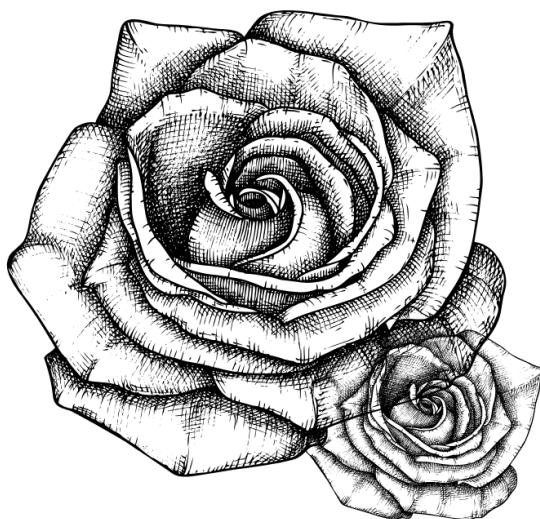


DOMINIQUE

Literary Magazine



Volume 1 Issue 1



Dominique

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Dominique

Vol. I Iss. I

We founded Dominique because we believe there are more deserving submissions than there are literary magazines to publish them. We came to this conclusion after working for several other literary magazines and having to be part of that rejection process. While Dominique aims to publish artful writing, our blog format, rolling submissions, and personalized rejection letters are intended to make this a writer friendly venue.

That is to say, we feel no pressure to limit the number of acceptances we make. Our issues are published whenever we have a decent number of accepted stories (usually eight prose pieces and however many poems we've accepted in the same time) and everything we publish is also available on our website. So if we have two great pieces, we don't have to choose. We can take both. And we are also open to reprints.

Dominique especially aims to publish young and beginning authors. All of us are at this stage in our own careers, or we have just recently emerged from it, and we have a great appreciation for

what it means to be published. First and foremost, publication is a validation of a writer's value. Writing is an intensely personal process. The huge amounts of self-worth invested in a writer's finished product make rejection from literary magazines sometimes feel like a judgement on the validity of the author's experience, perspective, and voice. But this also means that the opposite is true. Publication affirms the author's belief in their own work.

In this economy, in these times, we all need reassurance.

Our literary magazine is entirely self-funded and run by volunteers, all writers I have met through my time in undergrad and completing an MFA at Old Dominion University, which is the "Dominion" being alluded to in Dominique. We are an imperfect organization.

But we are also honest. If we like your work, we will tell you we like your work, and we will support you throughout the publication process. Some of our contributors have published books since they were published by us, and we work to promote their work even after their initial publication. We also maintain our blog Marginalia to discuss the behind-the-scenes aspects of running a literary magazine, including our decision-making process.

In terms of what we want to publish, don't worry too much about that. Write something with heart, with compelling characters, where something happens, in a specific time and place, that shows us something about ourselves in a new way. You know, whatever it is that makes good literature. If you still want specifics, then here is our mission statement.

Our mission is to discover and publish exceptional and spirited writing that speaks to your lived experience. We publish writing that is beautiful, truthful, and willing to experiment with form and subject. While we do not discriminate in who we publish, we are particularly interested in debut authors and voices who are not already represented in other literary magazines. As readers of Roberto Bolaño, Han Kang, Octavia Butler, J.M. Coetzee, and Oe Kenzaburo, we appreciate dangerous work dealing with taboo subjects that you may have had trouble placing elsewhere. But

while we are hard to offend, we also have a hard line for what we tolerate. We will not read work that glorifies or revels in violence, hate speech, and any form of discrimination — and this list is not exhaustive. Please consider before submitting any work whether you are comfortable with it being read by people who are similar to the characters you depict.

To my point about imperfection, the incredible Devika Rege, author of *Quarterlife*, was kind enough to let me know that the original version of this quote had misspelled J.M. Coetzee's name! But we edited and learn and try not to make the same mistakes twice.

This is an exciting opportunity, and we thank you for joining on this journey. So send us your writing, and please query if you haven't heard back from us in two weeks. I look forward to reading your work.

On behalf of Dominique's incredible team,
Thank you for your support.

—Henry Stevens
Editor-in-Chief
Jul. 3, 2025

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The Farewell Tour

Gregory Smith

“Why do you need the cane, Pop? You’re in the wheelchair. You’re not going to hit me with that cane, are you?”

Willie Monroe and his son Jake were searching the parking lot, heads down, peering on the ground. The lot was located next to a Boy’s and Girl’s Club in St. Louis, Missouri.

“Of course not,” replied the old man. “You’ll see why I need the cane. Let’s go!”

“Wait a minute, Pop, what’s over there, next to the red Buick?” asked the son. “Look, there it is! Do you see it?”

Once certain that this was the location they were searching for, Jake set the brakes on his father’s wheelchair. The old man swung his cane in the air, Jake well out of range, like he was proceeding through some sort of ritual. After several minutes of this odd behavior, the old man said he was ready to go. Jake wheeled him back to the car.

They loaded up and moved on. The old man fell asleep in the

front seat as they got on the turnpike, Chicago bound. A good time to call their neighbor, thought Jake, who was watching the dog while he was gone.

“Hey, Luther, it’s Jake. Everything ok at home? How’s Cletus?” Jake asked.

“Cletus is fine. We just had ourselves some snacks,” Luther said.

“Luther, what did I tell you? No snacks. That dog is chunky enough. The vet said he’s got to lose some weight. Stick with the diet, as we agreed.”

“Ok, ok. I didn’t think pizza would hurt him none. How’s your father?” he asked, quickly changing the subject.

“He’s sleeping here in the car. We just left St. Louis, on the way to Chicago.”

“St. Louis? Why are you in St. Louis? You are watching the Cardinals play?”

Luther ought to have known the route. Jake and his old man had planned it out last spring. He wanted to visit the old Negro League baseball stadiums.

“He wanted to see the spot where home plate was located at old Sportsmen Park,” Jake said, “That’s why we were in St. Louis today”

“So, let me get this straight: You’re not going to see a real baseball game in a real baseball park. You drove all the way to St. Louis to see where a stadium, which no longer exists, used to be? That’s some crazy shit,” Luther remarked. “The Alzheimer’s really got your old man something bad. Why do you let him do this to you? There’s no stadium there no more.”

“I know,” answered the son. “He calls this trip his ‘Farewell Tour’, whatever that means. Listen, Luther- you may think he’s crazy, but he is my father. He never asked anything of me before. And I know he’s only going to get worse, according to the doctors. So, that’s why I took a few weeks off work and we are on the road. If nothing else, it’s a bonding experience.”

“Damn if I would drive a thousand miles just to bond with my old man,” Luther said. “Say, what does he want to see where all the

old stadiums were? Your Pop never played in the Major Leagues; he played in the old Negro Leagues.”

“I know that” Jake snapped. “But this is what the old man wants, and whatever the old man wants, he gets. “

“When are you coming home?”

“In about a week. I’m not sure how long this will take,” Jake replied. “We still have a bunch of cities to hit yet.”

§

Old White Sox Park, otherwise known as Comiskey Park, used to be in the parking lot of New Comiskey Park, in Chicago. That is where they quickly located home plate (or what once was home plate). Once again, the old man went through his gyrations. He sat at the spot where White Sox and American League batters hit for eighty years. He remained in silence, somberly contemplating the moment, like a worshipper in prayer at a holy shrine, finally asking to leave, almost in tears from the experience. Jake didn’t get it, but his was not a reason to ask why, only to act as a taxi.

Away to the next city on the agenda- Minneapolis.

The site of the former Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington, Minnesota was inside the Mall of America, the largest shopping mall in the country. Smack dab in the middle of the gigantic mall was an amusement area for children called “Nickelodeon Universe”. It was there, among dozens and dozens of kids, that they located home plate.

While Willie went through his now-familiar reverent homage, Jake fondly remembered Metropolitan Stadium as the home of the NFL’s Vikings. ‘The Purple People Eaters’, as their front four was passionately known, did their dirty work every Sunday on the frozen turf of Minnesota, guys like Alan Page and Carl Eller, terrorizing NFL backfields.

Jake loved football more than baseball. He had soured on baseball after learning of the racism his father and other blacks endured while playing the game before it was integrated. Jake and

baseball bitterly did not mix; how dare they treat his father and other black players that way, he thought.

Meanwhile, the old man was lost in his own little world, singing the virtues of the Twins Hall of Famers Rod Carew and Tony Oliva.

“Magicians with the bat,” Willie remarked. “Hard to strike out. Always put the ball in play. Damned great hitters.”

A ten-year-old boy stood nearby with his mother, listening in bewilderment until, to Jake’s embarrassment, Willie’s language became a little too salty for her liking.

“I’m swearing at the damn pitcher not the kid!” Willie explained.

Exactly what would have been 520-feet left center of home plate stood a stadium chair, painted red, signifying the longest home run ever hit at the old Met, a titanic blast by the great Harmon Killebrew. This truly was a sacred spot in the history of baseball.

Jake allowed Willie all the time he needed to reflect, to gesture, yes, even to pray, before they left the mall behind. Of course, he had to touch that Killebrew home run chair.

“God, I LOVE Baseball!” Willie sighed.

“Pop, weren’t you ever bitter about the way you and the other black players were treated back then?” Jake asked as they approached their car. “Sure, son,” Willie replied. “We couldn’t figure out why. Just because our skin was dark that doesn’t change what kind of people we were on the inside. That didn’t change our heart or our love for the game. Most of us were damn good ball players. I played with and against Aaron, Banks, Robinson, even Willie Mays. That was in the Negro Leagues. Why did it have to stop there?”

§

Crosley Field in Cincinnati was home to the Reds for fifty-eight years. It was particularly known for its “Terrace” in left field. The

“Terrace” was an unusual slope near the outfield wall, built instead of a warning track. Every old park had a quirk like the “Terrace.” Jake and Willie found Crosley Field’s home plate in an alley between two buildings. There was no fancy plaque to designate the area like other historic home plates. It was simply a white home plate, painted on the asphalt, with a simple sign nearby.

Willie had a rather unusual reaction when he was wheeled alongside the marker.

“I see it! I see the terrace and the scoreboard!” he yelled, his voice echoing along the alley. “I see everything right in front of my eyes! Frank Robinson, the great one, hit right here. I can feel it! Vada Pinson! Oh, what a hitter he was! Pete Rose, you devil you! This is where you got many of your hits, slapping the ball here and there, line drives everywhere! Oh, I can see it all before me.”

Jake began to worry about his father’s increasing delusions. He had checked with the doctors before embarking on this trip. In fact, they thought it might do Willie some good, maybe spark a memory or two. “Fantasy Validation” is what the doctor called it.

Who knows why Willie asked to do this “Farewell Tour”? Maybe it was his way of saying goodbye to the game he loved so much for so long?

§

Forbes Field in Pittsburgh was next on the list. Willie described the park’s beauty in the car as they entered the city of Pittsburgh: Ivy-covered outfield walls, much like Wrigley Field in Chicago; a large hand-operated scoreboard in left-center field, with a gigantic clock attached to the top. Iconic, stately, classic. This was the place where the great Bill Mazeroski, the tobacco-chewing second baseman of the Pirates, launched a ninth-inning blast to beat the Yankees in Game Seven of the 1960 World Series; it’s where the legendary Roberto Clemente patrolled right field, making his signature basket catches and showing-off his rocket right arm; and where the Hall of Famer Willie Stargell, also nicknamed “Pops”,

began his career, hitting moonshot home runs over center and right field.

They pulled up to Posvar Hall at the University of Pittsburgh very early one sun-splashed September morning. It didn't take long to find a home plate in the lobby. The relic was encased in glass, embedded in the floor. Oddly, Willie didn't have the same excitement as he approached this home plate.

"What in blue-blazes is wrong here?" Willie erupted. "Something's wrong, son! Something is wrong indeed! This is not the place!"

"It's right here, Pop," Jake said. "See it! The authentic home plate of Forbes Field. This is the spot."

"No, it is not," the old man insisted. "I don't see no light tower. No grandstand around us. No scoreboard in left."

"Neither do I," said Jake.

A security guard was watching this scene play out several feet away and began to stroll over to the pair.

"Pop, I don't know what to tell you," Jake said, exasperated. Each time Jake took off the wheelchair brakes to leave, Willie would slam them back on.

"Can I help you gentlemen," the guard politely asked.

"My father thinks this isn't the Forbes Field home plate when it clearly says right there that it is," Jake said.

"I never said anything about that not being home plate," the old man countered. "I said this is not the right spot where it was located."

"He's right," the guard affirmed.

Jake looked surprised. "Then why is home plate here?"

"Because the real location is in a nearby Ladies Room.," the guard answered. "Fifth stall."

"Is there any possible way to see the exact location?" asked Jake. "It's kind of important to my father."

"Not unless he intends to change his gender," said the guard.

"I knew Honus Wagner," Willie said, "If that helps any."

"Sorry," the guard answered. "This is the best we can do,

old-timer.”

“Well, you got a gun—I can’t argue with you,” the old man said, laughing. “Let’s go, son.”

§

On their way to Yankee Stadium, they stopped for breakfast. While Pop dipped his scrambled eggs into a patch of ketchup on his plate, he shared his opinion on various baseball-related topics. He could talk about baseball for hours. This morning, he went on a rant about the “new” baseball stadiums:

“They’re alright,” he started, like he was lecturing a class on Baseball 101. “Everything old is new again. In the seventies, they started replacing the old places with those new, cookie-cutter, multi-purpose shit boxes. Ugly as sin. They finally started realizing that they were shit boxes, so in the nineties they started making them look old again. Places like Camden Yards. Why didn’t they keep them old in the first place? Now, every stadium must have a corporate name. Like ‘Citizens Bank Park’. If that was the case, back in the day, there wouldn’t be no ‘Crosley Field’ or ‘Forbes Field’. It would be the name of some jackass corporation. They are taking all the charm out of baseball. It’s all about money, damn it...”

“Pop, how come you’re not bitter about the way Baseball treated you back in the day?” Jake said.

“I wish it was different, son,” Willie began. “I wish I could go back and do it all over again. Maybe, if I could go back, I would tell players like Jackie Robinson, Judy Johnson, and others not to give up hope. Our sacrifice, our suffering, what we endured would not be in vain. If only they knew.”

“Baseball is a great game, son. The game will always be there. No matter the color of a man’s skin, no matter his religion, no matter where he is from- it doesn’t change the fact that Baseball is a GREAT game. In the end, Baseball will survive.”

When they reached the new Yankee Stadium, they found that

the grounds to old Yankee Stadium- The House That Ruth Built- was now a public park called Heritage Field. The original home plate area was now somewhere around second base in the new Yankee Stadium.

“Well, I can’t let you in, just to hang around second base,” the stadium guard said. “Buy a ticket to this afternoon’s game. After the game they are doing ‘Seniors Stroll the Bases’. You can get all your pictures then.”

That’s exactly what they did. The Yanks beat Boston, 3-2, then fans were invited down on the field. Rows and rows of older fans lined up to take their turn to stroll the bases, the line reaching outside and around the stadium.

The stroll- with Pop in his wheelchair- was enjoyable, even for Jake. Not often do you get the chance to be on a big- league field. When they reached their destination, second base, Willie yelled to stop. He wanted to stand ON second base, as the traffic behind them grew more congested.

“Pop, what are you doing? We must keep moving!” Jake implored. “This is a stroll, not a camp-out!”

“This is it, son,” Willie exclaimed, standing from his chair. “This is where the Bambino stood, hitting baseballs out of sight. Lou Gehrig, The Iron Horse. What an RBI machine! Joltin’ Joe DiMaggio stood on this very spot! I feel it- I feel the vibes! I can see the mound. Why, it’s old Bob Feller himself! Rapid Robert! His fastball would whiz by so fast you could hear it hum. You’re going down today, Bob! I’m going to knock that fastball clear over the monuments in straight center field. Lay one in there, Bobby- boy!”

On and on he went, swinging his cane like a baseball bat, calling the pitches: “That’s a strike- I’ll give you that one. Come on, Bob! You can throw harder than that! Why, you throw like a little girl! Throw one right in my wheelhouse!”

“Sorry, folks!” said an embarrassed Jake, helping fans go around his father.

Willie swung his cane one last time in a mighty upper-cut motion. “He got me, damn it, he got me.” With that, the old man

plopped down in his chair, slumping forward in disgust. Then he burst into tears, his head in his hands. Jake stood frozen, surprised and heartbroken by his father's sudden outburst of emotion.

"I belong here! Get away from me! I belong here, son! They said we couldn't play. They didn't let us. They didn't let us..." he wept.

"What's the hold-up here?" an older, irritated woman asked.

"Keep moving, pal!"

"Excuse us, ma'am," Jake replied. "My father is a little emotional right now, seeing Yankee Stadium and all. He used to play in the old Yankee Stadium when he was in the Negro Leagues. I hope you can understand?" The woman nodded and her expression softened.

Jake put his arm around his father's shoulder. "Come on, Pop, let's finish our stroll," he said.

With that, they slowly rolled to third base, then to home plate, the old man looking so sad as they exited the field.

"High and inside. Feller knew I could never hit high cheese. Good scouting. I got to tip my hat to him," Willie mumbled in the car.

Meanwhile Jake got on his phone.

"Luther? It's Jake. We just left Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. We'll be home in a couple of days. I want you to do me a favor..."

§

Howard University Hospital in Washington, D.C. was their next destination. The university bought the Griffith Stadium property in 1964 and demolished the then dilapidated steel and concrete structure. A beautiful hospital now stood on the site. The only memory of the once-proud stadium was the home plate located somewhere in a hospital hallway.

"Go down the main hallway, around the corner from the elevators, next to the bathroom, and that's where you will find it," said a hospital employee.

There it was, a simple monument to the past: a white home plate and a batter's box painted on the gray tiled hospital floor. A large black and white photo of the exact location hung on the wall in front of them.

“Hard to believe what was here,” the old man reminisced. “This was all open. Trees beyond the outfield fence, the bright green grass of the infield. This is where Walter ‘Big Train’ Johnson smoked fastballs by the over-matched hitters. This is the spot where the great Mickey Mantle blasted the longest home run ever hit- 565-feet to right field, over the roof and completely out of the damn stadium. Josh Gibson was the only other player to do that, hit a ball out of this park.”

“I thought you told me that blacks weren’t allowed to play in major league stadiums until Jackie Robinson,” Jake asked.

“That’s right,” Willie replied. “But the legendary Homestead Greys, they played many of their home games here on Sundays. We used to take the train down to D.C. to watch them play. They played for three seasons here, when the Senators were out of town. The folks used to come and see the Grays play because that was good baseball back then. The Senators were a bad, bad team. You ever hear the saying ‘Washington- first in war, first in peace, last in the American League?’ That’s how it was.

“Think about it, son: They let the Greys, a black team, play ball here, yet the boys would go to get food after the game and were denied service. It’s hard to believe now. Someone who may have watched them play that afternoon and cheered for the Greys, that same person might own a restaurant and not allow them to eat dinner there. All because of the color of their skin.”

“I am really sorry, Pop,” the son apologized.

“Sorry for what, son?”

“I am sorry that you and other black athletes had to endure that kind of racism,” Jake said, shaking his head. “It’s ironic that Howard University, one of the oldest black universities, would put a hospital here- a place of healing.”

“The black fans had to sit in the right field pavilion over there

when the white Senators played. That's where we were told to sit. But we were happy. We were all happy just to be at a baseball game."

The pair took a few silent moments to ponder what had happened and what life was like now. Some things were better left in the past.

"Things sure have changed," Pop remarked, gazing at the wall. A wall that signified the end of an era.

§

Jake and his father pulled into the train station bright and early the next morning.

"Why are we at a train station, son?"

"It's a little surprise. "We're going to take the train back to Philadelphia," Jake informed. "Just like the old days."

"We traveled by bus most of the time," Willie said.

"Now you tell me. We are not taking the bus. I already bought the train tickets."

"What about the car?" Willie asked.

Just then someone rapped on the passenger front window, "Hey, Mister Monroe! Roll down your window! It's me, Luther!"

Sure enough, there stood Luther, their neighbor, with a toothy grin.

