauty and her friends, and a very large Monarch, on their way home.

“Sabroo” by Nastaran Makaremi Translated by Negin Mohammadnajd

We were standing on top of the well. Ehsan had picked up a stick and was drawing a line around the well. He was annoying me. I wanted to bite him hard. But I promised Maman I wouldn't bite him anymore. He was making stupid noises ...aaaaaaaaaaaa ... his noises were rising and falling. They were getting closer and farther. There was no smell from the well. Sometimes it smelled and dirty water came out of its edges. There was nothing today. The well was empty, large, and silent. Maman would be very angry if she knew we were here. A few days ago, when I found the baby mice in the campgrounds and brought them into the room, she turned red with anger. She washed my hands a hundred times with alcohol and soap and said that I had given her hard days. Then she picked up the baby mice with a dust-pan and threw them out in the snow. Their skin was red and wrinkled. I sat above them and watched. Maman poured a pile of snow on them and said, "Get up. Do not touch these filthy creatures anymore. If I see you doing that again, I will burn the back of your hand with a hot spoon. Maman's behavior was so much better when Baba was around. But it's been a long time since he's in the middle of the war. Maman is afraid of " in the middle of the war", but I think it's like dodgeball. One throws the ball; the other gets hit or catches the ball. The sound of the shots, however, is sometimes very loud. So much so that it breaks the glasses of houses and destroys walls. My hand's skin is stretched and stinging. I lift my bondage and take a look at it. My wound is drenched and red all around. It looks like my skin is cut short. I took Ehsan's hand, who was starting the seventh round, and said, "Let's go." Ehsan grabbed my bondage. I pulled my hand back and let go. He turned and stared at the well again. He said, "Did you tell Maman Sabroo is there?" I looked around and said, "Yes." He said, "I did not hear that."

"You were asleep," I said. "The liar is God's enemy," he said. "You are" I said. Whenever he says something bad, I say that. Then I became the enemy of God in my mind. I went into the well to fight him. God knew karate kicks. "Whoever loses, must tell the truth," he said. I said, "It's not acceptable. You said, yourself, not to tell anyone ..." I spat in his face. He didn't like it and raised his head. His eyes turned red. His hair caught fire and he shouted, "Go to hell." Hell was hot. My heart was broken. My hair was burning. I punched God in the back. I said, "I am a child. Children should not be thrown into hell." God laughed. He turned blue. He froze. He cooled down. "I was joking. Well, come here to me," he said. Sabroo was there too. He was sitting on the sofa staring at the darkness, watching Cinderella, and eating pistachios. He was fine. God poured a handful of pistachios in my hands. I looked out of the well. Pistachios became a handful of gravel. I spilled them on the ground. My bondage got dirty. The Cinderella cartoon was played on a white screen last night in the camp chapel. At the same time, all the parents had gone to look for Sabroo. Cinderella was pretty. The kind fairy had given her a beautiful dress and crystal shoes. She was spinning on the screen and singing. But there was no sound. The film had jump-cuts. The device that was playing the film belonged to Arash's dad. He was in charge of the prayer hall. Finally, whatever he tried on the device, he couldn't fix it. Cinderella stayed upstairs and the naughty woman locked the door on her ... Then a policeman came in and asked us if we had seen Sabroo. We all said we did not. Ehsan looked at me and said nothing. The police left. Maman says they are planning to call the fire department and they would send someone to look down the well. "I'm telling Maman ... Ms. Davati says I must always tell the truth," Ehsan said. I said, "Okay, go and tell her. May God throw the bad guys in the well..." he got scared. It is very easy to scare him. Ms.

Davati hates me. Since the day I saw her at the school office. The principal was also there. He was pushing her against the wall. I do not know why he was pushing her that way. Maybe they had a fight. Ms. Davati's scarf had fallen around her neck. Her hair was a mess around her and she turned red when she saw me. I said, "Ma'm, your scarf ..." she always said that we women and girls should help the revolution with our hijab. Then we used to tie our scarves tightly so that the revolution would love us. Principle turned and looked at me in surprise. It was as if he had laughed. His cheeks were going to explode. He pushed me aside and left the office. Ms. Davati fixed her scarf. She must have forgotten to tie it. Like Maman that sometimes forgets, and goes outside of the room without a headscarf, runs after Ehsan in the corridor and doesn't allow him to play with Khanoom Sahar's children. KhanoomSahar is huge and black and always smells like meat. Her husband disappeared in Abadan and sent Khanoom Sahar and the children by bus. The bus was full and the driver had said, "Only women and children." And he left behind.

After that, nor did hereach Mahshahr, nor Shiraz, nor Ahvaz, nor anywhere else. She had said all these things to Maman and cried. She has five sons. She once said to me, "I wish God had given me a daughter like you." Sabroo was also a good boy. Unlike the rest of his brothers, he wasn't naughty and God would rarely humiliate him.He was quiet. He preferred to throw stones into the well. We also threw stones into the well. The rocks used to fall into the welland make a splashing sound. Khanoom Sahar, although she constantly cursed, was kind. She wants to be friends with Maman. She tells her " we understand each other's pain when both our husbands are not with us" ... Mamadoesn'tlike it. She keeps ignoring her. I understand it looking at her face and her fake smiles. Ms. Davati always says in class that we should be kind to each other. Because there is not enough space in the classroom and we have to sit on the benches with our three other classmates. Here, Ms. Davati is a first to third-grade teacher, and the principal himself teaches fourth and fifth graders. Classrooms are always cold and heaters never have oil. Instead, Rasool Maleki, who sits next to me, is a good guy. He says that his father is going to take them to Kuwait and he wants to marry me when he grows up and take me there too and sometimes he wraps his arm around my waist so that I don't fall off the bench. Ms. Davati frowns whenever she catches my eye, but she always gives me 20 for all my dictations. She once said to me, "If I tell anyone about her, God will make me blind." I'm not afraid of going blind. I close my eyes and think about what it's like to be blind. I once told Mamanand Ehsan, "I went blind."I closed my eyes and banged myself at the door and the wall. Mamanwas bored. She had cried. Her eyes were red. "It's ridiculous," she said to me. Maman misses Baba." She is also angry with him. That is, whenever she misses someone, she gets angry. The day Baba wanted to go back to Abadan, Maman cried a lot. She said, "Where do you want to go? Tothat slaughter house?" "They summoned us. We all have to go back to the refinery," Baba said.

Maman said, "Which refinery? They have bombed it by now." I was thin king of dodgeball. With those loud shots. Mamansaid, "Isn't this enough? War and homelessness?" Baba said, "I will be fired. There will be no bread left for us to eat." Maman said, "Why should I eat when something may happen to you." I went and took a piece of bread from the kitchen table and gave it to Baba. . Helaughed. He held Maman's headto his chest. "Nothing is going to happen," "you should take care of them while I'm away." he said. Baba was strong. His strength was too much. He used to bend his arms and two bumps would appear. Two large bumps on his arm. But Ehsan is a coward. I bet he is afraid of hell and going blind. Last week, when I cut my hand, he was very scared.

When he saw blood, he peed in his pants. I laughed at him while I was crying. Maman took off his pants and said, "Go and wear something else." I had badly drawn the knife on my palm. I wanted to see how sharp it was. It was very sharp. Maman took me to the hospital. Sabroo ran after the car until he could no longer run. Blood came out of all the fabric Maman had wrapped around my hand. I was scared too. Ehsan cried all the way because I had called him Mr. Poo. The nurse there picked up the fabric. Then brought a strange thread and needle and sewed and bandaged my hand. Now the skin of my hand is stuck together again. But it seems to be shortened and stretched. Like plastic. Like a fish-like chocolate. My heart seemed to stretch that day and was torn from its place. I don't want to think about the well. But the well comes to me every night. Sounds like moaning. It is moaning. Probably it's something has broken. Head, hand, legs ... I go above the well. I go in to it. I see God sitting there and making a moan-like sound to scare us. He laughs when he sees me. His stomach hurts with laughter. I do not laugh. "Where is Sabroo?" I ask with a frown. There were tears in his eyes with a lot of laughter. He wipes away the tears and says, "He left. He's playing with those toys in that corner." He points with his finger to the darkness. I look at that corner. Sabroo is not there. I turn around. God is not there. It is dark everywhere and I am alone at the bottom of the well. Sabroo didn't have toys. We only had a bike. We would bring it to the campgrounds. In turn, I used to put Ehsan and Sabroo behind me and ride it. My legs used to get hurt. I pushed too hard to pedal. Yesterday Khanoom Sahar came to the door. "Have the kids not seen Sabroo?" she asked. Maman called us. "Did you not see Sabroo?" she asked. Ehsan looked at me. I said "No" and nudged Ehsan. Khanoom Sahar asked, "Weren't you playing outside together?" I said, "Yes, we did. Then we came in. He stayed out." I stopped breathing. My mouth smelled like liars. A bad smell. Like the smell of onions. Ehsan hid himself behind Maman and said softly, "We were by the well." Khanoom Sahar was checking the end of the corridor with her eyes. Checking her other sons, who were asking other rooms for Sabroo, and as if she did not hear Ehsan's voice, she left. Maman closed the door and said, "Didn't I tell you a hundred times not to play near that well? Do you want a hot spoon?" Ehsan escaped and went to the corner of the room. That night, everyone realized that Sabroo had disappeared. All the men and women set out to look for him. Some men even went to the pump motor outside the camp. I stayed in the room. Maman came back to us earlier than the others. I heard her voice in the corridor telling Khanoom Sahar, "Don't forebode. They will find him." Khanoom Sahar was crying loudly ... God had come out of the well. He had gone to buy cigarettes from Mirza Razi's stall. Sabroo threw a stone into the well and shouted. Ehsan also threw a stone into the well and shouted. I did it too ... Then Sabroo picked one up and threw it at us. I escaped. The stone passed by Ehsan and me. We became Iranians and he became Iraqis. We started throwing stones at each other. One of the stones bowed in the air and hit Ehsan in the chest. He got hurt a bit. I also threw one in return. The stone went up and hit Sabroo in the head. Ehsan and I screamed and laughed. We turned around and clapped. Sabroo but suddenly stopped. The black part of his eyes went up and it turned white. His body, like a piece of wood, didn't bend. He didn't bend and fell into the well. God arrived. He had a cigarette in his hand. He bent down in the black part of the well and the smoke of his cigarette died in it. Then he looked back at us. "Go home. Don't tell anyone," he said. We went backward. I took Ehsan's hand and pulled him. I was afraid. My heart was kind of cramped and crumpled. Maman says firefighters are supposed to come and get into the well. God will surely give them Sabroo to bring him up.

“The Precipice of the Periphery”

Kelly Kaur

cruising blissfully on the meandering Arizona highway on a blazing summer afternoon. the music blares from worn-out speakers and float out unrolled windows. tears for fears. we chant, “Everybody wants to rule the world.” freedom passionately beckons. the cool breeze from the open windows rebelliously fingers my dark black hair and twists it into unruly spirals.

the cruiser takes a sharp turn. the lone white police officer trails behind. bewilderment. trepidation. heartbeats treble. what have we done? are you speeding? no. is this rental car stolen? no. you must be speeding? “hell, I said no, didn’t I? oh my god. detention camps? lights flicker furiously. sirens wail indignantly. trapped to a rude halt in the unfriendly skinny shoulder of the vast highway. why are you stopping us, officer? what? driving unsafely? too slowly? ok. I’ll follow you to your cruiser. here’s my driver’s license.

my friend? in the passenger seat? she is from Canada. yes, she is Canadian. yes, she has her papers. no, she is not here looking for work. ok. thanks for letting us go, this time. and oh yes. thanks for the driving lesson on how to let cars in safely on the highway. thank you, sir.

silenced. muted. no more songs left to sing. the sky morphs into angry pockets of hate. darkness. it’s 2018, man. isn’t it? I just want to belong for gawd’s sake. fingerprints. thumbprints. full frontal gaze. recorded. and you. and you. and you. glide by past my distinct invisibility.

