

short stories | flash fiction | creative non-fiction | artwork

OVERTLY

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LIT

where faith meets art

Leila Aboulela
Neena Halle
Lisa Voorhees
Marc Isaac Potter
Alexander Orozco
Ibrahim Babátúndé Ibrahim
Shaurya Arya-Kanojia
Sadia Akhtar
Salonee Verma
Narimaan Shafi

Morning-meadow
Jones
Jowell Tan
Saptarshi Bhowmick
Hazel J. Hall
Lily Nobel
Moshkur Ajikobi
Kristen Kareem
Emma McCoy

'Reverie'
Cover image by Fatema Johra

Maryam Shadmehr
Aini Butt
Rushda N
Fatema Johra
Cherry Wong



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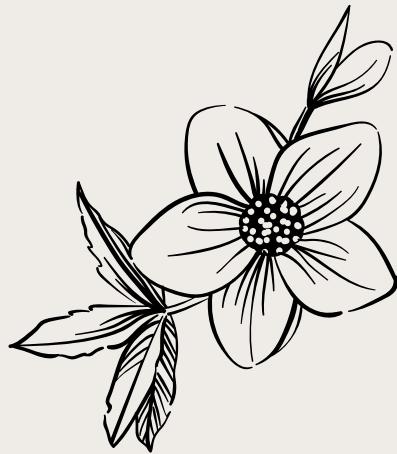
letter from the editors

Welcome to the second issue of Overtly Lit! We hope this issue finds you in your favourite reading chair with your curiosity ready to be satiated. This issue took us longer to get out into the world than we planned because well, life, as always, finds a way to throw unexpected and expected things at us all. But as the standard of talent in our wonderful contributors continues to impress us, we believe this issue is definitely worth the wait!

We're proud to share the second instalment of Leila Aboulela's agony aunt column. With her Islamic minded approach she has shared some wonderfully wise advice that anyone can find value in. Leila writes of being conscious of the beauty of helping others while also knowing when to put your own needs and wants first.

There are short stories to get lost in, taking you to a world of outlawed magic in Lisa Voorhees' *'The Windmill of Hartbruck'*, or an unforgettable and unexpected mother-daughter adventure in Neena Halle's *'The Pursuit at Dawn'*. In these, as well as the other stories, we love how faith was so naturally a part of the characters' lives.

Faith is an ongoing journey, a personal relationship, not only with something we believe in outside of ourselves but also when reflecting within. There are essays that demonstrate this self-reflection, such as *'Learning to Unlearn'* by Aini Butt. This is extended into reflecting on former generations and humanity as a whole in Morning-meadow Jones' piece *'My People Hurt People'*.



It's important to recognise trauma and pain in our lives and of those around us, and the way it connects to faith itself. Kristen Kareem shares her personal story of a difficult labour experience and the important role faith played in helping her through in *'The Opening and Birthing'*. Hazel J. Hall's *'The Wall in My Therapist's Office'* is a poignant look at dealing with one's own difficulties amidst the cruelty of the world.

Art, stories and essays help us make sense of the world and of our own experiences. They help us share a sense of hope with others. This issue does all of that, with elements of faith braided in, as in life. We hope you'll find something to relate to, to lift you or to make you feel seen within these pages.

love, Madeehah & Safiya

salaam, dear Leila

I find it hard to say no to people when they ask for my help with their creative projects, even when I know I'll be stretching myself. If I can be helpful to other people then I want to be so and I believe that Allah helps those who helps others. But there are times when I've said yes to too many things and I overwhelm myself and in order to meet all the commitments I've made, I end up neglecting my own creative projects.

Part of why I don't want to say no to people is that I don't want to offend anyone or for them to feel like they couldn't ask me again in the future and I also don't want to be left with feelings of guilt. How can I go about saying no when I need to?

Hafsa

dear Hafsa,

When I was growing up in Sudan, many people around me did not have their own personal comb, their own bed or their own towel. This was not because they were poor, but because they did not have a sense of individuality or exclusive ownership. Sharing things was their way of life. They felt so much part of their family, even the extended family that there was no sense of us versus me. And this attitude applied not only to material possessions but to effort and time. Time for oneself, ‘my’ space, ‘my’ projects were alien concepts. As much as I loved reading as a child, I was aware that my self-absorption was often considered aloof, insular and elitist. In such a society, helping others was not even considered help. It was what one did, part of normality, the nature of life. But the world changes and so do people. We are not like that anymore. Schools foster individuality and children are encouraged to know their favourite colour and their favourite cereals. Individual ownership of all things is encouraged and so we grow to nurture our own space and our own ways. Helping others becomes an effort, we are going out of our way; it is taking away something from us and we can come to resent it.