"I know it's you, dummy!" said the old man. "What are you doing here?"

"Pop, I asked Luther to take the train down to Washington to meet us. He's going to drive the car back to Philly while we ride the train back," interjected the son.

§

All the way from Washington to Philadelphia, Willie told his son stories about life playing baseball in the Negro Leagues. He had never confided about his baseball life so much as he did on

that train ride. Maybe because Jake was interested like never before to listen. It was almost as though Willie had a need to relate these stories before they were forever lost in time.

“Buck Leonard,” Willie said, “was one of my best friends back in the day, even though he played for the Grays. He was known as the ‘Black Lou Gehrig’ because he played first base and hit behind the ‘Black Babe Ruth’, none other than Josh Gibson, another friend of mine. We all got along. And we all loved Baseball. We had to- there was no money in it. We played for love of the game, son. All we wanted was a shot to play in the Major Leagues. Sadly, most of us never had that chance.”

The corner of Twenty-first Street and Lehigh Avenue was quiet on a chilly, fall Tuesday night. It used to be a bustling block when Shibe Park- later known as Connie Mack Stadium- was there. It was once home to the Philadelphia Athletics and the Philadelphia Phillies. When it opened on April 12, 1909, it was the first concrete and steel baseball stadium. The A’s beat the Red Sox. 8-1 that day. The Phillies squeaked by the Montreal Expos, 2-1, in October of 1970 to close the old ballpark down on its last day. In between, there were championships- all won by the A’s- and lots of losing seasons- mostly by the Phils. There were also All-Star games, concerts, and even high school and professional football games graced Shibe Park in its heyday.

“Hey, I remember you bringing me here when I was a boy,” Jake said.” I remember the thrill I felt when I first saw the light towers as we approached the stadium. We would pay a quarter to neighborhood kids to ‘watch’ our car so the hoodlums in the area wouldn’t steal the tires. So much I remember about this place: It smelled like a ballpark. It looked like a ballpark. Everything about it, from the vendors yelling to the aroma of hot dogs, peanuts and cigars. It was real baseball.”

Jake was surprised by how nostalgic he had become. Maybe he was learning something from his father. Maybe he understood Willie a little better now after this “Farewell Tour.” Maybe he didn’t need to hate the game of baseball just because of the racism of the

past. If Pop could find forgiveness in his heart, maybe he could too.

§

Shibe Park – or the ground where it once majestically stood – was now an evangelical church. How appropriate to build a house of worship on such a revered spot.

“What are we doing now?” Luther asked from the back seat.

“We are going to find home plate,” informed Jake.

Instead, they found a Pennsylvania state historical marker, which read:

SHIBE PARK/ CONNIE MACK STADIUM

Early Major League baseball park opened here in 1909. Renamed, 1953. Home to Athletics, 1909-1954; Phillies, 1938-1970. Site of three Negro League World Series; five A's World Series victories. Among first to host night games. Razored, 1976.

They wandered around the lot, looking for the exact spot where the home plate had once been. It was getting dark and a breeze kicked up, spinning dried, crumpled leaves across the lot. The overhead streetlights fought to switch on, at last shining a faint glow on the vicinity.

“It’s right here,” Willie whispered. “Stop right here, son. This is the place. This is where the batter’s box used to be. I can feel the vibes.”

Luther started laughing before Jake told him to be quiet. The old man knew what he was doing.

“Pop, are you sure? There’s no plaque here.”

“Damned the plaque,” Willie insisted. “It was right here, son. Wait...look!”

Willie gasped, craning his neck to scan the entire parking lot. He was practically jumping out of his wheelchair with excitement.

“Don’t you see it?” Willie said, amazement in his voice. “It’s

all around us, shining bright. The lights! The grandstand is taking shape as I speak. Look! There's the left field roof! Jimmie Foxx used to smash baseballs clear over that roof and onto the street back there. I bet if we went back there right now, we would find a few tarnished baseballs rolling around the gutters. Look over there at the pitcher's mound! Why, that's none other than Satchel Paige warming up! Well, that doesn't surprise me none. I have witnessed Satchel pitch both legs of a doubleheader more than a few times.

“The legendary Kansas City Monarchs! That's right, we played them quite a few times at Shibe Park. They were the best. June 21st, 1943- we beat those Monarchs for the first time. I still remember getting dressed in the A's locker room that day. Can you imagine that? Using the same stall as Foxx or Al Simmons?”

“I need to stand up, damn it,” growled Willie. The old man was shaking as he struggled getting to his feet. Jake gave him a steady hand while Luther looked on, dumbfounded.

“That's right, Satchel, throw me one, right over the heart of the plate. You're not striking me out this time!”

Willie swung his cane in the air for strike one. “You got me that time. But I'm ready for you now. Let's go!”

“What the hell is going on here?” Luther exclaimed.

Jake didn't bother to answer, for as soon as he helped his father to his feet, he could see everything play out in front of him: the parrot-green baseball diamond, glowing and glistening under the powerful lights; the grandstands all around him, buzzing with activity, packed with fans, most wearing hats; the smell of stale beer and onions in the warm air. It even felt like summertime again. Everything- just like when he was a boy, like the first time Willie brought him here.

Magically, Willie Monroe was now wearing an off- white jersey emblazoned with the red lettered words “Phila. Stars” on the front. He swung a real ash baseball bat instead of a cane. The players, the umpires, the fans, the batboy- they all looked real, not ghost-like or like a hologram. Everything was real- from the sweat on Willie's weathered face to the sound of the radio announcer de-

scribing the on-going game to the clicking of the distant teletype machine, sending the score all around the league.

Jake's mouth hung open in awe at the scene.

The catcher returned to his position after his brief meeting on the mound. "Play ball!" bellowed the black-clad ump, adjusting his enormous chest-protector.

Willie stepped into the batter's box with a determined look on his face. He took a few practice swings from the right-hand side of the plate, his intense brown eyes burning a hole in the fearsome pitcher sixty feet six inches away. Satchel Paige, toeing the rubber, went into his unorthodox windmill wind-up. A blazing high fastball popped into the catcher's mitt.

"Strike!" cried the umpire.

"Strike? If that ball was any higher, I'd need a stepladder to reach it," Willie said to the ump. He spit a wad of tobacco juice on the grass before stepping back into the box.

"Come on, Pop!" Jake encouraged from the on-deck circle. "You can do it!"

"You're throwing pure country heat, eh?" the old man mumbled. "No curveball? Just going to blow me away, Satchel? Is that what you are planning to do?"

"I don't see nothing," lamented Luther. "Y'all are crazy. Like it's some kind of 'Field of Dreams' shit. I'm walking back to the car."

"Pop was right," Jake mumbled to himself, still stunned. "All this time, he was right."

Ghostly Paige went into his funky, windmill-like wind-up again, this time looping a beautiful curveball over the plate. It had a perplexing twelve-to-six break, surprising Willie, who froze with the bat still on his shoulder.

"Strike Two!" yelled the ump. The crowd cheered, eager for the strike-out.

"Time-out!" Willie shouted. He walked back to the on-deck circle, kneeling next to his son, dusting his bat with an old resin bag.

"Son, you know how much I love Baseball. I belong here. I've

decided to stay this time. Josh and the boys are offering me a contract to stay on and play ball. You have your own life. This is mine. This is where I belong. Do you understand, son? Baseball is in my blood.”.

“I understand,” Jake said. “This isn’t a dream. It’s REAL. I can’t keep you away from this. You’ve got to stay, Pop. But I’m going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you too, son,” Willie replied. “When you think of me, know that I’m doing what I love. Know that my spirit will always be alive if Baseball is alive.”

Willie and Jake warmly embraced.

“Let’s go, batter!” the umpire roared.

“Go get them, Pop!” Jake said.

Willie, with the gait of a much younger man, strode into the batter’s box once more.

“What now, Satchel? Going to show me ‘Uncle Charlie’ again? Or do I see the heater? The moment has arrived!” he said.

Crack! Willie slashed his forty-ounce bat at another blistering fastball, this time crushing the old horsehide into the night.

“I’m pretty sure I got all of it,” he yelled as the crowd gasped as one.

When a one hundred mile-an-hour fastball meets a forty-ounce bat, something’s got to give. Willie dropped his bat and admired his shot. The baseball appeared like a fading white comet in the dark sky, vanishing over the roof of the left field grandstand. He stood there only for a moment. Afterall, he didn’t want to show up his friend, Satchel, who was also watching the mammoth home run in wonderment.

“Satchel Paige, you’re still the best I ever hit against!” Willie shouted as he joyfully rounded the bases.

Jake jumped in the air, arms raised in triumph, cheering for his father. He felt like a kid again.

When Willie touched home plate the scene instantly dissolved into what it had been before: a windy, cold and barren church parking lot.

§

Jake slowly headed back to the car, pushing the empty wheelchair. Luther was already in the back seat, trying to get warm.

“Where’s your father?” Luther asked out the window. “Where did he go?”

“I imagine right about now Pop is sitting in the dugout, talking baseball with his teammates,” Jake surmised.

He folded the wheelchair, lifting it into the trunk. He heard a noise near his feet. He looked down and saw an old, weather-beaten, tarnished baseball slowly rolling toward him, only to be stopped by the left rear wheel of the vehicle. Jake picked up and ball and noticed a faded signature in blue ink. The ball was signed by his father.

A knowing smile crossed his face. Willie Monroe was playing baseball again

A Brief Romance

Chris Carrel

I had not intended to fall in love with a bumblebee, but then who means to fall in love with anyone? It just happens, like the arrival and departure of seasons, the weather of love is shaped by greater forces than can be seen. At the time I met her, I was sitting in my backyard writing hut distracting myself from a screenplay rewrite on a reboot of a reboot. It wasn't my first rodeo with a script written by committee, and mutated by market data and favorability algorithms, but I was beginning to hope it might be my last. I had begun to refer to myself as a script technician and at times doubted whether I qualified as a real writer anymore.

On that day, blessed diversion found me through the window. Pacific Northwest springs arrive in riotous explosions of green shades and colorful blossoms that flood your eyeballs and inebriate the spirit. It is a season prone to confabulation, declaring itself eternal, erasing all thoughts of the recent winter and foreclosing premonitions of fall returning. So bright were the yellow, red,

purple and orange flowers amid the riot of green, that it was hard to believe they couldn't live forever. Some of the flowers I saw were even dancing, bowing up and down like drunken congregants at a baptist revival, though the day was breezeless and sunny. I went outside to have a closer look and found the culprit of this mystery dance was bees. Fuzzy, black and yellow bumblebees, the kind you commonly see here during spring and summer. As a bee would land in a California poppy's orange bowl of petals, their weight caused the tall flower to crash towards the dirt. The long spindly, green stem was just strong enough to hold bee and flower bouncing an inch or two above the surface. When the bee flew off after a few seconds of pollen gathering, the stem rebounded launching its orange flower like an amusement park ride back to its original position. The combined effect of the bumblebees coming and going among the twenty or so long-stemmed poppies was like watching piano hammers repeatedly striking the strings without sound. The motion was mesmerizing.

As I watched the bees fly in and out of the flowers, one bumblebee, in particular, caught my eye. Though she looked the same as her sisters, with a fuzzy black body striped by three thicker yellow bands circling her backside, she flitted from flower to flower with a verve that set her apart in my view. She worked hard, as bees must, but she moved her body with the lightness and precision of a dancer and the playfulness of a new lover. She seemed to enjoy what she was doing. You might think that all bees of a species look and act alike, but I felt certain this girl was special.

This was a bee who appreciated life and the work she had to do in it. I could use some of that, is what I thought, at the time. Lately, my own work had been reduced to a paycheck. I made a good enough income that a career change seemed out of the question, but it had been a long time since I felt joy in it, or pride in the eventual movie. On the rare occasion that I saw the finished film, I often could not tell what if anything of my writing made it into the theater.

Ever since I was a young girl, I wanted to be a writer of short

stories, but there's no money in that. It's been years since I'd even tried to write new fiction. Now, I wrote not to create something original in the world, but to do the opposite and to make my house payments in the process. If I could sit down and write without any external pressures, I could be happy, I thought. Like a bee flying between flowers, lapping up nectar from the fertile folds of brightly colored blossoms. Instead, I was a trained monkey chained to a laptop and forced to regurgitate tired, old tropes over and over again.

“I hope it's alright if I watch you work?” I said to the little black bumble butt sticking out of the petals as the orange flower hovered off the ground.

Pardon me? she buzzed, then grumbled in a lower register. Hang on.

Her translucent wings worked furiously to lift her fuzzy body from the flower. As the poppy rebounded she came to hover in front of my face while I repeated the question.

I'm not working, I'm living, she said in a voice like a song played by many tiny instruments. You can watch me living. It's as free as spring pollen.

I had never before looked so closely into the face of a bumblebee. Her breath smelled sweet and floral, like a fresh bouquet. She was beautiful in her terrifying perfection, a heart-shaped face covered in yellow fuzz and capped on opposite sides with large, black teardrop eyes that were as mysterious as a deep lake. Two antennae danced expressively above her head. Coquettishly, if I wasn't mistaken.

“If you're sure you don't mind,” I pressed.

Yes, Yes! She laughed. Maybe later, I'll watch you living for a while.

She descended into the bowl of another poppy flower, which bowed and danced to her presence.

“Is that as fun as it looks?” I called as she moved to a nearby flower, but she didn't respond. Before flying back to her home, though, she made an orbit of my head and called out, You should try it sometime, sweetie! before flashing away toward the trees at

the edge of the yard. If I didn't know better, I would have thought she had just flirted with me.

It rained the next morning, and the bees and other flying insects stayed hidden. Apart from the spare robin or crow, falling water was the only thing that moved in the yard. The leaves of the trees and plants drooped under the weight of the rain and lent the morning a depressed and defeated feel. I shut myself inside the shed for much of the day, finding myself surprisingly productive, despite my sullen, cloud-sodded mood.

The Sun returned late in the morning and as I walked to the house for lunch, I saw the California poppies beginning to dance anew. When I returned to the shed, I saw that my new friend was back at work, busying herself with a prodigious patch of buttercups and dandelions that dominated a corner of my shabbily maintained lawn.

“Hello, Poppy,” I called to her as I walked by, summoning the name from the flower I first saw her at. “It’s a beautiful day for flowers.” She waggled her rump in greeting as she combed busily through the anthers of a lofty dandelion. Her tiny black feet danced expertly on the thin golden petals, her wings lifting where needed. I wanted to stay and watch the grace and artistry of her efforts but I had to return to work.

Later that afternoon, a tapping on the window broke my concentration and I looked up to see Poppy wiggling her antennae at me. I opened the door to let her in and she cruised about the tiny, cramped space in a gentle arc, surveying my overloaded bookshelf, the unreliable printer and the desk covered in manila folders, notebooks and index cards. The buzzing of her wings sang around the small room as she approached me. The warm, itchy smell of pollen teased my nose.

I’m on my way home to deposit food but I wanted to remind you to smell the flowers. They’re one of the best things in life.

“I will,” I promised. “But if I get too busy in here you might have to come remind me.”

Her antennae and facial hairs shuddered slightly, an expression

I would later learn to be the bumblebee equivalent of blushing.

I do get busy myself, but I like you so I will try. With that she buzzed her way out the door.

I went directly outside and smelled buttercups, tiny tips, and Oregon sunshine, along with a pumpkin-hued poppy. As I inhaled each flower, I asked if she had been there.

Poppy and I saw each other frequently over the next several days as she flew about the garden. She often knocked at my window to tip her antennae in greeting. We exchanged small talk about the weather, the flowers that were in season, and the miscellany of our respective days. She was easy to talk to and our conversations flit brightly among topics, like a bee sampling sweet blossoms.

Then followed a few days in which we didn't see each other. I had a number of meetings and appointments to attend in the midst of a string of cool, wet days. I missed her company and felt irritable and incomplete. In this state, I began drafting a short story about a lonely Irish nurse in 1950s Kansas and the injured farmer she cares for in the hospital. I kept telling myself it was too sappy and the writing weak, but I kept working on it, driven by the sudden, powerful need to write something original.

By Wednesday, I had to return to scriptwriting and did so in a miserable mood, despite the Sun's return. The gray, cloudy weather of the past few days seemed to have taken up residence inside me. I had fallen behind on the script so I forced myself into productivity in the way that desperate writers under deadline can sometimes do, punching out tight sentences that had previously eluded me. Around three in the afternoon, I went into the house for coffee. When I returned to my chair I found a small pile of yellow pollen left on one of the note cards on my desk.

The gift was a perfect antidote to my sulk and I could have kissed her, if such a thing were possible. She remained unseen the rest of the day and I worked into the night to finish my rewrites and send them off to the script manager. Contrary to the happy reunion I imagined, Poppy came to my office the next morning in great distress. I held my hand in front of my face so that she could

land in the palm. As she spoke, waves of emotion rippled through her fine hairs and delicate wings, and lightly tickled my skin beneath her feet.

Her sisters had taken notice of our friendship. They disapproved from the start, but had let it slide until she gave me her gift of pollen.

Giving hive resources to anyone else is a crime, she droned woefully.

“But you collected that yourself,” I objected. Perhaps, a bit too hotly, but, as a writer I felt keenly the sting of misappropriation.

Hive law says all that comes from the hive, and all goes to the hive, so I am guilty. She lowered her head and her antennae drooped slightly. The play of light and shadows in my office highlighted the tiny, fine hexagons composing her compound eyes. There was something strangely human in such alien beauty and the realization of my feelings for her arrived in a sudden jolt of clarity. I threw all caution to the wind.

“Not everything comes from the hive, Poppy.” I touched my free hand to my heart, hoping the meaning of the gesture would come through as I confessed my love for her.

“The hive has no claim on my feelings or the person I see who inspired those emotions. And unless I am wrong, you feel something like this as well...”

Oh, I do, Colleen! She buzzed brightly again and her antennae danced with the truth of it. You call to me like a flower.

“Well, the hive didn’t make that either,” I said as calmly as I could while my heart took flight within my chest. “We made that together.”

Things happened quickly after that. Her sisters gave her an impossible ultimatum: Choose me or the hive. They thought this would force her to abandon me but they failed to understand the nature of romantic love and perhaps, they didn’t know their sister as well as they thought. I set up a small wooden box in the house filled with dirt from the yard. Poppy spent the better part of the next three days building out her subterranean chamber, reinforcing

it with wax and making her space comfortable. I tried to focus on my work while she nested, but found it difficult. Since the divorce, I had become used to the quiet routine of living alone and now with Poppy moved in, I found myself at equal turns giddy and awkward.

All the familiar angles and spaces of my home felt new and exotic, and I moved around the place like a visitor, afraid I would do something clumsy or stupid and thoroughly discredit myself in the eyes of my darling.

Of course, things were much stranger for Poppy. I was living in a place designed for humans and filled with furnishings and cultural references to reassure me I was nestled within a larger society. Her entire life had been lived in a crowded and tightly knit colony, working, eating and sleeping with several hundred sisters. All those sights, routines and smells of home were missing. Though we were happy to be together, she couldn't escape the fact that for the first time in her life — and for the rest of it — she was without her family.

It helped her to talk about her former home. Many evenings before bed she recounted stories of hive life and filled in the colorful characters of her sisters, though I confess I couldn't keep track of them all. They say humans have the mental space to track about 150 relationships. Bees like Poppy easily exceed this. Their ability to know and remember their sisters is as remarkable as their detail for flowers.

We settled into a daily routine. While I worked in my writing shed, Poppy performed her regular floral work while becoming something of a flower tourist. Freed from the dictates of the hive she took opportunities to visit new kinds of flowers, and explored the blossoms available in neighboring yards. In the evening she would describe her adventures and tell me about the different flowers she encountered. Poppy knew the details of my yard and its creatures to an exquisite degree. I could only describe the yard's obvious features, the house, the garden, my shed, the maple tree, and so on. Poppy cheerfully told me stories about individual plants and trees, the position of branches and leaves at various times in

the spring and the tales of their growth, so far.