2020. down on 17th Avenue S.W., Calgary. in the midst of a pandemic, the mad and the brave have ventured out to sing a collective song of freedom. “everybody wants to rule the world.” the lovers. the haters. the clueless. the masked, faceless people snake in unruly meanderings, crossing from one trail to the other. disconnected, I watch them. familiar fissures of anxiety shoot sharply from the atlas of my being. zigzag to my origin. my mother’s womb. my gasping breaths spiral through my passports, permits and passes. pedigree painted placards. accents muted. the ambivalence of equality.

the fervent marchers stomp riotously to a raucous tempo and rhythm that unfold in uniformed ardent frenzy. I am on the outside. the eternal, infinite, perpetual outsider. I stand on the precipice of the periphery.

I don’t want to march for my equality. join your lines of dissent. shout your songs of protest. I just want to be. to simply. belong. make no apologies. make no justifications.

it’s 2021, man. isn’t it? I just want to belong, for gawd’s sake. just like that. just like you. and you. and you. and you. seamlessly, effortlessly, faultlessly.

no more precipices. no more peripheries.

just a piece of peace.

“Kindertransport”

Silvia Hines

I

I got the cheek swab from Grandma Rose and mailed it off with the DNA kit exactly one week before leaving for college. I’ve wanted to find someone related to Grandma since I was a child--someone other than Mom and me---and this could be my last chance; Rose just turned 95! I couldn’t have gotten the swab even a few years ago because she would have been onto me and refused. I didn’t tell Mom what I’d done because she’d likely say something silly, like I’d be interfering with Grandma’s karma. When Mom talked like that, Grandma and I used to roll our eyes behind her back.

Grandma had made it clear she didn’t want anyone to do any searching. She said she knew what happened to everyone, that no one had survived, and she didn’t want to talk about the past. But back when I was a child in grade school, she didn’t seem to mind talking to me. We’d sit together on the patterned velour overstuffed couch in her Manhattan apartment, her feet, like mine, not reaching the plush carpet, and she’d answer my questions about her childhood in Poland.

I especially loved hearing about Ana, who was both her first cousin and her best friend. She told me about playing in wheat and potato fields, and on the edge of a forest that abutted their village. When they had to play indoors, she said, she and Ana wrote their own stories and acted them out, since books were in short supply. She showed me a sepia-toned photo of Ana and her older brother, both posed formally, unsmiling, and both wearing dark clothes, all of which Grandma said was typical of photos the time.

“Ana is so pretty,” I said when I first saw the photo. “I want to meet her, and her brother too. How old are they now? Can we visit them?”

“We can’t,” she said.

“Do they live too far away?”

“Yes, very far,” she replied, rather abruptly.

The first time Grandma told me how heartbroken she and Ana had been when they were separated at the age of eight, I cried. I was also eight at the time. Grandma’s family had left Poland for the US sometime in the early 1920s, and Ana’s family had stayed behind. Young as I was then, I realized Ana was dead. I understood that Ana’s family should have left for the US also. But I also recognized there was something more than sadness in Grandma’s voice when she talked about the loss of Ana. I thought there was anger too, which made no sense to me since Ana was a child back then and couldn’t have been in on the decision to stay in Poland.

When I was about twelve Mom told me everything, or at least everything she knew. By that time, I'd read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Mom was sitting at the edge of my bed after kissing me good night, and although I was tired and needed to go to sleep, she continued talking. I could see she was about to tell me something important, so I kept my eyes open.

"Jenny," she said. "You've been wondering about Rose and Ana. I think you're old enough now..."

I bolted up in bed, alert again. We both laughed. I'd known there was a story.

"She told you about their separation when they were children?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, Grandma had corresponded by mail with Ana for as long as she could," Mom said, "all through their childhoods, until 1939, when the war started."

"By then Grandma and Ana were grown up?" I asked. "But you weren't born yet, right?"

"Right. Ana married early, in her teens," Mom said. "And she had two children, a son named Piotr and a daughter, Raizel. They would have been our cousins."

I'd studied genealogy in a biology class, so I did a quick calculation. "Second cousins for you," I said, "and for me ... second cousins once removed."

Mom smiled. She went on to tell me about a plan to send the children, Piotr and Raizel, to England on a rescue mission called the Kindertransport. The children were about eight and four then, she said. Piotr was the older of the two and was going to look after Raizel until they arrived. Apparently, this escape trip was planned but had never happened. Grandma had waited to hear from the children or their English sponsors, according to the plan Ana had sent her, but she'd never been contacted. She'd tried to find the children right after the war ended but wasn't able to.

"Why?" I asked. "Why didn't the children go on the escape trip?"

"Grandma assumes Ana couldn't bring herself to part with them. I think that's why she seems angry, or at least annoyed, when she talks about Ana." She paused, and smiled ruefully. "Jenny, the parents who sent their children on the Kindertransport knew they'd probably never see them again."

I gulped. "To send them off would have been a ... selfless sacrifice, wouldn't it?" I said. Mom nodded.

I was getting sleepy again, but I thought there could be more to the story. Maybe it's because I'm planning to major in pre-med and eventually become a psychiatrist, or maybe it's my love of thriller novels, where there's always a twist you never suspect. Mom and I agreed we would never know the whole story for sure, and we didn't talk about it anymore. Now, five years after that conversation, I packed for college and awaited the DNA results

II

From: Judith Miller

To: Jenny Greene

Subject: We may be cousins!

Thank you, Jenny, for your email on behalf of your grandmother, Rose. I agree it's amazing and mysterious that she and I are such a close DNA match---possibly second cousins according to the folks at Ancestry. However, I think I can solve the mystery. I'm pretty sure I know how we're related.

My name is Judith Miller and I'm a psychotherapist living in San Diego. My mother, Rochelle (originally Raizel) was born in Poland in 1935. Her parents, Ana and Abe, died at the hands of the Nazis, apparently in Auschwitz, according to available information. I believe my mother is the daughter of the Ana you mentioned in your email!

My mother escaped the Nazis because she was sent to England in 1939, at the age of 4, as part of a humanitarian evacuation program called the Kindertransport. She died just two years ago, and in going through her papers my brother and I found a letter from Ana, the biological grandmother we'd never met. The grandparents we did know had adopted our mother in England and then emigrated with her to the US. No one ever talked about our mother's biological parents; it was taboo. The letter is addressed to Rose Stern at a New York City address that I can't make out and is dated August 1939, exactly 75 years ago! I am certain this Rose Stern is your grandmother.

I've been Googling Rose's name for over a year, persisting because my son tells me documents are constantly being digitized and something may come up. But Rose Stern is a pretty common name, and I guessed Rose would probably be going by a married name at this point. Meanwhile, we've had the letter from Ana translated from the Yiddish, and if you reply to me and agree that we are truly related, I will scan it and send it your way.

As you will see, Ana asked my mother to get this letter to Rose in the US when she arrived in England. Ana probably was afraid the mail wouldn't go through after the Nazis invaded Poland, which may have been anticipated in late summer 1939. But my mother was only four years old!

I can only conjecture what it was like for my mother to find herself alone in England, at such a young age, to be cared for by people she didn't know, what fear and disorganization she must have experienced. When my mother spoke of this period in her life, which was rare, she expressed anger at being separated from her parents. She said she will never forget the look on her mother's face when her parents brought her to the train. I think she used the word haunted. She once said she would have preferred staying in Poland and dying together with her family. Then she looked at us, my brother and me, and apologized. It was hard for us to understand that we couldn't completely make up to our mother for all she had lost.

So we think our mother forgot about mailing the letter. Somehow, it stayed with the possessions she had brought with her, first, to England, and then, about twelve years later, to the

US. We all know about PTSD. If you can forgive a psychological cliché, I think my mother later developed what they call “survivor’s guilt.” She knew she was the only one alive from her biological family and may not have known about the extended family---your mother’s family---who had left Europe so much earlier. Perhaps by the time she got to the US, she thought it was too late to mail the letter.

Now I know what you’re thinking: but there were two children. What happened to the boy? I’m going to leave that question for Ana herself to answer for you in her letter.

Jenny, I sent my DNA sample to Ancestry because I wanted information about my genetic heritage and disease susceptibilities. I didn’t expect to find a close match other than on my father’s side. And I certainly didn’t expect to find a clue to the identities of the people mentioned in the letter we’d found when my mother died. Since my brother and I grew up with no biological relatives on our mother’s side, you can imagine how excited we are to have found you. Please write back!

III

From: Judith Miller

To: Jenny Greene

Subject: The promised letter

Thank you for writing back, Jenny, and for including your phone number. Attached below is the letter from Ana, translated into English. I will give you some time to read it, and then we will talk on the phone.

August 1939 [The exact date is blurred]

My Dear Cousin Rose,

I fear the winter we are soon to endure is going to be fierce, another deprivation, especially for the Jews. Remember, Rosie, how we used to build those huge snowmen outside your house, pilfering buttons from your mother’s sewing basket for the eyes? For us now, even for the children, there is no joy. Everything is bad news. We no longer have any notion of what good news would be like. Our parents’ admonitions to think positively are gone and forgotten. Rumor has it the Germans will be invading Poland soon, and that will be tragic for us. Hitler annexed Austria last year, and now he wants Poland. I don’t know if this letter will ever get to you; we have heard word that the mail is being censored even now. Things can only get worse.

We had insufficient food this spring and summer and we fear we will suffer greatly during the coming winter. I can see us huddling together under blankets for lack of coal. Even now, we can’t spare any crumbs to feed the beautiful birds and can give the children only the tiniest crusts to feed the ducks in the pond. Piotr, of course, hasn’t been involved in any outdoor activities

because, as I told you in my last letter, he has been very ill throughout most of the summer. Thank God, he is improving now from his bout with pneumonia, although he still has infections of the larynx and pharynx. If he is this ill in the summer, God please tell me how he will survive this winter.

I know. You were right. You are probably wringing your hands right now, asking why we did not accept your offer of sponsorship and get to America when it was still possible. You wrote to me that you had read a bit of Mein Kampf and were following the newspapers, and that we had better get out of there as soon as possible. But we had a life here, and we had been happy. We love the community here: the crazy, serious men who devote their lives to studying the Talmud, the Hasidim with their curious dances and oppressive rules, the mystics who study Kabbalah all day long. Even the zealous debates on the merits of Zionism versus socialism. We have the theater, newspapers, and a good school for Piotr. And Mama and Papa are buried here, nearby.

So when things began to change, around 1935, we thought it would blow over, as things like this had in the past. We couldn't have been more wrong. Of the many insults we have suffered, the worst was when Piotr was beaten up on the way home from school by a gang of boys who just last year were his friends. Since then, one of us always walks with him to and from school. In short, we are in shock, and I fear we will pay the highest price for our mistake, for staying here.

You asked about the trains taking the children to England. We did arrange for both children to go, did I not tell you that? Piotr was to watch over Raizel on the trip. Yosef did not want to send either of them, but I was able to convince him that our children must survive this madness. I told Y that if the children survived and we did not, you and your family would take care of them. So I sewed into the waistband of Raizel's skirt a cloth pocket, like those money belts you hear about, and into it I put a piece of white cloth with your name and address written in indelible ink. I wanted to insert my gold wedding ring for its value, but Y convinced me it would not stay with our daughter for long. We had been warned that no valuables would be allowed to leave .

