

Ardor

Written by Hasan Abir

A land. The spine; bistre ground, beige grass, like its own planet wafts alone on a light peach river, either too soft or too sturdy, to keep a balance it strives, suits life.

Over the spine, trees. The speechless; deep violet barks, stark yellow leaves all seasons, reasonably still in midsummer, reasonably afraid of storms, 100 ft tall, makes everything else feel small, ancient but how ancient is always a question, home to rigid nests built by the toughest bird lives, suits land life.

Between the speechless, a society. The speechful; by the name *Ardor*, three centuries young, multitudes of groups knit into one, the jade-colored tribe believes in a Bee God the cyan in a Ladybug the lime in a Firefly the olivine in a Dragonfly, few to none believe in belittlement, few to none can come to settle with their judgments, never huge establishments, always white houses with their own private wells and garden beds all cool under a bloom of yellow canopy, no two houses situated next to each other, sows mainly potatoes and wheat but also a variety of fruits and vegetables along with breeding cows pigs and chickens enough to keep itself fed and diligent, no luck in the river for the eels protecting their naive cousins, mobile carts to meet the constant demands of rations, open markets in every neighborhood to meet the constant demands of the mobile carts, sawmills in every third neighborhood to meet the constant demands of new houses, the few horses around rather than to get around used only for racing, facing no major crisis prospers by itself without any foreign contact.

With an origin. Initially it was mostly the foreign parties that conjoined the *Ardor* of today (Long before this land looked lived-in, it was first home to, along with the wild plants and animals, two jade men and a lime woman. Never did they have any trouble with

nature, only with themselves, for shrieks and groans were their finest language. Like hunters and gatherers, they survived there, although "since when" is a lost detail. To compensate for that, the thorough details of a peculiar no-moon night remain today. The night began how it usually does, with the crickets. But their singing soon ended as a dozen or so small boats, packed to the limit, appeared some distance away, rowing to the south shore of the land. They had journeyed a long way from the sandy, red-orange hills, located far from this land's proximity. Despite that fact, the hills are still near enough to be faintly visible from the south shore, especially at noon. Quite a big, unextended family boarded each of the boats. Mostly, the children occupied the space, adding to the overall load. The mothers all held their burning torches up high with one hand, while the other actively prevented the children from feeling the river. What made the boats heavier was their luggage, which the fathers took care of. The flickering light from the torches revealed that very few of the families shared a single identity; each belonged to a different tribe, along with their beliefs in God. That wasn't all; the light also revealed, though still leaving a bit in the dark, those who had been paddling all along: maroon-skinned men in heavy armor with tall spears sticking out and up from their backs. And with every sweep of their paddles, they grunted in disgust. When the time came to land the boats by the shore, rather than parking them permanently, the rowers were already rushing to sail back the other way, but without the passengers. The rowers showed only hostility when emptying their boats; a shoulder push or a kick on the passengers came naturally to the guards. As soon as the last little boy put both his feet on the shore, the guards all hastened at once, failing to realize that they were heading back without their only light source to lead the way. Not a single person among the arrivals knew about the three people who inhabited this land, and the fear of the unknown consumed them thoroughly. The night was still young, and the children couldn't keep their chins from falling. As a solution, the mothers all arranged their luggage in such a way that four children at once could rest their heads on them. Meanwhile, all the fathers worked together in attempts to

protect their makeshift resting place from the wilderness. Fortunately, all that precautionary work was for nothing, for the night passed away without bringing any threat, although it did wake the three inhabitants. Afraid of such a crowd, two of the inhabitants, the jade men, only watched over the families from in between the leaves, while the third, the lime woman, stayed even further back. That didn't work for long, as the fathers' keen ears immediately caught the fearful three in sight at the rustle of the leaves. Surrendering early, the inhabitants stepped out of the shadows and into a small patch of light, with guilt on their faces. Then, each member of the families, including even the children, began bombarding the three sullen faces with rapid questions, which were all either variations of "From where?" or "How come?" A word might not have come out of the trio, but their mouths and hands were desperate to communicate. After wasting almost half an hour with vain attempts, the arrivals all suddenly grew quiet; they had figured out the problem. Once the realization ended, they all sat on the ground before the inhabitants, ready to interpret signs. In the meantime, the carefree children played in the background. Then, the inhabitants, using their rounded square heads, pure white eyes, dry lips, strong stick arms, dirty fingernails, dirtier toenails, and thin tree branches, carefully illustrated one ultimate answer to all the questions the families had. At first, the interpreters were only scratching their heads during the show-and-tell, but later, they formed the whole story with the small bits. Today, those bits tell us that when the mutes were as little as the children playing in the background, the king who ruled the red-orange hills back then banished them, first, from a small undercover village at the back of the hills, then from the hills altogether. The king did so, however, after mercilessly burning down the village, which, as he claimed, was only a pigeonhole for drunkards, thieves, and adulterers. These three mutes luckily survived such a chaotic event but lost everything they held dear to their hearts. As a final blow and to erase any witnesses left, the king kicked them out of the hills entirely without caring if they could talk. "At least he was kind enough to let these poor kids live,"

the families remarked. Obviously, the mutes couldn't ask the same questions, or at all, back to the families, but the fathers answered them anyway. These arrivals, consisting of not only jade and lime tribes but also cyan and olivine, went through much the same fate as the mutes, though for a completely unrelated reason. To begin with, they tell the mutes about their protest against the strict laws of segregation in the red-orange hills set by the new ruler. The ruler, as they further described, had made a tier list of tribes; it was only the tribe at the top of the pyramid that he treated humanely. Doing so, he was offending the one sentiment that all families equally shared: "The only difference that counts is between the creator of the world and the world itself." Nothing would harm the families if they had kept that belief to themselves, but a thought such as this didn't stop them from voicing against the laws. Evidently, their protests failed to bring a change; instead, they brought banishment upon the families. When the storytelling had ended, it wasn't as important to confirm that the mutes understood everything, for the tribes were all already beginning to bond. Rather, what felt more important to the mothers was to hand out white gowns from their luggage to the three barely clothed inhabitants, thereby initiating a community by the name *Ardor*. Ever since that night, no new exiles have arrived by the shore in such a way, or at all).

