

ISSUE EIGHTEEN

LUNARIS REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF ART AND THE LITERARY



LUNARIS REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF ART AND THE LITERARY

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Foreword

Simultaneously publishing two substantial issues spanning more than 200 pages, although painstaking, resonates with the human experience and relationship with the infinite imagination of possibilities. *Lunaris Review's* Issue 18 is a treasury of enchanting narratives that traverse the depth and dimensions of human experiences, one of self-discovery offering a complex symphony of emotions and echoes of history.

In “Being a Shrink,” Pam Munter unveils her soul-stirring journey as a psychotherapist, narrating how her vocation enables others to embrace a better life. Within these poignant recollections, we glimpse the weight of knowing that saving a life is not always within our grasp, and the profound responsibility that comes with the role. Like Yorick said “It’s when you know that you can’t save a life that things get serious. I’ve never enjoyed being the harbinger of death.”

But in Ian Douglas Robertson's “Murder,” therapy transcends the conventional confines of an office, revealing that healing conversations can transpire in the most unexpected places like a local pub, over pints of beer. Through the lives of Don and Yorick, we grapple with absolution, pain, and the tethered nature of our humanity. Yorick's reminder to keep our wings clipped echoes the age-old wisdom of humility. Reminding us of Icarus, he says: “It stops us from flying too high.”

Olusoji Obebe's “Waterward” plunges us into a narrative of loss and survival, tinged with the supernatural but anchored on everyday realities. Through Babajide's prayers and aspirations, we witness the resilience of the human spirit against life's trials, one augmented by rituals of work, wishes and prayer: “As I go out looking for what we can eat, may I not meet what will eat me. May the sun rise and dry our dreams, so we can wear them like the most fashionable cloth. May today bring laughter, good news and strength. Amen!”

Yet not all good things come to pass, and Princewill Ibe's "The Stars are Crossed at Us" embodies this truth. It's the love story of Mmasinachi and Nnamabia that invites us to unravel the complex interplay of love and loss, painting it as vividly as having "the same impact of taste on your tongue". It reminds us of the transitory nature of love and the pain it leaves behind, a lasting companion. "Mmasinachi, [meaning] beauty is from God" and Nnamabia meaning affection, so what's in a name?

As William Shakespeare quipped, "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet." But that's not the case for Miranda, the protagonist in William Torphy's "The Poacher" whose son is 're-christened' at birth, from Kwento to Edosio. The story recounts how the son is entangled in the manifestation of both names. It explores the significance of names and how they shape our destinies. It unwinds the complexities that arise when a name holds the power to influence a life's path.

Just as rare as they come, John Brantingham, through his ekphrastic poetry inspired by Francisco Goya's paintings, delves into the essence of art: to seek meaning, to reflect, and to unravel the enigmas of existence. His poetic persona's contemplation mirrors the profound journey of artistry:

And life asks you to spend your time making
sense of whatever this cruelty signifies to you.

And more than we can recount here, from the antithetical aesthetics of John Grey to the resonating prose of MY Lee, this is the soul of art: to seek meaning. Hence, dear readers, we invite you to immerse yourselves in Issue 18, and may the amazing narratives (re)kindle your imagination, stir your soul, and linger in your thoughts long after. Always, thank you for being part of this literary odyssey.

Tolulope Oke & Mariam Banire,
Publisher & Associate Editor, *Lunaris Review*

After the Norse

From a cliff's briny grip
down, down, you might slip,
voices the steeled ocean.
For steep is my contemplation
of ducks floating on dotted lines.
Upcoming dawn in pearl grey
cuts through this bleak hour.
Ocean extends inland
an admonishing finger,
fomenting bird squalls,
pointing to urban lights behind
aligned on streets slack
with hasty modernism.
A haggard city imprinted
on fog's sorrow.
Unlike this sharp coast
on which I hone my perception.
Only a few houses there
have rooted in singularity,
adrift from each other
on granite, ice and star.
Compromise inside out
with each other.
Conjurations of safety
form candlelight halos
where Thule looks in
through sheets of glass.

In the heart's offing
solitude will finally change
them into weather.
Their blood in tides, rivers, eddies,
their skin guttered, cragged, ravined
until they stand beyond
themselves conquered
by spirit's invisible conspiracy.

Pam Munter

Being a Shrink

IT MAY BE POLITICALLY INCORRECT to admit this, but I loved being a shrink. It was stimulating, challenging and, well, fun. For nearly 25 years, I was a clinical psychologist in private practice in a suburb of Portland, Oregon, seeing as many as 38 clients a week in 45-minute sessions. I haven't done that in more than 25 years, but hardly a day goes by that I don't think about those years and all the people who trusted me with their lives.

In the final decades of the last century, there were few restrictions placed on who could avail themselves of mental health services and how long the treatment could continue. Equal access to mental health professionals was mandated by state law, making it easily accessible to anyone with insurance. That has all changed with the advent of managed care and the giant industrial complex that has transformed the insurance industry. More about that later.

How does one morph into a shrink? As an adolescent, I was sometimes perceived by peers as "too intense." They wanted to chat about the latest pop music hits or teen idols; I wanted to hear about what they thought and felt, not mere external events. Even then, it seemed to me that what happened within the self was far more absorbing than activity outside it. That this predilection might be a forerunner to becoming a clinical psychologist didn't occur to me until I was in my early 20s.

In fact, I was heading in an entirely different direction. I had just been awarded a master's degree in Political Science, and volunteered to teach it at the University of Panama in the Peace Corps. After selection, each of us met with a clinical psychologist for further vetting. Almost immediately, I was fascinated by her approach to screening,

the assessment techniques, and how she arrived at her conclusions. Close to the end of the four-month training, I was informed I was being sent to a different country due to political instability in the region. This wasn't what I had signed up for, so I submitted my resignation. Before leaving, the Peace Corps required an exit interview with the same psychologist. The meeting was scheduled for an hour. We ran it into two. I had tons of questions about how she did her work, wanting to learn more. Once I began reading, I knew this was it, an epiphany if there ever was one.

The academic road to the Ph.D. was more problematic since I had taken only one Mickey Mouse undergraduate course in psychology. So, while I was teaching political science in one department of the university, I was filling in an undergraduate major by taking classes across the campus. Soon, I applied and was accepted into a master's degree program in a second university across town. After receiving the M.A. in Psychology, I was accepted at a doctoral program in another state. Lots of hoops, both geographical and academic. The training is intense and comprehensive, including experimental design, statistics, neurology, social psychology, personality theory, and abnormal psychology—and, of course, psychotherapy, theory, and practice.

The more relevant part of clinical training was to “see” a client while the session was recorded for subsequent discussion with a faculty advisor. Whether or not he (and it was always a “he”) thought I was doing a good job depended on whether our psychotherapeutic orientations were compatible. This could be troublesome. There was an extensive array from which to choose, including the classical Freudian approach, the more detached Skinnerian behaviour modification techniques, and Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive cognitive therapy, among many others. From the get-go, I was most at home with the seldom-taught existential-humanist school. I had found an instant camaraderie after discovering the works of James F. T. Bugental and Carl Rogers.

The basic premise was that the client and I were in a relationship between equals. She was not a “patient” upon whom I would apply techniques, nor would I presume to tell her what to do. The answers, so to speak, would come from the client. This approach

started in the waiting room when I introduced myself as Pam Munter, not Dr. Munter. Something that small established the tone, producing an almost immediate reduction in stress in a setting where comfort typically evolves over time. We had a fridge full of water and soft drinks, routinely offered before the session began.

When the client entered my office, s/he could see the setting was more like a well-appointed living room with a choice of comfortable seating. There was no massive, imposing desk, no remnants of a medical habitat and certainly no white coats. I leased a space configured to my specifications, making sure the entrance, exit and hallways were all accessible, as well as the bathrooms down the hall.

“What brings you here today?” I would ask, knowing that the response would be only part of the story. We would soon move to the task at hand, the exploration of the often-hidden inner world while using the presenting issue as a fulcrum. What matters to her? What’s important? What does she expect from herself and others? What get in the way? So many can neither identify nor express themselves accurately on an emotional level, delegating their lives to external authority. They lack internal access and vocabulary to fully participate in their own lives. As a result, they are living inauthentically.

I knew my limits, both personally and professionally. I would not see people who were psychotic or afflicted with intransigent personality disorders, both categories quickly recognizable. If someone was suicidal, addicted, or merely wanted to stop smoking, I was not their most effective choice. I was best with people who were willing to risk fully “being there,” capable of engaging in internal excavation, who would think about our conversation between sessions. It turned out that most of the time, they were also people I liked. It made the stressful job so much easier.

The hours were long, the work intense with no place to hide. I would arrive home exhausted but usually satisfied I had done good work that day. The downside was the toll on the rest of my life. Intensive work like that could easily drain my tank. The days with difficult clients felt like an emotional marathon, requiring that I pace myself with frequent breaks during the day. Though I had a young son and partner at home

and enjoyed a social life with several good friends, it was not ethical to discuss my client's issues outside the therapy room. I had to work out my thoughts and feelings relating to clients on my own. We had dedicated a large room in the office suite as a library and I found myself in there enjoying my solitude when there were cancellations. It was essential for me to take care of myself physically, by eating well and exercising most days. Short vacations several times a year were a must.

Over the years, I had the opportunity to work with people of all abilities, life situations and orientations. Some of them were professional people, others were stay-at-home wealthy women (handicapped in their own way, I mused). I was on the "approved" list for LGBT organizations and for two of the local Catholic orders, there were individuals, couples, families, groups, kids, and teenagers. Some of the clients were famous, too, presenting a unique set of issues for us to work out.

Dark humour has always been an integral part of my own set of coping skills, an embedded viewpoint I often shared with clients. Good-natured teasing or a flippant aside broke the ice and leavened our sessions with perspective. It wasn't limited to the therapy room. During one of my lectures to a large group of nuns on the topic of "celibacy," of all things, I couldn't resist responding to the fulsome introduction with a comment. "I am neither Catholic nor celibate, so perhaps it's a testimonial to the strength of your faith to invite me here and I thank you."

In addition to therapy hours and public speeches, I kept myself honed with media appearances, acted as an expert witness in many criminal cases, engaged in frequent public speaking opportunities and started a groundbreaking quarterly newsletter for clients. All this was just plain fun, tapping more of my resources.

While I empathized with their daily struggles, the most challenging clients were not necessarily those with psychological disabilities, not even the people who were struggling with incapacitating illness or terminal diseases. The toughest were the angry ones, those who were dragged there by a spouse or a parent against their will. I had to remind myself to be patient, to avoid reacting on a personal level. It had nothing to do

with me but more with the many issues outside the room that were making their lives a living hell. Sometimes we worked through it; sometimes we didn't.

One of the most essential coping skills I developed as a shrink was consistently setting a firm boundary. Though I was living inside their life in a way, I had to remember that it was—in fact—their life, not mine. The decisions they would make would be theirs alone. I was responsible for fulfilling my role as a clinical psychologist, a guide. The outcome was their department. It was a matter of respect.

I closed the office long before I wanted or expected, a direct result of the insidious and frustrating encroachment of HMOs. When a referral came from a client with an insurance company that used managed care, I would be granted a small and insufficient handful of sessions to “fix” whatever problems came in the door, no matter how chronic or acute. More time might be allocated, only after reams of paperwork, justifying the extension by describing the client's problems in detail. This started to feel unethical and was antithetical to the way I knew I was most effective. I recognized the economic realities, but the application of quick psychological band-aids is not how major life changes occur, at least not long-term. What used to be in-depth psychotherapy is now more like counselling—limited, structured, and prescriptive. For those who can't afford it, existential therapy is prohibitively expensive. And so, with great ambivalence, I left the profession that was the most perfect match to my personality, abilities, and sensibilities.

As we've collectively faced horrendous crises over the past few years, I can't help but wonder what happened in the lives of those people who came into therapy because they were unhappy, frustrated, confused, or at loose ends. They honoured me with their trust, inviting me into their inner world. It was inescapably intense and meaningful. Many of the clients' struggles moved me to tears. I admired their courage to face the unthinkable demons from which they had sought to insulate themselves, sometimes at great cost.

Since a quarter of a century had elapsed, reconnaissance was complicated. I had no desire to contact them personally or insert myself in their current lives. I only hoped they had continued to lead lives of agency using acquired tools to face subsequent challenges. Before HMOs, it was not unusual to work together for years, usually weekly.

Thanks to Google and Facebook, it was possible to cobble together a little of their post-therapeutic stories. Of course, it's mere speculation to gauge quality of life, degree of satisfaction with their choices, and perseverance of therapeutic growth.

Some clients had come to my office because they were students in my classes at Portland State University. Back in the free-wheeling 1970s, there were few boundaries between students and teachers, and many would hang around my office after class. The usual therapeutic detachment was nearly impossible under those circumstances, a major reason they came to me as a therapist when confiding in a "stranger" was too formidable.

Here are a few of their stories, the potentially identifying facts changed to preserve confidentiality.

Marilyn was a bright, articulate student who already possessed a graduate degree in economics. She took several of my classes (she solemnly called herself a "Munter Major") and an active participant in class discussions. She made an appointment to see me in my practice because she was depressed, trapped in a loveless marriage to a controlling husband. He was traditional, threatened, and unsupportive of her desire to better herself through education. Marilyn was receptive to evaluating and examining every aspect of her life. After a particularly rocky period in her marriage, she tentatively raised the possibility that she might be bisexual, a revelation we explored over subsequent months. Eventually, Marilyn found the courage to leave her husband, entered a graduate program in psychology and there, met a woman with whom she fell in love. Marilyn eventually became a licensed psychologist herself and relocated to another state. Today, photos on Facebook show her happily retired, married to her partner and in frequent chats with her grown children. I get updates from her every few years, referring to her peaceful state of mind, crediting the depth of the work she was

able to accomplish. Marilyn navigated challenges on several levels, fully present in our sessions, unafraid of growth and where it might lead her. She faced her issues with clear-headedness and curiosity. I admired her courage. My goals were to help her get at what mattered to her, mute the controlling “shoulds” of her evangelistic upbringing, and discover what she wanted at a deeper level. She came to trust herself and, as a result, rekindled hope for a productive and satisfying life.

Evie was also a former student. When we met, she was in a long-standing relationship with an occasionally abusive woman, the maltreatment not disclosed until much later in our work. She admitted she drank too much, which she said helped quiet her anxiety and cloud her low self-esteem. Evie was working at a fast-food restaurant, feeling scattered and unfocused in every realm. She and her partner had a wide social network, which provided convenient distractions from their issues. Evie, like Marilyn, was personable and warm, easy to like. She was able to handle most everything I’d throw at her, often with a quick retort. She lived life on its surface with little relationship to her inner self. It took more than a year, for example, before she could think about a career other than counter work. Through our exploration, she discovered a passion for politics and obtained a position as a political aide, opening doors for advancement and a more secure financial future. Good decisions in one area don’t necessarily translate to others. As she ratcheted down her abusive relationship, she began a series of indiscriminate affairs with men. Her often frenetic social and sexual life was a smokescreen for her larger issues around anxiety and shame. The pursuit of self can be frightening, sometimes filled with unpleasant revelations. Underscoring our work was a focus on developing resilience and new coping skills, moving her focus to problem-solve from within. It took time, gentle therapeutic confrontation, and her willingness to engage – both with me and with herself. During one of our occasional hiatuses, Evie pursued an intimate and more stable relationship with a woman she had known for years. It was at this point that we began to wind down our work together. She was building a healthy relationship and had found a career she loved, with renewed hope in her own future. She had fashioned

the life she knew she deserved. Now, 25 years later, she is retired and has maintained her domestic partnership. She recently emailed to thank me for our work together. She said she often thought about our discussions, much to my pleasure.

When Rachel and I met, she was in her early 30s and unmarried. She had a long-term “Same Time Next Year” relationship with a married man in a distant state, predictably problematic. She struck me as well-defended, quick to push away anything that might further provoke her discomfort. She was a tall woman, her demeanour suggestive of power and intimidation. There was a shroud of sadness behind her eyes. My initial task was to manoeuvre gingerly through the wall of defences, gain her trust and encourage an investment in her own value so we could undo whatever damage was so apparent on the surface. Curiously, she didn’t reveal that her father had sexually abused her until a year into our sessions when she found a potential (and available) partner. She had deeply buried the resulting vulnerability within a tough veneer. As with many victims of sex abuse, she assumed responsibility for its occurrence. She came to understand her father’s exploitive control was self-serving. We all carry around our past like existential luggage. We can’t erase it, but we can contextualize it, both historically and within the person we are today. The partner, who subsequently became her husband, was an uncomplicated, old shoe kind of guy, comfortable with himself and no threat to Rachel. The main obstacles were his two young children and an ex-wife, which Rachel was ill-equipped to handle. We began multi-generational work, as I met with the new partner and with each of the children. When Rachel had worked through the difficult history and felt safe again, a wedding was scheduled. According to Facebook, they are still together, both retired. The “kids” have their own families and regularly socialize with the parents. I felt a strong attachment to each one of them and think of them often. Her courage in facing her father’s victimization and letting go of her emotional fortress were integral to her moving on with her life.

Shelley worked as a clerk for one of the large corporations in the business park in which I had my office. Her initial, cheerful, animated demeanour was overwhelming,

her anxiety palpable. She was in habitual performance mode with wide-eyed reactions so studied they resembled bad acting. I wondered what was so frightening that would merit the elaborate defence system. She acknowledged feeling both anxious and depressed, blaming others for her emotional state. I struggled to cut through her world view to get to whoever lived inside. Shelley was nearing 50 and, though she was on her own, she was still very attached to her parents, who formed the centre of her social life. Her dates with men ended without explanation after just a few encounters. She bounced off people, seeking to make an impact by manipulating them to get what she wanted, rather than to honestly engage. She shared with delight the pranks she played on her women friends, in denial about the embarrassment and pain it caused others. It was a tribute to her charm that she had lifelong pals, in fact, who could see through the blustery personality to the fragile, needy person underneath. Our weekly task was to debrief the crisis du jour, explore how she might have dealt with things differently, and to discover what her behavioural choices had to do with how she saw herself. I encouraged Shelley to take responsibility for her own life, to come to know and trust herself so that she didn't need to perform for others. Despite our frustrating therapeutic dances, I liked Shelley and, while our sessions likely comforted her and raised her self-esteem, I left feeling unfinished. Checking Facebook, I can see her friendships have apparently endured. She has sufficient resources to travel, both alone and with friends and looks to have carved out a satisfying life on her own.

One of the most complicated relationships I had was with Terri. I don't recall how she found me, but she came prepared to work at the very first session. Bolting into my office, Terri looked as if she dressed in thrift store rejects, frumpy and dishevelled. I was immediately drawn to her honesty and naïve directness. Her unsophisticated coarseness and openness to inner exploration were engaging. Shortly after we began, I met her domestic partner, Deb. While Terri was articulate and voluble, Deb was quietly depressed, reticent, and withholding in every aspect of her life. It was clear that Terri did the social and emotional work in the relationship. At the start, Terri announced she

expected therapy to consist of a thorough developmental review, beginning with her earliest years. I agreed, so long as she was willing to dig into substantial issues as we went along. Over time, she acknowledged her bombastic personality helped deflect her anxiety, putting her in charge of any situation. Her fears were rooted in a dysfunctional early family, compounded by self-defeating decisions along the way. She confessed a few months into our work that she had lied to her employer about having a college degree. Telling her boss, the truth did not produce the chaos she had feared, which dissipated some of her ambient anxiety. After a year of working together, I thought we had ended our sessions amicably, so I was astonished when I received a letter two years later, declaring her anger with me for “premature termination.” We exchanged a few letters and resolved the situation, but it caused me both confusion and distress.

Shortly after we ended our work, she became a vocal and combative community advocate for her small town. Her relationship with Deb apparently stayed strong until Terri’s recent death. Though her revisionist history made life difficult for me, I consider our work together a success. Ironically, she had left therapy with a sense of optimism, with concrete plans for her future which worked out well. It would seem she channelled her unexpected anger at me toward the political establishment.

Long-term existential/humanistic psychotherapy is no longer economically feasible for most people, no longer covered by insurance. The zeitgeist has adjusted to these realities with a movement now toward online therapy. The healing process is more accessible than ever, a hopeful sign in these troubled times. Whatever form it takes, the therapeutic relationship is integral to change, to restoring the person within. For me, the mission was to deepen the clients’ connection with themselves, to identify and ground them in their own values and beliefs. When successful, the anxiety and depression that crippled their existence became less causal and sometimes even disappeared. Their personal journeys inevitably impacted me, broadening my own perspectives. It was a constant reminder that living life authentically is a daily challenge and that conquering anxiety and depression is attainable with time and commitment.