As you have probably guessed by now, Piotr will be unable to go on the train with Raizel because he is still so sick. We were advised that he probably would have a relapse of the pneumonia and quite likely would die if we sent him. As you know, this trip involves a train as well as a boat. I think Y was secretly glad for this turn of events. He sat by Piotr's bedside for hours on the day this was decided, while I did my best to start preparing our baby, only four years old, for leaving us. She will go in less than a week. There are to be caretaking adults along on the trips to look after the littlest children until they are picked up by the sponsoring adults.

I am enclosing a birthday card Piotr made for you when he was recuperating. I told him everything I remembered about you while he lay sick in bed. He asked many questions about you, especially whether you had any children and whether he could meet them some day. I told him you did not yet have children but I was sure you would soon, since you mentioned a man you met recently at the Workmen's Circle meeting in New York. How I would like to be at your wedding. In a world that was not insane, we would all just get on a ship to cross the ocean, visit you, and watch you say your marriage vows.

We pray all the time, those of us who still think there is something like a God lurking somewhere, that the world will hear of our pain and do something. It is funny that we are still willing to pray even though we are certain we cannot rely on God himself to do anything for us.

Your loving cousin,

Ana

IV

From: Judith Miller

To: Jenny Greene

Subject: I'm coming to visit!

I'm greatly looking forward to our second phone call this Sunday. And after we talk on the phone, Jenny, if you and your mom agree, I'm going to immediately book a flight to Connecticut for a weekend when you'll be home from college. Clearly, Zoom or Skype will not do the trick, judging from the hilarious and sad story you told me about the time you set Rose up to Skype with her brother-in-law, and she insisted the man on the computer screen was a television actor who looked just like her late husband's brother.

You also told me you're not sure Rose remembers the whole story about Ana and her children or that she'll understand when we tell her who I am. Jenny, I'm confident that when the four of us are sharing the same space, when we sit at a table in each other's presence ... when we show Rose the letter from Ana I've sent you and bring out her photo of Ana and her brother ... I believe that no matter what she says about what she remembers, an important part of her will know what we're saying. In her heart, I think, Rose will understand that her cousin Ana wanted both her children to survive, and had attempted to make that happen.

Perhaps Rose will even understand and find it interesting that I am here---that I exist---only because of the efforts of a large group of enormously generous people. And though I assume she isn't inclined toward science or technology, perhaps she'll also find it interesting that you and I have found each other because of the work of a diverse group of creative scientists---the developers of DNA matching and the inventors of the Internet!

Finally, by now you know that Ana learned of Rose's beau through letters they'd exchanged and that she longed to be able to cross the ocean and attend her cousin's wedding. Well, Jenny, my son David is going to be married next summer here in San Diego. Is it too melodramatic for me to suggest it would be an honoring of our ancestors, or the fulfilment of a dream shared by Rose and Ana, if all three of you flew to Southern California to stay at my house and attend my son's wedding?

Your loving cousin,

Judith

“Statue of Slavery”

Francesco Capussela

Unstriped robe under unimpeachable
stars. Rust erases her bronze origin
in the vitiliginous fashion of history.
Pigeon poop slides.

Another white tear
on the lady’s cheek.
Curious how a mere
bird migration remarks
her colossal little shame.

From the balcony around the torch,
a peregrine falcon points down
at the book of unholy laws.

In a folklore-fueled July night
skyscrapers pop their corks.
The grand jury of fireworks
joins the falcon’s landing forks
on the goddess’ crowned nest.

On an Ellis Island street,
a teen stares at the ocean
as the falcon glides down

from the green crown
through invisible fleets.

Rising his torch of speech
cocked at muffled clouds,
he fires for his gens' pains.

A gentle bliss in unison
with the black sound
of cemetery chains
in the abyssal ground.

In growth under macro skies
both falcon and afro teen
know what it implies
to be pigeonholed
by the volatile
upper society.

“Us Wards”

Candace Amarante

“Hello, is this X?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“This is Y, from State Penitentiary W. We are calling on behalf of Z.”

“Who?”

“Z. He says you were the cook of a friend of his, the former Ambassador A to country B?”

“That’s correct.”

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news ma’am, but Z is to be executed next week. ... Ma’am, are you still there ... hello?”

“Yes, I’m here ... excuse me, it ... it’s a bit shocking.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Why did you call to tell me this?”

“Well, ordinarily we give those slated for execution their favorite meal the day before they die. Somehow, Z caught wind that you lived around here, and asked me to contact you to see if you’d prepare his last meal.”

“I see. Groundnut soup?”

“Yep, that’s exactly what he wants! None of us here knew what it was, but he said you would. Z’ll be executed next Friday. Would you be able to make this groundnut for him?”

“I guess ...”

“Good. You think you can bring the meal to the penitentiary? You could also see him before he dies; he doesn’t get that many visitors.”

“No ... I’d ... I’d rather not.”

“I understand. Just to let you know, you ain’t obligated to prepare the meal either. It’s just protocol for us to fulfil the last food requests for those on death row.”

“Yes, I’ll do it for Z.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Much obliged to you. I’ll call you early next week to confirm the drop off location and to compensate you for your troubles.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“It’s standard procedure, ma’am. Even though this case ain’t quite standard, we still have to compensate you.”

“Really, it’s not necessary.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am; we just can’t do that. Tell you what ... you can give it to charity. Many inmates have families they can no longer provide for; you can leave the money in the charity box here when you drop off Z’s meal.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

“Well, alrighty then. I’ll be in touch. Good day to you, ma’am.”

“Goodbye.”

Too bad he hadn’t asked for zaki-tumboi; I would have prepared it in a way that the cyanide from the leaves would have killed him before the lethal injection. It would have been a gentler death. What could he have possibly done to be on death row? He didn’t have diplomatic immunity like my former boss, Ambassador A. Easier to throw Z under the bus. Knowing Ambassador A, that’s probably what happened. I pondered poisoning my boss once, but lucky for him, he detested zaki-tumboi. Z was different; I remember how cordial he was with us ... the help, the child servants ... I didn’t even know what we were called or what our legal status was back then. We were nameless, forgotten subjects to those ruthless diplomats. It was as if all the energy they exerted to prevent disorder among nations was released on us ... convenient targets; not covered by any law or jurisdiction, neither from the countries that held our bosses as distinguished guests nor from our homeland, which asked us to be their representatives’ faithful servants. Bearing the brunt of their wrath, we saw each other’s scars and subtle reactions: cowering on seeing a raised hand, flinching at the sound of an elevated voice. We couldn’t even turn to each other. If one of us relayed his or her plight to another, it could become fodder for an idle, glib diplomats’ wife to spread as gossip until it circled back to the mistress of said nameless, forgotten one ... and the gossip would lead to more abuse for that poor soul.

*

Memories can be brutal, lifelong companions—fortunate are those with happier ones. Thankfully, I have some from my years back in country A with my parents. They could not afford to send us all to school, only my brothers, while my sisters stayed home cultivating our little farm. I was the youngest and often a nuisance, quiet only in the warmth of my father’s employer’s kitchen. Not that I was particularly fond of food, but rather mesmerized by the act of cooking. Watching Baba cook calmed me. From the time my tiny hands could grasp a knife, I commenced as Baba’s sous chef, standing on a tiny stool, chopping all the vegetables needed to make a hearty obe ata—which he’d cook once a week. That was the base for many main meals: chicken stew with rice, spinach stew with snapper, corned beef stew, and on Sundays his employer’s favourite, liver stew with boiled cassava.

Then sickness struck our home taking two of my income-earning brothers. Mum fell ill, too. With rising medical bills, my parents could no longer afford caring for the rest of their children and began giving us up, not to the state, but to affluent families. Baba was the cook of the most prominent family in our village. When he informed them of our woes, they referred us to

Ambassador A. My parents gave me to him and his family, with the hope that my basic needs would be met, including my education in exchange for my service as their cook.

At fourteen, I found myself at the doorstep of the soon-to-be Ambassador A to country B. For the first time, a picture was taken of me. I was not allowed to smile. I was given a hard-covered little book with that picture of me without a smile. They asked me to sign it, I couldn't. The mistress signed it for me. When I later looked at my picture, I appeared as if in a state of shock. I probably was.

I sat at the rear of the plane with two siblings, another young girl slightly older than me, seventeen or so, and her brother who seemed in his early 20s. Both were giddy. I was terrified. She was to be the nanny of the ambassadors' young children. He was to be their driver. They were both very kind to me. I found out on our plane ride to country B, that they, too, were given up by their families, who hoped for a brighter future for them. None of us received the education we were promised.

*

Country B was cold and grey, like our rainy seasons but with frigid air and snow, which I was seeing for the first time, and detested. Ever so grateful to be confined in the warmth of the kitchen, I rarely ventured out, only for weekly grocery shopping. Almost every day I cooked for some function or dinner party. My mistress had no sense of the kitchen but barked commands anyway. After a two-week spell of non-stop cooking, I dropped an entire meal on the floor. Horrified, my mistress scolded me mercilessly and summoned her husband. When he saw what I'd done, he grabbed the nearest wooden spoon and commenced beating me with it. I had never been beaten before and wailed from the shock. As the guests were still present, the mistress pleaded with him to stop. She hurried to the phone and ordered a meal to be delivered immediately. Ambassador A grabbed my throat and said he had not finished with me. After the dinner party, he kept his promise. *

I never did get over the first beating. The shock numbed the subsequent pain, but not the emotional turmoil. It was a few days after that beating when I first met Z. He would be a frequent visitor to the home of Ambassador A. That night, I prepared my father's favourite, groundnut soup. Watching Baba prepare the soup was like participating in a sacred ritual: he'd catch the chicken, slit its throat and, as the blood drained, he'd whisper a prayer thanking her for sacrificing her life to nourish ours. Then he'd pluck her feathers, cut a fresh lemon in half and wash the naked chicken with it as if scrubbing a dirty child with a bar of soap. After butchering the whole chicken, he'd season it with salt, pepper and garlic, then douse it with the juice from the other half of the lemon. I'd then take a paper bag full of fresh peanuts and roll a glass bottle filled with water over it to grind the nuts into a fine powder. This was followed by my regular chopping duties: one medium onion, a couple of scallions, a long stalk of celery, half a green bell pepper and three garlic cloves; my fingers redolent of vegetables. He'd combine all these ingredients in a pot of boiling water, sprinkling it with salt, dried thyme, white pepper and dried basil, then let it cook for two hours until the soup, thick and creamy, was ready to serve atop basmati rice.

In country B there were no nuts to grind; I used peanut butter, the creamy one. There was no chicken to slaughter; I used store-bought chicken already chopped into pieces on a yellow styrofoam tray; I whispered a prayer anyway.

I served Ambassador A and Z. I had forgotten that Ambassador A did not like the groundnut soup over his rice; it was to be on the side without mixing. A plate was thrown in my face in front of Z. He'd never attacked me in front of guests before, which made me wonder who exactly was this Z? A good man, I guess, because he came to my aid, which infuriated Ambassador A. The first rule: do not help us nameless ones. I fell victim to the wooden spoon again that night.

*

I don't bruise easily, but the seventeen-year-old nanny did. I saw the welts on her arms. I heard her cries. I dared not ask what she'd done. All I knew was that the young children were no good and relished getting her in trouble. Her brother was a coward, no ... too harsh, maybe he understood that if he were to intervene, it would have only made matters worse for her. The mistress pretended not to hear or see. I thought of Z, but he'd not been around for a while now.

*

The mistress's father passed away. She had to return to country A with the kids. The nanny pleaded to accompany her. The ambassador refused. Her nightly sobs were different from the ones before then. Her bruises were in different places. She became aloof; neither spoke to her brother nor me, nor made eye contact nor dined with us. Her brother asked what he could do. She remained silent.