When I learned to read her waggle dances she described for me the dance of colors and shades of light that played through the yard and how they changed with the moods of the weather. She buzzed-sang a joyful ode to flying through the air currents that prevailed between the trees and the flower garden. showing me that what I had previously thought of as my backyard, was an undiscovered world, built by millions of creatures I ignored, from birds and bees to worms and tiny soil creatures. While I frittered my time away on forgettable scripts for sequels and reboots, these unseen artists wove together a teeming wild ecosystem with a million intertwined story threads that composed the fabric of earthly life.

In contrast, I found the human world dull and difficult to explain to her. Our atomized lives lived in cars and buildings sounded sad and lonely to me in comparison to the bumblebees' communal society living immersed in nature's rhythms and dramas. Though I had always considered myself a happy person, I began to have doubts as I described the routines and practices of my own life and work. Poppy was particularly confused by the concept of jobs and she interrogated the idea repeatedly.

"Work is how you get what you need to live," I told her as we talked at the kitchen table one afternoon. I drank a lukewarm cup of coffee while Poppy sipped nectar from a wax cup the size of a lid from a tube of lip balm. "It's like gathering pollen but instead of making honey, we get paid money and we use that to buy our own honey."

Money, it turned out, was difficult to explain. I had never really thought about it before and when I tried to clarify its function, I always seemed to end up saying that's just the way it is. It was even harder to explain property ownership. Bumblebees only recognize the natural common rights of the Earth. Yet, she was an easy going girl and agreed that much of the human world was beyond her realm of understanding. The important things are what we share between us, she decided.

When Poppy asked me to read some of my writing to her. I

chose the short story I had written about the nurse and the farmer. She was silent for a moment after I finished. Then, her body buzzed and vibrated, as she stood on my palm.

You made flowers with your words. Her small bee voice dripped with wonder.

When I told her that I doubted I could sell it and she would likely be the only other person who ever heard it, she simply told me, Flowers can't be sold.

I didn't have the heart to tell her.

The hive continued to shun Poppy and I worried how this would affect her. I had my own painful experience with estrangement. My mother refused to speak to me for several years after I came out and I still carried that bruise on my heart.

I feared it might crush her to be rejected by her mother and several hundred sisters, but it seemed to animate her, instead. She was sad sometimes but Poppy transformed those low moments through work. She spent long hours in the yard, gathering nectar, which she kept in hexagonal cups that she made from her own beeswax. She gave away the excess nectar to a hive of progressively-minded black-bottomed bumblebees in my neighbor's yard.

At first, I assumed that Polly's vigorous work regimen was meant to distract from her pain. After all she didn't need to collect as much nectar and pollen as before since the hive didn't want her contributions. I had always been told that pollination was an accidental byproduct of bee's pollen gathering behavior, but Poppy assured me that bees understood what they were doing.

How could we not know?! Her voice buzzed with laughter. The flowers won't shut up about it.

I was hatched to serve my sisters and pollinate flowers. Her voice grew serious, almost defiant. With her antennae, she gestured at the wax cups filled with sweet nectar that lined the counter and bookshelf. If my sisters won't have me, I will pollinate as many flowers as I can while I'm here.

The differences we negotiated were more than just cultural. We lived life at different speeds. Where Poppy spent a second or two

at each flower, I labored over words and often spent long periods staring at the screen or printed page as the gears of my mind slowly ground forward. I marveled at the amount of living Poppy had packed into a life that, by mid-June, I estimated had lasted maybe eight weeks. Our sense of time and history was naturally quite different, and yet we met in the middle somehow. We built for ourselves an in between place where time moved at the pace of our love.

Our evenings were quiet, as you might expect from a diurnal pollinator and a writer. She made herself a special beeswax couch on the coffee table that she could rest on while I read to her, or we listened to music or watched TV. We whiled away many hours just talking about life.

Like any couple, we changed each other in often unseen ways. We altered our perceptions of history through the stories we told of our lives before we met, and we opened up bright new possible futures through the stories we created daily between us. Perhaps we pollinated each other, in a sense.

I know people will want to know if we enjoyed a physical love and if so, how we did it. I may be a bit old-fashioned but I don't think it is proper to share such details as if it were common gossip. Let just keep it at this: we did love each other, thoroughly, and there are amazing, erotic things one can do with nectar and pollen and the delicate attendance of tongues.

It wasn't until mid-summer when I discovered my dreadful naivety. It was the sight of the California poppies dying at the end of their season that sparked a horrible epiphany. I rushed to my computer and searched for information about bumblebee lifespans. I was in tears before I'd read half a page.

We didn't have long. A matter of weeks, perhaps, if we were lucky. When I worked up the courage to broach the matter with her, Poppy was also surprised, though not in the way I'd expected.

You survive the winter?! There was awe in her voice. Only queens live through the winter.

Though I'd told her stories of my childhood I had not realized

that she naturally assumed they had occurred earlier this year.

Despite the depth of her feelings for me, insects approach existential matters in a more factual and less sentimental way than humans. Their lives and deaths are held closely to the rhythms of the natural world. They just don't spend a lot of time living in their own heads, fearing the end. When death comes, it comes, whether it's old age or a crab spider laying in wait behind a petal. How you die is not your story and there is no untimely death, only the life you lived, the pollen you collected and the flowers you pollinated.

I was not a bumblebee, though. I was the one who would be left behind to grieve. The thought of losing her terrified me. I had become accustomed to the sound of her wings buzzing around my head, the music of her voice and the gentle caress of her feet and breath on my skin. A world without her loomed and an ache blossomed in my chest and throat when I thought of it.

But there was nothing I could do to avert what was coming. She would die and I would be alone again, and very soon. I ultimately found inspiration in Poppy's positive transformation of her estrangement with the hive.

"Maybe this is a gift, this knowledge," I told her one evening. "People often take each other for granted. They think their relationships will last forever. But knowing this, we can make our last days the best possible time. We can live out our last days together in the way we want to."

I want to see the flowers, Poppy said, after a moment's reflection. Her black eyes seemed to shine and sparkle with the idea. All of them. My entire life has been here. Just forty-nine different kinds of flower. I want to see the rest. As many as we can.

I pushed all my projects aside, claiming a death in the family. We began taking road trips to visit different parts of Washington and Oregon, to find new flowers for Poppy to see, and to touch and smell and pollinate. There were hundreds of flower species for us to chase before fall arrived. We took day trips to parks and forests nearby and longer trips to mountains, dry forests and deserts. In this time, I saw more of my own native habitat than I ever had.

before. While she visited her flowers, I wrote in my notebook and took small hikes.

Late at night in our hotel room, Poppy would recount each of the flowers she had visited that day, describing the distinct flavors of their sweetness, the exquisite surfaces of anther and pollen and the shimmering electric field each blossom wears like a magic cloak. The flowers came alive to me in her telling, appearing in my mind as characters in nature's great movie. I wrote down her memories, adding my own observations, and embellishments of word and style to translate for the human audience.

We saw seventeen different kinds of buttercup, and wild roses that grew in bogs and their spiny cousins that clung tightly to rocks in mountain meadows. We saw few-seeded bittercress, hairy rock-cress and field pennycress, and we saw white mountain-heather, pink mountain-heather, and yellow mountain-heather. We stopped to visit roadside flowers I spotted as I drove. We hiked mountain trails to find the last blossoms of the summer.

Poppy pollinated bright yellow hound's-tongue hawkweed, and the tall and spiny slender bog orchids. At the edge of a Pacific Coast salt marsh, she delved among the malodorous bouquet of the northern rice root's black lily blossom. Alongside a quiet road in Central Washington, she rustled among a group of foothill daisies growing in a loose clump of yellow grasses. While I watched from below, she ascended a rocky cliff to greet the Sitka mistmaiden, a small plant thrust forth between two rocks, proudly proclaiming sunny-side up yellow centers inside white petals.

Both of us were amazed and delighted by the number and variety of different flowers we discovered during our weeks on the road. I believe we were at our happiest then, even though death mercilessly stalked us.

By mid-september, Poppy began to grow weaker at an alarming pace. I woke each day worried it would be her last.

One Tuesday morning, she asked me to take her to visit a field of flowers at a park near our home but the weather would not agree. Instead, we watched the yard from behind the windows of

our cozy home.

All my sisters are dead, or dying, like me, she said that afternoon as we watched the endless waves of drizzle descend from the drab, gray skies. Everyone I know will soon be gone. Everyone. But you.

The Sun returned the next day and brought a few more degrees of heat with it, and Poppy seemed to rally remarkably. I suggested we drive over to the park where several bushes of scarlet bee balm were still in bloom.

Yes, let me see the world while I still can. Her voice sounded faded and weak.

I placed a small square of yellow fabric on top of the dashboard by the steering wheel, and gently positioned her on it so that she could watch the world going by as I drove.

We made small talk the way old couples do. I complained about the price of gas as we passed a service station, and mumbled about how I needed to do a load of laundry when we got home. She reminisced about happier times with her sisters during the spring. Finally, we settled into what seemed like a comfortable silence.

I arrived at the park to find her gone. Her tiny body lay still and lifeless on the yellow cloth as I parked the car. I softly spoke her name several times, though I knew she was no longer with me. The interior of the car felt strange and lonely like an abandoned house and I thought I smelled dust in the air.

Sliding her delicate body from the cloth into my palm I brought her to eye level. The vibrating brightness of her had departed and left behind only a husk. The hairs on her black and yellow carapace looked stiff and plastic and her ebony eyes had gone dull.

Though I would break down in tears later, they wouldn't come just then. Outside, the sunlight shone warmly, burnishing the green hues of the grass and the trees beyond. Across the shallow lawn lay a small rose garden, its blooms still vibrant and catching the early light. It was a day that Poppy would have loved, the kind of day she allowed me to see anew through her eyes.

I considered her body in my hand. How light she was in death,

as if the greater portion of her had already taken flight from her physical remains. Such is the miracle of life that someone so small and light could bring love to something as large and ungainly as a human being.

I walked her across the grass to the scarlet bee balm, a broad bush of green stems topped by a profusion of scarlet-red globes that looked like three-dimensional asterisks with their multiple spiky petals. I stood there for awhile with my dear Poppy, admiring the brilliance of the plant. Each flower was a cluster of deep red, two-lipped petals their long openings shaped for hummingbirds, despite the plant's name. Even if she hadn't been able to drink its nectar, I knew she would have appreciated the beautiful blossoms.

One of the flowers had dropped some of its central petals, leaving a small depression where I gently placed Poppy's body, and left her resting atop the burgeoning seed heads. The arrangement held her like a departed queen on the royal funeral bier. I left her there, bathed in the glow of the morning sun.

Walking back to the car, I resolved to tell our story.
The whole of it.

Reflex

E.M. Tow

There's something about stubble that has always bothered me. The man on the other side of the subway car is running his fingers across his unshaven cheek and I wince a little and avert my eyes.

My fleeing gaze meets Nora's and she asks me what's wrong. Her earnest concern hides under an expression of fake concern. I start cracking the knuckles of my right hand and dismiss her worries with a coy smile. The subway stops on 86th.

We're headed to Sunset Park for a Saturday-afternoon stroll; my idea, so of course I'm uneasy. Nora sports wide-leg jeans and my greenish sweater. It looks much better on her. I run my fingers across my cheek to triple-check its smoothness and I let out a breath I'd forgotten I was holding. The subway stops on 59th and I am glad to leave the unshaven man behind.

We wait for the D train, standing almost against the subway wall. We adopted this habit quietly a few weeks ago, after a man was pushed onto the tracks. I've always been good at maintaining unspoken status quos. Nora shows me an Instagram Reel and

giggles, and I offer her a low chuckle. I smooth back my hair and remember it is shorter than it used to be. “I liked my hair longer,” I blurt out.

“Hey, you look really handsome with it short, I promise,” she replies.

I try to crack my knuckles but it hasn’t been long enough since the last time so nothing happens. An unshaven man walks by. I tell Nora some story about my kooky Latin professor and catch myself putting a little too much intonation into the ends of my most amusing sentences. Luckily, the D train arrives.

Half an hour later we get off at 36th and grab \$7 smoothies. Nora takes a selfie and shows it to me. She is waifish, delicate, in her baggy clothes, and I’m toned in a small white t-shirt. She slides her phone back into her bag and it occurs to me I forgot to look at our faces.

We keep walking towards Sunset Park. I hold her hand and seem to swallow it with mine. I am six inches taller than Nora and every time I turn to face her I have to tilt my head downwards a little. A couple walks by us suddenly, a couple who look much like we probably will in a decade or so. Older-me smiles at real-me and I feel a little ashamed of myself. And disappointed.

We get to the park. A group of elderly Asian women perform calisthenics to the beat of foreign pop music. Nora translates some of the lyrics for me: the same vapid stuff we make here, more or less. We sit atop a sloping hill that overlooks the East River and the Financial District and Jersey City even.

Nora sits cross-legged and I realize so am I. I switch to sticking my legs out in front of me. They stretch past our plaid blanket and conquer the surrounding grasses. “You’re not like any other guy I know, Nathan,” she says, her cadence suggesting a prelude. “Yeah?” is all I say in return. I crack my knuckles. My throat feels a little raw inside. “Yeah.”

She takes a deep breath, about to say something. My eyes water. I try to keep it in, but when I go to wipe the tear from my cheek, my fingertips graze against faint stubble, and I start to sob.

Old Wise Soul

Isaac Aju

Old Wise Soul

In my Abiriba tradition when a child said things heavier than the child we say that the child is an old man in the body of a child
And I would imagine ancestors speaking communicating things through a child
Things the parents would often miss.
I would imagine ancestors trying to live lives they did not live while they were still here
I would imagine ancestors bringing stories wrapped in wisdom
A child saying things heavier than their mouths
Adults turning their heads to stare at the child,
The child not really understanding what he had said
Or whom he reminded the adults of
Maybe they suddenly heard the voice of their father long dead in the voice of the child.
Maybe they saw a streak of their grandfather in the child
So they turn to stare
But not too long
So as not to make the child feel important.

On our way back from visiting my cousin brother my mother said he reminded her of her dead brother.
He speaks exactly the way his father spoke, she said to me.
Full of wisdom, full of quiet power.
I would have loved to analyze the topic

But of course we were Christians
There are things we shouldn't be talking about
Even things as important as how

our ancestors are always present in us,
Watching, quiet, but present.

We Christians

We would rather be quiet about some topics
rather than address it directly.

I wanted to talk

about the idea of reincarnation and ancestral presence
But I held my tongue.

We were Christians.

Devotion

Yurii Tokar

Two young goats, a girl and a boy, were born on the same day, after the morning explosions. Something bearing death was shot down over a field not far from where the new lives were born, or perhaps it reached its target and caused destruction somewhere. But the local residents of the village are used to explosions. Although “locals” is a strange word. Visitors and local residents have been mixed up by the war.

Rural life is unusual for me. My profession is a math teacher, and my apartment is far from the village I found myself in. I was in this house where the little animals were born, next to people I did not know before, because of the winds of war that control the sails of human destinies. The fifty-year-old owner of the house was a large, tall, and good-natured woman named Oksana. She and her thin husband, Misha, had no children. I, too, have no children or family at the age of 58. During the war, we all found ourselves under one roof by the will of Heaven.

Time passed, and after a few days, the cute little goats were

running around the room. Yes! It's true. The animals lived in the house. Every night, they spent inside the big wooden box filled with straw. But in the morning, they regained their freedom. Unfortunately, the mother of the kids got sick and couldn't produce milk. So, Oksana milked the second goat every day and then gave this milk to the little animals from a bottle. The adult goats were in the barn, while the little ones lived in the house. A week later, the little goat's brother died and left her alone. Oksana named her Lisa and talked to her like a child, especially when she fed her milk from a bottle. I was surprised that she talked to her as if she believed that the little animal understood human language.

Besides the goat, there were three cats running around the house, and two dogs in the yard. It all looked a bit like a zoo. The barking of dogs and the purring of cats prevented me from conducting distance mathematics lessons inside, so I taught from a car parked in the yard. However, during the day, I went into the house many times, for example, to make myself some coffee. It turned out that the little goat had become very attached to the mistress of the house, and as soon as Oksana went outside, Lisa would start screaming hysterically. Never before had I thought that the scream of a small creature could be so loud. Sometimes I looked at the screaming goat, waiting for her mistress to return, and it seemed to me (or maybe it was so) that tears appeared in the eyes of the little animal.

I thought "Could Liza really have become so attached to Oksana that she screams and cries so loudly, even when her mistress leaves the house for a few minutes?"

Misha was indifferent to animals.

Misha, Oksana, and I usually dined together. I brought sausage or fish bought at the store, bread, various sweets, and sometimes a bottle of vodka, which the owners did not refuse. They put various pickles and dishes made from homemade products on the table. I do not drink alcoholic beverages, but I gladly took part in table talk, learning more and more about simple rural life.

But one conversation struck me. After drinking another glass

of vodka, Misha said thoughtfully, “Our Liza is somehow weak and not gaining weight. Maybe it’s time to cut her up for meat?” The hostess was silent for a while, drank her glass, and then said, “No. It’s too early. How much meat will she produce? Let her gain at least a little weight. Besides, maybe she will become strong and start giving milk. Let her live for now, and we’ll always have time to slaughter her.”

The women spoke of Lisa as if she were meat, quite calmly, and this was in incredible contrast to her sweet conversations with the little goat when she was giving her milk from a bottle. During this table talk, I remembered Lisa’s eyes. I understand that it is hard to believe, but in the wide-open, naive eyes of the animal, devotion to Oksana, or even love, was clearly visible.

“Well, look for yourself; we can wait,” Misha answered indifferently, slightly shrugging his shoulders and stabbing the fragrant fried potatoes with his fork.

After dinner, I walked outside to the yard past the kitchen, where Lisa was already sleeping in her box. I glanced at the small, living, curled-up bundle and thought that in the morning, when the mistress would leave the house, Lisa would again scream hysterically because of parting with Oksana.

Of course, the little goat didn’t know what fate was in store for her. But do we know our fate? Do we know whether a rocket will fly over the house or fall on it if it is shot down? When will peace come? Will good ever triumph on this Earth? When will people stop killing each other?

I thought about all this, standing in the yard and raising my head to the spring sky, which was generously scattered with stars. At the same time, I understood that many of the stars visible in the sky have long been gone, and we see them because the light from the stars takes too long to reach the Earth.

And the small, living bundle in the box in the kitchen slept soundly, breathing barely audibly. Did Lisa see dreams? Who knows.

—Ukraine, 2025

The Open Door

R.H. Nicholson

A gray smudge smeared across the city as a steady drench poured on the usual congested traffic. Taxis swerved in and out of lanes. Bicycle messengers pumped with helmets pointed down dodged commuters ejecting from the subway and irritated dog walkers balanced bumper shooters and little plastic poop bags. Wide-eyed tourists gawked up at the skyscrapers and electric billboards.

Amidst the traffic, a limousine pulled to the curb in front of the Century Center, a 1901 art deco masterpiece, a giant concrete dancer with golden fans spread across her façade. The driver popped out in a navy suit, jogged around the hood of the Lincoln, and, unfurling an umbrella, opened the back door for David James Blanchett, esquire. Super-lawyer, powerbroker, celebrity hatchet man. He was dressed exactly as a man of his stature is expected to dress, from his haute hair style to his Demesure oxfords, toting a Florentine diplomat bag, pressing his Silvio Fiorello necktie to his chest to protect it from the rain. The doorman pulled back a heavy

gold-handled door to allow his entrance, the security guard already holding open an elevator.

“Good morning, Mr. Blanchett,” he called out.

“Not liking this weather, Lucio.”

J.D. Blanchett strode into the lift as the guard shooed others toward another car. When the doors slid open on the 75th floor, he paused, as he often did, to admire the signage across the glass doors: Blanchett Legal Services, LLC. He was damn proud of his career, forged at Columbia, clerking for Justice Stevens, achieving partner at forty, and especially of his leveraged buyout of his father’s two partners when the old man retired. He believed he was a self-made man. He approached the sliding automatic doors, flanked by potted Ficus plants, and, striding briskly and with arrogance, smacked into them. Bam! His head ricocheted back, his foot thudded, his briefcase slapped into the barrier.

“What the hell!” he gasped.

The receptionist sprinted from her desk and passed through the automatic doors in alarm. “My goodness, Mr. Blanchett, what happened?