Being a shrink was simultaneously humbling and ennobling. People willingly put their very lives in my hands. It sometimes took a long time for significant changes to occur, for them to feel a sense of wholeness and to live life more honestly. But what a worthwhile journey it was.

Ian Douglas Robertson

Murder

YORICK AND I REMAINED IN TOUCH after college, even though we had gone our separate ways; he to a brilliant career as a surgeon, me to an uninspired life – career is far too strong a word for it – as a farmer. He, unlike me, had known from the get-go what he wanted. His favourite subject at school was biology and his preferred activity was dissecting creatures, big and small. I found the whole process quite nauseating and would always find some excuse not to be present on the days Dr. Waddingford intended to bring a frog or a rat into the lab to be sliced open and duly hung, drawn and quartered. Yorick couldn't wait, which surprised me, as he was one of the gentlest people I knew.

Yorick was the son of an acclaimed Irish painter and a renowned Indian lawyer, who was also a professor at Trinity College Dublin. They owned a rambling old house in the depths of Wicklow, surrounded by two hundred acres of prime grassland, on which a large herd of sheep grazed. I spent many delightful weekends there while at school. We would climb the hill at the back of the house and look out over the moody Irish Sea, with the sound of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C Minor or Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1 'Winter Daydreams' wafting up to us, in varying degrees of intensity, on the erratic south-westerly wind.

We started college at the same time. He went to the Royal College of Surgeons, while I went to Trinity College to do a degree in languages. Yorick, being far more efficient and practical than I, had found digs in Harcourt Street, in a residence whose primary function was to accommodate African and Asian students. Though Yorick was

only half Indian and in fact could easily have passed for a slightly dark-skinned Italian or Spaniard, he felt some affinity for people of colour, not that he had been teased or bullied at school as a result of his mixed racial origins.

Having spent my summer working in a factory in England, pretending to be a man of the people, I arrived at Trinity on the last day of registration, which meant all the desirable lodgings had been snapped up. Yorick, as was his wont, offered to help me out. "I can pull some strings and get you into Koinonia House," he said. "Claim that you're an Indian albino or something." But I had already found a place off the North Circular Road. So, I didn't take up his offer.

After university, we kept in touch and showed a passing interest in each other's careers. His was meteoric and illustrious, a rocket destined for the higher stratosphere, while mine was more like an underpowered firework that fizzled out after a short and unexciting trajectory into the night sky. On my infrequent visits to Dublin, I would always look Yorick up. He had married an Irish Indian girl like himself, and they had three adorable children. She too was a doctor of some repute. I was always slightly ashamed of not being able to boast acquired wealth or fame, but Yorick was not one to attach importance to such vanities. Even when he had gained international acclaim as a surgeon, he remained humble and self-effacing.

Whenever we met, we spent little time with his family, as he wanted as much time with me as possible - in a quiet pub somewhere - so that we could reminisce about our happy-go-lucky student days. I don't know why he regarded them as happy or go-lucky, considering that he spent most of his time buried in a mound of medical books, which to me seemed inordinately bulky and turgid, while I was out demonstrating for workers' rights or the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. When I wasn't protesting about something, I was honing my skills as a public speaker in the Hist or on the Dining Room steps. Study seldom entered my equation of things.

When his parents died, he and his family moved into the house in Wicklow. I was immensely jealous of their enormous house and grounds, though I only had myself

to blame for my cramped two-bedroomed flat in Athens. I made no effort at all, you see, to overcome my squeamishness about cadaver dissection.

I arrived at their home in Wicklow one evening in early spring. I decided to combine a visit to Dublin with a tour of the British universities, one of the more interesting aspects of my job in the school where I worked. Yorick and Samantha had just come back from some exotic holiday and were full of their exploits. I obligingly drank tea and ate sandwiches in their gazebo at the end of the garden, but after an hour or so, Yorick could see that I was sagging under the weight of haute cuisine and cocktails by the pool and suggested we make our way to a local pub for a pint of plain Irish beer.

The pub was virtually empty, apart from an old chap, who looked as if he'd set up permanent residence there. We ordered a large pint each and settled down in the comfort of a snug that looked out on to a small river tripping merrily down the mountainside. Yorick and I are good listeners. That's why we've always got on so well. Yet, as good listeners, we tend to get talked at rather than to. In each other's company, however, we allow the other to express his opinions without interruption. As always, Yorick was keen to talk about our college years.

"Do you think, Don, that you could ever forgive the person who murdered a loved one?"

I gave him an odd look, wondering what on earth had prompted such a macabre question. "Well," I said hesitantly. "I suppose it very much depends on the circumstances. Now, you *are* talking about murder and not manslaughter?"

"Yes, murder. Possibly not premeditated, but most definitely murder."

"My initial response would be no. I don't think I could. Probably the only way to come to terms with my grief would be to transform it into hate, hate for the perpetrator. I've watched several interviews with people whose loved ones have been murdered and what comes across is their need for retribution. In America, of course, this would be the death penalty - in many states, at least."

“I know that I could never come to terms with the murder of any of my children. I think I would probably want to seek revenge. It’s the stuff of Hollywood movies, I know, but the desire for vengeance would be overwhelming, wouldn’t it?”

“What brought this up?” I asked puzzled.

“You remember the Shan Mohangi case?”

“Vaguely,” I said. “Remind me.”

“Surely you remember Shan Mohangi, the South African medical student. We were in the same year at the Royal.”

“You don’t mean the guy who murdered his sixteen-year-old girlfriend because he thought she’d been unfaithful? What was her name now? Hazel something?”

“Mullen. She used to work at Brown’s Chemist’s.”

“Yes, of course! That caused quite a stir. Public feeling was running very high for a while.”

“Do you remember the time we went to Kelly’s corner for chips with Aadarsh, Baahir and Chidike, which nearly ended in Aadarsh being killed?”

“How could I forget? It was about 1:30 a.m., I remember. I waited outside while you guys went in. These gurriers came up to me and one of them said, “Are you with them?” I said I was. “You wouldn’t want to be seen with them fuckin’ darkies, pal. You might end up gettin’ your face flattened.” Well, there was no point in getting into a fight, so I said nothing. When you guys came out, I didn’t bother mentioning the exchange I’d had with the gurrier. I thought there was no point. Anyway, I assumed it was me they had it in for, for consorting with ‘darkies’.”

“It was in all the papers the next day. I can see the headline now, *Indian Medical Student Beaten to a Pulp on Charlemont Street.*”

“I felt immensely guilty about that.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Don. None of us was aware they had followed us. Aadarsh’s digs were only a hundred yards away. Who could have suspected that they were waiting just around the corner?”

“What did Aadarsh do after graduation?”

“He went back to India, worked in the slums of Calcutta. He knew Mother Theresa.”

Yorick went silent and spent some time studying the froth on his pint of Harp.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just remembering Aadarsh. He sacrificed his life for the poor of Calcutta and then ended up being murdered on his way home from work, for no reason at all. Mistaken identity. It’s so ironic. He escaped death at the hands of a gang of Irish hooligans only to be killed by the very people he was trying to help.”

“I had no idea Aadarsh was dead. I’m sorry.”

“In many ways, I wish I had done what Aadarsh did.”

“Aadarsh enjoyed sacrificing himself for others. It was his calling. Your destiny was here... Have you even been to India?”

“A couple of times. But you’re right. I felt such an alien there. Yet, I sometimes feel guilty for not doing more to help the underprivileged.”

Yorick hadn’t changed.

“Why did you bring up the Shan Mohangi case?”

“I read an article this morning that had an enormous effect on me. Hazel’s mother, Bridget Mullen, was buried in Dean’s Grange Cemetery on Saturday.”

“She must have been quite old.”

“Not all that old. In her sixties, I should think. It wasn’t her death that shook me so much as what she said before she died.”

“Yeah?”

“That she completely forgave Shan Mohangi for killing her daughter. And her son Ian said the same thing, and that he was sure God had forgiven him too.”

“It was certainly very magnanimous of them. I suppose she didn’t want to die with hatred in her heart.”

“I hadn’t thought of it like that. Yes, you may be right. I suspect she was very religious ... I know you’ve never been one for religion, Don, but there’s a lot to be said for a faith that allows you to turn the other cheek. It means you can relinquish the desire for retribution.”

“Maybe... I wonder how Shan Mohangi feels. You knew him quite well. He was a bit of a loner, wasn’t he? I met him a few times at the Green Tureen. But I can’t say I knew him.”

“I didn’t particularly like him. He was very competitive, always trying to prove that he was better than the rest of us. He had a massive chip on his shoulder about something, maybe because he wasn’t as rich as we were. I found him hard to talk to. There was a kind of inverted arrogance about him. He was a bit stocky, I remember, and he felt rather uncomfortable in the presence of the opposite sex. Yet, he was surprisingly successful with women. Of course, they were usually girls he felt were beneath him.”

“Didn’t he get engaged to a nurse before he started going out with Hazel?”

“Yes, apparently it was a very tumultuous relationship. All I know is that when they broke up, she made quite sure he couldn’t find her. I think she went to England to get as far away from him as possible... I remember him complaining about Irish women, how flighty they were. Hazel was only just fifteen when they met. Yet, he went berserk when Hazel’s mother said she was too young to get married. ‘Girls in my country get married at twelve,’ he said. ‘Hazel is nearly sixteen.’ He gave Bridget a hell of a time apparently, even though she had never actually forbidden the marriage. She just wanted Hazel to experience a bit of life first.”

“How did they become an item?”

“I’m not quite sure but they say he met her in Brown’s, fell in love and asked her out. She was reticent at first. But he kept on bringing her flowers and small gifts, chocolate and that kind of thing. In the end, she gave in. They started going out and then she introduced him to her family. They lived out in Shankill.”

“What did her mother think of him?”

“Well, from newspaper reports it seems she found him very polite and courteous. I’m sure she must have had her doubts, though. There was a lot of prejudice against coloured people back then. On the other hand, she may have been flattered that a medical student should be interested in her daughter. Bridget’s husband had died, so she was in a very vulnerable state, having to look after seven children alone. You’ve got to remember, Don, that in Ireland in 1963, young Catholic girls were not like English girls, all free love and sex. In fact, most Irish girls at the time wouldn’t dream of going to bed with a man before marriage. I’m sure you remember what it was like.”

“Only too well! So, you reckon that the only way he could get her into bed was by marrying her.”

“Exactly.”

“I remember reading about the case at the time, but it’s been quite a while. Just what happened exactly?”

“It was Hazel’s half day at Brown’s. So, she knocked off a 12.30 and went up to the Green Tureen to see Shan. He lived in a one-room apartment just above the restaurant, where he worked as a part-time chef. During the trial he claimed that she admitted seeing another man, implying that they had had sex. He totally lost it and strangled her. That’s *his* story at least. Another version is that he got her pregnant and tried to perform an abortion on her and she bled to death. I think the first version is more likely, though. Anyway, poor Hazel is dead. He doesn’t know what to do. So, he cuts her up into pieces. Having dismembered and disembowelled her, he has to find a way of disposing of the body parts. The head was the most difficult. He tried to boil it down in a pot, but this took much longer than he’d anticipated. The smaller parts he flushed down the toilet or just hid behind pieces of furniture. Others he tried to burn in the furnace below the restaurant. On the day of the murder, some passersby saw smoke coming out of the basement and called the fire brigade. They came and found Shan half naked, sweating profusely. He told them that there had been a fire, which he had managed to put out. So, they left. Then, a day or two later, the other residents in the

block complained of a stench from the drains. The landlord and owner of the Green Tureen suspected something was not right, especially as Shan had been behaving so strangely. He confronted him and finally Shan confessed to killing Hazel.”

“And he was arrested and put on trial. It was a very high-profile case, I remember.”

“The death sentence was still in force in Ireland in 1963. And, as he’d confessed, it was an open and shut case. He was sentenced to death by hanging and was sent to Mountjoy to await execution. He was on death row for a whole year. They had even appointed a hangman, Albert Pierrepoint, the last hangman in the British Isles. Shan filed an appeal almost immediately and, fortunately for him, during a long-drawn-out appeal trial, a law was passed abolishing the death sentence for all crimes except the killing of a member of the police force. His sentence was commuted to seven years. After serving four, he was set free and sent back to South Africa.”

“So, that was the last anyone heard of Shan Mohangi.”

“In Ireland, yes. He went back to his native Natal and set up a very successful business there under a new name, Narentuk Jumuna. He went into politics and is now a member of parliament.”

“So, justice was never served.”

“Well, that’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it, Don? In what way would justice have been served? Can anyone say what punishment would have fitted the crime?”

“I wonder what your father would have said.”

“Oh, my father would have advocated the death sentence, I know that, but I like to think we’ve moved on since then.”

“So, what do you think would have been a fair punishment for Shan Mohangi?”

“That’s the thing, Don. We’re dealing with immeasurable here. You can’t quantify the value of a life, in the same way that you can’t calculate the equivalence in terms of punishment. Clearly, if there was any chance that he might commit a second crime, then life imprisonment would have to be imposed. But it appears that Shan

Mohangi repented for what he had done. Just before he was arrested, he tried to take his own life. He locked himself in his room and turned on all the gas outlets, the oven and the heating, but the gardai came and forced open the door. He was quite clearly eaten up with guilt.”

“Or he just panicked.”

“Possibly, but he was interviewed on a TV programme called *Thou Shalt not Kill*, in which he said that he would do anything to make amends. He said how much he loved Hazel, etc.”

“Surely, it was just an attempt to win the sympathy of the viewers. You can’t get away from the fact that he took someone’s life.”

“So, you’re suggesting that he should have been hanged?”

“No, not at all. As you said, we’ve moved beyond that. At least the law has. Whether we as humans have is another matter. The question is, did the punishment fit the crime?”

“I think it did, Don. First, he spent four years in prison. That can seem like a lifetime, especially if you’re on death row for the first year with all the time in the world to think about someone placing a rope around your neck and being dropped into the void. Second, he has shown regret on several occasions.”

“Yes, Yorick, but Hazel cannot be brought back to life. Bridget Mullen had to live with that for the rest of her life and Hazel’s siblings will have to live with it for the rest of theirs.”

“In the same way that Shan Mohangi will have to live with his guilt. Surely that is a form of punishment?”

“How do you know he feels any guilt?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, of course! But I wouldn’t kill someone.”

“Are you sure? Have you never totally lost it? Nearly hit someone?”

As usual, Yorick got me thinking about my past, my impulsive youthful past, and questioning myself and my actions. After thirty years of marriage, I had forgotten what jealousy felt like, the hurt pride, the deception, the emptiness, the overwhelming feeling of frustration, the fear that you may lose the one thing that gives meaning to your life, and then that urge to cause pain and instil fear. How easily rage can turn into violence, which can lead to a tragic accident, to murder even.

“I think I have lost my temper once or twice,” I lied.

“Weren’t you a dangerous person in that state?”

“I was in control...I think.”

“You think?”

“Yorick, you are sounding frighteningly like your father. Am I on trial here?”

Yorick laughed and took a long swig from his beer. “No, of course, not. I just don’t think we should be so self-righteous, that’s all. We all have done things we regret.”

“I suppose it all boils down to whether the regret is genuine or not. How can we tell? Human beings are so good at deceiving others.”

“If the professed regret is bogus, it will show.”

“I wish it were true. I know how easy it is to turn on emotion. I’ve seen actors produce real tears and audiences cry their eyes out because the actor was so utterly convincing.”

“Human emotions are not part of an exact science, Don. They are not governed by hard and fast rules. Are we able to judge the sincerity of emotion? No. So, we have to give someone the benefit of the doubt.”

“What you’re saying is that we should give Shan Mohangi the benefit of the doubt.”

“Absolutely.”

“Even though justice may not have been served.”

“In his case, I think it was.”

“All right. I give in. Perhaps you should have become a lawyer, after all, Yorick.”

“A lawyer, no way. I much prefer the exact sciences. I would find it very hard to make judgements about guilt and punishment, interpreting emotion and future intent. I leave that up to your intuitive understanding of people, Don. Saving lives is more my cup of tea.”

“I would be quite useless as a judge of people – only if it’s part of a work of fiction, that is. Can I get you another pint?”

“Why not? We can drink to the fact that we’ve never murdered our wives.”

“Are you taking the piss, Yorick?”

“No, I’m serious. I don’t know about you, but I’ve had the urge to strangle my wife on countless occasions. So, perhaps we should rejoice in the fact that we haven’t.”

I looked at my gentle, harmless friend in shocked silence. Could he really have such urges? I laughed uneasily. Might we all be capable of murder?

“I’ll drink to that. And let’s order another beer quickly? As usual, you have managed to unearth memories that I have tried to keep buried.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sure it’s very therapeutic. It certainly stops me from becoming too self-righteous, as you say.”

“I think it’s important to have one’s wings clipped every so often. It stops us from flying too high.”

“You’re right, as usual, Yorick. Now, can you please tell me why you liked your student days so much? All I remember is you poring over endless volumes of incredibly dull medical books? When did you have time to enjoy yourself?”

“Don’t you remember the times we used to go to those noisy, smoky dance halls and listen to those ghastly show bands? As for the ‘incredibly dull medical books’, I was merely indulging my thirst for knowledge. One thing is dissecting a frog or a rat in the lab, another cutting someone open in the hope that a malignancy can be removed. It’s when you know that you can’t save a life that things get serious. I’ve never enjoyed being the harbinger of death.”

“I envy you, Yorick. It must be wonderful knowing that you’ve saved so many lives.”

“Yes, I suppose it is, but one always has that feeling that one could have done more.”

“Yorick, you’re incorrigible. How should I feel? The closest I’ve ever come to saving a life is helping an old lady cross the road.”

“That’s not true, Don. You feed people. What could be more fundamental than that?”

“An interesting thought. Perhaps, I should re-evaluate my contribution to humanity.”

“Most definitely.”

“Ah, our beer has come. Drink up, my friend.”

“Cheers!”

“The view from this window is quite stunning, isn’t it? It’s hard to believe sitting here that there are people who want to strangle their wives or girlfriends.”

“Yes, I always come here when I want to get away from things.”

The Stars are Crossed at Us

TO LOVE AND BE LOVED, they say, is to feel the sun from both sides. But what happens in the moments when the sun chooses to scorch you grey and pale, when it bakes your soul to a crispy muddle so that nothing is left of your essence? Do you wear a blanket of all the colours of gloom to shield yourself from its rays? Or do you darken your vision instead with big, black shades from all its radiance?

Well, in the end, you'll discover that to love and let go can be the same thing, that it can have the same impact of taste on your tongue. You would learn for yourself that the pleasure of love lasts for a moment and the pain of it, a lifetime – forgetting, almost impossible.

A tender story of hopeless lovebirds tangled in the webs of an ancestral tradition that labels the fragrance of what they feel a stench.

Mmasinachi

We were in Okemmili street, seated under a low-pitched, metallic roof, on a rough pavement made of cinder blocks that formed an extension of mama Ada's retail store. You held my hand in yours and allowed your fingers run through it ever so ethereally, sending freezing tickles down my bones. Your left shoulder bore the weight of my head and the faint manly smell of your body filled my nostrils, making me want to inhale every part of you.

You were gazing at the moon, saying something about how beautifully it graced the sky, how magnificently full its radiance was upon earth. You praised it, the moon.

And called it a golden work of art fashioned out of a rare kind of love — pure, perfect love, you said.

I did not give much to what you were saying. It was something about the milky innocence in the movement of your lips that held me lost in my desires; the way they parted and joined, adhering to the rhythm of your words like ballet dancers intending to steal the moment; the fresh crust in the brown of your upper lip and the silky texture in the red of your lower lip, projecting like the deliciousness in the rich combination of African dishes. Now, that was the real work of art. No doubt.

You looked down at me and our eyes met. You held my gaze for what seemed like forever until I felt the white of my eyes melt into grey. I managed to avert my gaze to something else, anything. Maybe to the flowers that adorned the tall fence of the newly built modern bungalow which nearly everyone on Okemmili street had used as a background for their Facebook pictures. But before I could as much as blink off my gaze, those lips came descending upon mine. Soft. Full. Warm.

THE FIRST TIME WE DID THIS, made this magic, was on the evening of the day I lied to papa about going to church for benediction when, I was going to see '*nwoke*'. I was going to see a man. A man who, without knowing it, became my daydream and night chills.