With a stairway as a relic. The peaceful; built less than two and a half centuries ago, by the south shore, a quarter into the river, by the name *Steps to Acceptance*, by its lower end a short rotting black-wooden pole, the yellow rooted trees nearby permeate yellow moss over its stoney surface, drowns in monsoon, a tiring climb it is in the drought, leads to an entrance archway with its name chiseled on the violet arch, open to both outsiders and insiders but people rarely visit.

Anything through Ardor

At an offshoot of the main paths, a small, clientless clinic endures. The windless mindless rain of an early serene morning; its roof consisting of many leaks. And inside, surrounded with medical equipment, Polum Cadence, the jade owner, sits. All alone; a bucket by his seat collecting the raindrops in which his eyes drown. Then, his head tumbles. On his doctor's desk, for a nap, staying down until the beat of the last raindrop (around noon).

Water, less than pure, runs. From a bathroom shower, washing the grit down the silky smooth lime figure of Brena Surge; for about fifteen minutes before she thinks to tap it off. Then, using a thin slice of soap, in a circular motion, she scrubs. Herself, from top to bottom; silently moaning.

Polum, Brena's lover, runs. In through their fence gates, up to the porch, and in through the open house door; his white doctor coat hovering in the air; his face sprouting a pout. Then, flying from the inside, a black lace top, a long red skirt, a golden-yellow blouse, and matching undies land. On the porch, like the frogs hopping around. Instinctively, Brena storms out. Of the bathroom, in just a towel; yelling at her man. What have my lovely clothes done to you? Take it out on me instead, if you will. As told by Polum's stressful face, none of her words seem to possess the power to even slightly shake. His focus. His stress seems to stem. From failing to find whatever he is looking for in her wardrobe.

A broken window by the front door stirs. Noticeably. And standing before it, Brena lets down. Her neck-short wet hair, waiting for it to dry with monk-like patience. Now that Polum has exhausted both himself and the wardrobe, he charges. Headlong, at her; giving up his coat to the floor on his way. Arriving at her, he wriggles. Both her wrists, demanding an answer; while his lips curl down. Enough now, bitch! Where do you hide the five rillens? Unable to contain, a strong shriek breaks out. Of her seemingly naive mouth; eventually

squeezing an answer out of her but not the one that could calm him. Along with the other rillens! Louder, he again demands. Show me where!

At Brena's insistence, another search takes place. In the same wardrobe, where she pulls open. Every single tray; deepening Polum's letdown afterwards. Just when he is about to throw a fit, it comes. To her: the memory of him leaving for work at dawn. Before you left home, don't you remember telling me to repay any debts with those rillens? Some cousin of yours—I can't remember his name—came right up to our porch asking for the money. He is family to you; I couldn't have rejected him, could I? Softened by her words, he dwells. On time. Have I really become that forgetful? Things like that only happen to the old and unwanted. So what if I've reached midlife? My small forehead surely isn't telling! Agreeing, she prances. I too am sure my gapless hair, artful lips, full breasts, and artful hips are here to stay, even when I'm as old as you! But that is an eternity later. Don't worry, we age like mannequins! In an instant, her glee fades. Awful thoughts! Let's erase them all! As the lovers' brief conflict shrinks to nothing, the two bounce off. Each other's bodies, like two balloons tied together with a single knot; edging one step at a time towards the bathroom. Once inside, they lock. The door, with a thud strong enough to shoo the birds away from the roof. Then, for the second time, she turns on. The shower.

Upon stepping out the door, the clock hands on the opposing wall welcome. The wet household, notifying them that it's indeed time for lunch. So, like a hungry cat, Polum runs. To the kitchen, to fetch their meals. But finding nothing cooked or prepared, he moodily walks out. What's with the empty pots? Instead of food, Brena serves. With high enthusiasm, her long-cooked ideas for the day. Do you know which way leads to the *Stairs to Repentance*, or whatever its name is? My father used to carry me around in his arms and read the whole story to me. And when it ended, he kissed me goodnight. But his little girl would rather sneak in from behind to watch him, through the bedroom keyhole, make love to her mother. I used to look forward to that all day, although it was always a bore

to watch them begin with kisses and cuddles. Anyway, I don't care what the story behind the place is about; I'm interested only in the place. How quiet and windy it must be! Imagine us rolling amid the yellow-peach hue without a soul around other than ours! We could play as much as we wish in our own cool, wet bubble. Why don't we take a day off and go there? I promise it'll be a thrill like nothing else! Taken aback, he thoughtfully responds. That will be alright. Give your best. But what about our lunch now? Rushing, she tells. Her solution. We can eat outside for a change. Why don't you take out the trash while I dress up? Also, on your way out, carefully walk around the pile; I'll wear those clothes today.

Before dressing up, Brena, in a brief solitary moment, sorts out. A concern. First, she pulls out. Of Polum's coat, exactly five rillens. Then, tidily, she puts away. The rillens, in her slim makeup box which rather than any makeup-related items is full of only money. Dressed to leave, she glances. In their tall mirror, one last time. In that moment, the sight of her body at its plumpest seizes. Her breath; and wets. Her victory fingers. Done admiring herself, she sets off. Outside, all the while tightening her lace top further.

Inattentively dumping trash next to their fences, Polum keenly observes. Every walking passerby. Then, suddenly, stealing all his attention, a young girl strolls by. Her lime body in only a striped unbuttoned shirt and stockings, her arm bearing a long dirty white sheet, her eyes holding incomplete sleep. Recognizing her immediately, he tries. To turn her to him. Hey, wait! Who made the bloody stains on the sheet? Without stopping or even facing him, she answers. A neighbor's kid painted it with pomegranate juice! In disbelief, he resumes. Sure, a neighbor's kid. A young mother like you is quite a treat, I daresay. How about we meet next week? Same place, same pay, yes? In the meantime, a breath at a time, she shrinks. In his view; never opening her lips again.

Meeting each other at the gates, Brena gifts. Polum, her brightest smile; while Polum wraps. Brena, with an arm. But then, forced by the surroundings, she clamps. Her nose. Rain and garbage sure do

create the worst stench known to. Interrupting her, he suggests. Miss Almy, the dying widow who lives at the borders of our neighborhood, shouldn't mind having guests over if I know her at all. So, on their feet, they set out. With as much energy as their starving stomachs could spare. Finally, after a whole morning of dull skies, the sun shows. Itself; drying their damp backs as they walk along the path.