“The goddamn doors didn’t open!” he reached up to examine an emerging knot on his forehead.

“The sensor must have malfunctioned,” said a young attorney, Matthew Graves, drawn by the loud noises.

“Think so, Einstein?” Mr. Blanchett spat back sarcastically as he stood stunned in the entryway. “The doors always open. They just...open,” he mumbled.

“I’ll get someone here to fix it right away,” the receptionist, Allison, assured him. “Are you alright? Should I call your doctor?”

He shrugged her off, “No, no. Just get it fixed NOW!”

Matthew Graves held open the door, and Mr. Blanchett walked through holding his head as though it might fall off.

“The team is in the conference room waiting for you,” Allison directed him. “Coffee, cream, one small ice cube?”

Mr. Blanchett burst into the conference space and found his team huddled around a rectangular cherry monstrosity, a table

fit for a state dinner. “Where are we?” he asked as he plopped his portmanteau on the table and sat at the head, the table strewn with canary legal pads, pens, various beverages, a tray of Danish, and file folders.

“We know Mr. Zamenstra was driving his Porche 911 west on Wallace at 10:40 A.M. enroute to the stadium. Officer Derek Hinds pulled him over. The officer later stated Zamenstra was driving erratically. He approached the car, and, according to said officer’s video feed, Zamenstra was thrashing about in a panic, appeared to be irrational in a manner consistent with the influence of drugs, possibly hallucinogens,” new hire Cameron McAvoy relayed, crossed his arms, and nodded at another associate.

“The officer directed the suspect to exit the car, but Mr. Zamenstra did not comply. Officer Hinds said in his interview that he believed the suspect was, quote, “High as a kite” and did not understand the command,” Hunter Phillips, an overeager law clerk, read from a file.

“Then it gets really weird,” Cameron picked up the story again. “Officer Hinds reached in to force Zamenstra from the vehicle, grabbing him by the shirt, and I’m quoting the officer: “He flailed around, screamed something I couldn’t make out, looked me right in the eyes, collapsed, and died.”

Mr. Blanchett pressed a tissue to his forehead and kept checking it for blood but found none. He glanced through the conference room glass at the broken automatic doors and glared at the miscreant contraption. He could feel a headache fomenting. “Can someone ask Allison to bring me some Tylenol?”

Cameron McAvoy slipped his head out of the door and summoned Allison. After a moment of silence someone intoned, “The family wants charges against Officer Hinds and the police department for manslaughter. They also want racial profiling charges, civil rights violations.”

“We have to get this right,” Mr. Blanchett warned. “The fucking quarterback of an NFL franchise, a Black man, dies mysteriously in a traffic stop by a white cop on his way to a game. The

media will feast.” The room grew still. “Preliminary autopsy?”

“No drugs, no alcohol,” Matthew Graves answered.

“What else?” Blanchett asked.

“He had a Glock in the glovebox. Permitted. Phone recovered. At the lab right now,” Cameron spoke up. “Family will be here in an hour.”

Mr. Blanchett unleashed a list of orders, from digging into the officer’s background to a review of the video and audio and a timetable of Marquay Zamenstra’s movements that day and the night before. He wanted members of the team and coaching staff interviewed, his friends, his bookie if he had one, girlfriends, anyone who might shed some light. But as he barked these directives he stared at the glass doors that had injured him, failed him, denied him unfettered access to his kingdom. After the team dispersed, he slipped into his office and into his bathroom. There he examined the welt on his head, touched it, winced, took off his right shoe and sock, and lifted his foot onto the toilet seat. The big toe was red and swelling, the little top vein throbbing. Maybe I should go to the hospital, he thought. I could have a concussion or a broken bone. When he emerged into the outer office to tell Allison to call his doctor, he noticed a repairman in a bright lemon tee shirt knelt beside the open office doors, pressing and pushing with his fingers.

“What’s wrong with the damn thing?” Blanchett hobbled over and asked the young man.

“It doesn’t work, sir.”

“Very funny. Why not?”

“Too soon to tell, but preliminarily I suspect it’s the electronic sensor in the floor. I’ll have to excise the carpet and spring the box to be certain. Might need a new one or it just might need recalibration.”

“Recalibration?” Blanchett echoed him.

“Yeah, it means re-set,” the repairman said.

“I know what is means, smartass.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“So, what’s your suspicion here?”

“I theorize, and mind you I’m just hypothesizing, that your sensor was state of the art when installed but is now outdated. I fear we may not be able to find a replacement.”

“In other words, this will cost me a shit ton of money?”

“Probably. But I know a guy. I might be able to get you the hook up,” the repairman offered.

“The hook up?” Mr. Blanchett’s voice lifted.

“A special deal, a largely unknown option, an inside transaction not available to everyone.”

Mr. Blanchett chuckled at this young man’s unexpected verbal skills and ripe sarcasm.

“I know what a “hook up” is. What’s your name, son?”

“Jamarr,” he answered.

When Jamarr stood up he revealed his considerable height and powerful presence. He placed his hands on his hips, lowered his head, and tilted it. His muscles rippled under the lemon shirt. He looked like an athlete. Mr. Blanchett noted his impressive hands, just like the famous David statue, he thought. He wanted to say, No offense, Jamarr, but why did your parents choose such a Black sounding name? Didn’t they know it would work against you in life? Blanchett folded his arms, his Brooks Brothers shirt crisp and starched. He imagined Jamarr saying, “Well, mister, you might not have noticed, but I am Black. And not ashamed of it, thanks for asking,” with an edge in his voice. He’s smart, Mr. Blanchett thought as Jamarr began to gather his tools and make notes on the invoice, turning his back on his customer.

“Say, Jamarr, I’m just curious. Why is someone as obviously intelligent as you doing this kind of work?”

“Excuse me?” Jamarr turned back around and faced Mr. Blanchett, holding his frustration although the level was rising.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with this. Hell, we need repair people. There’s dignity in all work. But it seems like you could do better. I’m guessing you didn’t go to college.”

“I do go to college, sir,” he said, clenching his fists, then relaxing, “Night classes at Woodside Community. When I can afford it.

You do realize college costs money, right?"

"They still have minority scholarships for people like you don't they?"

"PTP?" Jamarr realized his reference was cryptic. "Pity the Poor, yeah, fuck that. Besides, believe it or not, I earn too much income at this gig for those."

"Do you talk to your mother with that mouth?" Mr. Blanchett asked.

"My momma doesn't ask impertinent questions like you do," Jamarr shot back.

I should have you fired right now, Blanchett thought. I could call up your supervisor and have your ass on the street by lunchtime. But that wouldn't fix his damn doors.

"Touche. Okay, why don't you see what you can do with your 'hook up'. Make this secret transaction with your dubious, underground connection. I'll double your fee if you get the doors fixed today. Deal? When you get back report to me right away."

Mr. Blanchett limped back into the office and told Allison to have Cameron gather the team together in ten minutes. "I want an update. I need to know what I'm telling the Zamenstra family," he groused.

§

As Jamarr drove back to the warehouse, he took deep breaths to release his anger. How that smug, wiseass cracker had spoken to him. The condescension. The racist overtones. The attitude of superiority. He shouldn't have to deal with this shit in the twenty-first century. But this was his reality, and this job paid the bills. It afforded him time to take classes at night and on weekends. It allowed him to relieve his momma of some of the horror, the emotional and financial carnage she suffered after his daddy was struck down by a lunatic gunman at Saver's Corner when he was just trying to buy a lottery ticket. But this white-privilege lawyer had offered him double payment.

In truth, the repair was not very complicated. He made this kind of fix every day. It was easy money, tuition money. Automatically, he pulled into the chain-link fenced lot, parked the white company van. He would sweet talk Liza into going back in the dilapidated warehouse and snagging him a C124-ETB Electronic Trigger Button from stock. Maybe today he would even convince her to go out with him.

“I’m only interested in dating accomplished men,” she had said, whatever that meant.

Jamarr got back to the Century Center before the day was over. He found the electronic doors on the 75th floor propped open with the Ficus tree pots. Allison was not at her station, probably gone to lunch. He crept into the empty office and was contemplating his move when he noticed a knot of gesticulating people in the conference room, ties askew, top shirt buttons undone, jackets thrown over chair backs. He heard a panoply of voices through the slightly ajar door and determined one of those voices to be Mr. Blanchett.

“... no evidence that suggests Marquay Zamenstra was on drugs, he wasn’t speeding, he made no threats to the officer, but when the officer tried to speak to him, to interrogate him, he went berserk and then died. There has to be a reason,” Mr. Blanchett’s voice boomed like the courtroom maestro he was. “Find it!”

The people unknotted themselves and filed out of the room, completely disregarding Jamarr, zipping past his fluorescent yellow shirt as if he was a ghost. After the last team member breezed by, he poked his head inside and bashfully asked, “Are you representing Marquay Zamenstra’s family?”

“What of it?”

“I have a thought,” Jamarr offered.

“Doesn’t everybody. Maybe stick to broken electric doors, okay?” Mr. Blanchett looked exhausted, flustered. He downed a dram of brown liquid like someone stranded in a desert and placed the empty glass on the table with a loud thud.

“Did they find a second cell phone?” Jamarr asked.

“Say what?”

“Marquay grew up in my neighborhood. I sort of knew him. He had an alter ego, another personality that spouted outrageous suppositions, bizarre conspiracy theories, and braggadocio about his sexual exploits. But he operated under an alias, The Jizz, so his idiocy wouldn’t be connected directly to him in the mainstream press and on social media. He kept a second, secret, cell phone for that expressed purpose. Did they find it?”

“Don’t mess with me, boy,” Mr. Blanchett warned. “Sorry, cancel the ‘boy’. I know better. That just slipped out.” He stood up and, Jamarr thought, looked older and less in control than before.

“I do not jest. It might prove beneficial,” Jamarr surmised. Their faces only a few inches apart, the two men looked directly into each other’s eyes, and something shifted. An unquantifiable attribute of their nascent relationship, their give and take, their rapportee, their view of each other, the balance of power, had changed.

Jamarr seized upon another subject to escape the uneasiness. “I located the part you need. I can have it installed before you de-camp for the day.”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t care about that now,” Blanchett rushed from the room and began calling out names. “Cameron, Matthew, Allison, somebody get the DA on the horn, now!”

§

The next morning Jamarr bid his mother and sister good day and walked to the 37 bus for his trek to work. He clocked in with his ID badge though he no longer resembled the photo, his beard shorn off, his hair shorter now to make him appear less ominous to the general populace. He glanced around the corner at Liza, lovely as ever, and shuffled past the break room but stopped when he heard commotion from his co-workers huddled before the wall-mounted T.V.

“How crazy is that?” someone cackled.

Jamarr took the bait and asked, “What’s crazy?”

“Mr. Law Man just announced Marquay’s cause of death.

Seems they found a second phone under the seat, and he'd been recording himself on it when a bee or a yellow jacket or some such flew into his car. He was scared to death it would sting him because, get this, he was deathly allergic to bee stings."

"My man went into something called anafantastic shock, swerved everywhere, and died when the officer tried to check it out," another employee at Emerson Electric Services interrupted.

"Jamarr, did you mess up that that Blanchett guy's automatic door? He just called. Said get over to his office right away." Liza importuned, her French-tipped fingers clicking on the door jam.

When Jamarr landed at the 75th floor of the Century Center and the elevator doors slid open, he surveyed the impressive wall of glass that welcomed people to Blanchett Legal Services, LLC. He sighed and steeled himself for whatever vitriol J.D. Blanchett would hurl at him. But when he approached the glass doors they opened like magic. He walked through with a slight sense of vindication.

"He's here," Allison spoke into an intercom on her control panel. "Good morning, Jamarr. Mr. Blanchett is waiting for you in his office." She pointed the way.

Blanchett's office looked like a photo spread in Successful White Lawyers Magazine, leather and mahogany, cliched abstract paintings, shelves with trophies and framed photos of people with perfect teeth. J.D. sat behind a massive desk, a sleek laptop before him.

"Jamarr, my boy, glad you could come."

"Is something wrong with my repair?" Jamarr asked.

"Oh, that. It's fine, no problem. But that tip you had about the second phone paid off big time. I'm sure you've heard by now that Mr. Zemenstra's death was a freak accident, a tragic act of nature. And we solved it. We got justice for the family and managed to save the police department's ass all in one fell swoop. And all because of you."

"I'm glad it worked out. So, why did you summon me here like a recalcitrant schoolboy?"

"Recalcitrant. You are a hoot," J.D. chortled. "I like you, Jamarr. You have moxie, mad skills as the kids say. And you're smart.

I admire that. Come work for me.”

“Thank you, sir. But I’ll pass. No offense, but I consider lawyers to be blood suckers, vultures who manipulate the law to siphon innocent victims’ money.”

“Ouch! You do have a smart mouth. But also, a quick mind, and I hate to see it wasted. What if I paid your tuition? After you graduate you can leave if you want.”

“That’s a generous offer. But I don’t want charity. I just want a fair shake, to know I can succeed because of my own talent and drive. Isn’t that what everyone wants, to be judged on their own merit rather than a stereotype?”

“Look, Jamarr, that’s a sweet notion, but it’s naïve. That’s not how the world works. I’m giving you a shot at your dreams. You might not get another. Take it. Or don’t. I’m not going to beg.”

“Thank you for the offer. I know you think you mean well,” Jamarr stood and reached out his hand.

“Hey, the door’s always open,” J.D. said.

“Except that sometimes it isn’t, right?”

The men shook hands and Jamarr turned to exit. J.D. Blanchett watched as the automatic doors effortlessly opened to allow the young man’s egress out into an ever-so-slightly changed world.

The Reburial

C.J. Anderson-Wu

On the northwest side of the prison was a public graveyard, officially called the 6th Public Cemetery. The people buried here were not originally interred at this location; they were relocated from graves in Kakawasan, a branch of the Amis tribe, 39 kilometers away. Around two decades after the exiled government retreated from the continent to the island, it determined that the air force bases on the northern and western coasts were too exposed to the enemy across the strait. An empty site on the southeastern coast was selected for the new air force base. However, while the site appeared empty above ground, it was not empty below. Shortly after groundbreaking, hundreds of human remains were unearthed.

If this were happening today, according to laws regarding the preservation of historical assets, all construction would need to be halted immediately. Experts in cultural heritage would be summoned to conduct a thorough investigation of the remains to determine the appropriate course of action. In many cases, construction cannot bypass the graves and must abandon the site altogether.

However, more than seven decades ago, there was no concept of historical heritage preservation, national security was paramount. The Department of National Defense announced a three-month period for people to claim their ancestors. Any unclaimed skeletons would be incinerated, and their graves destroyed.

With no headstones, plaques, or any documents about the deceased, such as names or dates, the Department of National Defense assumed the graves were too old to be recognized and decided to resume construction soon. However, a small group of Mountain People suddenly appeared, claiming the site belonged to their traditional territory and was sacred because their ancestors had been carried there from the mountains to rest by the sea.

Evidence?

We don't have it.

Then how do we know you are telling the truth?

We don't lie about our ancestors; the consequences of such misconduct are severe.

You need to present documents to prove it, not make such meaningless swearing.

Look, we don't have written words, thus we don't have documents. If you don't believe us, the misfortune imposed by our ancestors will be on you as well.

Don't threaten us. We are responsible for national security.

If they had searched the archive left in the village office, they might have found something useful. It wasn't the first time their ancestors were forced to move; representatives sent by the imperial ruler from the continent, as well as Japanese colonists, had expelled them from their traditional habitat many times. Because they were ordered to use Han or Japanese names, their births and deaths were recorded, often with the note "barbaric" beside their converted names.

This is why the significance of the archive shouldn't be overlooked. It's crucial for issues of historical interpretation, decolonization, archaeology, and anthropology.

The Department of National Defense insisted that all the

remains be removed, despite warnings from the Mountain People. Soon enough, the construction team began to see the “consequences.” Although the groundbreaking date was chosen as auspicious according to zodiac signs, the area was hit by two tropical cyclones in one summer. Roads transporting building materials were cut off by flooding or landslides.

In addition to natural disasters, the builders faced constant accidents at the construction site—*injuries due to negligence and delays caused by mistakes.*

At last the construction team had to admit that the warnings of those Mountain People were not their imagination. They asked the Department of National Defense to negotiate with them. It was a faceless matter for the authorities to negotiate with the Mountain People, so they called on an Amis tribal priest. The conversation began:

Out of our respect to your ancestors, the national leader instructed us to find a solution for the relocation of your ancestors' graves.

We are not moving. Our ancestors have rested here for centuries.

If our national security is compromised, no one is resting in peace.

We are not entitled to move them. It's not allowed.

Come on, can you throw lots to summon their spirits and ask for permission?

Thus, a tribal wizard was engaged to communicate with their ancestral spirits. For Han people, there are two methods to communicate with spirits: asking Yes/No questions by throwing lots, or talking to them through a divine medium. For the Mountain Peoples, who now call themselves Indigenous Peoples, communication with spirits is done through tribal wizards or witches, whose functions are similar to shamans.

The negotiation with the spirits seemed to drag on, testing the patience of the delegates from the Department of National Defense. They began to suspect that the tribal priest and wizard were

deceiving them. The wizard chanted in an unfamiliar language, his voice fluctuating between low and high tones. At times, he spoke as if in conversation; at other times, he sang. Occasionally, he moved the beads arranged on the ground.

After four days of the intriguing ritual, the wizard finally concluded the matter with a site appointed by the Amis spirits, located 39 kilometers from their current position. Thus the reburial began, accompanied by various rites, chanting, and even dance-like movements. However, officers from the Department of National Defense noticed that not all of the graves were excavated; in fact, many remained untouched.

Why are there still so many?

They are not our people.

What? Then who are they?

The priest shrugged.

Can you rebury them with your people? One of the delegates, Cheng Sir, restrained himself from losing his temper.

Of course not. They are strangers, they might be Han people, or Hakka people, they are not us.

Cheng Sir was on the verge of exploding, but he held himself back for a second as a good idea crossed his mind.

They might be strangers to you, but not to your ancestors. After all, they've been resting in the same place for decades. Talk to your ancestors; they might want to move with their roommates.

The priest considered this for a moment and then went to speak with the wizard. They agreed to communicate with their ancestral spirits, though they couldn't guarantee any results.

The ritual began again. Fortunately, it was much shorter than the first.

Our ancestors said they can't make decisions for others.

Now Cheng Sir was really mad.

If you don't relocate all of them, I will pack them all up and burn them in the incinerator, including the bones of your ancestors, and prosecute you for obstruction of national security according to The Temporary Provisions Effective during the Period of

Communist Rebellion!

The priest, wizard, and their followers did not know what this long-named law meant, but from Cheng Sir's grave expression, they figured it was not negotiable. They quickly picked up their tools and dug up the human remains as fast as possible, ancestors or not.

Thus the air force base occupies the site of a former cemetery for Indigenous people and unknown Han or Hakka individuals. However, no one knows why they were buried there in the first place. Were they enemies or friends? Were they relocated from other sites?

Considering the gaps between the written documents stored in the village office and the oral history passed down by the Amis people, field investigations became necessary to address indigenous matters. The memories and teachings of the elders were more reliable than the interpretations of the written documents from an official perspective. According to some Amis elders, people in Kakawasan were forced to relocate by the Japanese colonial regime, which planned to construct a harbor around their land. The harbor was never constructed before Japan's imperial military was defeated.

After WWII, the Nationalist government repurposed the old Japanese ammunition building to establish a prison for imprisoning Communists, national traitors, or their sympathizers, and again expelled the indigenous people to grow sugar cane on their territory. The forests they once hunted for food or felled for building materials became state property, and they were no longer allowed to use these natural resources.

The extension of the runways for aircrafts several years after the construction of the air force base had removed more graves, but not all of them. The bones of the Pasawali and Kararuan people's ancestors still lie beneath the runways. After a long time of negotiation, they finally are allowed to conduct their traditional rituals for their ancestral spirits. Each year, they have to take turns to enter the air force base and worship their ancestors because part

of the graves are under the area where the air fighters T-BE5A Brave Eagles are parked, leaving no space for all the worshippers to be present at one time.