I loved it when I passed by your mother's shop at Afo ukwu market and caught you stealing glances at me. Glances, I would whimsically assure myself you would pay for in kind. And whenever I stopped by the shop to purchase items I'd never needed so as to create an opportunity to initiate a conversation with you, I always liked the delicacy with which you attended to me; a kind that distinguished an elite customer from a regular, even though judging by the petty amount of goods I bought from your mother's big, popular supermarket, I could never fit in the clique of her elite customers.

Your mother must have noticed, everyone must have. The way you smiled at me, spoke to me with the finesse of a romantic, thickened your voice to catch my feminine attention, took on the role of a gentleman by offering your seat to me, and sometimes fumbled with items when I was around bespoke loudly your affection for me. And I knew I wasn't mistaking when I concluded that you were into me as much as I was into you.

So, when we bumped into each other in church, that Sunday, after morning mass, I wasn't in for stealing glances and speaking in monosyllables. On the contrary, I was particularly interested in something deep. Something soulful and satisfying. Something I could hold on to for strength, something to assure me of the chemistry we shared, because the hunger of you in me had consumed every fibre of my being. It had reduced my common sense to nothing but you....and the memory of you.

As though the universe had whispered this to you, you grinned like a Cheshire cat, flaunting those cute indentations that appeared near the corners of your mouth and locked eyes with me much longer than I could contain. And when you said, “Hi, I'm Nnamabia, the guy from Afo ukwu market. Do you recognize me?”, my tongue went numb and my legs frozen stiff from an imbalanced mixture of raging emotions. For one thing, those words were more than you had ever uttered to me, and how could I not have recognized you? You with the dreamiest of eyes. You with the bristliest of brows. Your chiselled jaw and aquiline nose would give you away any day.

“I..I do,” I managed to mumble. Whether or not that was a befitting response, I wondered, evaluating my feeble words.

You gave a smug expression that hinted your glee at my emotional discombobulation. It pricked my ego, but I gathered the broken pieces of my grit and braced up.

“How can I be of help?” I said with an especially sour glance.

You smiled, “I thought you would at least tell me your name.”

“What good is my name to a stranger?” I replied.

“Good enough to make his day.”

“And what makes you think I'm Santa Claus?”

“Santa Claus doesn't come close.” You went on with that smirk on your face. Not when I thought I was doing so well giving you a hard time. it weakened me.

I paused for a moment and exhaled, “Mmasinachi, that's my name, if that tickles your fancy.”

“Mmasinachi, beauty is from God. Talk about things that go together; your name and your looks.” My goodness, your voice was so gentle.

“I wouldn't have thought you'd passed for a lover boy; you know.” My lips stretched in a smile that didn't reach my eyes.

“I hope you know this lover boy wouldn't let you be until he has your number.”

“Interesting. I see.”

“So, what do you say?”

“I say you ask in a much polite manner. I'm not any random girl, you know?”
Eziokwu, I was enjoying this, the fluidity of our first conversation.

“Okay then. Will the queen of all stars look with pity upon this lowly lad and bestow on him the honour to have in his possession thy golden number?” You gestured with your hands.

I laughed. Real hot laugh. You laughed, too. And we nearly choked on our laughter. I gave you, my number. You said you'd call before I get home.

“Is that how much obsessed you are with me?” I teased.

“Obsession is an understatement.” Your words gushed out in a whisper.

Before I got halfway on my journey home, you called. I let my phone ring a little longer before tapping on the accept icon. “Look who keeps to his words.”

We spoke for a while and concluded to meet in the evening at the street adjacent one dilapidated Rapture Is Coming Soon Salvation Ministry church whose members wore clothes three times their sizes and screamed *hallelujah* seven times at the closing of every service.

This was beginning to make sense, take shape, the chemistry we shared. I couldn't wait to get myself home, cuddle in bed and play and replay that scene of you and I, in the shelter of the sun, beaming with the pleasure of disguised joy, our faces glowing from the fulfilment of a deferred conversation.

Nnamabia

WHEN PEOPLE CONVEYED THE FEEL of love, they did so in such a mannerism that portrayed love as surrealistically perfect and spotless as though love was entirely a saint. They did not tell you that love, after all, could err. That it could snatch your brain and turn it into a morsel of dough. That it could tickle you and prickle you at the same time, without apology. That love could catch you in a web of intermittent distractions and keep you busy with nothing. That, sometimes, it could tug at your heartstrings, leaving you completely out of breath. No one ever told you of these perfect imperfections of love.

I met this girl at Afo ukwu market. Her complexion, the deep brown of cocoa. Her voice, as pure as water. Her countenance, the glitters of the stars. Her body, the pride of an African goddess. And, ever since, my mind has been clouded by the thought of her.

I glanced at my wristwatch. It was 6:35 pm. We planned to meet at seven. Less than thirty minutes left, I calculated. In a haste, I made my way past Mama Ebuka's boisterous eat and pay later cafeteria — surrounded by hungrily angry customers, screaming out their voices in a bid to be heard and attended to, at the same time trying not to provoke the plump, swarthy, aggressive woman drenched in a runny sweat that occasionally dropped into a big, red cooler in front of her each time she lowered her head to scoop rice from it — then, the construction zone spotted with metallic waste, two streets more, and I got to our rendezvous.

Amber glittering moonlight lit the street fogged with shadows of passersby. The evening air smelt sweet with ripeness. For a moment, I gulped in a stomachful of it. Cool. Fresh.

Even cooler, even fresher was you approaching me; your face, a bloom of delight.

“Hey,” I said. *“Kedu?” How is it?*

“O di mma.” You beamed, revealing bright tiny teeth. *It is fine.*

“You have a nice smile,” I complimented.

“Daalu.” You beamed again, this time sheepishly. *Thank you.*

We strolled down the street in search of serenity, privacy, anything far away from the exuberance of Okemmili's inquisitive denizens. Okemmili mellowed out as we approached its slopy end, gradually, surprisingly, until it was just you and I accompanied by the muffled sounds of our footsteps. We settled down in the extension of a lock-up retail store which would later be our usual and parting joint. We started off with the craft of honest compliments, then progressed to the gaities of small talk and climaxed in the gratification of a soulful conversation; the kind that leaves one at the mercy of an abundance of emotions swelling in one's heart.

From the gleam of affection that sparkled in your voice when you spoke about Papa, I could tell you loved him, wholeheartedly. You spoke warmly about how he wanted you to be a surgeon and how eager you were to grant him that, even though you had always dreamt of being a model. This, you said, was not because you didn't have a choice but because you wanted to make him proud, please him. It was something about the gravity of your sacrificial selflessness that made me size you up in my mind's eyes. You, in a blue scrub, a fleshy nose covered with a surgical mask, brilliant eyes hidden behind a loupe, slender hands dealing with blades and knives on unconscious patients; another image of you in a yellow tank top and a fitted, blue, crop jacket over a red mini skirt matched up with a tall, black boot, sashaying to and fro on a catwalk to the

excitement of a bougie audience, popped up in my head. But I did not tell you that I preferred none of these occupations for you.

You told me about your cancerous, deceased mother, whom you spoke of in the present tense, whom, for you, the past tense could not qualify because you still couldn't believe she's gone, and I said *ndo* with a lump in my throat. She died when you were fifteen, five years ago, you said. I did the math.

“You are three years younger,” I muttered.

“Oh,” you tilted your head and added, “you look and act quite mature for your age, then.”

“I get that a lot.”

“Let me guess, you took after your father.”

My father, I despised him. The memory of him came with a gloomy stench that putrefied ecstasy, suavity, the beauty of things — like these feelings we shared. But I did not tell you this. Instead, I smiled and spoke about my mother. I did not intend to tell you that Nne was a mistress, that she whored and aborted four children before me, but the words flowed, voluntarily, off my lips.

“You see, I was just lucky,” I pressed my lips into a thin line so as not to come off weak and tender and fragile. It didn't help, I guess.

“You weren't lucky,” you said. “You are predestined for greatness and It's in your story, it's in you.” Your words sank deep inside me, soothing a part of me I'd learnt to compress in a place beneath my fears.

I let out a breath and our eyes met again, but you cut yours away almost immediately. Whirling breeze fluttered through your hair. With my finger, I tucked a strand of it behind your ear. You shivered.

“I think we need to get going now. It's late.” Your voice was shaky.

I stood and held out my hand. You took it and allowed me to pull you to your feet. We were so close I could hear your heart beating in the silence. I moved closer, so your breast pressed against my chest. When your lips parted, I kissed you before you

could say a word. A shock of energy shot through my veins as you wound your arms around my neck in response. It must have been the adrenaline that made my heart pound so hard. Or the feel of willow slim, graceful body crushing in the thickness of mine. Or the softness of full lips gliding in and out of my mouth. I braced your back against the wall, took your hips, hitched you off your feet and began to devour. Fast and greedy. My tongue caught yours in a mild heat and tangled around it. I trailed my fingers down your neck, to your clavicle bones and then grabbed one of the feminine swellings on your chest. It was soft. Succulent. Full. You clenched my shoulder in a quiver, your nails digging into my skin through my thin shirt.

“Nnamabia,” you gasped, pushing me away and drawing me even closer, almost concurrently, your fingers trembling as they yanked at my shirt.

“Mma,” my voice came out in a groan. “Let's get you home.”

Mmasinachi

They would ask me when I learnt how to live, and I would cheerfully tell them it was in those blissful moments shared with you in the dark of Okemmili street, in the languorous masses at St. Vincent Church, in the scorching heat of Afo ukwu market, under the cool of udala trees and sometimes in the seductive privacy of your room where we squeezed out and poured into each other the flavour of a preconceived, procrastinated passion when Nne wasn't around.

Years later, they would ask me when I stopped living, and I would trace down the inception of my purgatory to when it had all begun.

A mildly sunny Saturday in September. You and I and Papa seated in the balcony, on low, wooden chairs, in front of an old, rickety table that held a small tray of kola nut and a bowl of alligator pepper which papa had offered you. You reverently dipped each kola nut into the bowl of alligator pepper before crushing them between your molars. It reminded me of a man who honoured the weight of traditional customs, except that this man, Papa, did not have eyes – like yours – the colour of crystals.

You winked at me as you cracked yet another kola, chomping ponderously on it, your temples throbbing in metrical harmony with your rigid jaws. I wanted to tell you how I didn't know you could mimic so perfectly one of those stiff-necked cows that chewed on anything green in Mazi Anyanwu's farm, but I smiled instead and watched the big bulb in your throat bounce as you swallowed in a gulp.

While you ate, we cracked silly jokes that bubbled our chests in amusement. Jokes that Papa could make nothing of, jokes formed out of our many secret adventures. It gladdened my heart to see you laugh, hear you laugh. How your happiness promised mine.

Afterwards, you and Papa were talking about some *omenala* with the cozy familiarity of old-time friends. The conversation which flourished in a thick, accented Igbo evolved around the sympathetic folklore of Osu and Nwadiala. Papa was explaining, with a hint of pride in his voice, how the Osu's were sacrificed and dedicated to deities in order to appease the gods. How, unlike us the Nwadiala's, they were sub-human....unclean....slaves....outcast. And how an association with them could result to all sort of misfortune. "An Nwadiala should have no business with an Osu," his croaky voice penetrated the walls.

I sensed a doleful change in your demeanour when papa asked, "*Nwa m, ebee ka i si?*" *Where are you from, my child?*

Seconds passed. Then you stuttered. Silence followed. And then Papa's voice, "Leave my compound." My world crumbled.

WHEN YOU LEFT, Papa asked me if you had touched me. I said yes, if he meant physical contacts and no, if he meant sex. The word 'sex' hung in the air between us; Papa and I never used such words.

Later, I would wish I allowed you into me that night when we met again, when our bodies tangled, we couldn't tell where mine stopped and yours started, when I buried my nostrils in the smell of you and let tears fall. Later, I would wish I eloped with you

into thin air in the deepest dark of the night with bountiful ripe udalas packed in the bottom of our bags. Later, my vision would blur behind a liquid wall each time this man, short and plump, pour watery, whitish fluid inside me after tiny, awkward minutes of the rubbery friction of skin against skin. I would name his first son after you, but it would still not be enough. Nothing would ever be.

Phillip Jay Marlin

Triple Threat

I'm looking for that baby rabbit
Saw him or her early on in the front yard
But I don't see it
Still it might be here

There was a scuttle at the intersection in the middle of the night
And the doors of the cathedral stood opened-wide
There was a crawling in the Aspen room
We've been waiting he said
But there was no we
The cable cars enacted a streetwise exclusion
Gather the papers and destroy them all

Homeless choristers escaped the long dull confusion
Call the victims of the uninsured
Here the squid comes out of the sea
I am putting on the captains vest
If you want to come bring your weapon
Thousands of integers were cast
The sighs from the tossed merchants arrive at last

Waterward

THE EGG OF TIME HASN'T fully hatched when I wake up. For some minutes, my body seems too small to contain me; so, I spill over myself uncontrollably. A strange reluctance to move wraps my ankles like an antelope snapped in a snare. I lie face up on the bamboo bed, awake but not active. Peering hard at the thatched roof, I try to listen to the whistle of the early morning zephyr. It sounds like a hunter's, calling his dog homeward. It also sounds more like the voice of the merchant ghosts returning hastily to their abode and telling one another ear to ear that it is dawn. The ghosts as many believe are of our ancestors who still come here in the dead of the night to buy and sell. I still remember the story told of Buja some years ago who saw a basket of yams and another one of dry fish in the open. He carried them away, unknown to him that they belonged to a ghost. And that's how he became a stranger in his own body.

I check my phone. It is 4:34 A.M. I'd wait a little longer, I say to myself. Again, my mind takes me far into the future. Old people think about their past, their memories. But boys of my age only think about the future; we daydream. My thinking grows so hard that I have to check my younger siblings on the other side if it hasn't woken them up. My 13-year-old twin brothers: the two philomels in this nest of ours. People who were floored by their musical talent would often call them P-Square. And there we have little Rose: mum's last card as we sometimes call her. She's got many appellations, though. She could be the tender flower smelling sweet to your nose and sitting soft on your palm now and within the two shakes of a lamb's tail, she has become a body of

tempest raging through the house with wicked noise and tears especially when she says she's hungry. We don't usually know when she's hungry until she tells us she is.

I'm the oldest and somehow my being the first child does make me reason and behave like a family man despite my young look and stature. Though I'm not certain about my age, I tell people that I'm 17. My mum told me that the day of my birth was a bad one she wouldn't want to always remember and so, she didn't write the date down. It was the day my father left and didn't return. But people had been making me wait for him to come back since I was a kid. When I was younger, they told me he travelled and would soon come back home, with many toys and biscuits. When I appeared to have become wiser, they hid his death inside a proverb: he's gone to the land of our forefathers. Until I learned of his death in the most painful way, I waited for him to return from that land. That day, the dark short boy that looked like a devil's footstool abused me and unexpectedly mentioned my fatherlessness. He said my father never saw my face. He said my birth was a bad omen. He said a prophecy had preceded my birth stating that my coming to earth was to chase my father out of it and cause melancholy. I wondered where this boy, younger than me, would've learned of these things. That day I cried a sea that drowned me.

I learned of my father's death in the most painful way. But I would still sit out in the evening sometimes waiting for him to come back. I would want to wait into the night whether his ghost would come to buy a basket of yams.

And the father of my younger siblings is still out there breathing. At least, the mails say he still breathes. But we're tired of waiting for him too. He would only come back home when the war is done in Somalia or when Uganda crisis is resolved or when the genocide in Rwanda dies down or when Boko Haram insurgency in the north stops. However, it always seems that the end of a war is the beginning of another. As a result, we could not go to school. Afterall, life is enough school.

“Jide, you're gradually becoming a man. I will help you into the military,” Rose's father once promised me.

He is a soldier of Igbo descent. But he loves calling me Babajide, the name mum confessed she unhappily christened me after my father who was a Yoruba. So, I don't like being called that. I would prefer Chidera. And I don't want to be a soldier either. I don't want to be waited for, for so long. I want to protect the people near me. So, boys like me only venture into bumping into people every day, hoping to bump into a helper. But when we find none, we'd gather in the evening recounting funny moments to make ourselves happy.

Before glancing at my phone again, I already know it's now time to set out. I grab my bag by the mouth. I could've smothered it if it were a human. Life has always taught me to hold tight whatever belongs to me or comes to me, or else it slips off and never comes back. So, I could even hold water till it becomes a sea without losing it. But not often with fish. I do fish to eke out a living for myself and my family. But fishing is more a luck business than skill. The last few days had been dry, indeed. On some days, I caught nothing. And when I luckily caught one or two, the fish would have been half-eaten by bigger fish; its flesh would have been ripped out to the bone. Only its head would remain, stuck at the mouth with my bait. And sometimes, I would lose everything, line, hook and sinker. Whether they caught fish and got stolen, I don't know.

Recently, I got some meshes to knot into gillnets for rivers and handnets for creeks. Last night, I set them in strategic spots. I know catfish like clear warm baths at night. They will even sometimes swim ashore. Salmon like it cold, though. And I know when and how to dig out mudfish.

I'm about to step out when I remember I haven't done my morning prayer ritual. I say some few words of prayers about harvesting the biggest and plentiful number of fish today in the whole of this Erémi. I say, "As I go out looking for what we can eat, may I not meet what will eat me. May the sun rise and dry our dreams, so we can wear them like the most fashionable cloth. May today bring laughter, good news and strength. Amen!"

I return in the evening. I have so mastered the art of struggling that I would not eat until I have made some money or caught some fish that would cater to my family. So, like today, I only ate once. Two balls of akara which go for ₦50, and a loaf of bread sliced in the quarter for ₦100. I could not sell fish today because I caught just three. But I carried a load for a woman in the marketplace today. It fetched me ₦500. When I try to murmur something against God, mum would scold me.

“Stop that, already! That doesn't mean God doesn't answer prayers. In everything, always give thanks.”

That's how we behave as if everything's fine: always thanking God. And later we bless the dinner of freshwater fish, eat and talk and laugh thereafter as if everything's fine. But tonight, I've got some serious news.

And I break it. “I got a job offer today.” Emeka, one of the twins, whistles a wow.

“Tell us more,” the other cuts in.

Mum is not looking indifferent also. But all this while, Rose has dozed off. I was told how she played throughout the day. Having grown weak, she now sleeps on the bed with her legs and hands scattered everywhere.

“You know Adex?” I ask. Adex is my friend; though, older than me. “He feeds well, feeds his family well, wears Gucci clothes, sends two of his younger siblings to school and he's not an OG.

“He introduced me to his boss today. One middle-aged man looking nice. He has three big fishing boats and does fishing on a large scale. Do you know how much Adex is being paid weekly for working for him?

“₦10,000!”

“Wow!” Someone between Emeka and Ebuka exclaims again.

“Yes, ₦10,000,” I repeat.

“So, what did the man say?” Mum asks.

“He said I could come and work with him on one of the boats in the deep if I'm ready.”

“That is in Ìgbèkùn?”

“Yes, in Ìgbèkùn.”

I see mum looking sceptical about it. She's always that way when she has to choose between two of her decisions.

“Ok,” she finally answers.

Her okay is all the green light I need. Of course, some pieces of advice follow.

And I would wake in the next morning to start my new job. I don't have to make vain fantasies about my daily endeavours anymore. Now that every Saturday would be a Christmas day, whether or not a single fish is caught notwithstanding. But I've not yet had a demo of what and how the work really goes.

According to Adex, I would just only take today to observe how fishing on a big boat is done. It's not actually easy fishing on the sea. Plus, the fact that we have to toil in the night.

During the day while we were unknitting the entangled nets and picking out materials that had stuck to the nets, Adex mentioned something about Imalòkùn, spirit of the sea. He told some fascinating stories.

“And she appeared!” He had said, with a note of exaggeration that was too obvious in the air like the smell of a dead fish. “A hill of water bobbed up before us and formed into the shape of a beautiful damsel.”

I hummed shortly and asked, “How did you know she's beautiful?”

“See...” I knew he was going to drop another bombshell. “Goddesses and female spirits are actually very beautiful beings. Besides, any water creature is always beautiful. Even Mammy-Wota. We've come across them once or twice.” He said the last statement with the pride of someone who really had seen a lot of life.

“Ehnnnn, really?”

“Yes. They always move in company. We met three of them one day, swimming so fast in front of our boat. They are very beautiful. Light-skinned. Long hair. But tailed.”

I don't know what to call these stories. Fairy tales or true-life stories? I sha know I've got something to tell my siblings, I'd thought.

Of course, Adex didn't stop there. He talked about their challenges at the sea sometimes. How they once experienced some large leakage that almost caused their boat to sink. How they once faced the tempest which he called the other side of Imalòkun. How their boat ran faulty at the sea amid darkness. But in all these stories, Adex always painted himself as a hero. He either swam to the seashore with another person he saved or without an injury at all.