On the way to Almy's place, the odd behavior of an unfamiliar house raises. The couple's curiosity, especially Brena's. The distinctness of the place lies. Not in its appearance but in its sounds: loud enough to travel all the way across the plot and into Brena's earring-bearing ears. Altogether, the sounds resound. Like an orchestra of clashing dishes moving furniture and most of all the intense yet ambiguous moanings of a woman going through a range of emotions. Enthralled by the vivid imaginations the sounds give birth to, Brena drags. Her lover along with her, to bend over the locked fence gates of that plot. Rather disappointed by the scenario, Polum reasons. His feelings. We don't know them well enough to have lunch in their house. And besides, I don't smell a cooking pot. Do you? Slightly annoyed by him, she explains. O, silly, open your ears! Sense her energy! Feel her passion! Then, inhaling a mouthful of air, she yells. Over the orchestra. That's the peak of pleasure! That woman inside is above us! A clueless cyan man, intrigued by both the orchestra and Brena's speech, joins. The couple; parking his tomato cart aside. Then, turning to both Polum and the stranger, Brena yells. Louder this time. We've found it, gentlemen! The real love! Her words greatly puzzle. The stranger; and to a much lesser degree. Polum. Only after regaining some of his common sense does the cyan man speak. Oh my! That woman inside the house sounds like she needs our help! She must be in some kind of household fight! Are you two willing to investigate? If so, count me in. Casually and with little passion, Polum objects. Investigate? Whatever is going on inside is none of our business. Rather than the stranger, Brena counter-objects. Why not make it our business? I would love to be in her place! Then, delicately

pulling Polum over to the other side of the path, the stranger softly inquires. Choosing the most appropriate words. Is this young miss—whoever she is to you—doing fine? All this chaos isn't getting to her, is it? Bursting into laughter, Polum blows. A shrill whistle, calling out his lover. Hey, sugar! This feeblehead just called you crazy! Reacting with a graceful spin and a mystic look, Brena ambles. Towards the stranger; her mind being impossible to read. Then, aggressively nailing his toe down with her heel, she clarifies. Her previous speech, with a new one. Aren't you one puny man? If you didn't comprehend already, what we are witnessing here is nothing less than an evolution. On one hand, we go about describing love in a million ways, and then, on the other, we fit pleasure within only a handful. We limit ourselves too much. Pressing her heel harder, she resumes. We've always dwelt on pain, haven't we? Now, is my love through yet? The next instant, back in the house, the woman inside lets out. One last moan, with her remaining strength, drawing a conclusion to the orchestra. Turning back to the woman's moaning, Brena starts. Clapping; her eyes growing moist; her face growing brighter. Then, looking in Polum's eyes, she wraps up. The detour. I can tell by his smell that he sleeps alone. Anyway, we have better things to do. Polum again suggests. Such as taking care of lunch. Let's not waste any more time. Then, the couple leaves. The cyan man alone rather in awe than in pain. And failing to resist, the man attempts. To break the locks of the gates.

Welcoming the couple, the gates to Almy's house stand. Wide open; as if expecting visitors. Then, with empty stomachs, the couple knocks. On Almy's rickety door. Responding, a brittle voice breaks. From inside. I owe nobody but God! O, spare this old lady! Polum clears. It's your son. Right after, the door handle twists. Confirming the magic in his words. Then, greeting the guests with a warm smile, Almy rather denies. The magic. It was your voice. I have to be careful these days. All sorts of troublemakers visit me, claiming to be my sons. Who is this lovely girl with you? It isn't that I won't let her in unless you tell me who she is. We, women, are anything but

threats. Aren't we, darling? Before Brena could answer, Polum hastily drags. Her, inside the house; pushing Almy aside. Then, with his eyes fixed on the kitchen archway, Polum loudly begs. Almy. O, Miss! We come starving! Bless us with something to eat! Leaving the door open much like her gates, Almy runs. Into the kitchen; her forehead wrinkling with worry.

Killing time in the light of the bedside window, Polum teaches. Brena, how to properly shuffle cards that he found on Almy's tidy desk. Cutting short their leisure, Almy exits. The kitchen, with dishes occupying her hands. As she places them on the dining table, the sunlight from the window lights up. Her beautiful moisturized olivine skin. But instead of that, it's the glimmering watermelon slices on the dishes that take. The couple's attention; drowning their faces with disappointment. Regardless of their feelings, they obediently take. Their seats, at the table. Noting their sadness, Almy goes back. Into the kitchen; and brings. Two pieces of banana, for each of them. Then, while the two unhappily eat, Almy attempts. To lighten the mood. You must forgive me, children, for these were all I had. What reason can this lonely old woman have to stock up on groceries? Making herself useful, she fetches. A notebook and her reading glasses from the desk, to jot down a shopping list. Silently, she writes. From her memory; with the sound of crushing watermelons in the background.

The moment the couple is over with their meals, Almy promptly questions. Brena; lowering her glasses. I've been thinking about all the possible ways you could relate to him. Correct me if I'm wrong now. Are you his stepdaughter? I have never met his children before, nor do I know how many he has. Once and for all, Brena answers. Sometimes. Whenever he likes me to be. Having put the puzzle pieces together in her head, Almy exclaims. Nice to hear that he doesn't bother calling you his stepdaughter, at least most of the time; stepchildren are just children after all! Make sure to be easy on him, dear. Multiple divorces must have sucked the joy out of his life. Winding back, Polum adds. To Brena's answer. She's my patient, too, at times. With pure affection, Almy strokes. His ego.