Having missed the timing for reburial seventy years ago, the Pasawali and Kararuan people's annual ancestor worship and chanting take place against the backdrop of the deafening sound of F-5E or F-16 jets taking off and landing.

Quite a heartwarming scene, isn't it?

By the way, Kararuan in Amis language means where the Amis people wash their hair, Pasawali means enjoying sunlight from the east, and Kakawasan means where spirits gather.

Miss Revolutionary

Troy Hornsby

Visions of Martin Luther staring at me
Malcolm X put a hex on my future someone catch me
I'm falling victim to a revolutionary song

—Kendrick Lamar, HiiiPoWeR

1

Nasreen sighed as she dipped her chin into her small hand. Willy continued reading his story, but none of his words planted themselves with interest in her mind. Her other hand tapped the small stack of papers on her desk, her own story looked up at her with childish admiration, though its parent could not look back at it the same. *The Border of Terror* by Nasreen Ismail, the black printed words read. It was a story she was most proud of after a week of research and anecdotes from Papa that left him silent when the verbal torture was over. After the silence he wept in her arms and she would hold him and rub his head.

All that trouble to have her story be told was “too political,” by Mister White. Too political? Those noxious words burned her ears and froze her blood, all she could do was respond with: “sorry, Mister White,” and fall back in her plastic chair while blowing a strand

of her ebony hair out of her face. The dozens of eyes heated her skin, until she sunk back into irrelevancy, remaining the same shy Palestinian girl who wished to tell her father's story—the story of millions.

The clapping woke her from her unwarranted memories. Willy bowed bashfully as he sat back down with a wide grin on his thin lips. Nasreen bit the inside of her cheek. Nobody clapped for her, the only ovation she received was an awkward cough when she finished. She crossed her arms and sat them on her small stack of papers, her chin rested on her forearm as she fought back welling tears.

“Wow, William, just wow. Now, there is some room for improvement, I feel your prose was getting a bit sloppy by the end with the lack of sensory details, but aside from that I have no further comments. A well-told story, William, thank you for sharing. Now, who would like to go next?”

§

Nasreen sat in the library, alone. The buzzing of a fly rang in her ear, but was quickly swatted away by her waving hand. Her history book that was opened to The Trail of Tears laid in solitude as its reader scanned the words but did not retain a letter. Papa was proud when she read the story to him, he wept from his wrinkled eyelids and clapped with pride. Would he worry that this career was unfit for her? She didn't want him to think that. It would hurt her to see him frown, she couldn't afford that.

Nasreen groaned and clapped her palms against her brown cheeks that shined with hints of red. I hate him, she repeated. How could the stories of the dead be ‘too political?’ No. It wasn't fair. Anyone could write about anything, why should she keep her mouth shut to appease others?

She lowered her head onto her open book, and wondered if she had been wrong in writing The Border of Terror after all. How could she be a great author in today's society if her work is seen

as “too political?” No one writes political literature like that anymore, she argued. What was she going to do now? Waste away with her flaming passion slowly snuffing out into a pile of useless ash? Would her stories consist of useless rubbish that no longer held the same sentiment as *The Border of Terror*? Would her work-in-progress novel be half-assed from start to finish? Maybe she would give up? Perhaps that was truly the only option.

Nasreen rose from her wooden chair, only to be surprised by Willy, who sat down across from her. He was not smiling, in fact, he was evidently exhausted with lips chapped—possibly from the cold wind of Portland—he was shaking and his large brown eyes hung low. He hung his red backpack on the chair and huffed. Nasreen ignored the man who basically had roses thrown at his feet while all she got was a bored cough. She closed her book and turned around.

“W-Wait, um, Nasreen, was it?”

He can’t even remember my name? “Yes.” She responded coldly. She held her book to her chest and raised her foot to leave.

“I l-liked your story. The B-Border of Terror, right? I thought it was great.”

“Then why didn’t you clap? Or say anything at all?” She didn’t turn to face him.

“B-Because, it was l-like watching a performance from a top-tier actor, you know. I was stunned, actually stunned. I could barely remember reading out my own story because I was too busy thinking about yours.”

He’s lying.

Nasreen turned around, biting the inside of her lip as Willy’s eyes entered hers. They were so gentle, so...intimate. His soft voice complimenting her story raised her heart rate slightly. “What did you like about it?”

Willy chuckled, “Where can I start? Many people don’t care for purple prose—I am the exception. Do you read a lot of Victorian literature?”

She shrugged, “A lot of it actually.”

“I-It’s evident in your work. In my opinion: you didn’t waste a word, it w-w-was like the p-perfect building.”

Nasreen smiled and slid back into her chair. “What did you think about the characters?”

“I thought them remaining nameless was a perfect device, and all of them were so captivating in what? Ten pages? I just want to read it again.”

His smile. He wasn’t lying to her.

“I can print you a copy.”

“A-A-And I’ll sacrifice my firstborn for it.”

Nasreen laughed, a soft and beautiful laugh not heard too often in her ears. “You don’t need to do that, but I’ll give it to you tomorrow.”

Willy smiled, “thank you. Oh, and don’t worry about Professor White, he’s a real ass when it comes to stuff like that. He always suggests literature that’s always inherently political, but shuns you if you do your own work.”

Nasreen rolled her eyes and frowned. “I’m sorry. You just raved about my story, but I was too upset that I didn’t even listen to yours.”

Willy chuckled, “don’t worry about it, you’ll have plenty of time to listen to my stories written from the eyes of animals.”

“You write from the eyes of animals?” She was curious, “now I really want to read your stories.”

“Oh, p-please, they ain’t as good as yours.”

“You don’t believe that, come on, let me see.”

§

The brisk cold of the coming Autumn rubbed along her arm as she walked down the sidewalk to the two story house where golden lights illuminated through the shaded windows. A few lucky investments— and a managerial position of the local supermarket —had allowed Papa to garner enough finances to bring Nasreen to a good college.

She took the silver key from her pocket and stuck into the black latch. She twisted it, and with a loud click, it was unlocked. Nasreen opened the door and was met with the smell of olive oil and chicken. Mussakhan, she thought as she salivated. She dropped her backpack by the door and let down her hair that she had in a ponytail an hour prior.

“Papa, I’m home!”

Papa ran from the kitchen with a bright smile. The same shade of black hair resided at the top of his head, with a snowy white presiding at its side with a black beard that covered the entire bottom half of his face. He was still muscular as he neared old age, and was still as sprightly as he was in his youth. He was dressed in a black turtleneck and long navy-blue jeans. He ran to Nasreen and embraced her tight, laying three kisses on her thin cheeks.

“My sweet thing, how I missed you, my darling,” he smiled and looked at her with a golden flame residing in his dirt-colored eyes.

“Hi, Papa,” she laughed, “I missed you, too. How are you? How’s the shop?”

“It’s good, my darling. Come, come, I finished some Mus-sakhan, I’m sure you must be starving.”

Nasreen sighed. “Actually, Papa, I’m going to eat and then leave if that’s okay?”

Papa was midway towards the kitchen when he turned around. “Really? Why?”

“Well...” she bit her tongue, “I was invited to a gathering with a bunch of the literature students. One of my classmates suggested I go.”

“Oh,” Papa glanced at the picture of Mama that rested on the small table in the hallway. She was a beautiful woman, with the same glistening brown skin and raven hair Nasreen inherited. Mama was quite thin, even before the tumor that they thought was benign reduced her to a twig. She often joked about it, much to the horror of her husband and daughter. Nasreen dreaded Mama’s jokes in her final months, but when Papa looked at the picture of her in front of a mosque in Palestine, she wished she could hear

one more.

“I-I’m sorry, Papa,” she walked closer to him and hugged him around the neck.

“My sweet thing, don’t apologize. You are an adult woman, a beautiful one at that, you deserve time to yourself.” His smile was weak, but it was a smile nonetheless. “Did your teacher like your story?” He asked as they entered the kitchen.

The rich smell soothed her, for a second she had forgotten her troubles. “He said it was ‘too political.’”

Papa frowned as he sat at the table. He let out a harsh sigh and fidgeted with the table mat with shaking hands. “I’m sorry, sweet thing.”

Nasreen shrugged as she served the meal on two red plates. “It’s okay, I guess. Someone in my class liked it though, the one who invited me to the gathering.”

Papa nodded. “That’s good. Who is she?”

Nasreen sat Papa’s plate down with a fork and smiled. “A he, actually. His name is William Donner, he’s a black man and was raised here all of his life. He’s a smart man, Papa, I think you’d like him.”

Another smile came upon his weak lips. “Is he handsome?”

She never considered that. He did have a clean face with a nice smile. His eyes glowed even with the light dimming in the library, he was tall, somewhat muscular, and his soft speech lingered in her more than his physical. “A bit,” she chuckled. “Now, let’s eat.” They both said a prayer to Allah and ate the steaming meal on their plates.

§

She was dropped off by the Uber in front of another two-story house, though there was no comforting golden light that escaped it. The sun had set, and the pale moon overlooked its inhabitants with a divine blessing in its silver line.

Nasreen climbed the empty driveway, through the concrete

path, and stood in front of the double oak doors with blurry glass panes in their center. Her hand was hidden in her long sleeve and she raised it to knock on the hollow door.

Within a second of Nasreen putting her hand back at her side, the door swung open, and Willy met her on the other side, smiling, sweating, and...handsome?

“H-H-H-Hi,” Willy smiled, “glad to see you.”

“Glad to see you,” Nasreen smiled, “why are you so sweaty?”

“Was running downstairs every time someone came. I was hoping you’d be the first, you’re pretty much the guest of honor.”

Guest of honor? “Oh...well...that’s unexpected.”

“My God, where are my manners? Come in, please. Do you want me to take your coat?”

“I’m okay, thank you.” She stepped into the large house with its pure white walls and beige carpet. The house smelled with the buttery scent of popcorn, though no hunger boiled in her stomach for anything else after dinner. “Popcorn?”

“Movie n-night,” Willy answered with a smile as he locked the door. “We’re watching *The Shining*, have you seen it?”

“I read the book.”

“Of course you have,” he shook his head with the same flawless smile. “I’m more of a movie guy at times, but can’t screenwrite with only one perspective of writing, you know?”

“Film major?”

“Yes. But the creative writing does help at times with p-pacing, a-and p-plot, a-a-a-a—goddamnit.” They stopped at the foot of the stairs. “S-Sorry.”

“For what?”

Willy avoided her gaze. “I-I just stutter a lot when I’m nervous, and it’s really annoying dealing with the damn thing.”

“I bite my cheek and tongue, it hurts like hell but I do it when I’m nervous.”

Willy smiled again. A warmth burrowed inside her. “I guess we’re both special in a way.”

“Yeah,” Nasreen smiled back. The sudden yearning for pop-

corn made her mouth water.

The two of them made it to the second story where a loft resided to their right. Seated on the black leather couch were two men and a blonde woman between them. On a red bean bag chair was another man with a shining phone in his thin face. On the floor were two women, both of them were thin and wore glasses on their puffy faces.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Willy started his announcement as though she were a celebrity, “this is Nasreen, writer of The Border of Terror.”

Nasreen bit her tongue and sunk into her clothes. One of the women on the floor rose to her feet with a gaping mouth.

“Oh. My. God! Your story was incredible. I could not stop thinking about it the entire day. Are you actually Palestinian? Was any of the story based on a true story you know? Did you—”

“Ashly, calm down,” the man on the bean bag spoke up without looking up from his phone, though his tone remained indifferent, “you’re going to suffocate the woman.”

“Shut up, Tom, I’m just asking a few questions.”

Nasreen’s face burned. “It’s okay, um, Tom. I can answer your questions, no problem.” Ashly smiled at this statement and hopped around excitedly.

The other girl on the floor waved to Nasreen with a toothless smile. “Hi, I’m Kriss.”

Nasreen smiled and waved back.

The two men on the couch nodded to her, though she believed was going to need to extract their names through conversation—her least favorite way to do it.

“Name’s Rosie,” the blonde woman on the couch announced. Her glowing hazel eyes seemed to go right through Nasreen.

She shuddered, but still kept a small amount of pleasantry. Willy ushered her to two lone bean bags close to Tom and they sat there. Ashly sat at Nasreen’s feet and proceeded with her questions. She answered with amusement and smiled as the woman wished to know more about how the story was conceived. Willy watched her

intently with a grin, Nasreen noticed as she answered a question about her parents, her face warmed.

“So...you’re an immigrant?” One of the boys on the couch asked, his blue eyes tore at her skin.

“My parents are. I’m a first generation.”

The blue-eyed boy nodded. “Nice. Fight the power.”

The blonde girl rolled her eyes.

“Why do you write?” Nasreen asked Ashly.

“Oh,” she shrugged, “a lot of trauma that seems to only get out when I write something down.”

Nasreen respected that answer with a gleeful nod.

“What about you?” Willy asked, his soft eyes still lingered over her.

“Well,” her throat knotted. “Before my mom died...I read at her bedside. Eventually she told me, ‘Nasreen, I’m bored of these books, why don’t you write me something of your own.’” Nasreen sniffled, though only air traveled in her nostrils. Her eyelids flickered as threatening tears began to pound against her eyes. “So I did. Every day and night I would write a story about a page or two with crayon, or pencil, whatever I could find, and I’d read to her. It was silly stuff like: a little girl riding a unicorn, or a story about a man who gets rich when it rains diamonds, or...” she hesitated, “or a doctor who can heal a sick person with a touch of his finger.”

Nobody paid attention to Jack Torrance striking the pale door with his axe. Their eyes, their wide, unblinking eyes, were now pointed at her—even Tom who looked away from his phone for longer than two seconds. She could not tell if there was sadness, empathy, or intrigue. Nasreen fought the coming threat of tears and shook off the hanging sadness she brought on Willy’s doorstep.

“I’m sorry, it’s supposed to be movie night,” she chuckled.

“Don’t apologize,” Kriss smiled, “so you do this to feel closer to your mom, right?”

Nasreen nodded.

“I think that’s beautiful.”

“I-It is,” Willy nodded

§

The orange light in Nasreen's room was dim, but still allowed her room to be visible. Its pale walls were the canvas that allowed the shadows of the room to be painted. Her large birch desk was littered with papers from school, writing, and personal items that buried her mouse and keyboard. She sat in her soft leather chair whose wheels remained stiff on top of the carpet and sighed. Her fingers tapped against the black handle of the drawer on her right. She swallowed, and hesitated, and pondered.

Open it. The soft voice of her mother called.

“I can’t.”

You can, it's just one quick motion.

Nasreen gripped the handle. To pull it out would be having to lift a tungsten cube with a broken arm. Seconds were minutes, and after sighing and wiping away her invisible sweat, Nasreen let go. Before any of the voices in her mind could scold her, she turned out the light and slid into bed. She pulled the covers over her head, and allowed the day to exit her mind with tears that soaked her cheeks and pillows.

§

Nasreen hated the cold, she hated her professor, and she hated her nonsensical assignments that worsened her self-loathing. The only thing she hated worse than those three, however, was people. When she read her story aloud, their eyes only seemed to watch as she crumbled into a child again, stumbling over her words, worried that boogers were flying from her nose, or that she was making a strange face. After her professor's comment regarding her story, she noticed that they stared more. She was no longer the girl that remained hidden, no, she was now The Palestinian Girl That Was Called Out By Professor White. That's what their stares told her, she didn't need to hear them speak.

The blinding light shined above her as she hid herself behind her laptop that was shut off. Groups of students buzzed and flocked to their own cliques as Nasreen remained alone, as she always had, and she always wished to be.

“Hi, N-Nasreen,” Willy sat next to her with a smile, “how you doing?”

Nasreen was speechless. “Why are you sitting here?”

Willy’s eyes circled around the room. “Free will, right? Plus, no one was sitting here.”

The eyes returned with smiles and whispers. “Willy, I think you might tank your reputation if you sit with me,” her reflection in the dark screen exposed the strands of hair that poked up from her scalp, her hanging bags on her eyes, and even her quivering lip.

“We’re all writers here, Nasreen,” he took out his Macbook and sat it down gently on the long table that acted as a part-time mirror. “Some write for money—like R-Rosie—others write for therapy, and you and I, we write for change.”

She raised an eyebrow, “but Professor didn’t call you out.”

“To be honest,” he chuckled, “the g-guy’s an idiot at times. Give him simple and honest and he’ll preach it night and day. But give him anything outside his little bubble—let’s say Ellison or Richard Wright, maybe even Borges—and he’ll flip his lid about its uselessness. The reason he said anything about y-yours, is because yours was obvious and specific. I told the story of a group of lions that reflect the war in Sudan, but I didn’t say anything about it did I? Not a time, not a place, not even a name, but if you research the event with my story, it all adds up. But he doesn’t know that, ‘c-cause he d-doesn’t understand us, or our stories and he never will. He’ll rave about McCarthy and The Great American Novel bullshit, but between you and me, he’s as little qualified to be a-a Creative Writing professor, as I am to be The President of Mexico.”

Nasreen smiled, “I think you’d be a great President, all things considered.”

“Thank you. I’d try anyway.”

Professor White entered with a loud swinging of the door and hearty “hello, glorious writers.” Willy turned to their Professor with a blank face, but Nasreen could not take her eyes off of him. Such passion, such irritation, such artistic light that burned like an immortal flame. She smiled at him, wishing to bury herself in his mind that seemed identical to her own.

§

Nasreen read in the library alone. Willy had an afternoon class, and so she decided on spending a few hours reading Gulliver’s Travels for her night class. There were only three people sitting at their desks and reading and the lone librarian who only typed away at her computer, pushing her glasses up every five seconds while unleashing a dry cough.

It was truly peaceful, the first time Nasreen had peace in school since before her mother passed away. The orange sun plastered its torso on the far end of the library, slicing the building in half between the last bit of light in the west, and the darkness that would drown the sky in a few hours. The smell of warm ginger tea and dust played with her nose, offering her solace as she analyzed Swift’s prose and satire. A chill sank into her jacket and lingered, but it did not matter as shifted in her wooden seat every second and brought momentary warmth.

Her peace ceased when the blonde woman, Rosie, she remembered, entered with pounding footsteps against the hardwood. The librarian hushed her without looking from her computer that should have remained in the 80’s. Rosie waved her golden hair that sparkled in the crimson sun and made her way to Nasreen’s lone-some table.

“Hey,” she glared at Nasreen with fire shooting from her pupils, and yet she followed library rules and spoke quietly, “what’s your deal with Willy?”

She looked up from her book. “What?”
“What’s your deal with Willy?”

She scoffed, “nothing? I’m confused.”

“I know you’re only doing your little activist performance to get in his pants, you skank. That whole mom sob story might fool everyone, but not me. You understand me, terrorist bitch?”

Nasreen bit the inside of her cheek until she was sure she might cause blood to break out and spill onto her tongue. She slid her bookmark inside the dry pages and slammed the book onto the wooden table. Rosie flinched and the conviction in her eyes burned away.

“Have you ever loved, Rosie?”

Rosie raised her eyebrow and scoffed. “What kind of stupid question is that?”

“I loved my mother, I love my work, and I love the life I’ve lived so far. If you truly believe I would keep it on the back burner for some guy, then you don’t know me. Maybe you don’t care, and that’s fine. I’m a terrorist skank, and you’re a racist bitch, and we can keep it like that. Deal?”

Rosie’s face puffed and burned with the color of a tomato. Her hands gripped on the sides of the table as her eyes attacked Nasreen with a vicious stare. “I hope your country burns to a pile of rubble, bitch.”

Nasreen’s eyes stung. The countless stories from her mother and father of the children coated in blood, the fallen rubble, the whistling of the bombs that ended with a deafening explosion. Countless times before her mother’s death the two of them sat in front of the television with the late night news on for updates on the invasion. “Maybe if you want Willy to like you, Rosie, respect the art he cares about.”

She scoffed once again and mumbled under her breath. She slid in her backpack and stormed out of the library.

Coming inside, though Nasreen figured Rosie didn’t notice, was Willy with two steaming plastic cups in his hands. He smiled when his eyes met Nasreen’s. She moved her hair out of her face and sank back into her seat as she had been doing before the confrontation.

“Hey, Nasreen, I got us some coffee.”