While Adex wanted me to appraise his told bravery, he only terrified me more about the sea experiences. But I do remember that I am about to do what I want to do because of my family.

IT'S NOW SEVEN DAYS. Other bodies have been found. The only survivor still is Adex. When asked, he'd say, “I saw him. I wanted to carry him to the shore. But during the turbulent wave, I saw another creature that took him away with speed.”

Whether this is some fairytale or true-life story, no one knows.

But almost half of the town now knows the sound of Rose's mother's tears. In the middle of the night when everywhere is cool and quiet, she would give a very shrill cry. In the dawn, she'd cry again, so long to make his son hear from everywhere he might be. This she did every day until the seventh day, without eating, without drinking and without leaving the same spot.

“If only tears could bring back the dead,” someone had said, shaking his head pitifully.

“The woman has lost her mind,” another one posited.

“What else does death bring other than grief and madness,” a man would always ask with sympathy.

“She said she's still waiting for her son and until then, she would not know the taste of food nor that of water,” a lady broadcast.

“A living waiting for the dead?” That was the question.

“But his body is not yet found. Ade said he was dragged into the belly of the sea by Imalòkun.”

“Ade might have lost his mind in the sea also.”

“Ah! Babajide!” A young woman exclaimed, stressing the *de* in Babajide. She added with a very sorry hiss, “And he was a young handsome hard-working boy with a bright future. What a loss.”

William Torphy

The Poacher

MIRANDA WALKED THREE MILES to take the van into Kumba. She brought Edosio’s favourite foods, *fufu* and *jollof* rice, and a blanket to protect him against the cold in his cell.

She had nearly decided against going. “Let him sit in prison for a while,” she told her two daughters. “Maybe that will put some sense into him.” But motherly love compelled her to make the trip. Once he was released, he would feel contrite for deserting them, and return home.

Her husband had started working in the oil fields eighteen years ago, the same year she gave birth to a son. He had wanted to name the boy Kwento, “one who protects the family’s name from destruction.” But just before taking to her bed, Miranda heard the cries of birds announcing rain, and in those short moments of silence between her birthing screams, she heard heavy drops pelting the tin roof like bullets. When her struggle was over, and the midwife held up the bloody, wriggling infant for her to see, she shivered from a sudden chill in the air. Possessed by a sobering premonition, she decided to name the boy Edosio, for “rainy day.” She took him into her arms, and he began to wail, unleashing a torrent of tears, as if confirming that he was indeed destined to give her grief.

As an infant, the boy’s quiet temperament seemed to refute her foreboding. He lay stock still in the woven straw basket, his black eyes alert to everything around him—his two sisters playing games with river stones, his mother sweeping the dirt floor and

preparing maize and cassava for sangha, a stranger smelling of sweat appearing periodically to stroke his cheeks and eat copious amounts of food before departing again.

But as soon as Edosio was able to crawl from the basket, he would disappear, sending Miranda frantically searching outside the hut, where she would find him chewing on roots or crawling toward the neighbour's goats. No sooner had he begun to walk than he ventured deep into the forest, forcing her to drag him back from the dense undergrowth.

"He will either be an explorer or a deserter," she thought, shaking her head. At least her two younger daughters were content to remain within eyesight.

At sixteen, Edosio was a handsome young man, and tall for a Bassa. Girls from the village passed the field he tended with his mother, shooting him sideward glances as he paused from his work to rub sweat from his bare chest. Miranda reprimanded the girls for their audacity, but she also knew that marriage might keep her roving son from leaving the village.

She discovered that her husband had died in an oil rig accident the day a company representative appeared at her door, extending corporate condolences and handing her an envelope stuffed with CFA francs equivalent to two month's salary. After grieving for the appointed amount of time, she told Edosio, "You are the man of the family now and must take care of us." Her desire to see him married was realized when one of the village girls he idled with became pregnant. She sent for her brother-in-law, who travelled from the capital to negotiate with the girl's father and arrange a date for the wedding.

But even as preparations were being made, Miranda recognized the faraway look in Edosio's eyes. One evening, after slurping down his ecru soup, he announced, "I'm joining the army to fight the Boko Haram."

She felt her face growing hot. "No, you must get married, or you will shame us!"

He didn't argue but was gone the next day. She grew panic-stricken. "Those gangsters are terrorizing and murdering people in the north. He'll be killed."

A letter arrived weeks later: “*Dear Mere, I’m working at Waza National Park as a ranger protecting the elephants and other animals here. I’ll send money to help with expenses soon.*”

At least he wasn’t fighting those crazy bandits. Still, Waza was very far from home. Although she wasn’t a particularly religious person, Miranda offered up a prayer for Edosio’s protection and safe return.

Now, months later, she waited apprehensively in front of Kumba’s Central Prison clutching the blanket and a package of food wrapped in newspaper. A dozen other women cradling bundles and wearing their best *kabas* stood in line with her. Two men in khaki uniforms kept order at the visitors’ entrance. The police here were said to be brutal, and conditions at the prison were terrible. Whatever he may have done, Edosio surely didn’t deserve this.

Inside the prison, a man eating his lunch glanced up from his desk and glared at her dismissively.

She mustered her courage. “I’m here to see my son.”

“What’s his name?” demanded the officer, chewing fufu.

His contemptuous manner made her shrink inwardly. “Edosio Moussa.”

He typed on a keyboard with greasy fingers. “Yes, I see. Your son has been arrested for poaching.”

“That can’t be correct,” objected Miranda. “He was working at Waza Park as a ranger.”

The man shrugged and pointed toward a metal door. A guard who looked even younger than Edosio snatched her packet away and tore it open to search, and then led her through a long, evil-smelling hallway that echoed with the shouts and tumult from prisoners. It was like being trapped inside a *jembe* drum, she thought, and resolved she would do everything in her power to get her son released.

She waited in a windowless room with other women at a long wooden table etched with the names of past prisoners and visitors. A door clanged open to reveal a ragtag line of prisoners. Her heart broke to see how thin Edosio appeared. His hair fell

in unkempt coils over his haggard face, and a deep gash creased above one eye. He limped toward her, avoiding her eyes as he slunk into the chair across from her.

Miranda grasped his hands tightly. “My son, I don’t understand. Why are you here?”

He peered at her with blinking, red-veined eyes. “We were supposed to meet buyers at the river,” he mumbled, “but instead, the park rangers and police were waiting for us.”

“What are you saying? Are you not a ranger too?”

He laughed bitterly. “I told you that story so you wouldn’t worry about me. No, Mere, I joined a group who tracked elephants. We took their tusks and sold them.”

Comprehension sluiced through her. She had seen photos of poachers shooting drugs or bullets into elephants’ thick hides and waiting for their victims to fall senseless to the ground. They used axes and saws to hack away at the great mammals’ flesh and then carried their bloody tusks away, leaving their victims to die.

She thought back to her childhood when she sat on her grandfather’s lap and listened to his stories about Cameroon’s magnificent wildlife.

“Elephants are the noblest beasts of the savannas,” he would declare, stroking her cheeks. “They are intelligent and patient. They respect their community and always protect the weakest ones.”

Miranda released her grasp on Edosio’s bony hands. “Have you no remorse for what you did? Have I not taught you anything?”

He grew suddenly defiant. “There were no jobs for me, Mere. I had no money. If we had been more careful, the rangers wouldn’t have caught us.”

Oh, my son is lost, she despaired. I should have used the *molongo* cane on him more often, but that’s supposed to be for a father to do. She pushed the food packet and blanket across the table. “These are for you. I’ll come again for your trial. May God protect you.”

She kissed him on the cheek just before a guard took him away.

On the way home, she stared numbly out at the rain lashing the van's windows, and recalled the day she gave birth to her son. As she feared then, Edosio had rained on everything.

Gazing at the dense growth lining the road, she was startled to see a figure appear in the liquid atmosphere. He was dressed entirely in white, his shirt spattered red with blood.

She closed her eyes to make the vision disappear. And when she opened them, her son's spirit had dissolved into the dripping emerald depths of the forest.

John Brantingham

Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War: This Is Bad*

My dead stand just behind me, muttering
their anxieties, their anger. They do not
like to see a monk run through the gut
with this officer's sword, his men enjoying
the show. My dead grumble and half wish
I'd move to the next print, but when I turn
to go, I feel a hand on my shoulder,
and a voice tells me to stay and watch.
My dead tell me not to blink. They tell me
that this image is hopeful, it readies
me for the war that's coming, that war
always is, but in the courage to look, we
learn how to fight back against cruelty.
My dead tell me my duty is not to despair

Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War: This is How it Happened*

Goya and I stand before his artwork,
a print of a monk killed in his church. Soldiers
loot sacred objects to bring back somewhere
in France so that friends and neighbors will think
of them as true believers, devoted
and pious. “This is how it happened,” he says,
and I say, “Yes, I’m sure, but the way
you open me to horror is repellent.”
He thinks and nods and agrees, “Yes, war
is savage, and seeing it is savage
and being made to think about what we
do is savage, and you can try to ignore
that we are savages, but that damages
you even more. It allows more cruelty.”

Viktor Frankl is there with us as well.
He will always be there when you need him,
and he says that even here, even in times
of incomprehensible evil,
life demands us to find meaning. Goya nods
thoughtfully, and Frankl says, “Do not turn away,
but don’t wallow. Armies always
believe they are above the laws of their gods.”
Frankl says that the problem is not artists
exposing evil but Napoleonic
tantrums that turn nations into killing
fields. Frankl says that the bizarre twisted
men who stomp on us must not be allowed to sink
us into hopelessness and unfeeling.

“Suffering ceases to be suffering,”
Frankl says, “when it finds meaning.” And he
says, “Goya used art to find his meaning.”

“Which is not to say,” (Frankl is pointing
at Goya’s print), “That we can ignore this.”
This moment for the monk was pointless suffering,

but if we collapse at the sight of killing,
we have lost the will to go on.
Goya used art to find his meaning,

not to ease the pain of the people dying
because of Bonaparte’s war. So his
Suffering ceased to be suffering,

the moment he decided to use his drawing
make sure that we could see this perversity.
“Goya used art to find his meaning,”

And life asks you to spend your time making
sense of whatever this cruelty signifies to you.
Suffering ceased to be suffering,
when Goya used art to find his meaning.”

Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War: This Is No Less Curious*

These soldiers (who are likely religious)
loot treasures they must believe sacred.
Or maybe they once thought that before they shed
the blood of children in rampages
across Europe, before rape complicated
their self-image, before murder, before they
forced families into lives of endless poverty.
After that, what could ever seem consecrated?
Goya's work shocks but doesn't always surprise.
Once a man feels that he is doomed to hell
why should he stop himself from stealing
a statue? And an army of conquest relies
on its soldiers' self-loathing. It must be built
permanently in them, just part of the training.

Stephen Wunderli

The Last, Good Cowboy

AFTER BRUCE DERN KILLED JOHN WAYNE, there was only one good cowboy left: Raymond. He lived with his grandmother three houses from me on the same row in Gary, Indiana. Raymond wore a cowboy hat made in China and he was deadly with a slingshot. We hunted mice behind the Jewish bakery where some of the kids called Mr. Goldstein a coward for not killing any Nazis like Americans did in the movies. The bakery survived the migration of Jews from Gary to Munster so rats, fat on mouldy bread, were ours to kill, splattering their guts against the wall. Nobody asked Raymond what happened to his parents or why his grandmother didn't come out of the house. The summer after we were done with elementary school, he knocked on my door every morning wearing that hat. "We're burning daylight Chucky," he'd say. My mother was still sleeping from working the night shift so off we went.

We walked with our eyes down, looking for round pebbles or the rarest ammunition, a stray marble. Perfect rat killer. Mr. Goldstein gave us a nickel for each dead rodent, and we bought hand-sized cakes with our bounty. The garbage was set on a table so the rats would gather underneath trying to climb up; easy to pick them off one by one. The only thing Raymond told me about his grandmother is that she would not allow him to watch war shows. So, he watched the Rifleman with Chuck Connors and became the lone cowboy in the neighbourhood.

The houses were squeezed up against each other, a fort of warped clapboard with balustrade gun nests and thorny hedgerows between buildings. We would move past those boundaries, step past the gates of safety and see the range that spread beyond

the school at the edge of the block. "There's a pool hall on main street," Raymond said. "Probably have rats there too."

"Mr. Goldstein won't pay us for pool hall rats."

"Somebody will. Maybe pay us for their hides."

"I don't know," I said, which meant I was afraid. I was coming off a bad year.

"It'll come back to you," Raymond said.

"I hope so."

The first Saturday of the summer we were confined to our street and the cut-through that led to the bakery. This was kept real by the threat that my mother would send me to live with my dad if I was any trouble. The plots of grass the size of a sedans in front of the houses had baked solid. The heat bounced off everything, the street, the sidewalk, the porches losing the fight.

"Wish you had a cowboy hat in this heat, don't you Chucky boy?"

"The Cubs would lose if I changed hats."

"The Cubs lose anyway."

"I still don't want to be a cowboy."

We were sitting shirtless under a half-dead tree in a lot where a house used to be but was toppled over. Nothing new was built on our street. Old stuff just fell down. We made targets out of bits of glass and if we were lucky, we'd find a lightbulb or a fist-sized piece of ceramic to shoot at. We made rules. The targets were set out in the pile of rubble. We would agree on which one to shoot at first. Whoever hit it named the next target. Pebbles whistled through air that smelled like iron dust.

Crash.

"Tie."

"I think it was mine that hit first."

"It was a tie; you know what happens next."

I did know, but I didn't like it. Raymond walked slowly to one corner of the lot. I walked to the other. I loaded a pebble. Raymond loaded a pebble and squinted at me.

We knew that in this gunfight, we'd both be going for flesh. It was cowardly to stand sideways. You stood facing each other, legs apart, bare feet planted firmly in the gravel. Skinny torsos breathing uneasily. Raymond counted down.

3, 2, 1. Fire!

Whzzzzzz

I spun dramatically and dropped to my knees, clutching my chest.

Raymond was laughing hysterically. He ran across the garbage strewn lot and stood above me. "Show me where I hit you! Come on, show me the wound!"

"You know where you hit me."

"Say it, say I'm the best shot in the West. Say it."

"You're the best shot in the West."

"Show me the mark!"

I sat up slowly and lowered my hand. My nipple was bleeding. Beyond him, hanging in the dead tree was an old tire swing where children used to play before the white flight. We were lone survivors, the stragglers. My father left first. My older brother left too, joined the army. My mother couldn't afford to leave. It was me and her and Raymond and his grandmother kicking against the current of hunger and want and the advertisements that promised the good life of the suburbs.

"Show me where I hit you."

"You missed, pilgrim. By a mile."

I looked to the side and pretended to see something. "It's Mr. Goldstein," I whispered.

Raymond put his slingshot down and turned around. I loaded quickly and drew back.

Raymond didn't have to turn around. He knew everything. "You draw on me you better shoot."

I held tight, thumb knuckle against my cheek until my elbow started shaking.

"I'm turning around in 3, 2, 1."

I eased up on the draw and let the pebble fall into my hand.

“Why didn’t you shoot me when you had the chance?”

“I don’t know, I couldn’t.”

“But you should have. I deserved it. You should have.”

Raymond walked away from me. I got the dizzy spells again, the kind that make you shake at first like your body temperature just changed and then my head got light, and my eyes teared up like they’d been scratched by sand. Raymond put his hand on my shoulder. He knew everything.

We suffered together. On Thursday nights we had soup in the alley behind my house. Our groceries would be gone by then. Mother wouldn’t get paid until Friday. Raymond would walk down the alley with two mugs of broth boiled out of chicken bones. It was Raymond and the small cakes from Mr. Goldstein that kept me alive that summer.

We started wandering a little farther from home, like we were expanding our territory, moving a block this way, another block that way, seeing things we had never seen before. Houses like ours with only patches of paint left, but different in little ways that make you wonder about the people inside them. Things like boots by the screen door and rags hung over the railing and not on a line out back. Habits of folks do not like us. We walked slow seeing everything, a ceramic cat in a window, a turquoise curtain. A bathroom rug on the sidewalk left to dry after being hosed off. A yellow dog that looked dead. We were walking into time, backwards and forwards in the same footsteps. Nothing is frozen in time like they say. It’s all motion, careening toward something new or lost or disappointing.

Where the row houses ended there was the pool hall. We knew this because Raymond’s grandmother told us to stay away. “Let’s just look for some bottles,” Raymond said. So, we went out behind the alley and came upon the back of the pool hall from a safe distance. We should go back,” I said. “I hate my dad.”

“One minute.”

That's where we saw three black kids wiping down a black Cadillac with blue towels. They looked at us and shook their pockets full of nickels. All those nickels and we didn't have any. We were down to shooting maybe two rats a week. I'd like to have popped one of those grins with a pebble and ambushed a couple kids. But we knew better. "Get back to work!" Raymond yelled at them. They just smiled and shook their pockets full of money. Raymond pounded on his bare chest with his fist. The kids just laughed. One of them started kicking around in the gravel for a stone to throw at us. They faked a charge, and I backed up, but not Raymond.

"Hahaha! You ran chicken boys. You ran!"

The boy who had been looking for a rock faked a throw and I ducked. They laughed harder. Raymond stood his ground. "We're not afraid!"

Before the boys could laugh again, the back door to the pool hall was kicked open and the tallest black man I had ever seen walked out in a hurry. He was wearing pressed shirt and clean slacks. The look on his face was angry. He walked up to the boy who was taunting us and cuffed him straight across the face, right to the ground. The other boys froze. "I ain't paying you all to kick up dust around my car!" The boy's nose was bleeding. The man pushed him to the ground before he could get full up. Then he grabbed him by the ankles and shook the nickels out of him. He dropped him square on his head. "Pick up them nickels and hand 'em to me!" The boy followed orders, scrambling around in the gravel, picking up nickels and wiping each one off before handing it to the man. "And you all, empty your pockets right here." He was holding out his large hand with the palm face up. His fingers were long and thick. He was wearing a gold watch. The boys did as they were told and when the man had his pockets full of nickels, he swung open the wide door to his black Cadillac and climbed in. The engine turned over and thundered. The boys all ran off, except for the one with the bloody nose. He just stood there letting his nose drip onto his shirt while the Caddy roared away, kicking up dust and spraying gravel on the boy.

I turned to walk away.

“No,” Raymond said. He walked over to the boy.

“What do you want?” The boy asked.

“I just never seen a man hit a boy like that.”

“You never knew my dad,” I said. I had followed him like I always did. Thick and thin we were together.

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

“You could come with us,” Raymond said.

The boy shook his head. “Wouldn’t matter.”

“We’re gonna find us some bottles and trade them in for nickels.”

The boy looked at me. “You know what it’s like to be afraid.”

I nodded my head. I had to. He’d seen me duck and run. “What’s your name?”

“Darius.”

“OK Darius,” Raymond said. “Maybe we can help you get some nickels.”

Darius wiped his nose with his hand and rubbed the blood onto his pants.

We checked the laundromat for loose change and found two nickels under a washing machine we had to fish out with a rolled-up newspaper. “That’s a start,” Raymond said, giving the nickels to Darius. We worked our way out behind the brick buildings where the businesses were, where I was only allowed to go with my mother. We’d seen a lot of range by then that we hadn’t seen alone before. “We should be going.”

“Your mother isn’t even awake yet.”

“It’s easier wiping down Mr. Big’s car than hunting for bottles,” Darius said.

“And how many nickels do you have from that?”

“I would have all of them if you hadn’t come along.”

“I think our new friend could show a little gratitude, don’t you Chucky?”

“He’s still hurting, that’s all.”

Raymond nodded. We shuffled along with our eyes searching dry grass bristling fence posts and shadows behind garbage cans. I lifted a lid and held my nose. “Rat!”

Darius stepped back a few paces. Raymond quickly drew his slingshot. I held the lid open for him to see. Whzzzz. The pebble flew by my ear and pegged the rat broadside. It squealed for a bit and wriggled before going lifeless. Raymond scooped the rat out of the can with his slingshot and tossed it in the dust. He stepped on its head to make sure it was dead. “That’s one more nickel. We’ll split the bounty on this one.”

“What’s he mean?”

“He means we get paid for killing rats. We’re like bounty hunters.”

“Grab that vodka bottle in the can Chucky. It’s a perfect target.”

Nobody pays for empty liquor bottles.

Raymond casually picked up the dead rat by the tail and we climbed a low fence and edged our way between two houses keeping our heads down so as not to be seen. We crossed the hot street and stood in the lot like it was our ranch.