When we help others or say yes to their requests, we are fighting our selfishness and laziness. This is a good fight, and the rewards are plenty. It is satisfying to benefit someone else, to alleviate their distress, to fulfil their needs.

Their happiness becomes our happiness. We feel good about ourselves. By helping others, we come to know that we are of use, that we are important. We have agency which we have used for the benefit of someone else. It is a duty to serve others, especially if they are our parents, our spouses, poorer or more helpless members of our community. Immigrant communities cannot thrive and would not have achieved their current success without the support and generosity of their more able, better educated, and more privileged members. Helping each other is a means of our survival.

But there is a downside to this and one which you have identified. In helping others, we can neglect ourselves. In lending a hand to strangers, we can fall short in our responsibilities to ourselves and our own immediate family. Your fear of giving offence and your guilt are warning signs. It is time to draw the line, to back away. If you don't, the consequences will be even more problematic. Resentment, irritability with requests, a sense of grandiosity, a mistaken belief that you are irreplaceable or that if you do not help, no one else can. You might also be unwittingly fostering dependence and laziness, rather than encouraging people to help themselves and pointing them towards greater empowerment. Even more dangerous would be a growing hostility against those you have helped. In the Qur'an, Allah Almighty tells us to spend on the poor, to give and to help but there is also a stark warning that we must not follow our

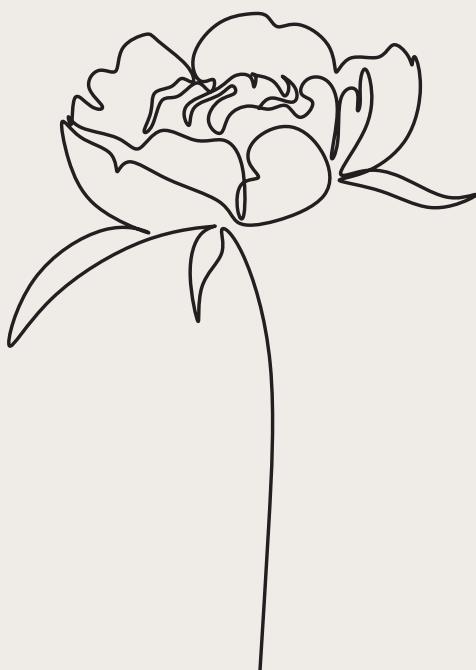
good deeds with harm, patronizing or rubbing the help in their faces.

Your letter reminded me of an iftar at the mosque. One of the ladies who was serving the meal was fatigued and overwhelmed. When asked for an extra piece of cutlery, she lashed out and started to shout about how she is doing her best etc. Her outburst was full of resentment, a sense of injustice that she had already given far too much and should not be expected to do more. Her raised voice shattered the peace of the happy, special moments of breaking the fast. It left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. Better if she had not been helping at all. Better if she had sat in a corner nursing her headache and eating her dates. We could have well managed without her; there was no need for a scene.

When it comes to your needs versus the needs of others balance is important. Instead of being afraid that you won't be asked to help in the future, it is wiser to fear the anger that can grow in you if you continue to unfairly neglect yourself. Instead of hesitating to give a polite, controlled 'no' to a request, it is wiser to guard against the more serious offence of grudgingly giving help under a cloud of a festering resentment.

Think of your capacity to help others as a muscle. If you strain it, it will ache and put you out of action. If you don't use it at all, it will weaken. Keep it fit and healthy, strengthen it so that it can do more, train it so that it can function more efficiently. And remember that our egos are trying to trip us all the time.

with love, Leila



The Pursuit at Dawn

by Neena Halle

She wasn't going to make it in time.

Deeqo raced out her room, gripping the edge of the wall to effectively turn faster towards the stairs. Her bag slapped her lower back with every step, jacket hanging off one arm. Her hijaab was barely pinned properly and her black skirt nearly tripped her.

Almost, almost.

An inhuman shriek pierced the predawn stillness of their home.

Deeqo froze on the last step, then turned sharply. Muku, their voluptuous ginger cat, flicked his tail in annoyance from above.

She winced and clambered up to him.

“Sorryyyy! Sorry, I didn’t see you,” she whispered gently. But Muku wasn’t having it. He yowled and strutted his long-haired coat away.

“*Naa Deeqo!! Hurry up!*” Hooyo screamed from outside, not caring for the sleeping residents. Her mother would not be waiting a second longer and if Deeqo wanted to catch a ride, she needed to leave. Now.