Who isn't in this neighborhood? You're the most no-nonsense doctor I've ever paid a visit to! Forget those who complain about your fees. This reminds me: I might need to see you tomorrow. Then, Polum takes. The banana peels and the plates, into the kitchen; leaving the old to amuse the young with tidbits. Suddenly, without warning, amid their chatter, Almy alters. Her tone, to be more melancholic. If you had met your uncle, you'd wish he was here today. Before I go on about him, let me just make sure: How old are you, dear? Chest out, Brena answers. Younger than 21 and not much older than 19. Taking off her glasses, Almy rubs. Her eyes. I would envy you now if I were a few decades younger. Anyway, back to your uncle. It is only in my life with him that I learned what love is and what it's for. He did too, long before me. And the older I become, the bolder the lines on my face get, while my soul sheds off all the minute details in life that people, especially the young, obsess over. Take, for example, romance in bed. Some go as far as to measure their overall happiness with it; they take it as tangible proof. I'm a modern woman too; I don't deny the fun in it. But fun is short-lived, unlike joy. If there's truly one particular thing in life that we were born to do, it must be to persistently water plants. It's mundane work if you only focus on the task itself and not the change it's bringing. The fruits you get for that process are what I call joy, and joy is what makes me yearn for days and nights. Your uncle's arms are what I needed for comfort while watering the plants; his touch—his love—hasn't worn off yet. Quickly, Brena jumps. To defense. We too tend a big garden, though I have offended a few of the flowers with my neglect. Slightly put off, Almy clarifies. O, you're still too young! Gardens have nothing to do with what I'm saying. Think of this notebook as a plant and the act of writing as watering. Every day, I add small segments to this children's novel that I've been writing for some time. Then, bursting out of the kitchen with a banana in hand and another in throat, Polum complains. Aloud. You really weren't lying, Miss. The kitchen is like a desert, but not the sweeter kind. After tapping the banana a few times on Brena's cheek and then handing it to her, he takes back. His seat. Ignoring him altogether, Almy again continues. So,

yes, the book. It's mostly covered with pictures. But I'm deliberately rejecting fantasy elements; I want to bring the most authentically beautiful things in life to children. I want to show them things that aren't apparent at first glance. Moreover, I'm replacing the monsters with hostile men equipped with deadly weapons. With the banana in her mouth, Brena, mostly aloof, objects. To Almy's last point. Why so strict about it? Anything can be a weapon for both love and hatred. Perplexed, Almy sternly responds. What love can you make with a sharp blade? Finish the banana; you'll come to your senses. Never taking her eyes from her fruit, Brena only shrugs. Then, after a moment of struggling to regain her thoughts, Almy returns. To her lengthy speech. I've met a few mothers, told them about my book, and they are all skeptical about it. They believe that a woman who has never experienced motherhood can never get through to a child. I pity their children for having such narrow-minded mothers. Polum agrees. With the mothers, more than with Almy. There's some truth to it. Children are erratic by nature. Did you notice those mothers' kids? All they care about is playing. Learning can come later, or never, depending on the kid. Accumulating patience, Almy goes. Deeper. Yes, I studied the kids thoroughly. My inner child will speak to them, not as a parent but as a friend. I wish to hinder the miserable cycle of life. Children, who, mentally, spend a lot more time elsewhere than where they are, stop appreciating life as they get older; they find it meaningless; they expect it to be something it's not. My novel, hopefully, will be able to simply tell them, "You're free to give life your meaning (and you should). There's no one to stop you." After swallowing the last part of her banana, Brena thinks. To give Almy some solace; her eyes glistening with kindness. I don't know, Miss. Life is too short to consider so many things. We're at our best when we are unapologetically selfish. You sound too bleak. Loneliness is unbearable, I understand. Let me tell you about a peculiar man; he'll cheer you up. Jittering her head, Almy completely untangles. Her mind. Then, Brena begins. Drawing even Polum's attention. I'll make it quick. So, there's a middle-aged man who arrived in our neighborhood just a month ago; he lives a couple of houses away from ours. I've only ever heard

about him and seen him from a distance but never met him personally. From what I've gathered, he seems to take all the bitter phrases that people don't literally mean, such as "This is a waste of money" or "I don't have time for this," and absolutely apply them to his day-to-day life. Now, what does that mean? It means that he avoids buying or doing anything that doesn't help him survive in this world. But how do we know that he is adamant about his ideals? We can see the evidence clearly when he comes out of his house, wearing nothing at all. Who needs clothes anyway? I can't wait to see if he keeps his tradition throughout the winter. Hardly containing her laughter, Brena adds. And every time he comes out on the open path, a crowd immediately surrounds him. They try their best to cover the man with anything they can manage, but his awful odor repels anyone from getting too close to him. United by the story, all three of them fill. The room, with their hysterical laughter. Amid the roarings, Polum's muddled mind declares. Certainly, a man from the future! He needs his own temple, a futuristic one. Almy sighs. A tepid sigh. God bless Ardor!

While the three collectively build a pyramid by stacking cards on the bed, the sky switches. To pink, in the background. Then, as soon as Polum places the last card, the King of Hearts, on the very top, the whole stack crumbles. At once, forcing the three to groan in unison. Ending her groan, Almy lightly complains. If a queen went on top, it wouldn't collapse. So does Brena. It didn't have a solid foundation to begin with. Polum, leaning on his back, addresses. The complaints; having completely given up. Forget it. It'll take too long to build again. One must adapt to the ruins. Then, somewhat moodily, he alerts. Brena; his head tilting up from his pillow. Didn't we have somewhere to go? Let's then. After checking the sky through the window, Brena returns. Her face to Almy. This afternoon felt like a minor vacation; thanks for that, Miss! To be frank, I wish you had something heavier for lunch, but I'm glad you served us enough fruits to fill our bellies. We must head out for now. We'll visit again sometime soon.

As Almy watches the couple walk out through her scentful garden, the sight of the open gates thoroughly fills. Her, with anxiety. Right away, straining her vocal cords, she yells. To the fleeting couple. Were the gates open like this when you two came in? Without halting or turning, Polum yells back. An answer. We wouldn't know! We were starving! Then, leaving Almy to herself, the couple, with a steady pace, exits. Through the gates. So a burglar really did break into the house last night! O, my precious gold medallion necklace! Forgive me, love, for my carelessness!

At last, with much-needed energy, the two head. To the south of *Ardor*, in the evening light. As they walk by a foreign neighborhood, landowners, one after the next, light up. Their lanterns on top of their gate posts. But then, to Brena's surprise, Polum introduces. A change in plan, by simply pulling out a necklace from his pocket: a gold medallion necklace that belongs to someone in particular. How about we visit a pawnshop before we go anywhere else? On first glance at the gold, Brena almost rejects. The idea; but her rejection lasts. Briefly. How far would that be? Putting her at ease, he responds. There's a market close enough to not test our patience.