“Oh,” she bit her tongue, “I don’t drink coffee.”

Willy chuckled, “that’s okay, more c-c-caffeine for me then.” He sipped on the cup in his right hand and cursed at it.

Nasreen chuckled and tapped her fingers against her book that laid face-up. The warring orange and black dragged their battle up the wall, the brightness was losing.

“Willy, I had an idea.”

“What is it?” He took out his laptop and opened it to a glaring white screen.

“You know how we’re going to be focusing on satire the next two weeks?”

“I do.”

“Well—and don’t laugh—what if I wrote a satire about what Mister White said to me? About how my story was ‘too political.’”

Willy’s soft eyes went into hers and he smiled. “Absolutely.”

“You don’t think it’s too much?”

He scoffed. “Professor White offended your people and heritage. Would you stop me from talking shit about someone who said ‘slavery wasn’t that bad?’”

Nasreen shook her head.

“Same thing. I just don’t want you to get kicked out of school for it.”

“You can’t be scared of the consequences of a revolution, Willy. I’d go up to the guillotine proud if I needed to, as long as I made sure I got a word or two out.”

“Those a-are s-some bars. Were those off the top of your h-head,” he laughed.

Nasreen didn’t laugh. The glowing orange was subdued and the white overhanging lights shined over the two of them like a spotlight. “Willy, would you stay by me?”

“Of course,” he took her by the hand, “a-always.”

His hand was coarse but comforting. Her own thin hand lingered in his embrace until he pulled it away quickly, muttering under his breath as his eyes darted between her and the keyboard.

Far out the window the last of the sunlight was falling behind the hills that resided miles from the campus. Violet and pink rivers ran through the sky without chains to withhold their flight. She smiled at the beautiful sight of orange, pink, and purple. The spiral of colors were soon washed away by the sea of darkness.

You will persevere, she thought, just keep pushing.

§

Sitting at her desk brought less comfort than she had hoped. The world beyond the screen was blank with only the black dash to comfort her with her equally empty mind.

As she turned in her chair without a thought to accompany her, the desk drawer called to her.

She ignored it.

Her story needed to be told just as the millions over the sea needed her to tell it. The title was conceived, then a sentence was born and soon bloomed into a paragraph.

Tears and blood from her people flooded into the story of her own making, attacking Professor White's words while strengthening her own. The sun will rise on us, Papa, I promise you.

§

do u think he has a KKK hood in his apartment? Willy's note read. Nasreen contained a chuckle.

“Probably.”

Professor White was going over the general roots of satire. Critiques of government, society, and religion.

“The former is the most popular as seen in Animal Farm or The Master and Margarita. Social satires, in my opinion, are the easiest to detect and write. I'm sure you all have read The Picture of Dorian Gray, that is considered a social satire as I assume you all are aware of. The base of satire, while being funny, is to tell a message in a very obscured way—much like an allegory of sorts.

For example, let's say I wrote a satirical fiction tale about...Ethiopian children who scream like monkeys and pickpocket traveling colonizers. To some that may be funny, and the message would be to critique the deliberate stereotypes of Black people."

Odd example. She turned to Willy who was struggling to contain his amusement.

The lecture passed gradually, but when it was adjourned, Nasreen stretched and groaned with gratefulness. The ruffling of backpacks and the flurry of conversation filled her with life as she carefully descended the stairs to the door on her left.

"Miss Nasreen, may I speak with you please?" Professor White announced.

Her body warmed and goosebumps trickled down her flesh. Willy squeezed her shoulder behind her as she passed the door to face the short fat man with a bushy brown beard and head of auburn hair. The edges of his eyes were cursed with crow's feet, his nose was as small as a penny, and his lips were unbearingly chapped. The last of the students trickled out of the room, and the door swung close with an echo.

"Yes, Professor White?"

He smirked, "I noticed you were not fond of my analogy in regards to my satiric lecture."

Nasreen grimaced. "Just thought it was in bad taste."

"No, no, you are entitled to your opinion, do not think I am upset. Unfortunately, that was the best I could conjure at the moment," he chuckled, "but I wished to speak to you about something else."

"What's that?" Her teeth grinded.

"Your story you presented the other day: The Border of Terror, I wanted to speak to you about it since I seemed to have upset you."

"You did."

"And for that I apologize, Nasreen. Last thing I want to do is upset my student."

Her eye twitched. "It's just...we both know many politics are

imbedded in literature and—while I don't believe my story was inherently political—you told me it was 'too political.'"

Professor White winced and leaned on his long spruce-wood desk. "I did say that."

"So...what makes my story so different from Gulliver's Travels or Animal Farm?"

Professor White inhaled harshly and shook his head. "May I be honest with you, Nasreen? And keep this between the two of us?"

Nasreen's mouth dried. "Sure."

"I don't find your story, and the story overseas in Gaza and Israel that...compelling. I mean...it's war. War is a generational cycle that'll occur forever. There have been many stories about war and I find yours to be...unoriginal, I'm sorry. You paint this picture as though it is truly a genocide when—in all fairness—it's not. It's like a seesaw, Nasreen, just two sides falling back and forth; threatening, bombing, killing."

Her blood did not know whether to freeze in shock, or combust with rage. She could only stay still as Professor White shrugged. For nights and days she bore witness to the constant bombings, the orange lights that polluted the dark skies like fireworks, only to leave ash, dust, and blood in its wake. The pictures of dead—massacred—children were forever branded in her mind, cursing her in her nightmares. Papa's cries after a nightmare or a sudden trigger echoed in her mind. And this man had the audacity to belittle the experience of her own family and blood?

"I understand." Her eyes burned. "May I be dismissed?"

"You may. Just keep writing, Nasreen, I'm sure with your style you could get published." He smiled, it seemed genuine, though her senses urged her it was not.

She nodded and quickly dashed to the door, her light backpack had gained one hundred pounds as the floor beckoned her. She opened the door to find Willy on the side who leaned against the wall with his attention on the gray carpet. He raised his head and raised his eyebrow at her downward expression.

"What happened?"

“Nothing.” She flew past him, her hands tight around the straps of her backpack.

“What did the f-fucker say?”

“Nothing, Willy, drop it.”

“Nas—”

“Just fucking drop it, Willy, please,” the warm tears escaped.

“Please, just leave me alone.” Nasreen left her friend behind, tears fell from her brown cheeks as the lights seemed to dim around her. She bit the inside of her cheek as her heart hammered her sternum. His smile, his goddamned smile burned in her mind like the photos, and Papa’s cries. Oh how she would use it against him, she told herself as she stormed through the hall. The edges of her vision were blank, the dim tunnel would only lead to her desk.

There’ll be no more distractions, no more excuses, no more doubts. Her story will be enough.

§

Her ears would have let out steam had she been in a cartoon instead of the unfortunate reality, at least then she’d be able to pound Professor White with a ten-ton hammer.

Nasreen had told Papa about the strange conversation, and he rightfully swore a tornado about the man he had never met. His cheeks glowed red in the golden light as they ate in silence. Later, as he watched Tom and Jerry to calm his nerves, he convulsed as his mind attacked him with memories only he held. Nasreen held and calmed him into the realm of sleep, the only place nowadays where peace was in his life.

The stars twinkled in the curtain of black in the outer world, the world now so far from her. The Judge, her newest story, was now bare in front of her. Four thousand words of tears and frustration were laid out, ready for all to see. Just a few tweaks were needed for it to be perfect, but Nasreen was proud of it all the same. Her eyes magnetized to the forbidden drawer, but were torn away with a quick glance to the stars again. She wished she were beyond

the stratosphere, where the flames of stars and supernovas would cool her back, instead of the flaming glares of her classmates and teachers. The memory of *Starcatchers*, one of the first stories she wrote for Mama, returned. Nasreen smiled at the memory. It was a rainy day, and Papa had told her to stay inside. Annoyed and hearing her mother's hacking, she wrote *Starcatchers* in Crayola with colorful illustrations outside the margins. Mama loved the story so much she had it framed by her bedside and during her worse days, Nasreen found her reading it with red eyes and drying cheeks.

The frame was in her arms the night she passed away. Nasreen turned off her computer and jumped into bed. The crickets played their song down below, the soft wind ran its finger along the wind chimes as its spontaneous melody played in her ears. The sounds of the evening sang in her ear as she sank into much-needed rest. All she wanted was for the story to sprout from a seed to a towering tree. Soon, *The Dead Revolutionaries* of the past told her in her dreams, soon.

2

The morning air was still fresh by the time she reached Willy's house. He was mowing the lawn with his earbuds bouncing against his chest. He nodded his head to whatever song he was listening to, sweat and grass glistened against his exposed arms which showed the tiniest bit of muscle.

Nasreen despised the scent of cut grass, but she endured it as she waited at the sidewalk where the tiny green blades were scattered. The sun overhead torched her until small beads of sweat protruded from her skin.

When Willy turned the lawn mower (while muttering a song with a smile on his face) he met Nasreen's eyes. His smile faded and Nasreen's heart dropped. He pulled out an earbud and cocked his

head.

“Are you stalking me?”

She had already prepared an apology, but was stunned at his sudden question. “I—uh, huh—what?”

“Are. You. Stalking. Me.”

“No, Willy, I am not stalking you.”

He squinted. “You sure? You s-seem to be the person to c-cuss someone out then stalk them.”

“That’s offensive.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Very.”

Willy smirked. “You’re right. You wouldn’t stalk someone with that outfit.” His eyes traveled up her body, analyzing her red Converse, gray basketball shorts, and oversized Slipknot shirt. “You’d probably wear skinny j-jeans and something stupid from H&M.”

“Fuck you. It’s comfortable and I look good.”

“Never said you didn’t. I said you wouldn’t stalk someone in that.”

Nasreen attempted to fight her smile but failed in the process. She sank in the grass as she walked slowly to Willy. “What would you say if I was stalking you?”

“That I’m right,” he laughed.

“Then I guess you’ll never know, William.”

“William? That’s certainly overstepping a boundary, Miss N-Nasreen.”

She stood in front of him. His soft eyes were now lowered on her, two brown spotlights that cooled her with their presence. “I’m sorry for yesterday.”

“Don’t sweat it. Guy’s just a jackass, and I’m sure you’ll be laughing in his face at the end of it.”

Nasreen cocked her head. “You’re not stuttering? You’re not nervous around me anymore?”

Willy chuckled. “I am, just can’t be s-st-st— goddamn it.” He broke out into a stomach-bursting laugh. “God, I hate you.”

“Hate you more,” she playfully punched his shoulder. “Do you

forgive me though? Completely.”

“Of course I do. Hard not to with a face like that.”

Her face warmed. “Thank you, Willy.”

“Always.” He smiled at her. It reminded her of Papa.

§

Willy was hesitant as he climbed the driveway to Nasreen’s house. She smiled and pulled on his arm that was now wrapped in a yellow Wu Tang Clan hoodie; he followed along with concrete feet. Nasreen pulled out the silver key from her pocket and stuck it into the lock with a loud click. She pushed the door open and the warm scent of lunch pierced her nostrils with its gentle blade.

“Papa, I’m home, and I brought a guest.”

“In the kitchen. I made us some falafels.”

Nasreen smiled and gasped, “Have you tried falafels, Willy? They’re sooo good.”

Willy shook his head. “C-C-Can’t-t s-say I have.”

Nasreen bit her cheek, but continued to drag her friend to the kitchen where the tender smell lingered. Papa was plating the falafels, leaving a third white plate empty. “So who’s our special guest?” He turned and his smile fell.

Nasreen tightened her grip around Willy’s wrist. “Papa,” she grinned, “this is William, the boy I told you about.”

Papa’s smile was rejuvenated with Herculean strength. “Oh my. Where are my manners? William, my name is Nasir, it is splendid to meet you.” He reached out his hand.

Willy met it with a deafening clap, Nasreen noticed the two bulging veins from the men’s hands. Why do men do that? She chuckled to herself as she grabbed her pink plastic plate from the granite counter.

“P-P-Pleasure to m-m-meet you, s-sir.” He smiled with fidgeting fingers.

“A stutter? Understandable, I’m quite a nervous talker at times.” He then spoke in Arabic that Willy did not understand.

“Our home is your home,” she chuckled. “So get yourself a falafel, Willy.”

§

Willy lay on her carpet with wide eyes and gaping mouth. Nasreen admired him in secret, his gracious laugh and a million thanks seemed to impress Papa, and even led to a secret text reading: He would make a great husband for you sweetie, with a winking emoji. She chuckled at the statement, but his own mannerisms reminded her too much of Papa. ‘Men marry their mothers, daughters marry their fathers,’ an old friend from high school told her after she had broken up with her first boyfriend. The man-child was nothing like her father, an intolerable douche who laughed at her dreams and wished for her to do something more realistic. ‘Writers don’t make money unless your name is Stephen King,’ he laughed one day while loudly chewing his bubblegum, ‘why not software engineering, or being a nurse, y’know?’

No. William wasn’t like that. He was much kinder, a bit goofy, but much more tolerable of her wild dreams.

“That was so good,” Willy said dreamily, “your dad is one h-helluva cook. Now I have to make you try chitlins.”

“Chitlins?”

“Yup. Pig intestines. Or maybe some oxtail, my mom can cook those two like nobody’s business.”

Nasreen chuckled as she turned to her computer. “I’ll take you on that offer then.” She turned on her computer and went to her folders. “I want to show you something, Willy, something I’ve never even shown my father.”

Willy jumped to his feet and walked beside her. His hands rested behind his back as he lowered his head beside hers. Nasreen opened the file titled: Pal-Is War Fantasy. Her friend cocked his head but didn’t say a word. The document was only three pages, three stupid pages that tortured its writer endlessly.

“Can you read this for me?”

Willy was silent, his pupils darted with the black words dancing in his eyes. He smelled of the cut grass from hours before, but it no longer bothered Nasreen. Her heart skipped many beats as her eyes bounced between her stagnant story and the man beside her who analyzed her story so intently, perhaps dissecting it, realizing it, answering questions with his own experience. The shining glare of the afternoon entered in slits through the curtain, illuminating separate sections of her room.

By the time he reached the final page he was smiling. And when the final word was read he lifted his face and sighed.

“What a shame, it was an intriguing premise.”

“You liked it?”

He nodded. “I understand it comes from the heart, and so you wrote the truth in such a format. Why don’t you continue it?”

She shrugged. “Don’t know how.”

“Well did you finish your satire story?”

She nodded.

“And how?”

Nasreen shrugged. “One word at a time, I guess.”

“That’s your answer,” he smiled, “it’s a premise that I can back, you just need to bring the damned axe and execute the rest.”

“Thanks Willy,” she smiled, “I’ll try.”

Her friend smiled, “that’s all I need you to do. I have faith your stories will transcend time with the right support.”

“That’s why I have you.” Her face warmed.

“And that’s why I’ll stay here.”

Nasreen’s hands rubbed against her own smooth palms. Her gut sank as she met Willy’s smile with her own.

“Hey,” he said, “I was wondering if you can send The Border of Terror to me, I want to do something for you.”

“Willy, you can’t do anything for me, you’ve done enough.”

“Nope. Not hearing you until you send me the story,” he chuckled.

Nasreen obliged with a chuckle and Willy thanked her with an exaggerated bow. For the rest of his stay they sat on the scratching

carpet with the cold room attempting to soothe their visible anxieties. Their joy ended when Willy's mother called to warn him of his cold dinner. He quickly said his goodbyes and thanks and left her alone again. Nasreen did not frown at his departure, she only smiled and spread out across the floor, counting the minutes where their presences would meet again.

§

Ashly and Willy sandwiched her, their seats at the center of the class were close enough to witness Professor White's irritated expression. He knows, she thought. The transparent lights seemed to heat her entire body, she was living in an oven, and slowly it grew hotter, and eventually she'd explode or melt.

"Hey," Willy took her hand that was shaking on the desk, "it's okay." His smile was clean, his face was freshly shaven, and his eyes were only focused on her.

She nodded and took a deep breath.

Professor White looked at his watch and with a swift nod he clapped his hands three times, signaling the class to pay attention. "Good afternoon beautiful ladies and gentlemen on this floating hunk o' rock."

There were scattered good afternoons.

"I hope you all have garnered a good rest as today we will be reading aloud our satiric stories."

There were groans, but Nasreen didn't know if Professor White heard them—or if he just didn't care. There were ruffling backpacks and the tapping of laptops sitting on their desks. Nasreen was already prepared, her printed story was laying in front of her without a hint of fear. Once the tapping of computers and the shuffling of papers had ceased—and there was only the sound of quiet, blade-like breaths—Professor White smiled and looked over the sea of students. He raised his thin hand and pointed directly at Nasreen with a sardonic smile.

"Nasreen, why don't you open our readings for today."

Nasreen stood with a still face. The oven was growing hotter. Her knees wanted to buckle, her hands wished to drop the paper and hide her face from the shame she'd face. No, she thought, don't stop. Her frown was forced into a smile.

“My name is Nasreen Ismail, and I’d like to present my story: The Judge.”

§

Nasreen had hoped that Professor White would be speechless at her story, and that those two words that had bothered her so (too political, fucker) would be wiped clean. While he was speechless with the exception of a mutter about the lack of sensory details, an unexpected factor in her day occurred: there was applause. True applause that almost seemed imagined rather than a true occurrence. She was floating, the pain in her mind and body no longer mattered, her peers admired her story and Professor White—if he was as smart as he believed he was—would’ve understood the meat of her tale six feet under. The third factor that brought joy to a rather depressing few weeks, was the warm hand of Willy that held onto her as she finished her story. He continued holding her hand all through class, and even as they walked out of class together their fingers were interlocked; they continued without a word.

§

Papa was drinking his ginger tea and watching a show from the 50’s when Nasreen told him about the elicit reaction she garnered in class. Papa laughed at her mentioning of Professor White’s red-denying face and petty mumbling.

“Serves the bastard right.” He sipped his tea and exhaled loudly, “I’m proud of you, little one. Your mother would be proud of you, too.”

Nasreen lowered herself to the couch and wrapped her arm around Papa’s bony torso. He rubbed her back and held her

tighter. Her shoulder grew wet where his eyes resided. She pulled herself away and wiped away Papa's tears from his wrinkly skin. His eyes were red and his lip quivered as he rubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

“My baby girl, I’m so proud of you.”

“For what, Papa? I haven’t done anything yet.”

“For standing up for what yourself. You did not let that bastard’s words stop you from doing what you love, you hit him with your own words, and you won in the end. For that I’m proud of you.”

Nasreen’s eyes watered. “Thank you, Papa. But it’s only because of you and Mama that I was able to do this.”

Papa smiled, his handsome face, despite his age, brought a familiar warmth. A warmth that reminded her of happier times, when he and Mama would fly her to Florida to see the star-sprinkled beach, or New York where the buildings were like giants.

“I love you, my beautiful girl.”

Nasreen chuckled, “I love you too, Papa.”

They both hugged once more, both of them allowed five invisible fingers to caress their backs with yearning love resting amongst them.

3

The drawer continued to call to her with its silent voice. Even in bliss, Nasreen turned away from the closed drawer, covering her ears from its sweet voice.

§

“Do you think Professor White will try and make my life harder?” She asked Willy as they ate their crispy sub-sandwiches.

“Most likely,” he spoke with a full mouth, wiping the marinara sauce from his chin, “he can’t get you kicked out, but inside our bubble he’s going to try and make your life Hell—more than he has before, I suppose.”

Nasreen nodded while taking a soft bite of her sandwich. “You realize we’re like little revolutionaries,” she smiled, “fighting the power.”

Willy laughed, “You’re right. Coincidentally, it’s always an old white guy trying to tell the ‘erratic’ and ‘impressionable’ colored children what two plus two is.” He scoffed, “Seems like our school is in need of a few revolutionaries.”

The twilight sky dimmed further. The horizon burned pink with its tendrils spreading through the sky. Its temporary beauty would fade within minutes, yet Nasreen hoped to remember it in her dreams, hoping for it to replace the anxiety that sped her heart.

“Rosie is having a party tonight, do you want to go?”

Nasreen rolled her eyes. Her tongue wanted to say NO, but it betrayed her. “Sure,” she bit her traitorous body part.