Z came back; I sought his help. To get him alone proved difficult. I had nearly given up when an opportunity arose on the day he was to leave country B. The ambassador left for the embassy earlier that day and said he'd send the driver back to take Z to the airport. I struck then:

"Excuse me, sir."

"Yes."

"I wondered if you could ..."

"What?"

"If you could ..."

"If I could, what?"

"If you could help us ... us ... I don't even know what we are called."

"Help, with what?"

"The ambassador is doing bad things to us ... please, tell the police. This is not our country. We do not speak their language."

"I ..."

"Please, sir."

"I can't do anything for you. Your boss is an ambassador and has diplomatic immunity."

"What does that mean?"

“Laws that cover ordinary people, do not apply to him. He can do anything he wants, really.”

“But why?”

“That’s diplomacy for you. For nations to remain friends their representatives must be above each others’ laws. But we are not afforded this immunity and must be very careful.”

“So, there are no laws to protect people like us ...?”

The driver summoned him. He looked at me, shamefully.

“You have a great talent for cooking. To be honest, I’m here so often to eat your food. I’m most fond of your groundnut soup.”

I did not acknowledge the compliment.

“I guess I could talk to him. That’s all I can do for you.”

I wanted to beg him not to speak to him, but he ran out to the car before I could stop him.

*

Ambassador A told me to kneel before him and reveal my scalp. I parted my hair in the front of my head, where he dabbed scalding ashes from his cigarette. I fell to the ground. He held me up and told me to stay still, then struck my burning scalp with a cane.

When I came to, I saw the nanny hovering over me. Gently removing my hand from my head, she picked the dried ashes from my scalp. Blood spurted onto her face. She held a cloth on my head trying to stop the bleeding. I gazed at her face dotted with my blood. She looked back at me; we realized we had no more tears to shed.

*

There was a military coup back home in country A. The mistress and her children were stuck there. Ambassador A was told to leave the premises in country B immediately. His life was in jeopardy in our homeland, so we were flown to the neighboring country where Ambassador A was granted temporary political asylum. As soon as we landed, we parted ways without even exchanging goodbyes with the ambassador. The siblings had relatives in this neighboring country; they took me under their wing and set me up with a loving family where, this time, I was to be the nanny. My employer was a prominent businesswoman who exported hair products to the United States, where we eventually relocated. After I took care of her children, she paid for my education. Luckily, my charges had taught me to read, so I didn’t need to start from the very beginning. Cooking was still in my blood; I opted to attend a vocational chef school. A few years later, I became the head cook at the local hospital; that’s where I was when I got the call from the penitentiary.

I prepared the groundnut soup for Z. He had meant well in both occasions when he tried to help me. I was just sorry that he was the one on death row. I never did find out what happened to Ambassador A and his family—better this way; I need to start filtering the memories I make. That call from the penitentiary did bring back one poignant recollection, my last conversation with Z in country B when I asked: “So, there are no laws to protect people like us ... us ...I don’t even know what we are called.” After Z was executed, I applied to state W Law School and found out we are called wards.

“The Sk(in) I’m in”

Mariam Magsi

You don’t look like you’re Pakistani.

Not at all.

You have such gorgeous brown skin.

You could easily pass for Mediterranean.

Somewhere from the South of Italy.

very

Exotic.

We’ll get back to your work in a second,

it’s just that...

I can’t stop.

Staring.

At.

Your.

Skin.

Why have you come back so tanned?

You look like Trump.

Stop going out into the sun

so much.

Sand.

Niggah!

They called me while I was crossing
the street, trying to get milk for the morning.

I didn't even know I was brown

Until I got here.

You've aged.

The collagen in your skin is really good.

I'm envious of you.

Mix some rosewater into your Ubtan

scrub yourself with it

especially the darker parts of your neck

elbows

the insides of your thighs and your knees.

A bride mustn't have such darkness on her.

You've always had these dark spots and circles.

You even had them as a child.

I hope your children get your husband's beautiful skin.

You have nice eyes though.

I hope they get your eyes.

You should bathe in milk to brighten your skin.

Cleopatra used to bathe in milk all the time.

I mean...you're kinda pretty.

Hmm.

Let's see here.

You have nice skin.

Are you Italian?

No. Pakistani.

Are you Mexican?

No. Pakistani.

Salaam. Arabiya?

La. Pakistani.

Are you Roma?

No. Pakistani.

Aap bahir say ho?

Nahin. Idhar Pakistan say hoon.

Español?

English & Urdu.

You look Persian. Are you Persian?

No. Pakistani.

Namaste, ma'am. India?

Nahin, jee. Pakistan.

You're getting wrinkles.

Khayal rakho apna.

You know if you just started working out everyday,
all your problem areas would tighten
and you would get that
youthful look again.

You know, you don't smell like the rest of them.

Don't play in the sun for too long.

You'll become Kaali

Dark is not desired.

Why are you so dark?

Isn't Canada a cold country?

Thought you'd come back fairer.

Don't go out

in the sun too much.

Chee.

Eww.

Why is the back of your neck so dark?

Why are there dark marks on your face?

Scrub your face and body with Ubtan.

Best, most natural, organic way to lighten.

Your.

Skin.

You'll be chamko-ing.

Like a gori.

Scrub your skin.

I said.

Scrub your skin. Scrub your skin.

Until you bleed.

Until I can't see blood from skin.

Scrub your skin.

“Beyond the border”

Dörthe Huth

the leaden night is coming
spinning a cocoon of dream tissue
around the rhythm of your breath
I pass the gate
between now and then
here and there
as a frontier worker
a hiker between the worlds
receiving the signals of the “other“ world
and her echo always throws back

over and over I have to
to run around a border
bend down and warp
crawl under fences
or build a bridge by myself
on the other side
careful in the border area
putting one foot in front of the other
not to step on an old landmine

sometimes like a drifting sanddune
carried grit for grit
to another place

sometimes blown like a feather
confused in the sandstorm
I do not always know where I am
and rarely where I would prefer to be
where do I belong
if I do not belong anywhere?

borders are not made for us
harsh they separate soft compounds
stones become border fences
boundary trees become markings
rivers become borders
the borderland a single wailing wall

a river blends into the landscape
it is initially defined
to a deviding line
the nomad heart
has to decide again
on which side of the riverbank
it erects its tents
build up, dismantle
pack up, unpack ...

states build their boundarys
sharing the world artificially
economy, family and culture

separated from each other
surrounded by walls
lays the heart down on stone
bleeds and ossifies
the pulsation
a relic from elapsed days

when dream and reality become blurred
the nomadic soul does not always know
on which side of the border it resides
longing often is just a stone's throw away
and yet beyond the reach of the border
with the sand, the wind pushes
a feather in front of him
it ends up in no man's land
between the borders on a mine ...

No border lasts eternal.

“Afternoon on a Train”

Stacey E. Bryan

The blurb describing award-winning author Octavia Butler’s sci-fi novel “Fledgling” wraps up by asking a question: Are all humans bigots, or are all bigots human?

Before that, though, a little back story first.

The book my father, Dr. Edward Bryan, and I were supposed to write together was called “I’m Innocent,” a humorous memoir detailing his experiences as the Chief Dental Officer of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Metropolitan Detention Center, during his golden years.

Ala the Shawshank Redemption, a curious universal innocence thrives in the prison system to which my father was privy and where the inmates affectionately referred to him as “Dr. No Pain.” I personally think that’s quite an accomplishment, considering how much dentists tend to be feared and avoided at all costs.

Tooth Docs seem to inspire that hesitant moment where, as they like to say on the island of dead Latin phrases, ante tubam trepidat: one’s courage oozes out. Of course, my dad had a captive audience with little or no choice but...still. In that situation, it would have been fairly easy not to care.

Eleanor Roosevelt said something about caring. She said: “We are afraid to care too much, for fear that the other person does not care at all.” And for her, championing civil rights before it had even technically become a cause probably felt Sisyphean times a million.

She received lackluster support, if any at all, from her spouse President Roosevelt, she managed to incite J. Edgar Hoover’s everlasting ire, and she acquired a 4,000-page FBI dossier documenting her philanthropic activities.

I figure anyone who has a 4,000-page FBI dossier on them is either someone I really don’t want to know or someone who’s really worth knowing. Mrs. Roosevelt proved to be the latter, because when she took the train one day 76 years ago and ran into the boy who would one day become my father, he was touched and deeply affected by the meeting.

But first let’s set the stage a little. Fly back with me, fly back.

It’s 1944. A 2-pound bag of coffee is 85 cents. Gas goes for 15 cents a gallon. The average house costs \$3,450. Just those three items alone should have your head awhirl, imagining the things you could accomplish with a time machine.

Double Indemnity and Gaslight came out that year, the average price of a ticket reaching about 32 cents. Can you imagine today removing \$1 from your wallet and buying a ticket to Avatar? And then receiving back change? The mind boggles.

The war was still raging but would be over soon. It was a war that affected everyone personally, besides the loss of life, in the form of food and gas rationing, metal, nylon, and other shortages.

My father is a 15-year-old African-American kid who lives in Boston. His cousin gets him a job working weekends and summers as a sandwich boy on the Boston to New York train. And one afternoon, the usual humdrum routine disappeared, replaced by a charged moment of muted excitement. Someone famous had gotten on the train. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

It must have been the equivalent of General MacArthur appearing out of nowhere, his gigantic pipe clamped between his jaws, or today, say, Mick Jagger sauntering into Target while you're busy folding the stone-washed jeans. Not talking about humanitarianism here. Just remarking on pure celebrity factor alone.

I thought it was pretty brave of my dad to walk right up to the president's wife and say, "Excuse me. Aren't you Mrs. Roosevelt?" to which she responded, "Yes, I am. Sit down, young man."

Of course, back in time, in the world that no longer exists, it amazes one to realize that she was completely alone, no security in sight. Nobody was hovering about. Nobody stopped him from approaching her. She wasn't even riding in the parlor car, but chose instead to travel in coach.

He said she was wearing black clothes, a big black hat, and that she chatted him up a little, asking him where he went to school (he matriculated at English High, the first public school in the U.S., which was also a college prep school). Mrs. Roosevelt then told him to believe in the beauty of his dreams and to get an education. "That is the way," she told him, "you will help yourself and your people."

In the movie *Anger Management*, an African-American man becomes very upset with Adam Sandler whom he perceives to have used the alienating phrase of "you people."

But on the train with my dad and Mrs. Roosevelt, it was the '40s, and what's not P.C. today was everyday life back then. And not that she meant anything by it. In a world of "us" versus "them," it seems that Mrs. R. was a strong proponent for just "us".

Which brings me to my dad again.

I think, in large part, his success came from not falling victim to the "us and them" mindset. He was in the world for a reason, and he would strive for what he wanted like anybody else. His personal "yes, I can," mantra preceded Obama by decades.

Well aware of the importance of school and further education, his surprise meeting with Mrs. Roosevelt must have been a pleasant exclamation point at the end of a sentence he'd already memorized. He recalls giving Mrs. Roosevelt an apple which he didn't let her pay for. He didn't see her eat it on the train and assumes that she took it with her when she disembarked at Greenwich, Connecticut. Alone, no security, once again, that he observed. She met a small group at the station, and he never saw her again. But her kindness and gentle encouragement remained with him his entire life.

It helped that my father knew all sorts of things about Mrs. Roosevelt that maybe other teens didn't. Other teens might not even have cared that, in 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let Marion Anderson perform at Constitution Hall.

My father knew, though. And my father cared. He was very aware that Mrs. Roosevelt had resigned from the DAR in dissent, simultaneously offering a paradoxical puzzle to the public at

large: why did Americans damn Hitler but censor Miss Anderson? A brain-teaser if there ever was one.