“We should collect our bounty now, don’t you think?”

“Let’s show Darius some shooting skills first, then maybe he’ll want to join up with us.”

Raymond took the pint bottle from me. “This needs to be a long-range target. The kind you wet your sights for and test the wind.”

“Fine.”

Raymond stacked several bricks to the height of a dog and stood the Vodka bottle on top, and just to make it more of a challenge, he turned it sideways. He trudged across the lot and walked right by me, all the way across the street to Mr. Dramond’s rose bushes. They needed trimming but that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. Mr. Dramond was mostly blind and had to feel his way to prune things in his yard. That meant getting stuck with thorns, so he didn’t do it but once a year. Raymond pulled his cowboy hat off and wiped his sweaty head with his forearm. “We’ll shoot from here.”

Me and Darius walked across the street. I showed him how to hold a sling shot.

“I know how to use it.”

We stood behind the briar defilade squinting at the target, sizing up the distance. There was no wind.

“You go first Chucky boy, a shot across the street to test the distance.”

I loaded up my slingshot with a pebble from my pocket, drew back and fired. The pebble kicked dust three steps in front of the stack of bricks.

“Was that a full pull?”

“Yep. But too flat.”

“OK, Darius. Show us what you got.”

Darius took my slingshot, and I handed him a pebble. He pulled it back and fired. We didn't see where the pebble struck.

“Too high,” Raymond said. “My turn to show you greenhorns how to shoot.”

That's when we saw the black Cadillac drive up the side of the lot, away from us. The chrome trim around the rear window reflecting the sun in sharp beams.

Raymond pulled his slingshot all the way back to his chin, tilted upward, pivoted toward the car and fired. I kept my eyes fixed hard on the rear window praying to God that nothing would happen. Without hardly a sound the rear window cracked into a spiderweb. The Caddy screeched to a stop. The tall man stepped out of the driver's seat and slammed the door shut. He circled the car, looked up at the rooftops of the houses that butted up to the curb.

Raymond yanked me by the arm, and I fell to the ground. Darius was already on his belly. “We dead now.” We army crawled to the edge of the house and watched from our bellies as the man stomped around, walking up each driveway, looking up into trees. He yelled at an old woman; we heard him from where we were hiding. “Did you see that?! Did you see anything?!” The way he yelled reminded me of my father the day he left. He slapped my mother hard across the face then bent down to put his face in front of mine. I was pushing myself into the corner, making myself small, holding my knees in a position of submission. “You didn't see anything,” he said with that thickness in his voice that comes from years of drinking. “Did you?!” I hid my head in my arms.

“It’s OK,” Raymond whispered. “He’s gone.”

“I’m staying here for a while.”

“OK, we can sit a bit. Whenever you’re ready.”

The day was still, but my head buzzed with the kind of static you feel after being slapped. I could hear dry grass breaking underneath me as I shifted my weight.

“What’s he doing?” Darius asked.

“Shhh. It’s just his way.”

I breathed in deep, the way my mother taught me. It took some time, but I finally lifted my head. The thorny hedge of rose bushes was still there. So was the lot across the street. And the bottle on top of the bricks.

“OK?”

“OK.”

“Let’s get you some water.”

We walked down the street to Raymond’s house, the rat swinging loosely from Raymond’s hand. He dropped the rat next to the house where the spigot was and turned on the water. The pipes groaned and we waited for the first bit of water to wash the rust out before taking a drink. The brown water washed over my hands. When it was clear I cupped and drank. Raymond went next, then Darius. The water splashed at our feet and speckled our legs. The screen door squeaked open.

“Vat you doing?”

“Getting a drink oma. We’re thirsty.”

“OK, den. I didn’t know it was you.”

This was the closest I had ever been to Raymond’s grandmother. I had only heard her speak from a distance when Raymond was young. Her accent was strange, German for sure, but she spoke softer than Mr. Goldstein. There was no harshness in the way she said words. She was standing on the porch just above me, holding the door open. Her face was pale and sweaty. Her hair pulled back under a faded piece of cloth that was tied behind her head. Her house dress was stained on the front, and she was

barefoot. Her bare forearm held the door open, and I could see ink there, a word, no, numbers tattooed on the inside. She saw me looking at it and quickly pulled away, letting the door slam.

Raymond glared at me. "Don't do that again."

"What?"

"You know what."

The three of us walked off the small yard and into the street. It was afternoon and getting even hotter, we hurried across the asphalt onto the dry grass that was only alive half the year.

"Your turn to carry the rat," Raymond said, tossing the carcass to me. I caught it and got blood on my hands. I looked at Raymond letting him know I didn't mind the blood. I held it like an apple for a bit before grabbing the tail and swinging it like a scalp. We rounded the corner and were about to call for Mr. Goldstein from the sidewalk because he doesn't allow dead rats in his bakery when the black Cadillac pulled up. The tall black man pushed open the door, unfolded his legs and climbed out. "Well, if it ain't the little rascals." He laughed out loud and eased his car door shut. "Hope you learned your lesson, boy," he said to Darius.

"Yes sir."

I tossed the rat under the front fender of the Caddy so he wouldn't see it. He stepped toward us and squatted down. His whole face smelled of cigarettes. "You kids looking to earn some money?"

"We don't wash cars," Raymond said.

"No, no," the man said, trying to be kind. "I got ten dollars here for the boy who finds out who broke my back windshield." He stood up. "Come here, come look." We followed him around to the back where he opened his large palm and rested it on the glass. "You see here, busted. Take somebody big enough to throw a rock hard, or a baseball. I'm thinking a teenager or a man. Maybe somebody I beat fair and square at billiards, maybe just somebody who don't like me taking his girl dinner on a Friday

afternoon for some fun. Nothin' in that, huh?" He laughed again. "You boys is small, but you got big ears." He pulled out a wad of cash from his front pocket and peeled off a ten-dollar bill. "See this here ten dollars. It's yours if you do a little snooping around, you got that. Just listen up and next time you see me. point me in the right direction and the money is yours. Think about all that soda pop..."

Raymond looked at Darius. He was staring down at his bare feet, his black legs still speckled from the splashed water. Blood drips among the stains on his shirt. We kept our backs to the store to hide the slingshots in our back pockets. There was no place to run. We knew Mr. Goldstein wouldn't protect us. It would be our payment from God to be beaten for our crimes. I looked at the man. He brushed a bead of sweat from his forehead.

Darius lifted his head. There was still dried blood smudged across his cheek, just under his eye. He looked over at me, his eyes opening and closing slowly with each breath.

"You took his money. We saw you," I said to the man. "How we know you won't take it back like you did his?"

The man clenched his jaw and bent down to face me. His wide shoulders drew back as he inhaled. He was the biggest man I had ever seen. He breathed on me like he could blow me over. "Listen here. You nothing but a poor boy, born in the dirt where you belong." He lifted his large hand and wrapped it around my neck. I was too scared to move. "I could squeeze you right now and your head would pop off." I felt his hand tighten.

"Give him back his nickels and we'll keep an eye out," I said, not knowing where it came from. I didn't care if he killed me then. I didn't care about anything but not being afraid. He loosened his hand and started laughing again.

"You got some spunk poor boy," he said.

He stepped back, opened the door and fished a nickel out of the ashtray and flipped it to Darius. “You’ll get the rest and the ten when you bring me some news I can use.”

He shut the door again, this time not so soft, and strode into the bakery. “Now to get something special for my lady friend.”

The bell above the door rang.

“Let’s go!” Darius whispered harshly.

Raymond stepped back and sat with his shoulders against the store. “Wait til he leaves. I haven’t eaten all day.” Darius joined him and kept his head down. I stood looking in the store. The tall black man was pointing to a fancy cake behind the counter. I turned quickly and grabbed the rat, crawled beside the Caddy, opened the door and stuffed the rat under the driver’s seat. I let the door shut soft, barely making a sound.

I crawled back and sat between Darius and Raymond. We scraped our calloused heels on the sidewalk and waited. The tall black man pushed open the door carrying a white box tied with a string. The bell rang as the door swung back and forth. He paused for a moment and looked at the three dust-covered boys, one wearing a costume cowboy hat, one black as he was with ashen skin and dirt on the top of his head from being dropped, and me with hair the color of burnt grass escaping from my older brother’s cap. I looked up at the man. He had a scar that coursed his forehead like an eyebrow and another across the bridge of his nose; red veins in his eyes started in the corners and split up to cover the white. He reached into his pocket and pulled the ten-dollar bill out again and held it against by mouth as if he was going to suffocate me with it. “Smell that money, boy. Smell it good. Now go after it. Go, go!” I just stared at him, my bare feet inches from his black shoes with heels that could crush my toes. He pulled the bill away laughing and put it back in his pocket. “You are just a no-good dog.” I watched him climb into his car. The Caddy roared to life, a spaceship that could take him far from our world. “Lazy, that’s all you boys are. Lazy!” he shouted at us. The sleek, black machine edged into traffic and rumbled away.

I stood up then, set my eyes on the horizon for a moment like I was looking over the range, satisfied. “Let’s go,” I said. “We got three nickels worth spending.”

We sat that afternoon in the shade of Mr. Goldstein’s store, slowly eating small cakes a crumb at a time, smiling at each other. From the pool hall to the bakery to the lot where an empty hip bottle would soon be shattered as a warning. This was our town.

Benjamin Cyril Arthur

Sunset and Boundaries

AS MY HEART SLOWED DOWN, so did the anxiety, I could finally hear the winds whistling through the windows as we drove out of the neighbourhood.

We Passed the same faces we saw every day, the same houses and I alternated between fearing that Derrick would stop driving and want to go home or that his car would stop.

“How are you feeling now?” he asked. His voice was raspy like he had a throatful of roses. He had this nasty habit of occasionally inhaling in the middle of a sentence, wavering, like each word might be the last one he pronounced.

“Okay, I guess.” I calmly replied. “I still can't believe your dad gave you this car.”

“Yeah, she's a beauty, isn't she?”

I pulled on my seat belt, trying to lock myself in, but the entire belt fell out onto my hands. “She's older than us, Derrick,” I said to him while laughing. “If I die in this death trap you call a car, I will hunt you till the end of time.”

“Relax, you're sitting beside a professional driver,” he replied, smiling.

We drove over a pothole and the old clunker rattled and shook as it coughed up gray smoke from its exhaust pipe. The road was terrible, to begin with, and got worse the further we drove. The street, just like the others all over Accra, was littered. Not with garbage, but with potholes and bumps. Other parts of the road had been dug up two years ago for laying pipelines and since have been left unattended to. The workers tried covering parts of the road with sand and mud but only one spell of rain was enough to

wash away the mud leaving a big hole that ran along the side of the road that did no good to cars especially an old car that was barely alive.

The car was the definition of barely holding on to life. The paint job, an even coat of rust over the old white paint that now looked gray, stood out among the cars that were on the street. The seats, I came to find out, were totally adjustable. In fact, they were removable, if not for some old screws that held them down loosely.

“You still haven't told me what happened,” Derrick said. He took a quick glance at me, then turned back to the road.

“I'm fine; I don't want to talk about it now. Maybe later.”

His phone beeped and a WhatsApp message appeared on the brightly lit screen of his iPhone. It was from Maeve. Sleep tight. was written beautifully on the screen under her name.

“Who's that?” he asked me.

“Maeve,” I replied. “She said you should sleep tight, like really sleep tight.” I blew him a kiss and winked at him, which made him burst into laughter.

“She likes you, you know,” I continued.

“How do you know?”

“The eyes Derrick, they never lie.”

“Her eyes?”

“Yes, her eyes. She looks at you like you're the most important thing on earth, you know, like how I look at waakye.”

“You love waakye,”

“I love waakye,” I replied, smiling.

“What if she doesn't like me? What if she likes you but is using me to get to you.”

“That's not true, and even if it is true, I can't accept her feelings. I don't want to fall in love.”

“Why, is it because of...”

“I don't know, maybe. The truth is, I fear loving someone or even planning a future with another person. That thought terrifies me, you know, loving someone is a big deal, and it comes with a risk. Opening up and being vulnerable to another soul who isn't your parent. What if they stop loving you and leave you when you need them the most? I don't think I can go through that kind of pain.”

“You always say this but last week when we were watching Heartstopper you were crying. And if I remember correctly what you said is this is the kind of love I want and need.” He scrunched up his face mockingly and I laughed.

“Well, it is the kind of love I want but it's hard to find and it's scary. I can't take that risk with my fragile heart.”

“But that's life. If you don't take risks, you won't evolve. Do you want to die alone?”

“I won't. If it gets too hard, I'll just move into your house.”

“who's house?” Derrick asked amid laughter.

“You and Maeve,” I replied.

“She doesn't like me like that Ben. And even if she does, she doesn't like the real me. she likes the idea of having me as a boyfriend; she likes the side of me she sees when I'm outside. I doubt she would like the boy who's sometimes depressed and anxious. The one only you know.”

“You'd never know unless you open up and talk to her.”

I would never know unless you open up and talk to me.” he raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“Touché,” I smiled.

“You don't have to be strong all the time,” he continued.

“I'm not strong. Look at my potbelly and look at your six packs,” I said, poking his ribs.” Who's the strong one.”

“That's not what I...”

“I know what you mean.” I quickly interjected.

We drove silently for a while, both of us deep in thought. I lowered the glass and placed my head on the door and just stared at the night sky that lay in front of us. There were no stars, the curse of living in a city. Nature shuns away from anything man-made. I don't remember the last time I saw a star in the night sky. The moon was out, though, playing hide and seek with the dark clouds that hung solemnly over us.

“You know the proverb. Time heals all wounds,” I finally spoke.

“Yes,” Derrick replied.

“It's a big lie, it doesn't. it softens the pain and makes you forget for a while until you run into your father and his new family celebrating his birthday at the restaurant you work in because he walked out of your life, and you had to work to make ends meet.” I could feel my eyes brimming with tears.

“He froze when he saw me, stared at me like an idiot. Luckily, my shift was over, so I just walked out. Seeing him with his new wife and children, I couldn't help but wonder maybe I was the reason he left because the fights started after my birth, maybe there's something wrong with me.”

“There's nothing wrong with you, Ben,” Derrick replied. “You are a fucking cliché of everything good, kind, and perfect in the entire galaxy and you know that.”

“Did you tell your...” he continued, “No, she hasn't been home in a while. She's probably passed out drunk in a bar somewhere.”

He removed his right hand from the steering wheel and touched my thigh solemnly as a means of comfort. Warmth spread through my body, but I didn't flinch. He patted it twice before moving it back to the steering wheel. The warmth left with his hand.

“Must be quiet and lonely at home,” he added.

“No not really. I prefer the loneliness to her drunk voice ringing in my ears all day. Besides, being alone is the best.”

“No, it isn't.”

There was a loud honk and two bright lights drove past us hurriedly, with its driver yelling insults aimed at us.

“Sorry, sorry,” we both yelled back. “It's the car, not us.”

“I know you want to own a car, but this isn't it, Der.”

“Don't worry; the car will grow on you.” He replied, smiling.

We took a sharp turn and rounded a corner onto a long, winding road.

“That's the site for the new cathedral,” Derrick said as he drove on.

“The country is a mess, but the government thinks it's a grand idea to shove all the resources and revenue into a church building.

“No, but heaven is the goal.”

“Heaven is the goal for Christians. I seriously hope that after they finish building the cathedral, the Muslims will also request for their mosque and the traditionalists will also request for their own shrine. Then they will know what sup.” Derrick chuckled and shook his head. “Wouldn't that be something,” he said out loud as he stared at the road in front of him.

We drove past a Goil filling station; three young boys our age were walking out of the mart laughing and talking.

“What do boys our age talk about?” I asked him as I stared at the merry faces of the young men.

“I don't know, alcohol, party, sports.”

“Are we normal? Cos we hardly ever do that.”

“Normal is overrated.” He replied, smiling.

“Derrick.”

“Yeah.”

“I want...”

“Waakye, I know.” He interjects. “That's where we are heading.”

I smiled and picked up his phone. “I'm texting Maeve to join us at the spot.”

“Why?”

“I like her for you,” I replied.

“You like her for me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Okay,” he replied, smiling.

We drove out of the quiet road into the loud busy streets of Accra. As we joined the long queue of cars on the road; the car made a loud rattling noise as it jerked forward sharply. Immediately, the radio, which had been off all along, came on and a loud Sarkodie song blared through the speakers.

“Jesus save us all.” I made the sign of the cross. Derrick chuckled. We took a sharp curve and entered the busy streets of Taifa.

The city was alive with the sound of horns and hawkers competing as if their lives depended on it. It was Like a forest of different sounds all mixed up into one.

The policemen standing in the middle of traffic shouting commands made the sweet evening a nightmare for drivers.

Christmas was soon coming, and they needed money for their families. So, whoever wasn't lucky was stopped, searched, and hounded till he paid his dues literally. The drivers were so affected that an older, refined-looking gentleman was in his feelings, beside him was a teenager probably his son weeping big dewdrop tears because the policemen supposedly found weed in the car and his father was not pleased at all. Derrick tried not to stare at the sight of a man crying so openly. He doesn't do well with emotions or tears.

There was the glint of an expensive watch band peeking from out of the older man's suit sleeve, and Benjamin decided, based on no other information, that it was too weird that the policemen would see such a watch and not stop the car for money.

They lumbered in the darkness around the car. I could hear them complain about what their bosses would do if the man doesn't settle them there and then. The man pulled out his wallet and grabbed a lot of notes. He quietly slipped them into the policeman's attire and then drove off.

When we got close to them, they shone their lights at the car, and once they saw the sorry excuse of our car, they waved us to go.

“Perks of having a very old car,” Derrick said aloud, and I laughed.

As we drove away from the chaos, I took my time to study Derrick's face. If he turned my way, I would feign interest out the opposite window and try to avoid his eyes. We'd been friends for six years and out of the six, I've liked him for half. His brown eyes, his red lips, his smile.

I braced my chin onto my chest and tried to stop the nervousness and warmth that was spreading across my face as I watched Derrick and the loud city go by. I knew I was doing that thing again, the Stealing of little glances, the blinking, the face that looked at him like he was my entire world. I could feel his gaze upon me. He was smiling.

“I cannot remember the last time we went to the beach.”

“Then let's go. Let's go to the beach.”

“What of Maeve?” he asked.

“I'll text her to meet us there with the waakye.”

“Okay.”

He turned back to the road ahead and I took this opportunity to study the length of him. God was he beautiful. But I could never tell him.

Eventually, the city started to expand as if it was breathing on its own. The houses started to spread apart, and there was more sky than he could imagine. The houses slowly began to change to coconut trees. Tall coconut trees that reached into the heavens.

After the confines of the tall coconut trees and the little forests, the beach suddenly opened. The stars were no longer dipping behind the hills by the time we reached there, and it was almost too expansive for me to take in. He tumbled out of the car gleefully and stumbled down to the shoreline.

The day was painting in the last of her colours. Only the softest of violets and orange covered the horizon, I was sad to not arrived sooner. I tilted his head back and walked to the water. Derrick was behind me.

“Slow down.” He exclaimed.

“Walk faster,” I replied.

The sky above us was a darkening blue smeared with faint clouds. Being in the city made me forget that the sky could hold so many colours. No one had the time to look up, we were all struggling to get food on our table. Derrick let out a small awe-filled sigh.

“All this beauty in the sky, as if Mother Nature is bragging.”

“If all this is your doing, you’d also brag too.”

He grinned.

The sea was shaking and rising, loud like a young mother’s voice but it looked sad as if it had been forgotten, like an old mother anxiously waiting for her children to return home.

“I knew this would cheer you up,” Derrick said.

“You always know what to do to cheer me up,”

“What are best friends for.”

“Friends, I hate that word,” I muttered to myself as I walked to the water.

We sat on the set and let the sea breeze warmly hug us. Derrick pulled out a can of Heineken from his trousers, opened it, took a sip, and passed it to me. I took it and swallowed a gulp. The beer tickled my throat as it went down. I turned to Derrick; his eyes were bright under the moonlight. He seemed more relaxed and calmer like he used to be years ago. I handed him the can and he took a gulp. After swallowing, he turned to me.

“Why are you trying to force Maeve on me, Benjamin.”

“I’m not trying to do anything like that.”

“Well, it feels like you are.”

“I'm not. I'm only doing this because I know she's good for you.”

“You know nothing about what's good for me.”

“I do.”

“You don't, trust me, you don't.”