Upon arriving at the market, the first thing Brena notes. Is the overwhelming personality that the place seems to embody. Meats, vegetables, fruits, cutlery, furniture, clothes, toys, books, pens (pencils), paint buckets, and more; they are all sold. Here, under the starry sky and in the radiant light of torches. While strolling between the market and its grand fusion of smells, Polum, having been here before, holds. The belief that a pawnshop hides somewhere at the back. Though Brena's eyes wander from product to product, her mind stays. Fixated, on the numerous experiments they could perform at the *Steps to Acceptance*. The rolling onions down the alley might bring Brena's mind back to the market, but Polum finds. Something even better to look at: the pawnshop. But the shop is. Empty of both a shopkeeper and customers; its countertop occupied only by a single almost-over candle. Not even bending over the counter is enough to give. The couple, a clue about the keeper. It's only when Polum fully digs his head into the shop

that they discover. Its old keeper on the floor sitting against the counter and chewing peacefully on his green apple. Then, pulling the man up by his collar, Polum swings. The medallion, before his face, back and forth. Snatching the medallion from his hand, the old man, rather lost in his head, imprecisely inspects. The gold, using his giant magnifying glass; time ceases to matter to him while he does it. Then, just as Brena decides to hurry him up, the keeper declares. The price of the necklace, for once and for all. A hundred rillens at most. Ask no more. Following his nature, Polum bargains. For a better price. Add twenty to that. Give me no less. Then, through the aisle of the market and out on the path, Brena catches. A short glimpse of a man on horseback maliciously drifting by. In the meantime, the keeper wearily justifies. Himself. Look, I've dealt with you all my life. Haven't I? Have I ever tricked you before? Take a hundred and ten, and let us both enjoy the night. Stop keeping your girl on her toes. Freezing Polum from arguing any further, Brena aggressively pulls. On his arm. Forget about that for a moment. Tell me, when was the last time you saw a horse pass through the town?

Suddenly, as it comes to everybody's notice, a thick smoke arises. From the open canopy of the nearby forest and up into the damp night sky; dispersing panic among all living beings. And while the night birds scatter as far away from the fire as possible, almost all the shopkeepers run. In the direction of the incident. Deserting their products, they rush. To prevent the fire from spreading to the market. The pawnshop keeper, on the other hand, instead of leaving his shop, pulls out. From his drawer, the hundred and ten rillens that he owes Polum; as if he and his goods are fireproof. Then, in a depressing tone, the old man mellows. His eyes mirroring the fiery scenery. I've struggled and survived all my life, as most of us do. But if there's nothing to leave undone, then why bother at all to, as they say, struggle, or even survive? While making his remark, Polum counts. His rillens, on the countertop. Well, bury yourself if you please. Then, spinning around to the motionless crowd, who stand confused as to what to do, Brena breaks. Into an ugly

scream. O, fools! What are we all idling for? Swipe all you can! As if a dam has opened on her command, each and every shopper, no matter how rich or poor, ejects. Themselves, at the unguarded shops; looting as much as they can carry with their dishonest bags. On the other hand, Polum, who has no patience for baggage, empties. Only the drawers; Brena following him and giggling from behind as he does all the work. Having depleted almost all of the market, most shoppers set off. Home; their solid bags weighing their shoulders down; their faces cheerful like newborns. But the couple, before heading out to the *Steps to Acceptance*, daringly agrees. To stop by the fire scene. As the evening approaches its end, the fire still burns. But not as dangerously as before.

Showing up to the property where the fire takes place, the couple walks. Into quite a scene. A regular white wooden house stands. Burning to a crisp, missing a quarter of its roof. Meanwhile, the shopkeepers bear. The toil of dousing the fire, passing around buckets of water and refilling them from the well. And a small crowd of people, those who initially ran with the keepers, idles. At a distance; watching the fire glow. Curiously, Polum picks. A lime-skinned man from the crowd, to approach. An empty house? The man, startled, answers. Oh, hello. I don't think so. I've heard a few howls come from the house. Especially in the beginning. Again, Polum inquires. So, an accident? The man frankly responds. I arrived here too late to know for sure. But I assume it wasn't. Take a good look at it. The fire seemed to have spread from the outside first. Then, suddenly hit by an earlier memory, Brena connects. The dots; jumping. So I wasn't dreaming after all! That horse and its odd owner that I saw pass by the market—this must be their work. With his curiosity satisfied by the clues, Polum concludes. Mystery solved. A shame, isn't it? It better stayed longer that way. Let's all end the day on this note. As Polum is about to leave with his love, the lime man, struck by a really old memory, makes haste. To stop them from walking away. Wait! I just remembered who lived here: the poor Giffini family! They were quite well known in the neighborhood for their giving nature, mostly for their charities.

Sadly, down the years, they ran out of resources for themselves, forcing them to live reclusively. Most have forgotten their faces, but so have I. I can't believe it's them! Only a subhuman would take their innocent lives. Exasperated, Polum pours. His two cents. Performances: some like them; others envy. That sets up for a sea of fame. Too much of that fame can bring nothing good. I find it interesting how the family hid themselves from the neighbors. Let's call this piece "The Death of the Forgotten Performers." The vanishing fire from behind quickly darkens. Polum's face. Then, inspired by him, Brena adds. Who knows what happened? It could be that the horseman was almost as charitable as the Giffinis. If we always keep a throne for only one do-gooder to sit on, it's bound to lead to such incidents. Wetting his upper lip, the hopeless lime man wonders. About it all. Is that all there is to this world? Has the universe always been in a balance? In response, Polum only nods. Lifting his brows up. Then, overwhelmed, the lime man asks. All the rescuers and the spectators, to head back home; now that they've fully taken care of the fire. The house that they all leave behind slowly crumbles. Somber and numb.

The couple may be back on track, but their yawns make them yearn. For a bed. Accompanying their sleepiness, Brena hears. Sounds of quick footsteps approaching them, again and again, fading in first and then out. And each time that happens, she sets about. To run, in fear of some figure in the dark chasing her. But Polum assures. That there is no such sound present and that they are only dreams born out of her fears. To make matters worse, one by one again, the landowners come out. Of their houses, to blow out their lanterns like bedside lamps. Brena, even more afraid, clings. To Polum's arm, tighter. There's no way we're making it to the stairway. Why don't we find an inn to rest ourselves? It must be past midnight now. We can only see so much. I might find my way somehow, but I'm not sure if you can; your eyes are too much to pour faith in. Her words brush. His sensitive nerves. What's up with you suddenly reducing me to a regular middle-aged man? Whatever it is, put it down. Then, just like how ice melts over flame, his