Years later, in 1956, my father would experience something similar on a smaller scale in being the first Black member of the International Dental Fraternity, Psi Omega, which resulted in an outraged uproar but later, ultimately, overwhelming support to keep him in.

I'm sure if my father had been 15 at several different points in time, naïve youth might have left him starstruck upon chance meetings with Lincoln or Kennedy for similar reasons, two historic figures touted for their humanitarian crusades.

But in retrospect, we know that Kennedy, like Mr. Roosevelt himself, did not, at crucial points, push for civil rights bills or causes, for fear of alienating powerful Southern democrats. He even voted against the 1957 Civil Rights Act, but during his campaign pulled a 180 and hurled himself into the mosh pit, hoping for--according to detractors--Black support to propel him forward while he attempted to face down Nixon.

And nowadays, everyone's aware of Lincoln's famous letter to Horace Greely stating that if he could save the Union with or without slavery, he would do it--the Union being the priority. Ultimately, slavery was wrong, but Blacks were not equal to whites.

Although it's no secret that politicians have always been politicians, one might wonder why, exactly, FDR snubbed Jesse Owens during the 1936 Olympics, contrary to the legendary urban myth that Hitler was the prevailing offender. Hitler actually did no such thing. Not to Jesse Owens, at least.

Would such ungracious behavior from the U.S. President actually aid in boosting his popularity, or had it been a more parochial component of his personal belief system? We have to mentally shrug and move on, because it's the past. But it's troubling, to say the least.

That the president and Mrs. Roosevelt operated at polar opposites seems glaringly obvious. We do know that Mrs. Roosevelt wasn't in it for the purpose of swaying the populace and winning elections. And her concerns were far-reaching: women's organizations, consumer welfare, housing, unemployment.

Her lifetime of philanthropy earned her worldwide affection and high regard, including the respect of many critics. She had been walking that road before she got married, and she kept hoofing it long after FDR had passed away.

I think my father did well to bump into Mrs. Roosevelt instead of Lincoln or Kennedy, or even her spouse, because her picture was, frankly, bigger, and it was presented in beautiful living color. If she had suddenly removed a crystal ball from within her satchel and was able to show my father the future, even he may have been impressed by what he saw.

The boy shining shoes outside Pop's Symphony Hall and the Shubert Theatre and getting fired from a restaurant for eating a piece of bread would become a man who would prize open various closed doors, including the unabashedly clannish ones of Braemar Country Club and L.A. Athletic Club, making it possible thereafter for other minorities to join.

He would see someone who would be elected as Chairman of the Board of Governors of said LAAC, having forged a friendship with Mr. Frank Hathaway, the owner, who would literally ask him to be the “Jackie Robinson of the private health club.”

The crystal ball would go on. It would reveal someone who would be honored with the position of the first Chairman ever of the John Wooden Awards and be invited as part of a Minority Task Force to the White House.

Born within the disheartening limits of an indifferent family unit, and not excluding a fairly unsympathetic 20th century America, my father’s tendency to shelter faith and optimize hope, to be empathetic toward the needs of others, would prove to be his master key.

In 1962, Eleanor R. was dying, disappointed with the slow progress of social change in America. And she had reason to be.

I was born in 1962, not to my parents but to two others, the daughter of a young white woman and a Black man. And while that initially might have seemed to bode well (interracial marriage was still illegal in some states), my biological mother gave me up for adoption, lying to the institution where I was to be kept that I was white.

When I met her later in life, she informed me that she’d thought I would “have a better life” with a white family. Luckily, her ruse, however well-intentioned, did not work, and I ended up with the Bryans, a family consisting of my older brother and ambitious parents who have both, at various points in their lives, graced the world stage, as my mother was a choreographer who at one point worked alongside greats like Duke Ellington.

Being half-Black in a Black family was a nonissue. Being loved was paramount. Ironically, the better life my biological mother had wanted for me came easily and unconditionally through people who were not white. But the undeniable fact remains that she automatically—as was the attitude even then—discounted Blackness as a viable option, even though she had created me with a man of color.

That weird disparity, the contradictory concepts of America’s founding, had taken seed, tunneling deep into the country’s psyche and creating a conflicted mindset, a stupefying Rubik’s cube, which our nation still grapples with today.

By 1962, The Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act still wouldn’t be passed until ’64 and ’65, respectively. My father had been practicing dentistry for many years, but Blacks wouldn’t be accepted into the National Dental Association until 1963.

Eleanor Roosevelt was disappointed. She was, after all, the woman who had acquired the 4,000-page FBI dossier. She’d worked hard to earn that dossier, to ignite J. Edgar Hoover’s deep suspicion, to unleash her particular brand of caring in the tradition of Booker T. Washington, Thurgood Marshall, Jimmy Carter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and John Lewis—to name but a few.

This is a woman who had J. Edgar Hoover postulating that she had “Negro blood” which motivated her “perverse behavior.” The thrill of \$3,450 houses and amazingly cheap movies aside, it was a strange time, indeed, where someone’s altruism could actually be interpreted as hostile or depraved and attributed to the fantasy of inferior DNA.

The Negro blood speculation invariably prompted other Americans to write in, asking if it was true. Mrs. Roosevelt responded that her family had lived in the country for so long that she couldn't answer with any certainty. Boom, boom! Give her a right, she'd counter with a left. That's just how she rolled.

I think it's safe to assume Mrs. R. would have been thrilled to see Obama become president and not surprised that the debate continued: while many were threatened by this president's heritage, others said he wasn't "Black enough." You just can't win! Mrs. Roosevelt probably would have simply shaken her head and chuckled knowingly.

Which brings me back to the beginning and the blurb from Octavia Butler's book, since it's a question Eleanor Roosevelt might have voiced herself. Are all humans bigots, or are all bigots human? You could substitute any word in there, negative or positive, and still preserve the equation's essence, surpassing our country's borders into the world at large. But the fact remains that if America is a quilt, then race relations are the thread that purls its borders and cross-hatches its surface.

The idea of America, though, a place that birthed my father and others like him, could be summarized in that blurb because of its inherent optimism, its potential for open-mindedness. The built-in hope that softens this country's peccability by counteracting with frequent greatness, or embracing sudden enlightenment, something most recently apparent with the deafening hue and cry following George Floyd's death.

In a microcosm, my dad is simply a Boston boy who done good. But in a macrocosm, he, and people like him, are a representation of that American hope first, and then something more far-reaching.

That afternoon on the train happened in a different world, a long time ago. But for my father, the encounter still sings, sustaining its melody for 76 years. This was due not only to a mutual moment of recognition but also because the subtext brimmed with intention undeniably more expansive than that meeting, that conversation, that moment.

I'm awed by my father and those like him who have bravely nurtured an open heart, who have not let their courage ooze out. Because without courage, being too afraid to care, too reluctant to yell into the void, the chances of genuine transformation, the ability to inhale possibility and exhale realization, would be much less likely to happen, preventing us from becoming more, more human, and maybe something beyond.

“Unnamed Visitors”

Sonali Sharma

A wobbly dun creaking door

Detaches the outward shushed virginal world

From the dim black blotches on inmost noisy walls

Dangling on a nail stabbed at the timber

Are undergarments of criss-cross shimmering fabric

Hooks of which are ordinarily undone by innominate trippers.

A moth-eaten tablecloth rests on a true-blue wrecked table

Which in the wake of frequent bangs

Has mustered the hardihood to lay out repose

As Aspirin, Motrin, and Ibuprofen

In a mouchoir stitched with a basic line

Shrouds a pill overfeeding meat

Munched continually by unnamed visitors.

A balcony with perpendicular oxidized iron bars

Elapses a sporadic symphony from their middle gaps

When the circlet of red-brown metal clinks incidentally

Gaping at its proximate copper twin

The lip tincture dwindles on dead evenings

Falling off in a disfigured shape on the latched windowpane

Against which thrust by anonymous guests.

A cemented staircase tinted with orange saliva

Transmits an odour of long chewed Asian betel leaves
When sputum lets proliferate vexing houseflies
Fatal maladies crush the substandard lives
Through a dingy passageway of an anguish prison
Travel the blistering footfalls of sickly males
Examining every slender physique in a yearning way
Taken behind cloudy curtains by unnamed visitors.

A constricted road bustling with nefarious crowds
Occupied with staring unsophisticated coarse talks
Carries the eye to a neighbouring plot deserted and ajar
Where mongrels nosh and scratch diapers and also remains
Of neonates born out of malnourished and tortured wombs
With no life and honoured entitlements to their tags
Whose mothers were impregnated by unsettling strangers.

A main side street under noticeable red, yellow, green lights
Grows into a midnight stop for files of affluent cars
A bit thick hands reaching out from lowered glass panels
For faintly veiled cleavages in wide-necked cotton-silk blouses
Discarding profane bucks at a time from scented pockets
Allowing them to be laid at the backseat spread
Being bitten to purple scars by unnamed visitors.

A single-storey house retiring with a shivered roof
Inhabits futile earthen vessels devoid of last grains
A chulha with chunks of half-burnt wood

Sits parched for weeks alone at the destined place
The sooty smoke on white limestone walls
Seems to blur in the beam of early morning
Stretching out through a Jali alike that day
She saw the disrelish faces of nameless outsiders.

An extensive courtyard fenced with mango trees
Their laughter squeezing the sweetness around
Overturning the marbles kept on the dotted topsoil
Her dupatta bijou marked premature spring
Hovered in the air cladded in floral print
Came to rest under her long braided hair
Remarked as provocative by unnamed visitors.

These unnamed visitors are observed by unspeaking things
Every second when they raise a hand at her
Causing mortification for the wordy living
The exploitation is raucous, boundless, ill-defined
When money is a fundamental and thirst amplified
But a sharp streak of inequality looms
In the acreage of our cultured humanity

Undenied.

“Just Another Sad, Raped Girl: A Poem of Starlight”

Emma Laurent

Just another sad, raped girl
Young, naive, in toxic obsession
Blinded by fantasies of true love
And tendered, scarring manipulation.

Your tricks and spells were an illusion of care
Your spat on my chest, the betrayal fresh and poignant
You orbited me until I could no longer fight the gravitational pull
Then rubbed my innocent face in steaming disappointment.

Just another Bitch who peed on your rug
Who overstayed her clingy, tear-streaked welcome
By refusing to live in the iron kennel you constructed
I would prove my value and compose you a tragic album.

As you grew bald and your gut followed
I would have been your trophy wife
Who kept chasing rainbows and butterfly lies
Sacrificed my dignity to give you a perfect life.

When I was bitter and vulnerable
Heartbroken and at my most depraved
You bled through my bedroom door's cracks
And drug me back by your claws, as if I'd been saved.

One night ruined you, ripped a part your jagged seams
The polluted moonlight revealed your soiled demeanor
Your janky, Space Cowboy smile, pointed fangs
Like a proud and jubilant necrophile crypt keeper.

Somewhere between me not being able to stand
And puke braided into my unbrushed hair
You saw me not as me but as an opportunity
For you and the gutter slush to share.

I was blind in dizzy dark and dizzy trust
You threw my tights onto the sterile carpet floor
You Shhh'd me with your yellow, acrid breath
As I whispered,
please.
no more.

The dawn came and you didn't burst into flame
You threw back the cheap, motel cover
My head was weighed down by sand and despair
To which you responded, roll over.

You were done quick.

Lick.

It.

Ty.

Split.

Yesterday's clothes at my feet, time to go

I stumbled into my boots, rubbing caked vomit from my cheek

I squinted at this vile form wondering, why hadn't I let It go?