He suddenly reached up and pulled something out from my hair. It was so quick it almost didn't happen. His hand was furtive and Fleeting, like a sonnet. A fissure I hadn't known about cracked open in my chest underneath it was a hollow feeling that had never bothered me before. It wasn't a crush anymore; it was more than that. I wanted nothing more than to feel the warmth left by his touch. He closed his eyes and sighed. Then he opened them again, it was as though the sky was raining on his face, it wasn't just rain, it was fear. I saw the change. I look at it, I looked at him. We were sitting close together on the beach. I opened my mouth to speak but Derrick leaned across the distance and placed a kiss on my lips. It was quick but sweet and warm.

He stared into my eyes. “Sorry for head-butting you.

“We could pretend it was a headbutt if you like?” I replied.

“I'm sorry, I shouldn't have...”

I looked both up and down the hill, and then I kissed him quickly on the lips.

All evening we lay in the long grass and watched the clouds roll around in the sky. I for one was glad we were lying down, for if we had been standing, I seriously wouldn't know what to do or how to act after kissing him. Waves of loveliness ebbed over me followed by waves of shame and regret. What have I done kept rolling in my head.

We laid a discreet distance apart. Until Derrick's pinkie found mine and he knotted them together.

James was the first to speak.

“Do you mind?” It wasn't a simple question, it was an invite, Consideration, searching.

“No, I don't mind,” I replied.

He got up and stretched his hands towards me. “Come.” I got up and held his hands and together we walked into the sea.

The water soothes my soul. The dark sky blended in admirably with the clean, soft water, it was beautiful, just like a masterpiece painted by van Gogh that came to life right in front of my eyes. It's beauty like none other. The water sparkled with an objective purity, so clear, soft, gentle, and so clean.

His smile was very inviting, and I could see the excitement on his face as we laughed and played in the sea. We rolled around for a while before sitting in the water.

We didn't say anything, we couldn't say anything and that made me nervous. Derrick didn't break his stare and he didn't say anything. His grin widened slightly and with each millimetre it grew, mine widened too.

We sat like that, just grinning until we laughed.

I raised myself on my elbows and kissed him. This one felt like our first proper kiss, not clumsy and with less pressure. I buried the tip of my nose in his cheek and gasped when I felt the secret warmth of his tongue. It thrilled me. It tasted sweet like cream and fuzzy, and his mouth was hot, pillow, and soft.

We broke free and stared at each other. Suddenly, a voice cut through the darkness.

“Derrick! Ben!” two waving arms shot out of the darkness and Maeve's head popped out of the dense trees.

I got up, about to walk up to her when Derrick's hand slipped into mine. He wouldn't let go.

“Benji,” she called again. I stared at her and then I turned to look at Derrick. His eyes were on me, never faltering.

The roaring waves blew over his face, but his eyes never closed. It stayed like the rest of the twinkling stars. He tugged my hands just once.

The tugging made the gesture crude, and inarticulate, but I understood.

He beckoned me only once. Once was enough. Stay, it said. Stay with me.

Debra J. White

My Volunteer Life among Refugees

ON JANUARY 6, 1994, A MAN DRIVING a passenger van said he didn't see me and my two leashed dogs as we took our afternoon stroll. The result? I landed in a rehab centre recovering from a traumatic brain injury along with multiple broken bones that prematurely ended my social work career. I moved to Phoenix at the end of a long recovery. Eventually, I resurrected myself through volunteer work and creative writing. Part of my volunteer work included helping in an English as a second language program, sorting and folding clothes for a global humanitarian agency, and meeting refugees for my assignments for the now closed AZ Muslim Voice.

I was excited to begin assisting in the English as a Second Language program at the Phoenix office of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) on a Monday in late August 2014. A surprise rainstorm, however, pounded Phoenix that day. City streets and roadways were flooded, a rarity for Phoenix. I called the IRC and said I would start the next day. That began my two-and-a-half-year odyssey with refugees new to Arizona as we taught them English as a second language.

On my first day, I met the instructor, a middle-aged man named Fadil, a refugee from the 1990s Balkan wars. When Fadil and his family arrived in the USA, none spoke English. Fadil learned quickly because he needed a job to support his family. He still had the first dictionary that helped him learn English. Now, he was teaching English to refugees at the IRC and at a community college. Wow, I was impressed. I bonded with Fadil right away and it was a pleasure working with him. I loved hearing stories about

his family and his life before the savage Balkan wars caused such misery and pain to millions.

There were two classes, one for refugees with little or no English skills and one for refugees with some knowledge. Morning classes were for the non-English speakers and English speakers attended the afternoon. I volunteered for the afternoon session. Classes consisted of two days of instruction, one day of discussion among the students and one day of computer learning. I provided extra attention to students having a hard time. I also performed special duties Fadil needed such as photocopying, retrieving pencils, pens, etc.

Refugees arrived through the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Most came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Nepal, Cuba, Mexico, Congo, Syria, Sudan, Myanmar and other nations. Now and then, a refugee slipped in from Tanzania, Rwanda, Iran, Zimbabwe, or Guatemala. They fled war, civil unrest or grinding poverty. Everyone had a story. I wish I remembered them all, but every refugee appreciated the chance to start over in the USA.

Some refugees formerly worked doctors, lawyers, nurses, engineers, etc. in their homelands while others were common laborers. Those with advanced degrees represented a dilemma. Refugees with medical degrees from Cuba or Iraq, for example couldn't work in this country as physicians unless they completed three-year residencies at accredited programs and mastered the language. That meant spending time repeating what they had already done but if they wanted to work as physicians that was the requirement. A residency is a paid position. For nurses, dentists, etc. requirements are similar. Some refugees who couldn't afford retraining instead worked as nurse's aides or dental technicians. They earned considerably more than in third world countries, even if they were over-qualified.

Cuban refugees spoke of hardships back home. Most received a government payment of \$20 monthly. Doctors didn't receive much more. Stores lacked many basic items such as soap, shampoo, bread, fresh meat, fruit, etc. but those items were readily

available on the black market for an exorbitant fee which many couldn't pay. Many Cubans had family members and sometimes friends living abroad who sent home remittances. Even a modest remittance of \$25 could buy a lot. Cubans shared what little they had with those who didn't receive remittances. For cheap entertainment, a group of friends and family gathered at the beach on weekends. Someone made sandwiches, another person brought beer yet someone else carried a radio for music and the whole crowd ate, drank, and danced.

A Muslim refugee from Iraq who I'll call Ahmed said that when Saddam Hussein was in power residents of various backgrounds got along. Even when the Jews were here, Ahmed said, we managed. Admittedly, Hussein was ruthless and domineering but society for the most part hummed along until the American imposed stiff sanctions after the first Gulf war. The sanctions didn't punish Hussein as much as they caused extreme hardships among the Iraqi people. Ahmed believed that the Iran/Iraq war of the 1980s resulted from a petty spat between Iran's Khomeini and Iraq's Hussein. Consequently, thousands of men died fighting each other and millions of citizens suffered deprivation. The American invasion of 2003 further disrupted society. Ahmed uttered harsh words for the Muslim militants who strangled Iraq. Because of their brutality, he fled Iraq for the USA, even abandoning a successful business. Ahmed said Iraq, although an Islamic country, often had loose rules and wasn't as stringent as say Saudi Arabia. Christians and Yazidis operated liquor stores and sold cigarettes. Ahmed said some Muslims patronized them. What I did, Ahmed said, was between me and Allah, not between me and the militants. Even though Muslims like him bought the alcohol and cigarettes, the extremist militants punished the Christians and Yazidis for operating the stores. Ahmed said that wasn't fair. He missed the old Iraq when, according to Ahmed, people got along even if he had to live under the bitter rule of Hussein.

A young man, a refugee from Rwanda, who I'll call John had been a teacher in the capital city, Kigali. His English skills were quite good. Fadil asked John if he planned to apply for a teaching job in the US. John wasn't sure because he'd read about the way

some American students and parents mistreated teachers. Fadil asked him to explain. John said students disrespected teachers, calling them names or not paying attention by texting on their phones. Cheating on exams and term papers bothered him. Parents sued the school if their students failed. And then the school shootings, the many school shootings. John was disturbed by the American school system. In Rwanda, he said, a student would never talk back to a teacher. A student would never carry a weapon to class. If a student failed a subject, a parent would never think of suing the teacher or the school. Teachers were highly respected and regarded. John said he was eager to work and to support himself, but he had doubts about becoming a teacher.

A young man from Somalia one day asked me what I was doing here. I asked him what he meant. He pointed to my motorized scooter. In my country, a woman like you would be home, taken care of by family. She wouldn't have to go out. Smiling, I told him I was a volunteer. I no longer worked as a result of the 1994 car accident, but I rebuilt my life with volunteer work. It was my pleasure to assist in the English as a second language program. He thanked me for my efforts and said that Allah would bless me. I appreciated his thoughtfulness.

About 12:30 p.m. every Wednesday, the day I volunteered, I rolled into the lobby and asked who was here for the English class. The lobby was often full of refugees. Some waited for our class; others were there to see their caseworkers. Refugees tended to sit together by nationality. Fadil always asked people to sit next to someone from another country. Two women, one Somali, one Mexican, got to know each other and always sat together. One day, a man sat next to the Mexican lady. A Somali lady arrived just a minute or two late. She smiled and said you'll have to take another seat please. We always sit together. He obliged and took another seat. The two women hugged and then the class began.

A young lady from Afghanistan attended our class. One day, on her way out I said a few words to her in Farsi, their common language. How did I know Farsi? I told her about my Afghan friend Diba who I met at the airport where I volunteered. I

mentioned my fondness for Afghan food, especially Bolani's. The next session, the Afghan lady (whose name I don't recall) brought in a plate of Bolani's, an Afghan specialty. I thanked her for her generosity, but these are too many for me. Let's share them with the class. Everyone in class that day was treated to a delicious Bolani.

Syrian refugees, both Muslim and Christian, often shared similar stories about their homeland. Life was routine, sometimes a struggle, until the civil war began in 2011. Then, everything was turned upside down. Bombs dropped on cities and towns, crushing buildings into piles of twisted metal and ash. Major cities like Aleppo and Homs were reduced to piles of rubble. Thousands died or were injured. Food and water became scarce. Arrests were common and mostly men just disappeared. Some refugees owned thriving businesses such as shopping centres, restaurants, or clothing stores. Others were ordinary workers. For the most part, Syrians co-existed with each other. They all resented the militants. Seeing no other choice after the war ruined their country, Syrians fled by the thousands. Some made it to the USA. Doctors, engineers, architects, and other high-level workers took menial jobs because they didn't have the money for re-training. Once they accomplished English language skills, some took teaching jobs. Some opened restaurants. Everyone welcomed the chance to start over. I cringed hearing stories of the war and its sheer brutality. My heart ached hearing of loss at what they Syrians left behind such as friends, family, businesses, homes, pets, and mementoes like family photos.

Towards the end of 2016, Fadil departed the IRC. The new teacher was OK, but I never bonded with her like Fadil. He and I were a team. Also, I tired of the long drive. To reach the office, I drove on three highways. If there was an accident or a stalled car, traffic could back-up for miles. I decided to leave my post and volunteer at another refugee agency only a ten-minute drive from home. If I were in better physical condition, I could even walk. I did, however, miss the one-on- one experience with refugees. I was thankful for the chance to contribute to their lives and hope I made a difference.

I joined the volunteer staff of Helping Hands for Relief and Development (HHRD) in January 2017 at the Chandler regional office, a suburb of Phoenix. A global humanitarian agency, HHRD has offices around the USA. They respond to disasters around the world with emergency aid such as food, water, school supplies and more. HHRD also partners with the WHO (World Health Organization) for refugee health care. Each HHRD office sends out about four shipments of used clothing, shoes and school supplies annually to a needy third world nation. As I got to know the former regional manager, Gul, she asked me if I would cover the office on Thursday. I said sure, no problem. Until COVID-19 shut down the economy in 2020 and sickened millions, I arrived each Thursday about 10:30 a.m. I opened the door and stayed until 3:30 p.m., our daily operating ours. Some weeks no one showed up. Other weeks there was a steady stream of visitors dropping off used clothes, shoes, cash donations or just to chat. I welcomed each visitor and thanked them for their contributions. COVID-19 tossed a surprise curve ball at our standard operations. Volunteers no longer covered the office on their own. A warehouse manager now assumed that responsibility. I missed my office responsibilities. Since I no longer held a paying job, each Thursday pumped up my pride and filled me with a sense of responsibility. I felt important, like a somebody dressed in my best clothing. I understood, however, that the main HHRD office was concerned about staff as well as visitor health and safety. So, as soon as we were given clearance to reopen in the fall of 2020, I returned for a few hours each Thursday morning to sort and fold clothes. Sometimes work alone; sometimes I had company. Volunteering at the warehouse gives me a reason to get out of bed. Plus, the people living in refugee camps need the supplies we sort, fold and send. Their misery never seems to end.

I met Wafa, the former owner and editor, of the now defunct AZ Muslim Voice while at the HHRD office sometime in 2015. I mentioned that I'd done professional writing and she asked me to work for her. During a two-and-a-half-year period (2015-2017), my refugee articles included a piece on the Syrian Sweets Exchange at a Phoenix synagogue. The Syrian Sweets Exchange is a group of Syrian women refugees, living in

both Tucson and Phoenix, who bake desserts popular in Syria such as baklava, halva, sahlab and kunatah, then sell them locally at mosques, churches, synagogues, festivals, etc. to supplement their incomes. I also covered a fundraiser for the refugees in Myanmar. I wrote about former President Trump's Muslim immigration ban and reviewed a 2015 documentary called Salam, Neighbour, about the gritty life in a Syrian refugee camp. On President's Day in 2017, I visited the Changing Hands, an independent bookstore in Tempe, to write about their generosity towards refugees. They donated proceeds from that day's sales to the local IRC. I was sorry when Wafa graduated from ASU School of Journalism in 2018 and moved out of state for a teaching position.

I had the pleasure to meet refugees through the American Muslim Women's Association of AZ (AMWA). A non-profit agency, AMWA is an all-volunteer agency that serves to promote a positive image of Islam and to help needy women from all ethnic backgrounds to attain self-sufficiency. A sample of AMWA programs are emergency assistance, adopt a family during Ramadan, serving meals at homeless shelters, household and food drives as well as collecting school supplies for poor children. Until COVID, refugees would whip up a tasty meal, charge a modest fee, and invite members of the public to the AMWA office or someone's home. We enjoyed a fabulous home-cooked meal while the refugees earned extra income.

The accident took away my ability to earn a living. I'd always been self-sufficient, finding my first job at sixteen years old. Since 1994, there's been a lot of ups and downs. But my life among refugees enriched me more than I imagined. At times, I was saddened by the cruelty refugees experienced. And some of them endured starvation, rape, bombings, fear, and more. One day I noticed a Cuban refugee in the English class with tears in her eyes. I asked her what was wrong. She said she missed her homeland so much. She never wanted to leave Cuba. But she couldn't feed her family on \$20 a month. I said I was sorry and held her hand. Working with refugees is a gift I'll always treasure, even if some of the memories broke my heart.

Clothesure

LILU STOOD STOCK STILL with an outstretched hand and her eyes fixed firmly on the back of Old Man Wang's balding head. After informing him of her resignation, he was refusing to pay her the last weeks' wages due to insufficient notice. He was now pretending to tidy a shelf and ignoring her. Lilu tapped her phone. Old Man Wang still refused to look at her, but the shop door opening made him turn around. Four shadows entered, masked, caps pulled down low, and filled the tiny space with menace.

Old Man Wang looked at his own phone under the counter.

"What you want?"

The shadows said nothing. They merely loomed. Old Man Wang glanced again at his phone under the counter. Lilu stood with her hand out, staring into his eyes. He ignored her and defied the shadows,

"What you looking at? Buy something or get out!"

Silence. Still.

"I will call the police!"

Old Man Wang suddenly shouted out and lunged for his phone. A large hand grasped his wrist and firmly forced his arm back to his side. A small, quick, gloved hand reached over the counter and picked up Old Man Wang's phone, placing it on a shelf next to the door. Everything was still again, less for Old Man Wang's increasingly ragged breathing. An unforgiving minute passed. Sixty seconds worth of enraged stubbornness and frozen threat.

Lilu hissed, with menace and measure, *“My wages. Four hundred and twenty-five dollars please, Mr. Wang. What I have earned.”*

The darkest, slightest shadow slid like black ink and a slim, stiletto blade flashed from a dark-gloved hand. Nothing else moved. Lightbulbs buzzed. Mosquitoes hung. Old Man Wang broke, with a sucking hiss of teeth he opened the till and drew out \$425, his hand shaking as he fumbled for the five-dollar coin.

“Thank you, Sir. Goodbye.”

Lilu put away the money in her wallet, picked up her daysack and left. Nobody else moved. Old Man Wang wiped a wet brow and felt dizzy. Lilu crossed the metre gap between the shop door and the clock stall and gave Chu Taai Taai a big smile in greeting. Mrs Chu, beamed,

“Hello lehng loei! That big smile tells me you’ve finally quit working for that miserable old bugger!”

“Yep! Free at last!”

Lilu knew exactly what she wanted. She reached up high and to the back to gently lift out a hand-size, round, vintage alarm clock with a blue face embossed with a golden owl whose eyes moved. It had been on Mrs Chu’s stall for 11 years. It had been Lilu’s grandmother’s clock. Mrs Chu had forgotten it was back there, she gasped.

Lilu took four crisp one-hundred-dollar notes from her wallet and handed them to Mrs Chu who was shaking her head.

“Chizing! No, no child, no need. Only worth one hundred anyway.” Lilu was not to be swayed.

“Not to me. Thank you for taking care of it, Chu Taai Taai.”

Mrs Chu had her hands behind her back, refusing to take the money. Lilu gently laid the notes down on the carved, wooden box that served as a counter and deftly placed a small chop on top as a paper weight. She tucked the precious clock inside her daysack, bowed, smiled softly and turned away. Lilu gave a little rap on the windowpane of Old Man Wang’s and the shadows, who hadn’t moved, dissolved and flowed out of

the tiny shop allowing Old Man Wang to gasp and suck in breath as if he had just surfaced from the grip of a riptide. Mosquitoes whined, lightbulbs buzzed and hung.

As she passed the underwear stall, Lilu noticed the pot-bellied pig of a creepy man leaning on his piles of faded knickers, peering over the be-brahed coat hangers on the border, drinking in the sight of two schoolgirls buying bubble tea from a nearby kiosk. Lilu wheeled right, marched up to his unsuspecting arse, and tapped his left shoulder. As his left cheek presented itself squarely, his leering lips still smirking as they swivelled, her right, open hand met his face. Her hand had come from low, right by her bent knee, launched from a dropped right shoulder, boosted by a straightening right leg. She only weighed 42 kilogrammes, but every single one of them was in that slap. The crack on impact was explosive and for a second there were no other noises in the market.

Pot-bellied creepy man went sprawling through the dangling, hanging, swaying garments of his stall-wall and crashed hard into the open, wet pools of next door's fish stall. Two polystyrene boxes of prawns and scallops split with the renting scrunch and squeal of traumatized foamed plastic. His right hand slapped and slashed through a tray of writhing snappers and bream; his cheekbone smashed hard against the solid metal wall of a grouper tank. Dazed and confused, pot-bellied creep floundered as fishwife and monger exploded with rage and invective towards him. Monger was pointing the sharp, thin blade he had been using to fillet; wife was spitting out curses like a nail-gun. Creep rolled away from the fish, upsetting a plastic box of squalid, sea cucumbers with his flailing legs and crawled back under the table that demarcated his stall. A masked, pitiless face froze him in place, Lilu had a slim blade an inch from his eye, she hissed,

“One day, when I am finished saving the world, I shall come back here and cut your slimy fucking face off.”

Then she was gone. He would look out for her in fear every day. Lilu slid the tiny knife away; she had put away childish things. She wasn't really coming back to deal with this childhood bogeyman...ever.

My Proposal

I can't be bothered. And yet I can be.
If it's something to do with you.
Or something that has nothing to do with you.
Stuff comes at me from all directions.
I figure why should I have to deal with it.
Then I do deal with it. Until I've had enough.
But there's no such thing as enough.
At least, not until there is. And enough of you?
I don't think so. Which is why, sometimes,
I don't think. That saves me the trouble.
Except when trouble finds me anyhow.
And the trouble is with you. Or not.
And, even then, it is. What I really mean to
say is, I want to spend the rest of my life
with you. That is, except for those moments
when I'd rather be alone. In which case, then
I wouldn't want you around. Though I would
miss you. Of course, except for those times I don't.

The Egret on The Far Shore

In the middle of the lake,
I rest on the oar.
Bobbing gently, the body has no weight.
The mind is pleasantly thoughtless.