temper drops. The instant he lights a matchstick from his pocket. The warmth of the stick drives away. All of Brena's sound illusions. That's it! Now manage an inn in the same way. Soon, the two realize. That an inn would be much harder to come by, especially in the dead of the night. For about half an hour, they lose. Their way, on a severely zigzagging lonely path with no structures on either side. Then, after eventually overcoming the maze, Polum, fazed by the situation, at last opens. His mouth. Perhaps we took a wrong turn somewhere. Got any matches in your purse? And so does Brena. O, how I wish I had my daytime courage now. Should we return to the market? I liked how bright and cheery it was back there. No, we'll get caught. Then, luckily, peering straight down their path, Polum catches. A glimmer of hope: the glimmer of a lantern on a gatepost. Coincidentally, the high wind, from their back, aids. The couple, towards the light. The lantern may be too timid to see everything around it, but it does reveal. The gatepost, without any actual gates fixed to it. And the sight of it does, for a brief moment, stun. Their sleepsick eyes; although their exhaustion raises. No questions. Assuming their safety, they sluggishly enter. The plot; with Polum taking the lantern along with him. But rather than a one-storey house they've come to expect, they, through messy foliage, find. An unusually narrow two-storey brick building too poor and old-looking for it to resemble a proper lived-in place. Upon laying her eyes on the scene, Brena turns back. To Polum. I would rather let the ghosts inside haunt me than go anywhere else now. Watch over me as I knock on the door. Compared to the walls and the windows, the door isn't as chalky, Polum observes. While holding the lantern up to her neck. As Brena waits for an answer, she amuses. Polum, with a quote. My father used to tell me, "A woman can go anywhere and get anything she wants." The door will open on its own; watch it. The very next moment, a thin, masculine voice breaks out. From the inside; dropping the lantern from Polum's hold. We're closed for the night. Come back tomorrow. After lifting the lantern back up, Polum, terrified, notices. Through a window, a shadow walking in and out; all the while Brena stands. By herself, confidently. Then, without the couple saying anything at

all, the voice flips. Its tone. Or pay double the rate through the bottom of the door, and I'll welcome you two in. Simply and heroically, Brena tackles. The voice. So this really is an inn. How much is the. Anticipating Brena's question, the voice interrupts. Judging your looks, you should already know the rate. It's eighty rillens. Pushing Brena aside, Polum double-checks. Is forty rillens what you are asking for? You know you're asking for forty rillens more than what this place can provide. But I suppose we have no choice other than settling here tonight. Now open the door. Sternly, the voice clarifies. A hundred sixty. Slide them under. Or feel free to sleep in the forest. With a palm over her yawn, Brena persuades. Polum, to settle. If I stand here any longer, I'll pass out. Let's pay him and go to bed. Then, obediently, although reluctantly, Polum follows. All the instructions. Likewise, the voice unlocks. The door; welcoming the couple into the dark abyss of an interior where it sneakily lurks. It's only when a candle gradually lights up the interior that the couple dares. To take a step into the building. The candle brings to light. A monk-like figure standing by a wall hooked with several pins off one of which a key dangles. With his face veiled behind his dark-green hood, the figure immediately hands. The key, to Polum. However, after taking the key, both Polum and Brena silently stare. Into the figure's hood; hoping for an explanation of some kind. Rather than anything of that sort, the figure hastily provides. A guide. Take the staircase up; the second door to your right leads to your room. I don't have excess candles to burn; leave before I put out the light. Losing interest, the couple heads up. The brittle old stairs, heavily stomping their feet. Once upstairs, Polum, at a loss for patience, dashes straight. Into their room; while Brena (who according to herself could pass out at any moment) delays. Joining him. Then, alerting her, a little black kitten shrieks. From behind; whom she willingly picks up once she hunches down. Much to her annoyance, the innkeeper blows out. The only candle that illuminated both downstairs and upstairs (partially) halls. Now in the absolute darkness, one of the only things visible to her is. The kitten's glowing and blinking little green eyes. Along with the eyes, she spots. Down the hallway, a tiny burning dot moving about in

the air; intriguing her greatly. Along with the dot, she hears. A faint feminine cry. Then, the moonlight through the hallway window banishes. All darkness, at once; forming the silhouette of a woman standing by the window with freeform hair and smoke trails. Holding the cat in her arms, Brena approaches. The woman, with a request; beaming in the moonlight. Mind me a piece? It's been a long time; my lips are in mourning. While the woman checks her smoke pack, Brena quickly flings. The cat, out into the bush below the window. Then, upon Brena signaling her to light the cigarette, the woman, still facing away from the moonlight, quietly responds. In a dense burdened voice. I have run out of matches. Unaffected, Brena balances. The cigarette, above her right earlobe, saving it for later. Then, the woman, after long contemplation, decides. To have a look at Brena. Meanwhile, Brena, with her elbows on the window sill, gazes. Up at the moon. As soon as the woman recognizes Brena's moon-kissed face, she immediately starts. Pleading; her face as wet as a fish. I can explain. Hear me out, please? Your husband only sees me every now and then. I only do business with him; there's no romance between us. Try not to be mad at him about this! Or else he will come after me, as he has done before. Doing this talentless work has already made my life hard enough! My mind, more than my body, can't bear all these things any longer! After scanning the woman's worn face a few times, Brena speaks. In quite the opposite tone. Yes, I know it all, but he isn't my husband. Girl, you worry too much about trivial things! Tell me. Weren't you the one he was talking to while dumping trash? I can tell that he dreams about you all the time. You must teach me some tricks. Or is being a young mother the only trick? Ah, I've never wanted to become a mother so badly! Lost, the woman returns. To facing the dark side. Then, sensually stroking her upper arm, Brena tries. Consoling her. O, sweetheart. No one cares about talent in this new world. Celebrate your work! If it breaks your sweat, it's a hard job. Besides, I envy your work; I might join you someday. Now, face the light; let me admire your shapes for a moment. You have a name, don't you? The woman, like a pupil, appeases. Brena's requests; though with her head bowed the whole time. Mama calls

me Baby. Baby calls me Mama. Men call me Cherry. Then, widely parting Cherry's unbuttoned shirt, Brena, grinning, settles. Her eyes, on her bare blue (for the light) breasts. But teardrops rolling down Cherry's chest break. Brena's immersion; arousing her to think of a better place. Which one of these doors takes us to your room? Take me there. Inside the room, Brena, astounded, comes upon. A glowing candle on top of an end table by which stands. A gigantic double bed on which sleeps. A big hairy olivine man naked and under his blanket. Enticed by the sight, she rushes. To sit beside him; with Cherry loudly whispering to her from behind. Please don't wake him up! I beg you, please! And Brena does. Exactly that: slapping the man hard on his bulbous cheek; all the while keeping her smile intact from before. Upon waking up, the man rapidly blinks. A few times, in disbelief, at the view that the women have served him. Once the man becomes fully present, he, still lying on the bed, turns. To Cherry, with questions; slowly lowering his blanket as he speaks. Thank goodness. I was losing interest in you. Is she your sister? A better question: Is she free? Brena, free or not, lights. Her cigarette, on the candle.