It's time to let You go.

It wasn't the last time I saw you

You slithered in when I was at my Soul's Hollow

I don't regret you, because I don't regret Myself

But being your secret Whore has become

Harder.

and Harder.

to Swallow.

You violate my dreams from time to time

I feel the shame dripping down my back

The ghost smell of ancient white crayon

Drying like mummified shellac.

I never uttered the word

Because to do so would mean I'd lost control

Never once did I consider

That It was You, who had lost control.

Yesterday, I was just another Sad Girl

Who had a messy experience She couldn't explain

But today I'm a Happier Woman

Who knows you Raped Me.

And I feel the starlight again.

“In the Words of a House”

Zachary Torres

Every object on this planet has a purpose. The clock ticks, the car drives, the pen writes and the phone calls. Their very existence depends on this exact principle. After all, what is a clock without the time, a car without its engine, a pen without ink or a phone with no connection? It is, therefore, in the nature of an object to be useful. Without question, they serve the needs of those who create them, working until the day that they can longer continue. And just as all men eventually succumb to age or disease, so too shall the clock's cogs rust, the car's engine sputter, the pen's inkwell dry and the phone's wires fall silent. But the death of an object is no cause for despair! These are funerals of celebration, not lamentation! Moments to rejoice in the knowledge that they were, ultimately, useful.

But why should these matters be of any concern to you? Before answering that, we think it necessary to clarify one very important fact. We the authors of this passage are not people, like yourself, but houses. We have tiles on our roofs and doors on our hinges. We have attics at our tops and basements at our bottoms. We have lawns in our fronts, yards in our backs and all manner of curious things within us. We are not any specific houses. Rather, you can consider us all houses put together. We are the house you sleep in, the house down the street, the house on the hill, and the house by the river. That being said, wherever we are or whatever we look like are of minimal importance. We write not to of ourselves, but of you. You, our beloved masters and cherished occupants; you, our brothers of bone and friends of flesh. We write so that you may see the evil that putrefies us. We write in the hope that you might understand the maleficence which threatens not only our kind, but yours as well.

The constitution of man is such that he is unable to survive the natural world alone. Take, for example, the proud lion of the Sahara: decorated with crushing teeth and tearing claws, the apex feline has everything it could ever need braided into the spiraling cords of its DNA. The alligator and the crocodile, similarly, possess senses so attuned as to detect prey from miles away and are shielded from attack by a natural armor incomparable to the flimsy fabrics you call clothes. Naturally, it came to pass that (cornered by beasts more evolved than he and thrust into the midst of a dangerous, unpredictable planet) man made use of the one superior facility the universe gave him: his mind.

The human conscience is such that, though purely abstract, can rival in ingenuity the physical advantages of other creatures. With some quick wit and a spark of inspiration, your species turned mud into bricks and twigs into thatching. Where before you wandered alone, safe only in the empty caves and alcoves of the wild, now you could settle anywhere without fear of persecution. After all, what are teeth and claws compared to the strength of masonry? Eventually (warm, comfortable and safe in the world's first house), you conjured up the three principles that would define the human race for all of its tenure on this planet. Love for your fellow man, unity between brethren and compassion for the Earth's creations. In one word: humanity.

Just like the clock lets you tell time, the car gets you from place to place, the pen writes down your thoughts and the phone connects you to others, the house aims to reinforce those principles of mankind. Around our hearths you gather with friends and family; you tell stories,

share secrets, hold hands, give kisses and warm yourselves with hugs of reunion or farewell. In turn, we shield you from the wind and rain as you accept any poor, wayfaring stranger into your homestead. We cover your heads as you offer a meal or a pillow to those in need of it. For years have we brought people together; for centuries have we defined townships; for millennia have we maintained friendships; and forever shall we defend the goodness of your species.

At least, that's how things used to be. Before, there was character in everything you did. There was care in all your creations, big or small. Whether it be a potted rose on the windowsill, a colorful mosaic in the glass or a decorative engraving on the door handle, every house told a story. We spoke of fraternity; of neighbors, relatives and fellows coming together as one to make something. Within the fibers of our floorboards, memories endured as in photographs; holidays, birthdays and celebrations living on in the ashes of our fireplaces or the portraits on our mantle pieces. Even with nature we were united; if not the moss falling from our roofs, then the trees and flowers along our paths; if not the rippling water in our wells, then the desert sands drifting through our door gaps.

Now, all that character has gone. One can hardly recognize man for what he once was, for what he once valued. What once took months now takes days, all the same and unchanging, all uniform and organized. For miles we extend in regimented, uniform blocks, each one of us as plain, austere and colorless as the next, differentiated only by a small number on the mailbox. We share the same fences, the same windows, the same porches. The same yards, the same bushes, the same lawn chairs and umbrellas. In our gardens, each blade of grass is measured to exactitude, snipped down to size when, like the thoughts of free men, they deviate from the norm. Inside, televisions play the same films, the same programs, the same stories and reports on the news, each one asserting that this—a bleached, bloodless depiction of what may only jokingly be called “living”—is the height of comfort and modernity.

With fleeting effervescence, that uniquely human touch has disappeared in all subjects of its creation. No longer are clocks conceived from the steady, careful hands of clockmakers, nor cars from the hard, determined grit of mechanics. The patient tuning of pen turners has died, not unlike the eccentric genius of the telephone's electricians. The beauty of imperfection has shriveled in the pursuit of unfounded excellence, where difference has become a disease and particularity a poison. In identical houses in identical neighborhoods in identical suburbs, identical families of identical ideals follow identical lives. Husbands and fathers descend identical stairs with identical steps, taking identical roads to identical jobs for identical salaries, returning to wives and mothers wearing identical dresses in identical kitchens to eat identical meals at identical tables. Their children play with identical toys and read identical books, prepared to grow into identical adults with identical values and set the cycle of identity into motion once again.

At one time, our walls kept people in; now they keep people out. At one time, we were places of comfort, places of support; now we are no more than prisons. In a world where everyone can be the ruler of his own kingdom there is no objection to sparing one's charity, and though thousands of us are built every day (tearing through forests and swamps and rivers and jungles, razing habitats with nothing less than the press of a button) we can share our hospitality with nobody.

As there are houses to live in there are also houses to pray in. Houses of worship big and small, ornate and simple, adorned with crosses, moons, stars and all manner of fanciful things. With religious zeal, those houses gave alms to the begging, protection to the poor and safety to the persecuted. They did this without question, with the aim only to inspire love and hope. But there

is little godliness in what we see today. The human of the present worships no god but money. Whether it be the mortgage for a house of living, the tithing for a house of praying, the loan for a house of learning or the debenture for a house of healing, the most basic of necessities come affixed with price tags. We are being deprived of our function, robbed of our utility, all because our core meaning negates the profit of narcissism. The standard of perfection has become limited to a life of debt, a means to get what everyone wants for the simple fact that everyone wants it.

So, while you fall into warm beds and bubbly baths, others freeze and starve on city streets, unable to live for the accident of their poverty. Oh, but you feel no guilt for this—no, no guilt at all. After all, those people on the streets are no more than thugs; riff-raff sleeping on park benches and under the awnings of bus-stops. No better than thieves, they steal your hard-earned dollars and slum about on the sidewalk; they overwhelm the food-banks and the shelters, run your economy into the ground! At least that's what the people on the news say: the people in their nice suits and crisp haircuts and shiny tie pins, miles richer than you'd ever hope to be. And you believe them. You believe them because it makes you feel better. You believe them because you have us—because you have us and those people don't and all the while nothing changes for the better, only for the worse.

The people on the news say it cannot be you. After all, you have the jewelry and the clothes, the shoes and the makeup, the cars and the electronics, the toys and the games, the vacations and the pools, anything you could ever imagine and then some. It's a story as old as capital, as old as greed. You seek control, subservience, and conformity when humanity is anything but. With your fallacies of advancement, you run your planet bankrupt. The proud lions with their whetted teeth and sharpened claws have no savannahs left to prowl; the alligators and the crocodiles wade not through moist marshes but oceans of waste and concrete. Nevertheless, you consume and consume and consume while others drown in seas of waste and rubbish. The people on the news say it cannot be you, but we know different; we've seen it happen. It only takes a repossession to make the rich man poor. An eviction to make him beg for goodwill.

Unwittingly, we fear, you have rewritten the goals of your own species. Instead of using those brilliant brains for good, you have fallen into a pit of self-servitude, fighting with less shame than the wild beasts you think yourselves so different from. In your search for comfort, you have become prey to distraction. In your quest for satisfaction, you have become an ouroboros of indulgence, ending only where you have begun. All the while, we remain stoic, quiet, and observant, hoping only to fulfill the task bequeathed to us so many centuries ago.

Because your battles are not our wars to win. As the clock, the car, the pen and the phone are just objects, so too are we. Every day, the sun shall rise and set over our roofs. Plants will grow and birds will fly and dust will settle on the sills of our windows as they always have. It is not our place to interfere, it never has been. We are nothing but observers, watching as you go about your lives. We listen to your arguments, your fights, and your quarrels and do nothing about it, moving only to settle our wooden walls which creak and whistle in the wind.

As the clock is only gears, the car only metal, the pen only plastic and the phone only wires, so too are we only boxes of timber and stone. One day—sooner or later—we shall bow to nature's forces as all terrestrial things do. Our wood shall become feasts for termites and our bricks the clay of their construction. Perhaps some rickety A-frames shall remain, speckling an otherwise empty countryside, or even earthy some plots of concrete where a weasel may make its burrow. But as time turns on that future day, we wonder what the state of humanity shall be. Will you have

perished in the quicksand of your own gluttony? Buried under mountains of knick-knacks and gadgets which will far outlast you? Or will you survive? Will you, perhaps, see the error of your ways? At some point, far along (after the continents shift and the forests regrow and the mountains turn into valleys), will mankind return to what it once was? Might there be warm meals to eat and baths to take and drink enough for everyone? Might each man pass cold nights in the comfort of a bed? A bed given to him not for a price but for the simple sake of having one? Might there be no money or hatred or prejudice or spite? Might kindness sprout from the embers of miserliness? Might a house, if we venture to ask, be a house once more?

“Migrant Families Deported by Surprise”

Bianca Barela

It didn't have to be this way.

Not the desert scrub divided. Not the forest woodlands divided.

Not the wetland marshes divided.

The seeds of mesquite trees need not have been limited by where javelinas could scat.

The bighorn sheep need not find new locations to birth their young.

Jaguars might have roamed the banks of the Rio Grande undisturbed far into the future.

The twin cities of Nogales didn't have to flood.

There was no need for 700 miles of fencing to be erected
and act like dams during the rainy season.

No need for half-dynamited mountaintops to change the horizon.

No need to scrape roads across undisturbed wilderness.

No need for piles of unused steel bollards to be left deserted at work sites.

No need for a quarter mile fragment of wall connected to nothing at all
to appear in the Huachuca Mountains.

I might have been the young mother with a 2 and a 5-year-old dangling from my arms.

You might have been the coyote promising hope for the low price of risk and sacrifice.

The coyote's migration patterns might never have been altered.

The pygmy owl might not have been trapped because it can only fly 5 feet above the ground.

An unaccompanied minor traveling north with her tia sleeps from exhaustion
under a foil blanket under a bridge under supervision by the government.

A father and his 4-year-old are flown 600 miles and then bussed and then walked
across a long bridge

only to learn they are back in Mexico.

It didn't have to be this way. The Rio Grande might have meandered forever.

“In Time”

Mary Moynihan

[*In time \(Video\)*](#)

“Refugee”

Denese Playford

i am listening to your world so deeply and carefully
even my own speech is a distracting noise.