My eyes are fixed on an egret,
dipping its toes in far shore shallow water.
My whole self fits easily into its presence.

I listen for movement.
I step ever so carefully.
Then suddenly, my beak jabs down,
spears an unwitting fish.

All this, without moving.
All this, without me.

Kyle Owens

The Café

THE AIR STIRRED WARM INSIDE the alluring night. Splices of car lights and long necked streetlamps cascaded their mural of illuminations onto the thronged boulevards and walkways.

Plaster walls, confined tight in bizarre artisan bellows, cut the eyes. Bright metal slipped across platters of flowed juices which waded into pools from fowls and mussels cooked to satisfaction's edge. Ceiling fans turned rapidly with clanging chains and speared the circulations of esoteric conversations below.

A gentleman scanned a literary journal in the centre of the room as he lifted a fork, tipped with a wedge of well-done steak, to his mouth. Two college girls loud talked their thoughts near a maw of glass. A leaned into door elbowed open as a-

“You’re late.”

“I know. I got caught behind a car wreck, looked like somebody got hurt bad.”

“I thought I heard some sirens while ago. Here’s your jacket. Jenna is about to go crazy waiting all the tables by herself.”

“Her hero has arrived.”

“But she was expecting so much more.”

A cartwheeled forward, carnaviged dense with the splendid aromas of fish, soups and coffees sweetened to a-

“Take your order?”

“Oh, I- Uh, just not yet. I’m waiting for my wife. She should be here at any moment.”

“Okay. That present for her?”

“Yes, it is. It’s our tenth wedding anniversary.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. It’s been ten wonderful years for me and probably two for her.”

Smiles and laughs pursued the gaze.

“Let me know when you’re ready then.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Eyes strived sharp into the window’s face and swallowed the rank that stand stilled the patterned, pedestrian flows.

A corner spilled full of button downed men as they selfished their ears without courtesy or-

“Swing and a miss, strike one. He was going for all that one. Osgood is batting .300 this year with thirty-five RBI’s and twenty-two homeruns, but he’s only one for his last ten. But he’s batting .400 against Percy for his career. There’s the sign, the windup, fouled hard down the third base line. Oh- that might have got somebody. The crowd seems to be looking at-”

A clock, mounted high on yellow, armed its way through the evening as the-

“What did you have for breakfast?”

“Half a banana.”

“That’s all?”

“I’m watching my figure. Lord knows no one else is.”

“What happened to the other half of the banana?”

“What do you mean?”

“What did you do with it?”

“Why do you care for?”

“Just curious.”

“I ate it.”

“You ate it?”

“It was still good. I couldn’t throw away good food. I kept hearing my mother’s voice talking to me. Don’t waste your food- sit up straight- go get me an aspirin you’re killing me.”

“But how’s eating the other half of the banana watching your figure?”

“I’m watching it get bigger.”

“Monica, you’re insane.”

“I know. What did you eat for breakfast?”

“A pack of orange crackers with peanut butter on ’em. I love those things so that’s a pretty good sign they cause cancer or something.”

“Did you bring a magazine?”

“Cosmopolitan.”

“I like that one. Does it have any sex surveys in it?”

“No, this month they have how a career woman should organize her life.”

“How?”

“By buying magazines.”

A ravine of rustled whispers crumbed the air. The reverberation of spoon raked bowls and shoes, paced sharp on tile, whet the ears. Fluttering moths bestride the columns of light that radiate about the outdoor black lanterns moustached against the cream-coloured facades.

Glossy pages turned slowly as senses of imagination tongued the rim of a relaxed mind. Eyes touched words and spirited in art that enriched the story’s cadence to-

William sat in a ladder-back chair beside the bed in the night silence. His silhouetted form bent forward; his right hand gloved into her left one as tears rushed out of his rubbed red eyes.

Memories were assuming shapes inside his head as his left hand brushed back her brown hair.

The moonlight shone through the branch shadowed trees and rivered forth through the panes of glass from across the room and streaked a bright light across the

floor that angled sharply at the bed and washed its way up her body with the edge pressed gently against her hairline.

Outside, the cold, naked trees stood still in the quiet air. Gentle slopes of snow paraded the ground with short hairs of grass that pricked through the thin, white crust.

The door opened and the living room light flooded the bedroom as his mother came in with the newborn child and placed her into his arms.

He was going to have to raise her by himself now. Their dream of a child was now his duty alone. The plans of their life together were now gone within a few moments of their greatest wish.

He stayed there by her side, pillowing his daughter against his chest in the silence of the winter night until the dawning sun porched the morning sky.

“There’s a drive to deep left! Back goes Johnson- he’s got it at the wall. One out in the bottom of the ninth. That one looked like it had a chance at the crack of the bat.”

Thrashing wings of throating doves spilled the ears.

Waiting eyes drifted into the windows which brought forth the realization that everything is more fascinating in the dark. A feel of wrapping paper inside his touch turned his thoughts to-

“How does a woman satisfy a man?”

“That’s easy.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. All you must do is look good in lingerie and be able to fry bacon. If you do those two things, you’ll have a man for life.”

“That’s it?”

“Men are very low maintenance. Like vinyl siding.”

A pocketed theme slams the crowd, and a man falls into its scream. He leaves disturbed, toting a gift he cannot give, consumed by thoughts of a halted life storied incomplete.

“There’s a hit to the shortstop, over to second, over to first and that’s the ballgame. The final score is the Red Sox 7 and the Yankees 4. We’ll be back with all the stats after this commercial break from our sponsors and have a last word. Back in two minutes.”

And the stars stood fired in shouts of sky as the peopled city wore the night away.

Michael Neal Morris

Incomplete Assessments

I THOUGHT IT LIKELY I WOULD NOT SEE him alive again. After years of vitality, my grandfather had been felled by the strange axe of something that attacked his spine. One moment he was dressing and getting ready to drive himself for a checkup, and the next he was on the floor. He would never walk again.

He went into the hospital expecting to die, and let my aunts know he was angry he hadn't. He wasn't well enough to take care of himself, and not sick enough to have the plug pulled. He had a hospital bed set up and around the clock care. My aunts and my brother alternated shifts turning him and keeping him company.

Visiting my grandfather was always a crap shoot. The image of him from my childhood was that of a perpetually angry man. He took a long time to warm up to children, particularly those who should have been old enough not only to obey but to have good manners and make rational decisions. Sometimes, as I got older, he would show affection by saying something to me that made me feel important, connecting something in my life to his as if recognizing we had things in common other than bullheadedness. He told me briefly (all talk was quick to him) about his days running track (where he got the nickname Pacer) or about his mother. I particularly loved hearing about how he and a friend built a makeshift radio station that could broadcast the records they played only to the dormitory next to theirs.

Yet, he could be cold in his assessment of what I was doing or in telling me what I should be doing. When I was in the hospital from pneumonia, he told me I had to quit sports (which had nothing to do with my illness). I knew he couldn't make me quit

playing, but it felt like a command. He rarely put conditions on anything, but I so often felt I'd lose something if I did not comply.

At the time I was obsessed with sports, particularly soccer, and was still under the illusion I could play professionally. As a boy, I had no vision of “making a living,” something that he always seemed to have his eye on.

For all of my childhood, and several years into my adulthood, I thought he only cared about money. And as a young person who saw things in black and white, all the while pretending to envision many colours, I thought that meant he expected my life's goals to be geared toward wealth. But young people can't see straight.

Neal Wilson Morris Sr. grew up in Grand Saline, Texas, and did not come from privilege. I never knew my great-grandfather, and barely knew my great-grandmother, who died when I was about ten. Compared to the great-grandmother on my grandmother's side, she seemed brusque, like her son. But I saw little of her, and so don't have a full impression. I do recall that at her funeral my grandmother instructed me to not bother my grandfather, and my grandfather looked dutifully sad, but not grief-stricken. I was a boy; what the heck did I know? Men of my grandfather's age and background didn't go around wailing in pain.

The story goes that my grandfather finished high school and had been walking along a street in Grand Saline when his track coach pulled alongside him in a pickup truck. The coach told him to get in, that they would be going to his house to pack because the coach would be driving him to Commerce that day. The coach had worked out something where my grandfather could attend college on a track scholarship. Up to that point, my stunned grandfather hadn't believed he could get any further education past high school.

It was at East Texas State University where my grandfather met my Ellisue Barber, the beauty who would later become my grandmother. In her book, my grandmother said they had been set up on a blind date, and my grandfather showed up

with a cigar in his mouth. My grandmother promptly told him she didn't care for men who smoked cigars, and he immediately put it away.

While in college, my grandfather worked very hard. When I think about him now, I imagine he was making the most of his unforeseen opportunity. He graduated in 1942, two years after my grandmother.

At some point, they moved to Dallas. My grandmother was a home economics major, and taught for a short time, but spent most of their marriage at home as I recall. My grandfather did some teaching too, classes having to do radio. Eventually, he would go to work for the then-fledgling company Texas Instruments.

I don't really remember much about my grandfather's life as a working man. Not that he didn't work. Even after he retired, he was forever active with projects and things. He loved, for example, going to garage sales and finding something like a vacuum cleaner or television, taking it home to clean and repair it, and then giving it to a family member in need, or donating it to his church for their bazaars. He and my grandmother (and his dear second wife as well) kept busy traveling and visiting family and friends all over the country.

By the time he was forty-five, he was officially retired from his job at Texas Instruments. My mother told me he had been offered an early retirement package and decided that since his house and cars and plane (he had gotten a pilot's license at some point) were paid off, he could afford it. Because he lived frugally but not miserly, he knew, I suppose, he could take care of his family on his investments and savings.

Looking back, I suppose this early untethering from nine-to-five working should imply he had plenty of time for his grandchildren, but I don't remember many moments with him, particularly from when I was very small. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, but my grandfather seems to have been doing something else much of that time.

I did accompany them to the Linden property to work or for some other excursion from time to time. Most of the time, particularly when I was small, I tried to

hang close to my grandmother. The house her mother had lived in, and which came to her upon my great-grandmother's passing, had a screened-in porch in the front, an addition that had been accomplished long before I was born. The porch was also covered in most places by the large leafy branches of whatever trees grow in deep East Texas, so that in the awful hot summer it seemed pleasant. I played a lot on that porch, and sat there quietly, very rare for me as a small person.

What is also rare is that I loved listening to rain on that porch. I hated rain, and still have trouble remembering how important it is when it gets in the way of my plans. My grandmother, of course, helped me to understand, probably better than my teachers, the science of rain and how it was not only needed for farming, which she knew a lot about, but for other things as well. I didn't care, because all I could see were baseball and soccer games getting cancelled. But on that porch, it was music.

The living room was small, at least it seemed so when I grew up and found myself inside with other adults. But as a young boy, it was huge with its glassed-in bookshelves, thick chairs, and sofa. I don't know how many times I slept on what in my mind was always the same sofa but must have changed many times. There were plenty of old books, many of which had belonged to my great-grandfather, an intelligent and wise man my grandmother adored. She would, by the time I'd reached adulthood, collect poems he and my great-uncle had written into a little book I'm proud to say I still have copies of.

I am sure I complained about being bored at the house in Linden. Kids like me didn't know what it was like to grow up too busy doing chores for ennui or self-interested whining. But my grandmother didn't let me stay that way for long if I groaned.

Nor would my grandfather allow it. He valued hard work, and was determined, most often to make sure I learned how to use my hands, as he had, to be useful. I think my brothers all took to this sort of "education" fairly well. But regarding me it was a constant source of frustration for my grandfather. Perhaps a combination of disinterest and ineptitude made mechanical tasks difficult for me, and at least early on, I sensed that

the ability to rightly hammer a nail or cut a piece of wood was a sign of the quality of man, as far as Neal Morris was concerned. It may not have been so.

At some point, he tried to set me to cutting thin, wooden dowels with some sort of (to me) precision saw. Of course, my first attempts were rushed and terrible. The pieces looked more hacked than sheared, and he tried to explain that the edges needed to be smooth and clean, and he demonstrated again. I tried to pay better attention to what I was doing, but there was no difference in the quality of my work. The harder I tried to concentrate, the more of a mess I seemed to make of things. Though many teenagers might have an eye to think he was getting it right, even I could see I wasn't. Eventually, my uncle had to finish the job so what pieces remained would not be ruined. And my grandfather muttered to himself the rest of the day.

This memory remains lodged in me, and I have wrestled with it a long time. I don't think my grandfather had impossible standards, or that I was particularly rebellious. He just had little patience with non-adults, and I have been difficult to teach. He was not cruel, and he didn't say the things other boys heard from men about one not being "a man" unless certain conditions were met, such as mastering complex tools.

When I was in college, my check book was stolen. Because I didn't use it every day, I had not noticed until a few days after, when a few checks started to bounce around town. I went to the bank in town, where I had my account, and tried to get some answers, and signed an affidavit that I had not written the checks. But the bank wanted its money. I stood firm that I had not written the bounced checks, and therefore should not have to pay for them. The bank wanted the amount of the checks plus overdraft fees.

Somehow my acts of what I thought were civil disobedience were discovered by my grandparents, who showed up at my dorm room one afternoon. They drug me away from my afternoon nap and downtown to the bank. My grandmother was silent while my grandfather half listened to my side of the story. I don't know if he didn't believe me or just wanted to get the mess over with so I wouldn't go to jail, which was being

threatened at this point. I, being young and I suppose foolish, was perfectly willing to go to jail (something I knew nothing about) to “take a stand.” He had other ideas.

At the bank, my grandfather listened to the smug bank manager explain, essentially, how much money I “owed,” and what it would take to close the whole matter. Then my grandfather gave him the money, got a receipt, thanked them, and we left.

I didn't speak to him for some time.

My grandmother was one of the few people who could get away with standing-up to him, telling him when he was off base, and getting him to change his course, even when he didn't want to. When I called him to ask to borrow his car for my honeymoon, he gave me an awful lecture about how my brother had not taken care of the car when he'd last used it, and he'd be damned if he was going to let me do more harm to it. I was nearly in tears; I was so shocked by his reaction.

But a few minutes later, he phoned, sounding very sheepish. I don't remember an apology exactly, but he did note that I was not my brother (who is very good and careful with cars), and that he would be fine with me driving his. When I got off the phone, and told my parents, my mother laughed and said, “I bet Ellisue gave him hell.”

But she did nothing in the instance with the bank. At least I don't remember anything except her saying I should trust this was best. I suspect she was torn between the stubbornness of two men (well, one and a half men), and thought it best to leave things alone. She said something about “the long run” or “living to fight another day.” I don't recall exactly. I just remember being hurt and angry.

And so, if other incidents did not make me think my grandfather was concerned for nothing but money, this one did. He always seemed to worry about it, not that he didn't have enough, but that I and others did not worry about it sufficiently. I didn't know to worry about money, because my parents had only enough, usually, to get by. I rarely asked Mom and Dad for anything because I couldn't stand hearing “We don't

have enough for--” whatever it was I wanted or thought I needed. I got fed and a place to live, so that was supposed to be enough.

Between semesters at college, I was to bring him the list of courses I planned to take the following term, with the amounts for tuition and housing, as well as what I anticipated I would need for books and supplies, to the penny. He usually wrote checks to cover everything, with a little extra for the books, just in case. But every time he saw my schedule, he asked, “When are you going to take some classes that will make you some money?” He was particularly interested in me taking computer science and never got over the fact that I earned a degree in English without a teaching certificate.

This disappointment came up again when I went to graduate school. I had graduated five years earlier, and had since managed to get work, budget poorly, and never advance far in whatever position I found myself in.

When I went to see my grandparents just before packing my wife and child for school, my grandfather was strangely silent. My grandmother had asked me what I planned to do with the added degree. Though I just wanted to write and hoped exposure to good teachers and more literature would help me find what I was missing, I told them I wanted to teach in college, which was partially true. I expected to work as a professor so I could live while writing, but I didn’t say this was not what I hoped to make a career out of.

My grandmother, with whom I had had many conversations about education, asked me why I didn’t want to teach high school instead (where there were many open positions for people with certification). I replied, truthfully, that I did not believe I could make a difference there. My grandmother nodded and smiled, apparently satisfied with my answer.

My grandfather said nothing, and I should have known that something was off. He was a man of few words, but he was rarely silent. It was only a few months later when they visited that he let go what he’d been holding. “I am still upset at you that you

didn't get a teaching certificate when I was paying for your schooling. Then you'd have steady work, and not be in this mess."

As I recall, this conversation happened during one of those moments where I felt I was getting the hang of life as a graduate student, feeling less like a failure than I had before as a nine-to-five worker at jobs I could not enjoy. So, the blow, at least in my memory, was worse than before.

I remember two visits with him (though there were others) after his collapse. Both were for me emotionally fraught, and in both, I held myself in check, probably out of shock. For one of those, my Aunt Kay had asked me to record my grandfather opening cards and presents sent for his birthday so that others could see and hear him. It was clear to his children this would be his last birthday. I remember feeling inadequate to the task, but I managed to get through it, even getting a thank you from the man himself.

The other event was during a visit. It was years after grad school, and I'd been teaching at Eastfield College for several years, a position he had not said directly, but in subtle comments led me to think he was proud of me for.

My grandmother, the long-standing buffer, had several years before passed away, and he had remarried. I was fumbling through the conversation, caught between trying to find something to say and trying to figure out if I was saying goodbye to him without drawing attention to that fact. But at some point, he blurted out, "You've made a lot of mistakes."

I am not sure what the context for this statement was. We could have been talking about anything from my determination that my hearing-impaired twins could not go to school with knockoff hearing aids like his to being late for some get-together or that I still owed him money from a previous loan. It doesn't matter: the statement became, long after his death, his truth for me. I was both sad that I was such a fuck up to him he had to say it and angry that he would risk these being the last words he might ever say to me.

He was ninety-five when he died. I don't even remember any more if this conversation happened before or after I recorded his birthday, and I wish I could recall, because it might have helped me understand much sooner that the remark was not all of what he thought about me, but something said during a difficult and painful day for a man still unsettled about his mortality.

At his funeral, I wandered about like someone slapped into numbness, unable to talk or comfort those whose pain was so much greater than mine. I am ashamed it took a long time to forgive him who neither abused nor neglected me, but had been mostly good and generous, even if I didn't get that any more than he understood my motivations or all my loves.

I have dreamed about him many times since. In most of those dreams, I am in his house, though the structure is not the one he and my grandmother shared in Dallas for over fifty years. It is always a new, to me, place, but I know it is his. When I see him, he rarely talks, and when he does, I can't remember what he has said. Most often he is smiling, something I remember he did more than I gave him credit for. When I wake up, it is me who is disappointed.

Adieu Mama

THE FIRST TIME I WAS QUESTIONED by police officers in Abuja was on a Sunday evening on my way home from a friend's house, walking through the illuminated streets of my quiet suburban neighbourhood. As I rounded a corner, I suddenly saw flashing lights in the distance and heard a police siren blaring through the night. My heart raced as I approached the scene, and my mind raced with questions. What was going on? Was someone hurt? I got closer, and I saw two police officers standing by their patrol car, questioning a group of young men. I hesitated for a moment, unsure if I should keep walking or if I should stop and see if everything was okay. But before I could decide, one of the officers spotted me and beckoned me over.

“Come here,” he commanded, his voice authoritative. “Come and answer a few questions?” I nodded nervously, feeling a knot form in my stomach. I had never been stopped by the police before, and I wasn't sure what to expect.

“Excuse me,” one of the officers said, his voice gruff but not unkind. “Can we see your ID?” I fumbled my hands shaking as I pulled out my driver's license from my handbag. The officers examined it. I could feel his eyes on me as he scanned my licenses, and I tried to remain calm, even though my mind was racing with questions. The officer returned my license after what seemed like an eternity. He informed me that there had been a murder in the neighbourhood, and I needed to be extremely cautious. He gave me a strong warning but let me go after I gave him some money. I had resolved never to have anything to do with the police since then, except I didn't have a choice. Unfortunately, I didn't have a choice today. I sat by the counter in the sweaty, filthy

police station. A police officer clad in a fitted jacket shuffled papers in an exaggerated display of duty. I couldn't help but curse the day I met Andrew. My weakness for tall, bearded men with thick brows and shy smiles had finally landed me in trouble.

The DSP walked into the station drenched in sweat. I became dumbfounded. Things were not black and white anymore. He looked at the police officer by the counter and signalled for me to come into his office. In his words, it was better that he took my statement in his office, where I would be more comfortable. As I walked behind him into his office, I reflected on the events that had led to my present predicament.