Awakened by a loud thunder near the end of the next morning, Polum climbs. Downstairs, in search of Brena; the clouds outside growing dimmer. Just then, a thin, short, jade man in nothing but short white pants steps. Into the building, through the open doorway; carrying his oversized umbrella. In his calmest manner, Polum asks. The man, about the innkeeper. Without much of a response other than a handstop, the jade man walks. Into the room beside the wall of pins. Then, the man, determined to block Polum's view, slams. The door, on his nose. After a few minutes of nothing, the doorknob turns. And the innkeeper appears. In his get-up from last night; with an announcement. The rate for the rest of the day will be three hundred and twenty. Amused, Polum frankly responds. Starting off with a chuckle. I admire cunning businessmen like you! Set up an inn in the middle of nowhere, then force them to pay a fortune. Excellent. I have a similar business model, although in my case, I apply that to a clinic. Anyway, no

need to get your hopes high; we are leaving. Just when the disappointed innkeeper is about to shut himself back in the room, Polum remembers. Brena's disappearance. Have you seen the woman that I came with last night? Then, completely throwing him off, Brena herself answers. His question; resting her hand on his shoulder from behind. Yes, he has. But I haven't. Tell me, hooded man. Do you keep a mirror around? Resisting no longer, the innkeeper goes. Through the door; leaving Polum to plan the day. If you still care about our dear lives, we should first head to a proper place to eat. Surely, we'll find one along the way to the shore. We must not be too far away from it; I can tell that by the cool breeze outside. Ah, my innocent days there! For some reason, I feel a painful regression inside, but at least we can toy with each other in peace there.

As a gang of little schoolchildren walk past Polum and Brena, they all together laugh. Uncontrollably, at the sound of the couple's roaring stomachs. In the meantime, the morning begins. To aesthetically transform into evening; as the leaves on the ground start. Spiraling up. Over a short time, the wind becomes. As strong as a solid wall; pushing the couple from the other direction. With the wind refusing any leeway, the couple stays. Stuck in one place, trying to overcome the force. Then, from above, an intact bird nest with bright pink eggs drops. Unharmful, to the ground by Polum's feet; dimming his face with pure horror. Reacting somewhat differently, Brena, both physically and verbally, tries her best. To make Polum walk around the nest with her. Love, we can't care so much. In this world, we can't care. We must think about ourselves first. The universe is flat on a pivot, remember? These aren't my words. You told me these things when we first met. With the wind finally clearing all the hair from his forehead, Polum, at ease again, kicks. The nest, out of the way. Then, only thirty steps later, they come across. The starting point of a new neighborhood; where Brena luckily spots. An open but sheltered restaurant less than fully packed. Crashing nearby, a brisk, ear-piercing thunder marks. The beginning of a heavy rainfall. But just in time before a raindrop

falls on Polum's head, they quickly escape. Into the restaurant's shelter. While the rest of the customers sit by their empty tables and admire the rain, Polum and Brena order. The heaviest meals that the cooks can make for a customer. Then, taking a seat at one of the two vacant tables, they patiently wait. For their food to arrive. And right after sitting down, all of a sudden, Brena feels. The touch of an unfamiliar hand on her shoulder. Looking back, she, pleasantly surprised, finds. That she has known the hand for all her life. Tapping on Polum's arm with a bright face, she draws. His attention to the hand. I don't think you have met him before. He escapes my mind once in a while. But say hello to my one and only brother, Slenn. He is a year older than me. Wearing a navy blue shirt on his torso, a terribly gloomy look on his face, and an awkward smile, Slenn sits. Next to Brena. Then, using a quick glance at Slenn, Polum not only introduces himself but also notes. All the similarities between Slenn and Brena's faces. Hello, young fellow. I'm a doctor. After that, his eyes go back. To the cooking pan; while Slenn quietly grows. Concerned for his sister. Is there something wrong with you? Is it something serious? Brushing his concern aside with a wave, Brena heads over. On the cook's whistle, to the counter, for their meals. As Brena brings the meals to the table, Polum, fulfilled by only their smells, finally breaks. His silence with Slenn. Why don't you entertain us while we eat? Anything will do. It will lift your weariness away, too. Watching the couple settle with their food, Slenn speaks. As per Polum's request; but he does so with a running nose and a stifling throat. These days, I'm on a hunt to find myself, just like how cavemen used to hunt for food. I chop logs at work, but my mind always ventures out in the wilderness in search. Today, I quit that job, despite the decent pay. One must have a solid meaning or reason before pouring all his commitment into work. What is life without a reason? Death always has one. Are we really happy without one? Popping the yolk of his omelet, Polum exclaims. I'm thoroughly entertained, brotherman! We build life with instincts; if we feel like it, we do it. Besides, it's a privilege to hunt for an answer to everything. Have you anything else to tell? Bring up a name for us

to mock. Holding a glass in her hand, Brena passes. Her one and only advice to Slenn; with him sneezing every now and then. It, indeed, is a privilege, especially when you have some place to fall back to. Look, do as you wish, but under no circumstances should you head back home to stay with Ma. She has very little patience for you or your costly meanderings. After uncovering his nose, Slenn responds. To both Polum and Brena; with a confident smile on his face this time. Thank you very much, you two, for showing me the way! Then, abruptly, he sets off. In the rain; visibly shivering on his way. It is not until he completely exits the couple's view that his body gives up. On a prickly bush beside the path. A long pause later, Polum speaks. A fly buzzing over his empty plate. So, that was your brother. Mother, too, I suppose. But what about your father? I mean, his age. After another long pause, Brena answers. Wiping her mouth. He doesn't want to see me; he wants me to move out of your house and stay with either them or someone healthy. Who's healthier than a doctor? Polum just rolls. His eyes.