Into the vacuum i am sending the ear
of my eye, and the sight of my feeling
in order to grasp what i do not know
and know what i seek to understand.

My whole being yearns with the blood of my desire
that what is not should be. A cry that comes
from the belly of my mind

is all i can say. I seek at least to know
you understand. I hope
you are speaking, and if i listen
quietly enough, the belief of my ear
will help me to grasp your voice
like a rope or a beam of light.

Nothing else is able to pierce the edge of these walls,
except the leading edge of your hoped for life.

Pour into me the shape of your world, that i
Grove towards it. For this i am
Silenced and listening.

"I love you" and "Question Box"

Cal Calamia

I love you

To set the scene, I was alone in the Social Security office with 852,390 other people not being helped for hours. Proof in forms that like shopping at my own thrift store where I've hand-selected each piece, I saw fit my middle names from the list of names I'd potentially name my future children— the same ones I was told to not have cause they'd be missing half of an appropriate set of parents, but now that I'm a boy, that won't be a problem (as long as I don't act homosexually on my bisexuality), but that's a different story

and this one is: I remember how it felt to sit on the curb for fresh air before I turned in the paperwork

and it felt lonely, quite literally rupturing the matriarchal lineage cradled by my birth name— felt like, betrayal of:

Carolyn, my mother

Annette, my grandmother

Lois, my late great grandmother

It was the moment I chose:

Calvin, me

Arlo, a shortened version of Italian Carlo, of Spanish Carlos, for Charlie, my baby brother

Luca, light, like sun hits skin on chest, like sunscreens scars, like my day alone in Rome, walking the whole city, as me, countries away from what I was known to be, just me and my concoction of learned femininity and attempted masculinity

Yet, though I'm still debating who for, I've kept

Cal for short— the name I've always had for short. Cal, a reminder that I did not die, so there's no need to lie to my little cousins about where the fuck I am. Oye tía, I've externally changed— something some would say is admirable for a cisgender person— a cisgender person who will strain ~unbearably so~ to drop the L I E off my old name. Just realized that spells lie, like the ones vacuumed by my baby girl ears in the cafeteria, the ones that giggled intrusive, entitled inquiries of Is that a boy or a girl?, giggled proclamations of Lady Gaga the Hermaphrodite, demanded Boys here, girls there, then, push it and parents will complain, the parents, the lies, the locker rooms, the bathrooms, the lies, whispered while I pretended to be asleep, unnatural, wide awake, thinking about wearing boxers, ostentatious, peeing standing up, obtrusive, me under my blanket

like the word trans under their tongues, because once I heard it, it would be me, so exceptions only for transportation, transit, transformation— but not like that

I put a few more quarters in the meter, filled my lungs up with liminal air, and watched my manila folder as it caught a tear. Caught myself thinking there would be a lot less for all of us to unlearn if my brain was never scrambled up— Rubik's Cubed, if I never had to find a way to solve that shit without taking off the stickers, las que saqué de mis libros españoles que indicaban que pertenecían a la biblioteca de la profesora, porque a veces me nombré a mi mismo según lo que fui llamado, pero ya no más

Y por fin

Calvin sounds like me and

Callie sounds like someone I love, someone I wish knew earlier that it's not normal to have existential crises about the fact that you'll never be a boy when you're eleven, and that people don't tell you everything you need to know when you're eleven, and that when you're obsessed with your boy Halloween costume when you're eleven

It is you

You are you

I am you

and it's okay

and I love you

Question box

Question box time

The kids fold their papers small

Wanna know how much homework they'll get

Wanna know if their stuff will all fit

in their lockers

if a kid's ever fit in a locker

Wanna know if fourteen is too young to have sex

if sex will make God love them less

but what they really want to know is

written in red

“U gay bro?”

Y mis hablantes nativos
en la clase de español dicen
que seguramente como pollo
en mis burritos
porque no puedo
con el picante
Soy un chico femenino
Can't smile at me, no homo
y mi acento en español
me hace sonar
como una mujer
No he practicado mucho español
como Calvin

Pero me llamo Calvin
en el PowerSchool
so I must be gay
The tech assistant says I look like a student
I look so (incredibly) young, like a tiny, little boy
He tells me this in front of my students

Not man enough is
small
Not man enough is
skinny

Not man enough is
ending my adjectives with an o
just to let my students know
I'm no woman

And when I get them on board
I realize it's for diving
and they jump to other conclusions:
I can't like women
with a jawline this soft
with this string bean(y) body
and a mustache not coarse
and of course
trans is not a consideration
even in this generation

I thought
but when I wrote my pronouns as they or he
on my nametag
a student followed me
changed what he wrote
from Monday to Tuesday
said I'm Leo
I grab his attention in the hallway
ask him if his other teachers know
He says no
I say Leo

I will tell them
and the way his smile glows

I forgot about the question box
I forgot about the question box
when my students started adding they
to their name tags
next to the pronouns they initially used
when a student responded to a survey
I am he/she/her/they

I forget about the question box
when my kids just call me profe
when the kids say Mr. C
when my students say I see you
I want to pass your class
I am happy to be in your class
This is my favorite class
when I am standing in the hallway wiping tears
when I offer a hug to quell fourteen-year-old fears
and “How do you come to school
every day with such high energy?
It’s like you’re so excited to teach us”

And I am so excited to teach them
who I am, what it means, who anyone can be
so excited for them to see
that who I am extends so profoundly
beyond “U gay bro?”

"The Girl With The Sealed Vagina"

Vartika Sharma Lekhak

In Laajpur, a notorious town on the outskirts of Delhi, strange things were happening. The events had baffled everyone. Initially, some had dismissed it as sheer foolhardiness and some as an act of sorcery. But now people were beginning to panic.

It all happened after the arrival of that girl. From where she came, why she was there, where she ate, to whom she belonged, no one had any idea.

The chai wala at the railway station was the one who spotted her first. Under a peepal tree, the girl was sitting cross-legged and devouring pakoras on a paper plate nonchalantly. She was all alone. No brother, father, uncle or a male friend to escort her at this time of the night.

It had never happened before in Laajpur. Everyone knew how dangerous it was. Families here lived in a permanent state of paranoia to protect their females. Even an eighty-year-old feared venturing out alone after sundown. And for any mother of a daughter, it was a complete nightmare even in a broad daylight, for she dreaded the brave innocence of her daughter and snapped at her fearless laughter. She would cook up story of some invisible monster who will grab the little girl if she is out of sight, and then the mother would watch with a painful satisfaction as the innocent smile vanishes from the rosy lips and shadow of terror fills the lovely eyes of her daughter. No child flew in this town like a naughty bird or played hide and seek with friends on the street. The Right of carefree childhood was brutally snatched from them at this tender age as they were being punished not for a crime but for being a potential victim of that crime.

It was this lawlessness which had earned the town epithet of rape capital of the country. An NGO had reported last year that this was one of the prime reasons behind the high rate of female foeticide in the region. So was the case with low female literacy rate. Laajpur was a thug town within the heart of this democratic country.

The girl would arrive at the tea stall every night and sit there for hours. Her presence had begun to make the men uneasy. Suddenly there was an alien amongst them. The swearing, loud cackles, impromptu jokes had a nervous edge, not that they were scared of her, but because the sight of a female in a male territory was frustrating, a challenge to their supremacy. They even hurled abuses at her, poked her with their mean eyes but the girl would keep sitting there, eating the potato patties at an unhurried pace. Some tried to chastise her, had she run away from home? Was she lost? But she would not even bat her eyes to acknowledge them as if they were like a transparent sheet of glass. May be she is deaf and mute, they concluded. But then she thanked the chai wala sweetly when he brought a cup of tea for her. Later he told others that her name is Rmaa.

‘But how do you know, did she tell you’, a customer asked.

‘It is tattooed on her arm. I saw it when she stretched her hand to take the cup.’

‘What more is tattooed? Did you peek anything else’, the men winked at each other and broke into loud cheering, eyeing the girl like a piece of meat.

Even in her loosely fitted orange blouse and long green skirt, which she wore every day, they could make out that she must not be more than fourteen or fifteen. There was just a hint of curves in her dress, which the men fantasized with an open lust while sipping tea one after another. In a way, the chai wala was glad of her presence because it had made his shop earn a profit like never before. And thus he didn't mind offering the complimentary tea and snacks to the girl.

This had almost become a ritual, but one night, true to everyone's premonition, the girl was pulled into a van by a group of boys looking for an adventure. This all happened right in front of everyone, at least fifty people in their full senses. But not one uttered a word of protest or even raised an eyebrow. It was a normal affair to them and in fact, the girl had asked for that. Haven't they warned her so many times? And besides one of the boys was the son of the Police Chief.

But there was one tiny bit of suspicion that troubled them. Was the girl pulled or she herself moved towards the van?

The suspicion grew into a shock and later into fear when next day they found the girl sitting in her usual spot with the same aloofness as if nothing had happened. In such small towns, this kind of news travels faster than its digital versions.

In the tea customers were huddled around a man who had brought the grapevine. The man, a school peon where the four boys who had abducted the girl studied, divulged the details of last night.

'There is no Vagina!!!'

The group exclaimed and looked at the girl in bewilderment. They broke into excited whispers as they goaded the peon for more details.

'That much only his mother could gather out of him when she found him hiding in the cupboard,' the peon said, 'rest three are also equally scared.'

The story that finally emerged after the gossips and facts were pieced together was beyond anybody's comprehension. Almost everyone refused to believe it.

She was taken to the fields next to the canal where the boys had planned to rape her and then dump in the canal if she resisted much. But no need arose of that because she, almost obligingly, followed them. Also, there was no need of pulling her hair, bruising her body or tearing her clothes as she herself lifted the skirt when they pushed her on the ground.

At first Mahesh, it was his turn this time to hit the jackpot first, thought that he was hallucinating because of ganja. He rubbed his eyes with the spit and looked again. A small cry escaped his mouth as he stared at the girl in horror. The other three, who were cheering and gesticulating lustily, also recoiled in disgust.

There was nothing, no hole between her legs. It was all sealed, like a dead-end. How was that even possible, they wondered aloud while the girl kept lying on the ground with some mock satisfaction on her face. This increased their frustration further and then in a fit of renewed rage Mahesh pressed onto her. But in the very next instant, he jumped off her and yelped in pain. His thing was scalded like it had touched a hot iron. The field, whose isolation had always thrilled the

boys during such adventures earlier, was now spooking them with its eerie silence. The laughter of the girl was still reverberating in the night sky when the boys started the van in hurry and ran away.

The news of the sealed vagina was spreading like wildfire. The tea shop was minting money as more and more customers, even from far-flung areas, were thronging the place to catch a glimpse of the girl.

But the actual turning point came when women started arriving one by one, unescorted. The peepal tree had turned into sort of a shrine for these women. Somebody brought a worn out carpet and spread it next to the wooden bench. A makeshift screen from an old saree was pitched to give them some privacy from the men eyeing them suspiciously. Even a cardboard box was put in the roots of the tree in which the visitors left the offerings they had brought for the girl of food, clothes, daily necessity items and money.

The girl sat on the wooden bench and the visitors on the ground below her.

'Rmaa help us,' the chai wala strained his ear to catch the conversation. Or did he hear Maa?

In a small town like this, it is not difficult to recognize people even if they are covered from head to toe. From the manner they walk, dress up, smell, sneeze or whisper, there is always something to give them away. And thus the tea vendor was astonished to recognize a woman who was brutally raped last year by more than fifty men. The rape was ordered as a punishment by the village council because her brother had eloped with a high caste girl. Soon after the ordeal, the woman had disappeared and believed to be dead, until today. And then there was another one, who bore a striking resemblance to a teenage girl who had disappeared some ten years back after she had stormed media with the allegations against her politician father about incest. There were many more, a mason's wife, a school teacher, a farmer's mother, the women who had borne the brunt of Laajpur's shamelessness. Besides them, there were other women as well, women who were until now hidden behind the veil of rituals.