“Cool,” Willy smiled, he seemed unaware of her visible irritation, “I’ll probably go like this, no need to impress.” He was dressed in ripped black jeans, his bright yellow Wu-Tang Clan hoodie, and a Pittsburgh Pirates snapback.

“I think I’m a little underdressed.” She was dressed in a long red sundress with three inch heels.

“You look better than I do,” Willy responded without looking from his sandwich. His eyes sparkled as he took a bite from his meatball sub.

“You love that sandwich, don’t you?” Nasreen joked.

Willy met her eyes and he smiled, “yeah, I do.”

§

Rosie’s house was a large two-story, had Nasreen not visited actual mansions, she would have assumed this house would be one. A long crescent driveway lined with bricks surrounded a marble

water fountain. Cars were parked and some rhythm and blues track was echoing from the backyard. Telestic laughter filled the bright-colored night; the lights reminded Nasreen of Christmas, such joyous colors that would glow in her home as an innocent, doe-eyed child.

“You okay?” Willy asked, squeezing her hand softly. She didn’t even notice his large fingers interlocked with her own small ones, but she didn’t care.

She nodded.

“Sure?”

She nodded.

“If you want we can go. Get some pizza, or go back to my place for some dinner. My dad made some steaks so I’m sure—”

“WILLY!” A high-pitched shout rang in Nasreen’s ears.

Willy grimaced as he smiled (weakly, Nasreen noticed) at Rosie who ran out the stained glass doors with a red solo cup in her hand. Her pink skirt nearly touched the top of her thighs, her short black shirt showed the underside of her boobs, and her red lipstick was smudged across her chalky cheeks.

She jumped into him and wrapped her long arms around his neck, forcing his hand to slip from Nasreen’s. “Oh, Willy, you actually came. That makes me sooooo, happy, thank you, thank you. I—” she burped, “have some Gray Goose, some—um—Don Julio, and...” Rosie twisted her head to Nasreen who stood with the cold wind blowing through her thighs. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I’m here with Willy,” Nasreen answered.

Rosie unhooked from Willy and scoffed. The wincing man wiped the white powder from his cheek. “Why? At the end of the night he’s just going to sleep with me and leave your ass with an Uber.”

“Rosie,” Willy snapped, his angled brows and fiery pupils sent a shiver through Nasreen’s body. “Shut up.”

“Um...excuse me? You know it’s true, we’ve done it before, I don’t see how it could change.”

“Yeah, it happened. One fucking time. We were drunk and I was stressed. Don’t try to make this whole thing something it ain’t.”

Rosie laughed. “Stop, Willy. You’ve lied to the poor girl enough. You love me.”

Willy’s cheeks puffed. His hands squeezed into balls as he stared at the laughing woman. Nasreen took a step towards her friend and put a soft hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“You’re just like those hoes inside, Rosie. Don’t know why I couldn’t see it before.”

“Excuse me? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Her voice heightened.

“You know what you want me for, Rosie. It ain’t like, it ain’t love, it ain’t even admiration. You just want to flaunt me around like a trophy, that’s all you ever wanted from me. You were proud to have your virginity taken by Jamal in high school, proud to sleep with half of the football team. You know what you’re doing, and I know what you are.”

Rosie dropped the red solo cup and nodded. Her pursed lips fell to the ground, defeated.

“Don’t disrespect Nasreen like that again, and don’t come bothering me either.”

He grabbed Nasreen’s hand and pulled her away from the colored house where the R&B had changed to a booming rap. Nasreen forced her smile away as she rubbed Willy’s arm, his face still contorted with anger but was slowly beginning to cool.

“I wouldn’t mind reheated steaks,” Nasreen finally said when they left the house’s perimeter.

“Me neither,” Willy didn’t smile.

They continued down the street, underneath golden streetlights and distant flickering stars. Trees rustled around them, sending crispy leaves and small sticks at their feet. The neighborhood was silent with the exception of a meowing cat that sounded from some mysterious crevice. Willy held tight to Nasreen’s hand as their footsteps crushed the gravel and stones underneath their feet. Her ankles ached and eyes hung slightly.

“You okay?”

She nodded. “A bit tired.”

“You wanna sit here?”

She nodded.

The two of them sat on the hard curb with the flicking noise of an active sprinkler firing across the street. A lingering smell of barbecue found itself between them, worsening Nasreen’s rumbling stomach.

“Are you okay?” Nasreen asked Willy who stared into the empty abyss of the road.

Willy sucked his teeth. “I’m trying.”

She understood. “Do you want a hug?”

He shrugged.

“If it means anything: I don’t see you as a trophy. I really enjoy spending time with you.”

Willy nodded without a smile. “Thanks.”

Nasreen slid her arms around her friend, marinara lingered in her nose. “Thank you for looking out for me, it’s more than anyone else has done in my life.”

His tense shoulders softened. “Of course.” His phone dinged inside his hoodie and he scoffed. “Sick of the damn questions.” He pulled out his phone and mid-breath he stopped.

Nasreen enjoyed the soft cotton of the hoodie and closed her eyes. The weight was too great to want to lift. She smiled and listened to the fast pace of his heartbeat from his back.

“Nasreen,” he chuckled, “remember how I asked you to send me your story?”

“I do.”

“What if I told you I submitted it for the school’s paper to print it?”

Nasreen’s eyes shot open. “Did it get rejected?”

“Answer my question first.”

“I don’t have one.”

“I have a friend who works for the paper so I asked him to take a look.” He turned to her with a smile, “everyone accepted it. So

it'll show up with the other stories in the paper."

Nasreen's heart beat against her sternum like a drum. She was close to falling on her back against the cold sidewalk, but remained upright with an aching smile. She wrapped herself around Willy and met his lips with her own. They were smooth and warm, and he accepted her greeting with elation.

§

What could he do? Nasreen asked as she paced around her room in the darkness. The changing lens of her concerns continued to flip in her mind. Her stomach bubbled with admiration for the man she had kissed only an hour before, but it also boiled at the thought of Professor White's grinning face attempting to best her in whatever game he was conjuring. But a story of hers was published—but Mister White could fail her and drop her from his class. There was no conclusion to her ceaseless thoughts. She folded her pillow over her ears and bit the cover of her mattress as she sunk into her bed. Why is this happening to me? Why is it just me? Rosie doesn't deal with this, Adam Jeanson doesn't deal with this. Why is it just me?

4

She and Papa ate in silence, their cereal crunched softly inside the invisible cloak of silence that rested over their long oak table. Papa was scrolling through the NEWS app on his phone while Nasreen was reading the latest discussion post for her Classical Music class. The soft sugary pellets dissolved in her mouth as she ate mechanically, she no longer remembered the sweet taste that she yearned for every morning.

"How are you, Papa?" Nasreen asked without taking her eyes

from her phone.

“Good, my sweet one. How are you?”

“I’m good. A bit stressed.”

“I thought everything was going well,” he lowered his phone, his aged gaze caressing a soft, invisible hand on her cheek.

“It is, Papa, it is. It’s just...” she tapped her foot softly, “...it’s just my mind has been wandering, you know. William said he got my story to be published in the school’s paper, but at the same time I’m scared that my professor is going to make my life harder than it already is in his class.”

Papa had only seemed to hear the former subject of her statement. “The school paper? Oh my goodness, that is swell, my dear, I’m so proud of you.” He pulled his chair out and waddled to her, squeezing Nasreen with surprising strength for a man his age. His heart beat strongly like a bull’s, and his breath smelled of fresh milk.

Nasreen slumped against Papa like a corpse. She had been kissed. Her story was going to be published in the school paper. Why was she so upset? Was it because of Professor White, truly? She didn’t know. Anxiety coursed through her blood from some empty source. In the warmth of her home, goosebumps formed on her smothered skin. Professor White’s grin overtook the gratitude, and she shuddered.

§

Professor White had been showing his students an example of good character development when Nasreen thought of an idea to resuscitate her novel. She quickly scribbled in her notebook and turned her attention to the whiteboard. Willy was sick—or so he said—so she was alone, facing sporadic burning eyes by herself. Kriss was sitting at the front of the class, and all of the others that introduced themselves to her at the get-together were dispersed across the classroom. Nasreen was in the middle of a burning ocean where her fate was held by a hateful god.

Her head fell on the top of her laptop as the gravelly voice of Professor White droned on.

When he finally dismissed the class she was the first one to be packed and heading to the door. Whatever was going to happen, she didn't want to be there when it happened.

"Miss Nasreen, can you stay here please. I'd like to speak to you."

Damn it.

Her heels skidded across the carpet as she quickly turned to Professor who held a spurious smile. She shuffled across the swamp-green carpet until she was five yards from him.

"How are you?"

Those fake eyes, fake smiles, and fake concerns. It all made her heart burn and fists clench. She never wished to harm anyone—not even Rosie—but him. "Okay, I guess. How are you, Professor?"

He nodded and walked to his desk, fidgeting with a shiny, uneaten pear. "I'm good, yeah, I'm good. I was wishing to speak to you about something I overheard this morning."

Her curiosity piqued. "What's that?"

"That your story—the one you presented in class a month ago—is being published in the school's paper." He leaned against his desk with his arms crossed. A smile came to his face, but Nasreen knew better than to believe a serpent's tricks.

"It is." Her answer was cold.

"Well, well, well, that is interesting to hear. I am proud of you though, Miss Nasreen, and am glad that success is growing in your future."

"Thank you, Professor."

"Of course, now hurry along, Miss Revolutionary." Miss Revolutionary. His words left with such toxic verbiage. How dare he? She had accomplished something many writers dream of doing, and he had simply ridiculed her in his mind, hiding it under The Trojan Horse of pleasantries. Too political. Miss Revolutionary. She wanted to punch him, but the satisfaction would be too short, done in a flash. She needed her retaliation to be slow and grueling

and just as embarrassing as his words were for her.

She needed to win, to prove that she was worth a damn. To show the world that her stories needed to be told.

§

Nasreen sat with her glaring three pages. Her head rested in the palms of her hands for what seemed like an hour. She was idle, she was useless as her story remained untouched.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Willy. She smiled instantly at his text which was just a GIF of Rottweiler puppies. Nasreen's rushing blood slowed to the speed of a calm brook. Life was serene, she would make it so; it would be safe, she would make it so.

She pulled out the note she wrote in class from her pocket and nodded. She then deleted every page until there was nothing and started anew.

§

Nasreen's heart hurt at its rough throbbing. Willy had gone to get the paper, and she was left in the library, inside the warm building that hugged her tightly. She had long finished Gulliver's Travels and her class had moved onto Dante's Inferno.

The words were not comprehended, only scanned over to fade from her memory. She didn't care if she'd be behind by a few stanzas, soon her own words would be reread by her in dark printed words. Her dry mouth was difficult to moisten; her racing heart did not stop, even as she grew lightheaded from the rushing anxiety.

Nasreen could do nothing but wait in uncomfortable silence.

It was another five minutes when Willy returned, a scowl rested on his face and his knuckles were nearly pale while he gripped the paper in his hands.

Oh God. "Willy, what happened?"

He slammed the bundle of papers on the table and cussed. "That fucking bastard. He fucked you, Nasreen, he fucked you. He

took your fucking story from the goddamn paper.”

She jumped to her feet and held Willy’s head in her hands. She hushed him like a mother would to a crying child, hoping for his anger to dissipate. “Okay, talk to me, Willy. What do you mean?”

Willy took a deep breath and sat down. “I was going through the paper to look for your story, but I couldn’t find it at first—even though I was told this issue would be the one with your story. So I called my friend and asked him why it wasn’t there.” He scoffed, “he told me that a member of the faculty convinced the head editor to omit the story from the paper.”

Her saliva burned as it traveled down her throat. “Did he say who?”

Willy shook his head. “Did he need to? He was told that the story was ‘too political for the school paper,’ and that it would ‘simply split the entire campus in half.’”

Nasreen fell into her chair and sighed. No. No tears. Please, no tears. There would be no tears in that moment, but there was an uncomfortable stillness in the library. The rustling trees that shook in the hanging gray of the campus had stopped their extreme dance. All feeling in her body had ended abruptly as those cursed words returned to her. The murder of crows had squawked at her: too political ...too political...Miss Revolutionary is too political. She slumped in her chair, biting the inside of her cheek as Willy wrapped his arms around her neck. The tears came then, slowly falling against her brown cheek and falling silently onto her blue denim jeans.

§

The house was upturned when Nasreen returned with dried eyes and a cold chocolate milkshake in her hand. The living room table was upside down, their sofa was torn with its stuffing thrown across the room, and the television that sat on a mahogany stand was cracked with yellow, red, and purple streaks stretching from the horrible cavern of darkness in the center. She dropped her back-

pack and slammed the milkshake on the small table by the door.

“Papa!” She screamed as she dashed through the house.

Her entire being numbed. Everything was silent as the cavern of her mind reverberated her racing heart and ringing ears. He wasn’t in the kitchen, though that section of the house remained untouched. She raced up the wooden steps, climbing the spiral with speed she never realized she had. The loft was also left clean, though Papa’s door was wide open with a startling hole in its center.

“Papa!”

She ran into his room, her feet sank into the carpet where she stood, dazed. The bathroom light was on, and from its entrance a red handprint greeted her. Her eyes burned, her limbs shook as she believed she would collapse any second. She made her way to Papa’s bathroom and found the beautiful tile that acted as a mirror was dirty with smeared blood. Papa sat against the tub—also stained with bright crimson—at his feet were blood-stained scissors.

Nasreen couldn’t scream, she couldn’t cry. A pulsing red came from his wrists, adding to his ruined pajama pants and gray tank top. Nasreen took her phone from her pocket and called the police.

5

The white light of the hospital offered her no comfort as she waited. A fat couple beside her had their own duet of coughing fits, the clicking of the receptionist’s keyboard rattled in her ears like beads of a maraca. Nasreen massaged her sweating palms, attempting to fight the vomit that was growing in her throat.

Why did he do it? She asked, why would he do something like that? Her heart burned as she remembered the blood. Oh God, the sea of blood that dirtied the bottom of her shoes and trailed behind her as she left behind the swift paramedics. Tears bubbled

in her eyes, but she did not let them leave.

“Miss Ismail,” a tall, stern-faced man with a fresh-shaven beard walked out of the long hallway with a clipboard in front of his face.

Nasreen shot to her feet and sped to the doctor. She was numb to the eyes of the waiting room that stared at her curiously. The doctor closed the door behind her and the two of them walked slowly through the long, beaming hallway.

A man in a wheelchair was being pushed into another room, a doctor and his nurse were talking at a desk in whispers, and a young boy was screaming in fear of getting a shot. Nasreen’s heart only quickened at the strange sights and dusty smell that attached itself to her clothes.

“You’re the daughter, correct?”

Nasreen nodded. Any verbal answer would lead to tears and a puddle of throw up.

“Well, Miss Ismail, your father is lucky you came at the time you did. If you had come thirty minutes later his condition and blood loss might have been too great to fix.” He sighed, “he’s okay right now, all stitched and bandaged, though he is asleep.”

A cold hand of relief settled on her. She nodded again, the tears fought harder. “Thank you.”

“Of course, Miss Ismail. He’s in this room. Visiting hours end in an hour, okay?”

The doctor opened the room and lying on the bed was Papa. A shining white gauze was wrapped on both of his arms. Nasreen nearly collapsed as she ran by his side and gripped his arm, ignoring the plastic tube poking his bicep. Her forehead brushed against the rough bandages and her knees grew cold against the gray tile, but she didn’t care. The dam in her eyes crumbled, and her tears escaped with a terrible scream. The doctor, with a deep frown, scurried out of the room in silence.

§

“Oh my God, Nasreen are you okay?” Kriss shrieked outside

of their class.

Nasreen cared little for her appearance. Her hair was tangled and unruly, her eyes burned with sagging bags underneath, she massaged her dry lips with her drier tongue, and stretched her aching limbs that rested in a turtleneck sweater and black sweatpants.

All eyes were on her. They whispered, but not with the usual poison, there was sympathy. Even Rosie held a lasting glance with a raised eyebrow. Ashly and Kriss rushed to her side, tears were boiling again.

“Where’s Willy?” She choked.

“He said he was running an errand, and he’d be back in a minute.”

Nasreen nodded.

Professor White opened the door with a bright smile, and the congregation of whispering students shuffled into the class with quick final glances. Professor followed the gazes of his students and met the burning retinas of Nasreen. His eyes carried joy, not for her suffering, she wondered, no one could be that cruel—maybe?

“Miss Nasreen,” he waved.

“Professor,” she grumbled.

He gave her a quick nod and disappeared with the door clicking shut behind him. Hot tears strolled down her damp cheeks.

“When’d Willy say he’d be ba—”

“Nasreen, why are you crying?” Kriss asked as she pulled the sleeve of her jacket to her hand and prepared to wipe the fallen tears.

Nasreen didn’t fight. The soft cotton scratched below her eye. “My dad, he—um—tried to kill himself.” Beads of sweat and tears fell to the carpet at blinding speed. Her weakened legs could no longer carry her as she fell onto her knees. Ashlyn and Kriss fell beside her, each of their arms rested on her shoulder as she bawled like a child—just as she did when her mother passed away.

§

Papa and Mama had often pushed her to make every class she ever took. Perfect attendance was a common occurrence for Nasreen, except for very minuscule exceptions like a terrible flu, a case of head lice, or a death in the family.

Her stomach bulged as the very concept of missing class on purpose was foreign to her. But Professor White was not her teacher, he was an enemy. He was merely an object she needed to overcome, somehow. But how? If one man had the ability to halt her pursuit of greatness, what good would fighting him be?

Nasreen basked in the darkness of her hood, hoping for the library's lights to not bother her. Nothing needed to bother her. Not a book, not a person, not a thought. She craved the void of existence, there'd be no Papa, or enemy, or even ideas that would plague her mind to no end. She was simply nonexistent, just as she wished to remain.

The sound of the chair across from her being dragged outward brought a frozen river of chills to her body. Please don't let it be him.

“N-Nasreen?” The soft voice across from her spoke.

Why?

“Um—I-I heard what happened earlier. Do you want me here?”

Yes. No. I don't know, Willy. God. Why did it have to be you?

She rose her head from the darkness and faced the concerned face whose soft eyes almost cured her with the faintest glance. Nasreen attempted a smile, but failed. “Where were you?”

He puffed his cheeks. “Running an errand, I'll tell you all about it later. Do you want me here?”

Again, he asked. Yes. No. Damnit. “I don't want you to bother yourself with me.”

“It's not a bother, Nasreen,” he spoke quietly, “I want to be with you right now. I completely understand you in this situation.”

Nasreen sniffled. “Someone in your family attempted suicide?”

Willy nodded with a sincere smile. “M-My auntie. Unfortunately she reached the finish line with her attempt.” He coughed and

chuckled, “she also made this face to me when I was a kid. She’d stretch out her cheeks with her fingers and bulge her eyes and for some reason I always found that amusing. She was one of the main reasons I wanted to be a screenwriter. I mean she had me watch *The Shining* and *Psycho* when I was ten and told me that I had the chance to write great stories like those ones.”

Nasreen nodded. “I’m sorry, William.”

“Don’t,” he shook his head, “this is about you. I mean, is he okay? Are you okay, Nasreen? Don’t lie to me.”

Her throat clogged. “H-He’s okay.”

“And you?”

Her head fell into her hands as the horrors of her mind returned. Mama’s cries of pain, Professor White’s destructive words, the blood that drooled from Papa’s arms, and the horrible drawer that called her every night. Her cries echoed in the personal cavern of her dried hands. “No.”

He stretched across the table and wrapped his arms around her. He smelled of cinnamon, and slowly Nasreen stopped her crying. She brushed the snot from her small nose and the tears from her cheeks.

“It’ll be okay, Nasreen. Whether it be tomorrow, next week, or next month, it’ll all be okay.”

She nodded.

“If you need me here I’ll stay, okay?”

“Thank you,” she squeaked.

“I know you’re going through a lot right now, and I know not a lot could help you at the moment, but I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?”

A soft smile came to his own empathetic face. “So I printed out your story and—with the help of some friends—had it spread throughout campus.”

“What?”

“Almost every door room, faculty room, classroom, and bathroom has your story perfectly positioned for someone to read it.”