The rain shows. No sign of stopping, not even till midafternoon. Since the couple hasn't left the restaurant yet, they have. Their lunch, as well. Then, caged in by both the weather and their growing libidos, they finally agree. To head out; fully aware of the difficult path ahead. And to no one's surprise, as they walk by the path, their clothes begin. To collect mud, rapidly from the bottom. The situation worsens. To the point where they have no choice other than taking off their clothes entirely. But starting off from the top rather than the bottom, Brena first pulls open. Her tight black lace top; then, her blouse; freeing herself to remain in just a red (now brownish) skirt. And mimicking her, Polum tears apart. His thin gray shirt. Rather than bear the hassle of carrying their clothes, they simply let go. Of their hold, forgetting entirely the next moment where they left them. Strolling together in the bliss of both the cleansing of the rain and the soiling of the mud, Polum warms. His hand, on her chest; and Brena. On his underbelly. Then, from afar and from the other direction, a middle-aged cyan woman carefully makes. Her way, around the mud; her tightly combed hair sheltered

by a white umbrella. Neither the couple nor the woman pays. Much attention to each other; at least not until they cross ways. With one careless step into a puddle, Polum immediately stains. The cyan woman's pristine dress; yet he doesn't think. Once, to stop; his hands still caressing Brena. Picking up a thin stick from the ground in reaction, the woman, furious, throws. It, at Polum's head. And the stick hits him hard enough for both him and Brena to spring back. In anger. Along with removing her hands from Polum's pants, Brena, in shame, rushes. To protect her breasts from the cyan woman's gaze. In the meantime, Polum's anger totally fades away. As soon as he recognizes the woman. Then, dominating the silence between her and the couple, the cyan woman speaks. Coldly, her tone clearly communicating her thick contempt. Don't bother hiding them, young girl. We're past the neighborhood. No child wanders off this far; either way, I'm sure they've already corrupted their eyes at the sight of you. I suppose you don't really care about the little ones, do you? Don't bother answering that either. To make myself clear, I only wish to speak with you. As the cyan woman hops across puddles to get closer to the couple, Brena boldly revolts. Putting her hands down. Pressing me with that guilt over a lousy motherly dress isn't very mature, is it? Once the woman finds a dry spot to stand on, she continues. I understand; life is deadly boring when you don't have to struggle for anything. So, naturally, in an attempt to overcome that terrible feeling, you try pleasuring yourself all day. It fulfills you at the beginning, but after a while you're bored again. Then you try bending pain all the way back into pleasure. And by miracle, you're satisfied; even more satisfied is your man. Let's bring them back; why not? Let's bring back those torture antics that the animals on the red hills loved to perform. But, back then, it wasn't pleasure but pain that the victims felt. I'm sure you've read that part of history. For people like me who have to worry about the cost of everything, clutching one's neck is only a sign of hatred, not love. Hardly holding back her laughter, Brena clears. Her doubt, with Polum. Is she one of your old wives? You shouldn't have choked her! Some women can be very sensitive about these little things. Keeping Polum's mouth shut, his ex-wife

instead answers. Yes, I may have known a doctor once, if you could call him that. His patients would wait for hours at his clinic, but he would mostly be somewhere else. He managed his livelihood both on and off his clinic; figure that out. He used to say, "Unlike a river, money has no source." I didn't understand what he meant, not until I saw a different doctor. Money was more alive to him than the beatings of a. Aggravated, Brena interrupts. Don't you think you have said enough? Try this: Look at us first, then look at yourself down in a puddle. Who do you think is enjoying life more: us, naked, or you, with your hair roughly pulled back? Ignoring Brena completely, Polum's ex-wife finally makes up. Her mind, to speak to her ex-husband; tears rolling down her cheeks. Listening, Polum tries his best. To hide his smirk. Does he never cross your mind? Our sweet little boy! What a beautiful soul he had! Don't you ever miss his purity—the purity that he tried so hard to protect from your hollow ways of life? Don't tell me you regret nothing. Please, don't! Show some feelings! In response, Polum starts off. With a sharp clap. What do you want me to say? I'm 47. I have only so much time to talk. We must get going. With broken limits, the cyan woman hurries. To get back on track. But within five steps, she loses. Her balance; and plunges. Her face, straight into a puddle. As the woman sadly washes herself in the rain, Brena murmurs. To Polum, starting with a sigh. She made me feel like you and I have known each other forever. Stale, forever. Polum adds. Also sighing. A month is often long—longer than a week.

Leaving everything behind, including the remainder of their clothes, the couple at last arrives. At the *Steps to Acceptance*. Now that the rain has gone away, it rewards. The couple, with a sinking sun that dimly highlights the yellow violet and beige of the earth surrounding them. Meanwhile, the peachy river grows. Translucent. The first urge Brena kills. Is to take a seat on one of the thick stone slabs on either side of the stairway. Once seated, her eyes desperately scout. Both the ground and the trees; for what exactly Polum at this point has no patience to find out. Rather, his gut instinct is to lift. Brena's hefty thighs high in the air. Peering past his belly, Brena, reluctant

to go along just yet, spots. A family of white roses, peeking out from behind the other slab and dancing in the breeze. With her search finally answered by the roses, she commands. Polum. Bring me a rose from there, and another one for yourself. Pluck them out with the whole of their stems. After exchanging smiles, Polum willfully approaches. The roses; although upon touch they do prick. His palms. As he is about to throw one at her, Brena, excitedly, spits. Into her hands. And having wiped his pricked palms on his chest, Polum, mesmerized by the rose, slumps. His bottom, on the other slab. Then, glaring at each other's delicate areas, they start. Stroking themselves in those very places, the rose stems never leaving their in-use hands. And the stems, naturally, open up. Their jade-lime skins, letting steamy blood trickle out. Along with the blood, all their senses begin. To liquefy; except vision.

Passing between and obstructing the couple's viewpoints, an aging lime man in a long, silk, white gown heads down. The stairs, and towards the river; holding a nude jade baby boy in his arms. While kissing the boy's round cheeks, the man takes. Both himself and the boy, down under the river, until their heads completely submerge. Following the drowning pair, two parallel trails of blood, one from Polum and one from Brena, flow down. To the river, first. Then, from there, the trails travel. Outwards, like snakes; never dissolving with water. After traveling over the eels, their cousins, and across the entire peachy river, the trails meet. At the shore of the red land; blending wholly to finish a bridge.

July, 2024—December, 2024