A customer punched hard on the table when he recognized his wife among the women. Another one lashed out angrily and hurled abuses one after another. But neither of them could muster enough courage to pull their women away.

'We knew that Devi will hear our anguish,' the mason's wife was weeping at the feet of Rmaa.

'Seal this vagina like you have sealed yours'

'Help us Maa, salvage us,' the women whimpered desolately.

The tears of profound sorrow were floating in her eyes as the girl embraced them one by one.

With their wishes granted the women returned to their abode, leaving behind the veils which were now fluttering on the lower branches of the peepal tree. And next day the town witnessed another bizarre episode. The women who were until now the invisible inhabitants of the town were now swarming its market, fields, streets, and highway. There were no escorts and no fear on their gentle faces rather panic and frustration was written over men, who dared not touch them however they were tempted, not even in a dark alley, not even if the women invitingly exhibited their smooth legs or displayed a carefree smile because they knew that this was the Cult of sealed vagina whose curse had already cost the chief's son his manhood.

The bigwigs of the town were assembled at the Minister's residence to discuss this phenomenon. At last, they had realized how big the problem was when their own women joined the Cult.

'This is disturbing the nature's balance,' the mullah chipped in as the memory of last night flashed through his mind when his wife had threatened to join the Cult if he impregnates her again.

'Yes', the pundit echoed his sentiments, 'even the monsoon was a disappointment this season. She is a daayan, a witch, who is going to annihilate this town.'

The police chief snarled in a seething temper, 'kill her in some fake encounter.' He was looking for an opportunity to punish the girl who had put a question mark over his authority in the town.

The Minister looked glumly around; he knew how severe the problem was. The women politicians, who used to work diligently for the party earlier, were now demanding equal representation in the Cabinet and elsewhere. And on top of that from fifteen days his men had not found even a single item for his pleasure, not even his regular prostitute. And then his own daughter had joined the Cult. The girl is indeed a witch; the Minister thought aloud, she should be stoned to death, burnt alive or paraded naked. If he had his way he would have poured acid between her legs and the hole would have opened itself.

But they all knew that it was now too late to take any such bold action because the popularity of the Cult had crossed even the international border, especially after BBC aired a special segment in its India series.

Seeing the power that the sealed vagina wielded, the women brought their daughters as well who they had left behind earlier fearing that who will marry them if they lose the basic essence of womanhood. But now they knew that the gains were higher than the loss. They were tired of carrying the burden of fertility which had started to consume them only. The gift that nature had bestowed upon them to flourish the mankind had now become their very weakness and thus it was now time to surrender it.

'Rmaa Rmaa Rmaa,' the chants grew louder and louder as the girl salvaged them one by one. The Cult was swelling day by day. Women, even from farther parts of the country and from across the international border, were now swarming the peepal shrine. And the aftershocks of this tremor were reaching far and wide. Schools were the first to feel it when the girls walked in fearlessly.

More than half of the workload of the police was cut down as the crime rate drastically dropped. Women no longer fought for 'ladies' seats in local transport. Almost every profession had now female majority as they are naturally flexible and hardworking, thus they didn't need to make any excuses to escape long night shifts, field trips or any vulnerable position. Be it military or a cab driver's profession, women were everywhere.

For the first time in the history of the country, almost every social-planning target was achieved. And within one financial year, India ranked among top economies of the world, owing to surplus workforce. Economists named it — the second Industrial Revolution of the East.

However, this success was making many people restless. The rivals were worried about the consequences if the country becomes a superpower. And more than that they (the men) were worried about the consequences if the Cult becomes a superpower. So frustrating it was for them

to watch those skirts which fluttered with the wind or the sensual body under a six-meter drape. They could not dare to touch even their own wives, daughters, sisters.

They had never even imagined that a single biological anomaly will one day break the myth of male supremacy.

And that it will one day threaten their jobs, the patriarchy, the ecosystem, and the political structure. Already, the workers were holding strikes for equal wages. Next, they will demand more seats in Army, Space program and every foundation program of the nation. Next, the Parliament will be taken over. They could not repeat the folly of having a woman Prime Minister again; the bitter memories of first one were still fresh. The international pressure was also mounting to find a solution to this problem ASAP.

Even the religion was on the brink of extinction. The priests at the Shakti Peeth temple were vexed to see that the goddess had stopped menstruating as the water of Brahmaputra was no longer turning red. The vagina of the deity was sealed and so did of other female deities worldwide. The mankind itself was at the brink of extinction. Who will carry forward their lineage, the men worldwide wondered.

A high-level meeting, comprising of important religious heads, scientists, economists and representatives from the international community was called to discuss this disruption in the laws of nature.

Open the Hole—the conference concluded unanimously.

Cabinet passed a law overnight and National Emergency was invoked. Holding marches, tea gatherings, even debates became a punishable offence. A curfew like situation was imposed in the country. The peepal tree vanished without a trace. Even the roots were pulled out from the earth, leaving behind a gaping hole which was filled with cement and over it a marble bust of Father of Nation was installed overnight.

An expert team of doctors arrived in Laajpur. And as the commandos guarded the high-security cell where the girl was held unconstitutionally, the Cult surrounded it from all sides irrespective of the fact that the loudspeakers were blaring the warning of Shoot At Sight.

The medics began the preparation for the procedure. The girl was lying on a makeshift operating table under the affect of anesthesia. The surgeon moved towards her with a scalpel glinting in his gloved hand. A loud gasp escaped his lips and the tool slipped from his hand as the surgeon looked there. He had never seen such a thing. There was absolutely nothing, not even the mark of a stitch or any conjurer trick. The girl had no hole between her legs. It was not a myth, after all, the surgeon and every medic present in the room thought aloud. Fear was clearly written over their tensed face.

‘Rmaa Rmaa Rmaa Rmaa Rmaa Rmaa’

‘Maa Maa Maa Maa Maa Maa Maa’

The chants in the background were getting louder and louder.

The surgeon picked up the tool and tried to concentrate on what he was ordered to do. Open the damn hole, the supervisor barked into his confused head. With a shaking hand, he lowered the scalpel to make an incision. But the moment it touched her there, the steel melted in his hand and evaporated. And one by the one, the tools, cot, flesh, weapons, everything present in the room began to melt.

The chants were still piercing the gloomy air when the earth began to shake violently. The men were unsure whether their dying brain was playing tricks on them or they actually witnessed a mythical legend when two giant hands emerged from the hole that had formed in the earth and carried the girl back.

Laajpur, with its over one million inhabitants and the girl, had vanished, wiped out from the face of the earth. It was a sinkhole, the investigators concluded. But not even a single grass of blade ever bloomed on that soil ever again. It was barren.

That was just the beginning.

First, the rains changed its pattern, and then the crops began to fail one by one, the land turned infertile. Sinkholes were reported all over the globe, swallowing cities without any trace. Delhi, Lahore, Mosul, Gaza, New Orleans, Istanbul disappeared one by one.

The Earth is sealing its vagina, environmentalists reported the incredulous phenomenon. The apocalypse had begun.

"We Will Cry Such Tears"

Ken Massicotte

He sat there cowered in the blanket. After a while he looked up.

Are we still the good guys? he said. Yes. We're still the good guys.

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

We will cry such tears as will break the hearts

of stone angels. It is not impossible that

I would help them seek revenge.

You saw them walking

with their plastic bags and worn out trainers,

thousands and thousands fleeing our wars,

sleeping under thin blankets,

rough or in cardboard camps,

nameless in smugglers' boats

on the swollen sea,

the ghosts and screams

of the dead in every sleep;

but even the dead boy on the beach

didn't changed your mind.

If God is watching he will help us

and when we stop to rest

and pray, I will say again that

people are frightened but few are evil;

we have seen blood and death

but have never had to kill;
we've travelled far and will continue.
And if they beat us?
But the good will always be there –
we must believe this –
as spring will come and new crops grow
I will work many jobs and study at night;
I will carry you, as I have,
to a new and safe land;
and you will learn to swim –
I promise you –
in a clean bright pool
with lifeguards
watching out for you.

"Oh!"

Nejoud Al-Yagout

Beyond the courtyard of oneness, they chant, Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!

And the lover asks: Have you fed the churchgoer?

And held the one who walks through lime-green reeds toward the ashram? Oh!

And as you wipe the sweat off the forehead of the other,

remember Al Wadood

Remember Him alone in the realm of stained glass and choir,

when the athan blesses your ears and waltzes in your heart;

and connect with Him alone in gurdwaras and temples and churches and synagogues and
mosques and markets

and in the savannah where lions and gazelles dance, remember Al Wadood for He comes to
those who beseech Him from

the monastery of the heart; remember Him alone in the vedas and the psalms, the gospels, the
ayahs and the

sutras—love letters, among many letters of love, among infinite letters of love, Oh!

Remember Him alone when you love the other and know no other, in the garden,

where gurus rabbis pastors priests nuns monks imams knead bread

and wash each other's feet—here is a garden, promised for lovers, remember Him

"Dowry"

Debotree Mazumder

Awaiting the arrival
Everyone was standing,
"It's a girl",pronounced the doctor.
Hearing this,
Heads hung down,
Smiles vanished,
And a voice was heard
"How will I ever get her married?"
It was the helpless father ,
Whose only concern was "dowry"
It's a great lie that,
Money can buy happiness,
Marriage is a true bond of freedom
And women are respected with immense love.
The greatest truth is,
Money kills many souls,
Marriage is a poker game,
And feminines are respected with fire,torture and death!!
I wonder does anyone know,
The reason behind all these?
It's a five letter word "DOWRY"
And what is dowry?
For me it's the,
Pathway to female foeticide,

Reason for torture,
And a great fact why women are dominated and made a version of joke!
It's a great surprise to know,
Mothers of our heroes,
Demand a huge ransom,
Neglecting the fact,
What their parents had to go through,
While getting her married.
"Action speaks louder than word",
I heard it,
But now I think it's wrong because,
A five letter word" D-O-W-R-Y"
Destroyed the world of females who went through it ,
Who fought against it,
It snatched their dignity,
Buried their self respect under demands,
And slowly,
Denied the fact that,
Key of their lives is not in the hand of Almighty but,
In the hands of such demons.
It's a shame to know,
We pray to goddess saraswati for bunch of notes,
In the mean time,
We kill her sisters and daughters for money.
"Dowry" Is a small word,
But an ocean of sins,
We can either live with it and be a shame,

Or stand against it and be a saviour and ,

A pure soul!!

“Tribute to the victims of the NOSO war”

TIMB Sara Augustine Laurence

Your souls cry on the sepulchres of the "unwritten" that an immortal breath ventilates in contrast to the dust that sticks to the epitaph.

Your tears wet the bones that a cold fear embraces to the sickly nights that put out the fire.

You are far from here but too close to us,

We carry you in our hearts like deep scars

And in the hands like a blurred map on the trajectory of the much sought-after dawn.

See! Now the light and the sun are hidden

At the threshold of the hypogeum where the feathers, too, are dying not to gather a word;

The agony renews itself and the procession waits for the silence of the lullabies that repel their evanescence,

From my ribs to the leaves buried in fertile memories, flows a bleeding symphony:

It is a funereal song, a festival of elegies declaimed with closed mouth.

Elegies that beat the sound of a golden trumpet on the reddened green mountains.

It is a blank page of an unknown book where your names are read with the heart,

It is a cry!

A dead time for you who passed so quickly,

You who without having remained eternal.