Since the fucker decided to limit your words, I thought someone might as well fight to push it out. Seeing how life has been treating you though, I doubt this is the last thing on your mind.”

“W-Why?” Nasreen was on the verge of tears again.

“A revolution isn’t one person, Nasreen. It’s a system; a body. You’re the heart and the brain; I’m attempting to be the blood and nerves, the section that spreads to the others. You have a unique gift that shouldn’t be silenced for the insecure bastards in power.”

Nasreen gripped Willy’s smooth face and pulled his lips into her own. The solitary kiss ended and Nasreen smiled. “How many times do I have to thank you?”

“You never needed to.” He chuckled and stood up with his hand proffered. “Come on, I’ll take you to the hospital. You need to be with your dad right now.”

Nasreen shook her head. “Take me home first. There’s something I need to bring to him.”

§

Papa was awake when Nasreen walked into his room with a thousand-pound three-ring binder under her arm. His glassy eyes stared through her with no subject residing in his dark pupils. She shuddered and sat down on the stabbing plastic chair by his bed.

“My dear,” he spoke with a dried voice, “how are you? How was class?”

“It was good, Papa.”

They were silent.

Why would you do this to yourself? She wondered this since the day she stepped into the red pool underneath her.

Papa sunk into the cushions of his bed and sighed as his eyes faded. “I saw your mother.”

Nasreen didn’t answer. She massaged the bumpy cover of the binder and bit her cheek.

“I am grateful that you were not there to see our homeland when your mother and I came to America. We witnessed massa-

cres and death. Constantly, I was asked to join the men who would charge to their deaths—I did not wish to do so.” His breathing shook. “Today, my love, I can perfectly describe the scent of burning flesh, and what a friend of mine shouted before his death. It was endless, Nasreen, and pointless. They despised us for land that belonged to us, and now we must suffer because of it.”

He turned to her, a single trailing tear fell to the bridge of his nose. “When I smile and laugh, Nasreen, I see the men I grew up with dying to fire and bullets. I hear the echo of gunshots and the roaring of trucks and flames. There is smoke and crying children and death. I live with this, my love, and there are times where it is truly unbearable.”

Nasreen nodded.

“I am sorry that I have given you an image so horrible. I did not wish to do such a thing.”

She bit her cheek and opened the binder to a dry old paper.

“What is that?”

“The stories I wrote,” she choked, “for Mama when she was sick. She always said it made her feel better, but she was probably lying. The pain had to be too much.”

“Oh, my sweet bird, your stories would make your mother forget the pain, don’t make yourself believe such a lie.”

Nasreen defeated the arriving tears. “Do you want me to read one?”

Papa nodded. “Please do.”

Nasreen read the first story titled: Two Monsters in the Closet. The story was terribly written with no commas, no structure, and an overflow of misspells. But the two of them laughed with renewed life coursing through them. The drawer no longer mocked her and a new sense of rehabilitation formed inside her heart. Nasreen Ismail would not be able to get the job finished, but Miss Revolutionary, and the blood that flowed within her, would.

6

There are moments in conflict where an adversary—no matter how hated—is given credit for an accurate calculation or strategy. Such a situation was forced upon Nasreen as she entered her campus to find multiple groups spread across the grass screaming at each other with bullhorns. Signs were lifted over their heads as they verbally fought each other.

FIRE PROF. WHITE, one of the signs read. DO NOT BOW DOWN TO THE WOKE MOB, an opposing sign deferred.

“Willy, what did you do?” Nasreen fought her bulging throat.

Willy smiled, “I might have written a paper at the end of it, stating that Professor White pushed to omit your story from the newspaper.”

“Why did you do that?” Nasreen inhaled deeply.

“People will empathize with your story, and that is important, but if it’s also shown that this story—that also mirrors true experience—is being shunned and hidden in The States, then it shows the corruptness of the people in control.”

It made sense, but Nasreen’s stomach recoiled at the vile words spoken across the grass, flying with the wind through trees and buildings like poisonous arrows.

“Did you use my name?”

“No, I made sure to keep you out of it until you felt you were ready to take the helm.”

Nasreen nodded. Amongst the crowd that defended Professor White—a crowd of white with a sprinkle of brown-skinned men and women—was Rosie, who joined the chorus of “terrorist supporters.” The separate crowds that remained under Nasreen’s banner—a more diverse crowd, she noticed—spewed their own violent words: “you support baby killers,” a man screamed; “you’ll burn in Hell for supporting a genocide,” a woman yelled close behind.

God, oh God. Teachers, staff, security, and fellow students all stared at the bickering groups with intrigue—the security officers’

eyes burned as they awaited for any sort of escalation. Warm air caressed Nasreen's nostrils as she inhaled and stepped forward into the dry dirt; the colosseum of dueling ideals. Her chin was held high as she stormed to the young woman with long black hair that reached to her hip. Her glowing copper skin made Nasreen assume the woman was Native American though she remained unsure, even as she was within close range of the bullhorn while the woman shouted.

"May I see it please?" Nasreen asked with a smirk.

The woman ceased her yelling and nodded to Nasreen. "Let the bastards have it," she croaked in a hoarse voice. The plastic bullhorn was forced into Nasreen's hand and there was power. Power to change lives and the world around her, the same power that flowed through her with every story she wrote. Now was the time to act, she thought as she held the trigger, should she become a revolutionary, it would have to be now.

"Excuse me," she screamed to the crowd across from her, "I am the woman who wrote the story you see plastered all over the school. My name is Nasreen Ismail, I am an American born with the blood of Palestine, my mother and father's homeland. They both have seen massacres and death, most of which was illustrated in the story you all have read. These are true stories told by survivors, survivors plagued with guilt and trauma and would do anything to rid themselves of it." She took a deep breath.

"You all denounce and rebuke the story of my people, calling us all terrorists when—for thousands of years—we have been wanting to protect our home. It is just like The Native Americans whose home was taken from them, they fought for generations and were called savages. Savages? For wanting to keep the land their ancestors held for generations, it is ridiculous. But you do not see it; I doubt any of you people with your silver spoons and nightly parties even care. You all will defend terror and injustice if it means you will live comfortably for the rest of your lives—or at least live in the illusion of comfort. In the light of Allah my people's stories will be understood, and you all will look like idiots in the end of it."

There was murmuring from the opposing group but cheers from distant onlookers and the crowd that surrounded her. The sun broke through the gated clouds and shined down upon her. A divine spotlight encircled her and lifted her lips to a smile. No, she would no longer be Nasreen Ismail, she would escape the cocoon of irrelevancy and enter the realm of revolutionaries, just as Allah intended.

“Shut up, terrorist bitch,” a gruff voice shouted from afar.

The sun dimmed. “Excuse me?” Nasreen shouted in the bullhorn.

“I said,” the gruff speaker was a tall man with moppy black hair and a thin frame, “Shut. Up. Terrorist. Bitch.”

There was laughter on the other side of the grass sea that bent westward with the strengthening wind. The tall man stepped forward with Rosie at his side. He brushed away the black strands from his eyes and pointed his long, bony finger at her. “Soon your people will be exterminated from this planet, just like you deser—”

In a blink the thin man was on the hard ground with a figure on top of him. His eyes were wide as a fist connected with his cheek. A moment of silence ensued, and the world was still as the man cried out.

Chaos followed.

The two crowds charged towards each other. Signs flew with the strong gust of wind. Nasreen fell onto the cold grass and the bullhorn was crushed underneath a man’s spiked boots. Oh God. I’m going to die, this is the day I die. A cold hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her to her feet. Kriss was sweating with a gaping mouth.

“Let’s go,” she shouted as she pulled Nasreen out of the rear of the crowd.

There were shouts and heavy thuds of fists on bone and skin. Whistles screamed from all across campus as cheers further rang out around the edge of the dueling crowds. Gladiators, Nasreen reminded herself, they saw them only as gladiators with brains instead of swords. Mud stuck to her hands as she propelled herself

from the jeering crowd of swinging legs and fists. She took a deep inhale of fresh air, away from the stench of deodorant and sweat.

Before she could descend to her knees, another (rougher) hand clasped on her shoulder and pulled her away from Kriss.

“Hey!” She shouted as she twisted her neck to face the stern security officer with gray beard stumps on his chin, a pointy chin, and eyes hidden behind the black curtain of sunglasses. His bald head reflected the sunlight that attacked her eyes as her feet twisted underneath her. “You’re going after the wrong people, sir.”

“Got other people for that,” his breath smelled of cigarettes and it nearly gagged Nasreen, “it’s you that needs to be put under control at the moment.”

“For what?”

The man was silent as he dragged her towards a large building that most likely led to The Dean’s Office. This’ll be fucking great, she thought as she winced at the man’s tight grip on her shoulder.

§

The Dean’s Office was a large room with a wide glass overlooking the campus. The dueling crowd had long dispersed, and many students were being apprehended by security. The Dean’s multiple degrees were hung neatly high behind his outstretched oak desk that shined like uncovered gold. On one side was a dormant United States flag and the other was the Oregon state flag. Their black flagpoles matched the dark carpet that acted as quicksand underneath Nasreen’s unruly feet.

She did not sit on the plastic chairs at the wall beside her, she stood in front of the seated Dean who stared at her with curious brown eyes. His gray eyebrows rose as he examined her, his thick lips twitched whenever she would move an inch. His thick fingers tapped his desk one finger at a time, not once did the mini limbs leave their given order. A group of papers rested in front of him beside the golden plate with the name: DAVIS, embroidered.

“Who are you, Nasreen Ismail?” He finally asked, rubbing his

shaved head with his right hand while keeping his left hand tapping.

“Well you said it right there, sir: Nasreen Ismail.”

He shook his thick neck. “Who are you, Miss Ismail.”

She didn’t expect any metaphorical bullshit. “The daughter of immigrants who came from an active warzone.”

Davis nodded. “May I tell you something, Miss Ismail? Something that is true but it is a rather unfortunate truth.”

“Free country, sir.”

Davis smirked, “yes, you’re right. Well, there is a faculty member who is pushing for your expulsion.”

Nasreen smirked. “Professor White.”

“I’ve voided this faculty member’s request, but they are quite insistent.”

“Because of my rebellious nature?”

“Because inciting a riot and violence on campus goes against our policy, Miss Ismail.”

“But I didn’t do either.”

He grimaced and stood up. His tapping stopped and he made his way to the window where the sun entered through the corner. Pellets of dust circled around him as he stared over the sight that had once carried chaos. “You are an intelligent young woman, Miss Ismail. Your father is a successful man who seemed to do well with the little cards he was dealt. Now my only question is this: why risk a good academic career here for something as silly as a story?”

Nasreen bit the inside of her cheek until there was nothing but pain flowing in her nerves. “Sir, with all due respect it’s not just a story. This framework of prose is just one of millions of experiences through the war brought to Palestine. Professor White told me the story was ‘too political,’ and it irritated me. You’re an African American, sir, what if someone told you that if you wrote a poem or a story about slavery or a man suffering under the weight of Jim Crow laws? It’d anger you because it’s not just a story, it’s a piece of your heritage and your blood. So no, sir, I’m not risking a good academic career here for a story, I’m doing it to protect my people

from across the sea, because it seems that a lot of people aren't willing to stand in front of the bullet to do it."

Davis turned to her, chuckling. "You are a radical, Miss Ismail. That's good, it's a species nearing extinction, you know?"

She nodded.

"I won't expel you, Miss Ismail, I hope you know that."

"Will you fire Professor White?"

He shook his head. "Unfortunately he has connections too great. Firing him is a double-edged sword, Miss Ismail, do you understand?"

"Yeah, I do." She raised her head to Davis whose eyes went wide when he met her gaze. "I would like to withdraw from this school, sir."

Davis nodded and turned back to the window. "I do believe it'd be best for you as well, Miss Ismail. I do wish you good fortune in your future endeavors."

"Thank you, sir." She turned and pushed open the wooden door that led to a long hallway of injured students that were seated in plastic chairs against the wall with security guards over them. She did not give Davis a leaving glance, he didn't deserve it. He would not jump in the way of the bullet in the name of a better future, and that was okay. But she had no need to spend energy on a population that would not bend for a progressive world. Her heart did not hurt as she asked for her withdrawal, it only tore the chain from its ankle and spread its wings to take flight.

Willy was seated with three security guards over him. His elbows dug into his thighs as he faced the ground. Nasreen pushed by the vulture-like guards and knelt beside him. "Willy?"

He looked up and smiled. His lip was swollen with a puffy eye socket and cheek. There was blood covering his nose and lips, and yet he smiled. "Hey, think I can get a modeling contract with this?"

"Shut up," her eyes watered, "are you okay?"

"Eh, I'm fine, might have a few bruised bones but I'll be okay. That guy that called you a terrorist though," he grit his teeth, "he got it worse, made sure of that."

“But you’ll get in trouble. If not by the school then by him. He could press charges or—”

“Won’t do that either,” he laughed, “I know a thing or two about a thing or two. He won’t squeal unless he wants to go to jail for a few years.”

“You sure?”

“One-hundred percent. Besides, fuck this school. I’m leaving this bitch as soon as I leave The Dean’s Office.”

“Looks like you’ll be in second place then,” she chuckled, “I just told The Dean I’m leaving.”

“N-No shit.” He leaned backward and winced, holding his ribs as he did. “Look at you, Nasreen. Acting like a full revolutionary right now, fighting for the good of mankind.”

Her heart fluttered. “And you’d be my second in command?”

Willy smirked, “always, Nasreen.”

She gripped his hand that was covered with open wounds and dry blood and smiled back at him.

§

The healthy flowers of Spring bloomed by the time Papa’s wounds healed into white scars. A warm wind had replaced the burning chill of Winter and had allowed comfort to reside in The Ismail Household.

Despite Nasreen’s initial fear of confessing her withdrawal from her university to Papa, she was taken aback at his excitement at her announcement at the hospital.

“Thank Allah,” he cheered, “I’m sorry you had to suffer there for so long.” He wrapped his bandaged arms around her, scratching the nape of her neck with its rough material.

“It’s okay, Papa,” she chuckled with remnants of tears in her eyes, “it’s all a long story but I’ll tell you.”

He smiled, it was pure and reminiscent of her childhood. “I think it’ll be your best one, Nasreen.”

While she did not agree with Papa on it being her best sto-

ry, she did write her experience in a fictional veil and sold it for one-hundred dollars—all without the threat of Professor White's faculty status to void it. The story was set to be published in the first week of Spring and worried nerves stretched through the limbs of the household.

“What if I wrote a screenplay about a black man that enters a world that leads to a flipped version of 1950’s America? So like... Black people are in power and the whole meaning of ‘Colored Only’ is in a whole different context.” Willy asked as he stared into the ceiling on the carpeted floor.

Nasreen laid beside him, the smooth roof had always been pleasing to stare at, but further satisfaction lingered as she stood by the man who bloodied his fists for her. “I think that’s a story only you can tell, Willy,” she chuckled.

“That’s what I said,” he responded with a laugh. “Give it time, Nasreen, we’ll both be writing our names in the stars with legends. Just give it time.”

She smiled and closed her eyes, imagining Mama in the sky, gifting fortune and love to her as her legacy burned into the Earth and Heaven. She was floating with millions of warm hands underneath her, carrying her to her destiny. It would all begin with one. All revolutions began with a step, a scream, a gunshot. Her actions on campus, she realized, were the simple breath a revolutionary takes before entering The Realm of No Return. Her own writing, the detailing of the events and her pursuit in publishing The Judge, would be her cry to the world beyond and a gunshot to those who would not listen.

“Mister and Miss Revolutionary,” she smiled and opened her eyes, “two visionaries.”

“Hell yeah,” Willy turned to her.

They were silent as their eyes danced in the short space between them. Willy’s warm breath of chocolate tickled the base of her nose.

“Thank you, Willy.”

“Of course, N-Nasreen.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Why the stutter?”

His smile faded as he turned back towards the ceiling. “I had a question for y-y-you.”

Her heart sank. “What is it?”

A nervous smile crept to his lips. “W-Would y-you l-l-l—fuck—like to b-be my gi-girlfriend?”

Her heart shot up to her throat and fluttered as her mouth stammered to answer. “Y-Yes,” she smiled, “what took you so fucking long to ask,” she slapped his shoulder.

“Too damn nervous, Nasreen.”

She jumped on top of him and wrapped her arms around his chiseled neck and held him tight. His arms wrapped around her back and held her just as tight. They were stuck for a moment, an incomprehensible, beautiful moment that nearly brought Nasreen to tears. All she wished for was to remain in the same moment of time forever and never allow it to escape her grasp.

An idea arrived as swift as a blade. She smiled and rested her forehead against Willy’s. “I think I finally got that idea for the novel.”

His soft lips kissed her nose. “Well, don’t just sit here now, you got work to do, Miss Revolutionary.”

She smiled and kissed his forehead gently and retreated from his warm grasp to the dark computer. In her reflection was not the same dark-haired, brown-eyed Palestinian girl only a year prior. No, she was Jane Austen, Chinua Achebe, George Orwell, Natsume Soseki, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison. She was a revolutionary, the one who would represent the few and battle the bullets that may come their way.

Nasreen turned her computer on, traveled to the file and began writing in earnest. The words of grief and love traveled onto the digital page with ease. This will be my passageway to the world beyond, she thought as she smiled. The stories of her childhood stared at her from behind the glasses of their plaques, cheering for her, just as Mama did long before.

Contributors

Gregory Smith recently completed sixteen speculative, compelling tales which he calls “Crossing Abbey Road and Other Fateful Short Stories.” Quite a few of the stories have been accepted for publication in various magazines and websites including Floyd County Moonshine, Piker Press, hackwriters.com, Schlock Magazine, Knee Brace Magazine, Sunhous Magazine, Word Gathering Magazine, and Altered States.

Chris Carrel is a writer of speculative fiction writer and other odd things from somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. He has been published at Literally Stories, JAKE, and others, has work forthcoming at Does It Have Pockets?, Dark Winter Lit and Skeleton Flowers, and posts occasionally at ccarrel.bsky.social.

F.M. Tow is a debut author and uneasy young person who tends towards anonymity. This is their first publication, a short story about the experience of discomfort with the physical characteristics of one’s sex assigned at birth.

Isaac Aju is a Nigerian poet who has appeared in Poetry X Hunger, Writers’ Journal – Live And Learn, and The Kalahari Review. He was the first Nigerian poet to be interviewed by Flapper Press Poetry Cafe based on his historical poems about the Igbo people of Nigeria. He lives in Nigeria, where he works as a fashion designer.

Yuriii Tokar is a 58 years old mathematics teacher in Ukraine. His poems, stories, and essays –written in English, Ukrainian, and Russian — have been published in both Ukraine and the USA in publications such as “День” (Ukraine), “Сімейна газета” (Ukraine), “Література та життя” (Ukraine), and “Освіта України” (Ukraine), and Gorizont (USA), Brief Wilderness (USA), Чайка (USA), and Adelaide Magazine (USA).

R.H. Nicholson taught writing for forty years but is now (finally) focused on his own work which has appeared in Ignatian Magazine, Adelaide Literary Journal, Echo Ink, The Blue Lake Review, The Back Porch, Big Window Review and elsewhere. His debut novel Justice House Shadows will be published this summer. He and his wife live in a small Ohio River Valley town with their geriatric cat Fezziwig.

C. J. Anderson-Wu is a Taiwanese writer who has published fiction collections about Taiwan’s military dictatorship (1949–1987), known as White Terror: Impossible to Swallow (2017) and The Surveillance (2021). Her third book Endangered Youth—Taiwan, Hong Kong, Ukraine was published in April 2025. Her works have been shortlisted for a number of international literary awards, including the International Human Rights Art Festival and the 2024 Flying Island Poetry Manuscript Competition. She also won the Strands Lit International Flash Fiction Competition, the Invisible City Blurred Genre Literature Competition, and the Wordweavers Literature Contest.

Troy Hornsby is an African American author of three books (a novella, a short story collection, and a full length novel) as well as a contributor to Pulp Lit Magazine. In addition to his writing, he is also pursuing a degree in English and Creative Writing to spread his love and knowledge for the written art.

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