I was glancing at Andrew through the glass opening of the door before opening it. He was dressed in the black shorts I used to taunt him about being too snug around his buttocks for his evening football game with his coworkers.

“I was talking to my mother, or I would have come earlier.” He pressed his lips on mine and gestured to the old apron I was wearing that day. “Aren't you coming along. I will be showing those men my Cristiano Ronaldo skills?”

“I am busy in the kitchen.”

“I learned about what happened between you and my mother. I apologize for my mother's actions.”

“I just had to leave your apartment,” I said tentatively. I wanted to say our apartment, but the derogatory words his greying, matronly Ankara-clad mother had used to describe me, words that implied that I was a gold digger, kept echoing in my head.

“Don't be angry, my love. Honestly you didn't have to leave the apartment when you could have just ignored her, really.” He placed his phone down on the table and began to pace around the room.

“Your mother made a scene. She called me an evil witch, Obim.”

“You are angry.” He looked puzzled. He sat down on the lazy sofa chair in the room, and for the first time I noticed how scanty my living room was, how much space there was between the furniture, how sparse my flat was. Most of my things were in his apartment: my favourite novels, my clothes, and most of my jewellery. “I didn't think

you would still be this angry. My mother is an old-school woman. She is still stuck doing things the old way.” He got up and moved close to take my arms, but I ignored him, turned away, and walked into the kitchen to attend to my cooking.

“You never told me you would be bringing your mother from the village,” I said. “You’ve never told me that I would have to contend with your mother.”

“Oh, stop it, Nkem. It’s not like you didn’t know all this before. You know I am the only surviving child of my mother, and we are close.”

I walked over to the gas cooker and took the pot off the counter’s warm surface with my back to him. I felt as if I had been betrayed by him. How could he not see that his mother’s behaviour was unacceptable? How could he allow her opinion to matter now, after three years together? I was angry with myself for allowing his mother’s behaviour to bother me. I should be able to handle it. I should have dismissed it as a local woman’s rant. I shouldn’t keep thinking about all the retorts I could have made instead of standing there mutely while she cursed and abused me before I left his apartment.

Nonetheless, I was upset, and even more so because of Andrew’s expression, as if he couldn’t see that I was his soulmate, with or without his mother’s approval.

“What did you cook?” he asked.

“Native rice with fried fish.” I laid emphasis on the native rice which I knew was his favourite. “Aren’t you going to play football?”

“I thought you would come.”

“I don’t feel up to it.” I turned around. “Why is your mother all up in our business lately? You assured me none of this would happen.”

“Nkem, my mother’s entire life is in Umudioka in Anambra State. Do you know what a small town that is? Of course, she will feel threatened by an educated woman living with her only son. Of course, you must be a witch. That is the only logical conclusion she can come up with from the whole scenario.

“Did you ever talk to your mother about us?”

“I need to get to the pitch early. Let's discuss this when I get back. I'll want you back at my place tonight.”

I paused to wash my hands. Did he just say his place?

“No, I am not coming over.” I said emphatically.

“What?”

“I said no.” I walked into the living room without drying my hands. The apartment seemed too small to contain the two of us at this point.

“What is wrong with you?”

I shook my head. I was not going to allow him to manipulate me as if there was something wrong with me. I had a right to be upset. It was my right to choose not to brush away my humiliation in the name of an old woman's fragile ego, and I was ready to claim that right. “Please go,” I said, motioning towards the front door. “Go and play your football, Mr. Ronaldo, and please don't bother calling me or returning here.”

I watched him get up and leave. He closed the door behind him with a loud bang. We had never had such a heated argument, and he had never been as impatient with my dissent as he was with other people. I felt dizzy. I sat alone at my bare dining table. I tried to eat my rice. It tasted bland, nothing like the way Rebecca always made hers. I never really liked her, but she was very handy as a maid and was a good cook. I turned on the television set, but there was nothing to watch since I barely stayed at my place and didn't see the need to subscribe to cable television, though I was glad I had my television around at least. Andrew insisted that I leave it behind. He preferred a 75-inch television over my 40-inch television. I considered paying a visit to my neighbour, but on second thought, I turned around at the door and abandoned the idea. My next-door neighbour's television was too loud. I didn't mind hearing the voices of the characters in the movie she was binge-watching. I was relieved that the sound had taken my attention away from my thoughts.

I left my plate of half-eaten rice in the kitchen and walked around the flat for a while. I sat on the cold tiled floor and leaned against the wall, hoping to feel less

unmoored. Andrew's mother's visit had ruffled my feathers. I felt as if I had left my pearls lying loose for too long, and it was time to gather them and guard them more carefully. My years of praying for a stable relationship had not prepared me for the reality of dealing with Andrew's mother. Nothing prepared me for his mother's invasion of privacy, the lengths she went to test my patience, and, most importantly, her domineering attitude since she moved in with us. To be honest, my sister Somto had hinted that I was moving too fast. Everything was moving quickly, but I had tuned out and ignored Somto's advice simply because I suspected she was jealous. I was consumed with visions of myself as the wife of this man, who seemed to know what he wanted out of life. I keyed in my sister's number and cleared the screen. Despite my reservations about calling her, I dialled her number again. Her nasal voice came through on the second ring.

“Babe, did something happen?”

I felt a rush of melancholy that my sister thought something had to have happened for me to call her. “Nothing happened. “I just wanted to check in with you; it's been a while since we spoke.”

“How shocking! I must have won the lottery,” she yawned. “How's Abuja? How is that your boyfriend?”

“Andrew is fine. Abuja is fine.”

“That is great considering I have been hearing a lot in the news lately. “

“You should come and visit.”

“I prefer Ghana; Nigeria has too much wahala.”

I wanted to tell her that I had asked her to come visit. But of course, I knew she heard me and had intentionally chosen to ignore.

“I will be traveling to London next month,” she said instead. “Maybe we could go together.”

“I have too much to do here.”

“Why don't we talk anymore, sis?”

“What a question?” She sounded amused, and I could imagine that her mocking smile was pulling up one side of her mouth.

“I just want to know why we don't talk anymore,” I said. She did not respond. We were silent for so long that I felt I had to apologize. “I shouldn't keep you, sis,” I said.

“Are you coming for Daddy's retirement party?” I asked her.

“No.”

“I should have guessed. Such gatherings are not your kind of scene?”

“I shouldn't keep you,” she responded, and then the line went off. I thought of calling my mother, but then again, I didn't want her up in my business. I wished there was someone I could talk to; someone I could lean on. When I think about all the things I want in life, I'm baffled as to why it's so difficult to find a man who can water my life. If only I could be like my sister. If only I could be more like a cactus, not needing constant watering and living their own life without the need for any man to nourish them.

I held on to my phone, fondling it. My parents never approved of Andrew. I was sure my father wouldn't be happy if he knew I was still cohabiting with him. I was also certain that the frequent cash deposits into my bank account and the new Honda CRV would have been withdrawn if he knew I was still funding his lifestyle. I laughed as I recalled Andrew's mother referring to me as a gold digger. I wondered if she was aware, or maybe she was aware but found it convenient to suffer from amnesia—it wasn't like her son was born with a silver spoon. He was her only child. His father died when he was young, and his mother tried to raise him on her own with a palm oil business.

I CAN'T QUITE REMEMBER HOW it all started or how I let it happen, but Andrew had come into my life like a tsunami and swept me off my feet a mere three weeks after our paths crossed. I had met him during an entrepreneurship program in which I was

one of the program facilitators. I was quite impressed with his confidence, intellectual prowess, and command of English, which had an air of civility.

Another couple of weeks later, we were in the luxurious interior of my car, his back pressed against the passenger seat as we shared our first kiss. Andrew was good company; he was easy to talk to, and he made me laugh effortlessly. I loved the soft, soothing rumbles of his laughter, and I enjoyed the gentle flexes of his biceps. It went from “I” to “We” in a matter of months. He was gentle, and everything that concerned me mattered to him. He taught me about sex and pleasure, something I had not really explored in my past relationships.

What was it about Andrew that was so intoxicating? It wasn't just the sex, incredible as it was. I had never met anyone quite like him. Unlike other men, who felt intimidated by the fact that I am from a wealthy home with a lot of money to throw around, Andrew appeared to be comfortable. There was a power he possessed that I was deeply drawn to.

I didn't mind spending on him or footing his bills along with his numerous ideas and business ventures, yet I liked the fact that he never demanded anything from me that I wasn't ready to do for him. He always made sure he tried to provide for me, pay the bills when we went out on dates, and ensure that I got a return on my various investments in all his business ventures, except for the ones that outright failed, of course, but I didn't mind. After all, there was plenty of money to throw around.

A year and a half into the relationship, I wondered why he wasn't making any attempts to propose, considering that I am thirty-two. I didn't want to come off as desperate, so I decided to give him more time. Maybe he was waiting for a sign from God after all; they say God's timing is the best.

When my father came to see how I was doing in Abuja, he whistled when I told him I was already dating someone. He had thought of suggesting his friend's son, who lived in Canada. My father would have liked me to date a Yoruba man, but the men I had met were sweet yet too peppery for me, much like their stew. I had tried other tribes,

like the northern Muslims, with whom I didn't like the fact that mere words could change the trajectory of marriage taking you back to square one. Then there were the Southeastern men, whom I thought chauvinistic until I met Andrew. My relationship with Andrew put me in charge, and I loved every minute of it. It irked me that despite the lengths I have gone to fight for Andrew, he pretended to forget how my father wasn't happy with me gallivanting with an Igbo boy in Abuja. It didn't bother me that my father didn't approve of my relationship with a man who was five years younger than me, nor the fact that I was the one bankrolling him.

How much information did I need to be in love? Andrew and I had a lot of conversations, and he had a great command of the English language. He loved to talk, and I loved to listen to him. He frequently shared his dreams and aspirations with me. Sometimes I wondered if he did not feel his tongue was a bit too loose around me.

What puzzled me was that he never said that he would need his mother's approval before making me his wife. I never imagined losing control of the relationship and playing second fiddle to his mother. I had no idea I had a rival, and she was going to be his mother.

LATER THAT EVENING, when the doorbell rang, I climbed out of the bathtub and went to the door, wrapped in my towel. Andrew was holding a white nylon-wrapped package of grilled catfish and chips from Eja Nla; I could smell the smoky spice from where I stood.

“Are you still angry?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Get dressed, and let's go back to the apartment together. I will talk some sense to my mother.”

He was drenched in alcohol. He came in and set the grilled catfish on the table, and I caught a glimpse of his vulnerability beneath his voluble confidence in his

bloodshot eyes. So, Andrew could be scared of losing me after all. As he hugged me, I pressed my face against his neck and quietly said to him, "Let's stay here tonight, but tomorrow I'd like you to fight for us. I'd like you to speak up for us. I'd like you to inform your mother that she has overstayed her welcome."

The first time he hinted at his mother's arrival from the village, there was an awkward silence during which he looked away. Eventually, he said, "I can't take any marital decision without my mother's consent."

"When did you become a mummy's boy?" I asked him.

"Don't say it like that, Nkem."

"Hmmm. Interesting"

"You know what? She will be coming over this Sunday. It's important she likes you."

"Hmmm. Are you for real?"

He smiled. "Don't worry, babe."

On that Sunday, I wore a knee-length Ankara shirtdress instead of the jeans I typically wear. When we went to pick her up at the airport, her countenance wasn't so receptive, but I assumed she was jetlagged from the flight. Later, I learned she wasn't happy with my dress. She complained it was too short, and she could see my womanhood. While I tried to downplay the embarrassing situation, Andrew started smiling sheepishly. After she was settled, I led the way to the dining room, where I had instructed Rebecca to have a full spread laid out on the Rococo-style dining table. "Mama, I instructed the maid to prepare your favourite Oha soup."

"I hope you know how to cook." She smiled, but it had no warmth. Then, almost like an afterthought, she added, "Ajo nwa naaza aha nne ya (a bad child answers his or her mother's name)."

We ate dinner while being waited on by Rebecca. And though the food was delicious, I picked my food because it was stewing. It turned bitter when, sometime

during the meal, his mother leaned back and said, “I hope you know my son can't marry someone old enough to be his mother?”

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT THE APARTMENT the following morning, Rebecca opened the door. Though she appeared to be shocked to see me there, she had apologized and said, “Sorry Ma,” as if she were somehow responsible for Andrew's mother's behaviour. “Are you going to be staying, or have you come to pack your things?” she asked, fiddling with her apron.

“Pack my things?”

“Yes, ma,” she said after a brief pause. “Mama said you will not....”

“Get out of here right now.” I didn't let her finish her statement. I reassured myself that nothing could come between me and Andrew. “Nothing can separate us.”

I watched Rebecca go back to the kitchen, thinking of what she had said. Certainly, Andrew's mother must have put those words in her mouth, and the village nitwit didn't know when to bite her tongue. I was worried again about my future with Andrew. I wanted assurance. I wanted to ease back into my life—our life, where the two of us had been a happy couple before his mother disrupted our lives. Andrew's mother stepped into the living room, her green George-style wrapper hung stiffly on her waist, and she smacked her lips together.

“I can see that you have charmed your way back into my son's life.” She reached out to adjust her green headgear, worn low on her head which almost covered her eyebrows.

I fought the urge to respond and kept quiet. I was certain Andrew was going to speak to her, and I couldn't wait for her reaction when he eventually put her in her place. “Anyone who says my son will not have peace will not know peace. Anyone who says that I will not rest will not see rest,” she smirked, turning to Andrew, who stood by the door, arms folded and eyes downcast, as if waiting for orders. I was surprised and

shamed at the same time. While I waited for Andrew to do the needful, he just stood and waited as if he needed someone to tell him what to do. I could sense he was about to betray me again, and I peered suspiciously at him while his mother kept on raining curses on me. I wanted him to scold his mother in front of me, but he didn't do anything. I was irritated that Andrew, who was earlier fearless and outspoken, was now like a squirrel. He was like a frightened little boy who couldn't face his mother.

“Rebecca, Bikonu leave what you are doing and come here,” Mama said.

“Mama, come, let's sit down and talk. “You shouldn't be doing all this,” Andrew said, after recovering his tongue from the cat that had gotten it.

“Bia, I don't want to sit down; let me face the witch and let her know her powers won't work on me,” Mama said.

“What have I done to deserve this, Andrew?” I asked, unable to bear the whole drama any longer. Andrew's mother held Rebecca gently and led her to one of the sofa chairs in the living room.

“Biko, you're in a vulnerable state right now, and I don't want anything to happen to my grandchild.”

I froze. “Grand... What?”

I stared at Andrew, then at Rebecca, and back at his mother. Mama's voice rose, as if my continued silence had driven her to shout. “Your medicine won't work on my son. He will not marry a barren woman, unless you kill me first. Over my dead body!” His mother clapped her hands, then hooted and slapped her palm across her mouth so that the sound echoed.

“Andrew...” I said.

“Don't call my son's name, you barren witch,” his mother said. “Leave my son alone. Tell your fellow witches that your plan did not work.” She moved toward me to stand in front of me. Her voice was shrill. I couldn't seem to get hold of myself. Worse, Andrew was a witness to the entire event and was doing nothing. I picked up my bag from the table and tried to walk out towards the front door. “Where do you think you

are going?” Andrew's mother yelled; she tried to snatch roughly at the sleeve of my blouse. My hand moved to cover my exposed cleavage, and the next thing I heard was the echo of a loud silence and then the thunder of my heartbeat as her body fell past me, banging her head on the glass centre table before she landed on the floor with a loud thud. Her head moved for a moment before remaining motionless on the floor. I gasped and dropped my handbag as a chill spread through me. My heart was pounding as I looked at Andrew, who saw everything. He went on the floor to check her pulse and found none. She appeared dead. Mama! It was absurd. I stormed out of the house in shock, got into my car, and drove off. I did not look back.

I sat at the police counter, my heart racing with guilt. The officer sitting across from me was calmly taking notes as I spoke, but I could see the shock and disbelief in his eyes. I couldn't believe what I had done. Andrew's mother and I had a strained relationship, and I won't deny that I had often thought of strangling her, but I never thought I would go through with it. I never knew I would be capable of taking her life. When Andrew first checked her pulse, I could have sworn she was only pretending to be unconscious. She looked like she would get up any minute and had just relapsed temporarily. It wasn't until I saw the blood and the way her head was bent, and her legs skewed that I came to realize that she was dead. I couldn't believe what had happened. I knew I had to turn myself in and take responsibility for my actions.

I couldn't ignore the sensation of remorse as the officer proceeded to take notes. I knew my actions had irreversibly altered the lives of everyone I cared about, and I would have to live with the consequences for the rest of my life. My mind was preoccupied with how Andrew would respond to what I had done. I was worried he would abandon me and move on with Rebecca since she was pregnant with his child. I hated Andrew and couldn't help but curse the day I met him. I might have mistakenly committed manslaughter, but I am certainly sure I am ready to commit premeditated murder if I ever laid eyes on Rebecca again.

ABOUT CONTRIBUTORS

Ayobami Ogidan is a Bowen University Mass Communication graduate and a Pan-Atlantic University School of Media and Communication alumna with a master's degree in media communication. Adulthood and the necessity for a “real” job got in the way, so he became a public servant instead, and has been working in the corporate communications department of a credit risk guarantee firm for 6 years, where he contributed to 7 issues of the quarterly newsletter. He is currently working on his first unpublished anthology manuscript, and this story is one of the stories in the collection. He currently resides in Abuja.

Benjamin Cyril Arthur is a graduate from the University of Cape Coast with bachelors in English and Linguistics. Growing up, he felt accustomed to the company of books and has loved reading and writing since junior high. He’s a strong feminist who believes in equal rights regardless of gender or sexuality and hopes to change the world with his stories. He was the first runner-up in poetry in the 2020 *Samira Bawumia Literary Prize* competition and the poems and stories have now been published as an anthology titled *All Ghana a Stage*. His short stories have been published by the Ama Atta Aidoo Centre for creative writing in their lock down anthology and *Tampered Press* issue no7. His stories and poems mostly center on life in Africa. Which includes both the struggles and the beautiful joyous moments.

Debra J. White: A car accident ended Debra’s career due to a traumatic brain injury. She re-invented herself through volunteer work and writing. Debra wrote for *Animal Wellness, Arizona Republic, Social Work, Airports of the World, Psychology Today*, and others. She reviewed books, contributed book chapters and wrote a book for TFH Publications. Her website is: www.debrawhite.org

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John Grey is an Australian poet, and US resident, recently published in *Stand*, *Washington Square Review* and *Floyd County Moonshine*. Latest books, *Covert*, *Memory Outside the Head*, and *Guest Of Myself* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *McNeese Review*, *Santa Fe Literary Review* and *Open Ceilings*.

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Michael Neal Morris' most recent books are *Based on Imaginary Events* (Faerie Treehouse Press) and *The Way of Weakness*. He has published several stories, poems, and essays in print and online. He lives with his family just outside Dallas and teaches Composition and Creative Writing at Dallas College's Eastfield campus.

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Pam Munter has authored several books including *When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart* and *The Teen Agers of Monogram*, *Almost Famous*, *As Alone As I Want To Be* and *Fascinating Me: Essays from an Unconventional Life*. She's a former clinical psychologist, performer, and film historian. Her essays, book reviews, and short stories have appeared in more than 200 publications. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and is a winner of the Sara Patton Award. *Fading Fame: Women of a Certain Age in Hollywood* was published in 2021. Her work can be found at www.pammunter.com.

Philip Jay Marlin was born in Queens, NYC. He began writing at the age of twenty-eight after reading Whitman's 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* given by a friend. Living, writing, and creating visual works in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA.

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Stephanie V Sears is a French and American ethnologist (Doctorate EHESS, Paris 1993), free-lance journalist, essayist and poet whose poetry recently appeared in *The Deronda Review*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Mystic Blue Review*, *The Big Windows Review*, *Indefinite Space*, *The Plum Tree Tavern*, *Literary Yard*, *Clementine Unbound*, *Anti Heroine Chic*, *DASH*, *The Dawn Treader*, *Dodging the Rain*, *Amethyst Review*, *The Non-Conformist Magazine*, *SORTES*, Short-listed in 2009 for a Pushcart Prize. Her first book of poetry: *The Strange Travels of Svinhilde Wilson* was published by Adelaide Book in 2020.

Stephen Wunderli is a writer living in Utah, USA. He has travelled much of the world and has published short stories in *The Kalahari Review*, *The Dawn Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Grub Street Literary Magazine*, and *The Write Room*.

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Art is sudden, almost forceful in creation; its offerings are subtle, but never transient. –

Dami Lare

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Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing. – Benjamin

Franklin