Deeqo tugged her winter boots on, eyeing the kitchen. Did she have the two minutes to slap together a sandwich? A glance at the clock said no.

“Here, here! I made it,” Deeqo huffed as she climbed in and closed the door to their ancient Toyota Sienna. Red with peeling spots on the hood, the car was a member of their family just as Deeqo was the middle daughter of eight children.

The engine was already roaring, heat sputtering out the vents in an attempt to clear the early March chill coating the windshield. Deeqo shivered beneath her winter jacket. The old heating system wasn’t doing much as far as warmth went, but it sure sounded like it was doing extraneous work.

“You took ten extra minutes,” Hooyo announced.

“Sorry, Hooyo, I was praying Fajr.”

Right as Deeqo clicked her seatbelt on, she caught a glimpse of her gray knuckles. Winter was ashy season for Africans. *My ancestors basked in sunshine, this Minnesota winter life ain’t for me.*

Quickly, Deeqo whipped out her Vaseline from her pocket, applying it liberally to her dark hands, wide forehead and two-toned lips. No one would be catching her unmoisturized.

Hooyo shifted the gear to reverse. The car groaned from the effort.

“You’re the one that’s going to be late for...*maxay aheed? Chemo? Ingris?*” Hooyo’s torso was twisted backwards, neck and eyes strained as they served as the rear-view camera. Her big maroon jilbaab looked like it was strangling her.

“Hooyo, it’s Chem, short for Chemistry. They love to start labs early.”

“Chem, chemo, whatever,” Hooyo muttered, waving a hand around in dismissal.

“They’re actually very different things, you know—” Deeqo started, then cut herself off with a sigh. She’d be the last one to correct Hooyo’s Somali-flavored English.

Hooyo had been living in America longer than Deeqo had been alive; Deeqo was sure if Hooyo wanted to, she could speak English perfectly. But stubbornness was a family trait.

Once Hooyo set her sights on accomplishing something, nothing and no one could stop her.

“If you can’t set your mind to do something and trust Allah, how will you get anything done?” Hooyo was fond of asking. It was the antidote to Deeqo’s self-doubt and fickleness.

At this early hour, their surroundings were a ghost town. The few street lights present flickered like dying fireflies. Their dim glow was barely visible through the dense fog blanketing the neighborhood.

Here and there a pair of glassy eyes would shine under their weak

yellow headlights. Probably the stray cats. Hopefully. *Poor Muku*, Deeqo remembered, *he probably hates me even more now.*

“Allah!” Hooyo exclaimed, eyes widening. “I forgot my qahwo!”

“There’s a Dunkin up there that has an early open drive through,” Deeqo offered. *And I can get some breakfast.*

“No, no, *waxaas majecli*. Somali *qaxwo* is all I can drink.”

Deeqo shook her head. “That stuff is drugs, Hooyo. I don’t know how you can handle it.”

Hooyo pursed her lips and tsked. “*Willi waa yartahay*, that’s why.” *You’re still young.*

Deeqo shrugged. She pulled the sun-visor down and set about fastening her hijaab. The chiffon material pressed against her face nice and tight, just how she liked it.

The sudden press of the brakes made Deeqo lurch forward, seat belt choking her concealed throat. She was tossed back into her seat, not having a moment to process what was happening.

“Hooyo!” Deeqo screamed. “What’s wrong?!”

But her mom looked shaken too. Then angry.

“Who is this crazy car!” She yelled, pointing forward and flinging Somali curses at the sedan that appeared out of nowhere.

“It’s probably a drunk driver, Hooyo...” but as Deeqo said it, she didn’t believe it. Sure, it was at the crack of dawn, but on a Monday? Wasn’t that a bit much?

Hooyo shook her head viciously, wagging her finger. She repeatedly flicked her high beams to signal to the driver to turn their lights on. But they didn’t. Not wanting to stay behind a reckless driver, she quickly left the lane.

Deeqo rubbed her throat—it was a bit sore and most likely red now—as she looked at the window. They were passing the sedan now, and Deeqo was curious to see who could be driving that crazy.

But as they passed the driver’s window of the car, all Deeqo saw was a hunched over figure wearing a navy blue cap and dark clothes. Her eyes flitted to the steering wheel where white knuckles gripped it tightly. There wasn’t much to deduce.

Giving up, she leaned back into her seat. Hooyo inserted a CD and the slow melodious voice filled the car. Deeqo let the Quranic recitation flow through her, letting it calm her nerves. Hooyo sighed and relaxed her shoulders.

A gentle mist replaced the dissipating fog, but the promise of cold rain still held in the clouds. Up ahead, the lanes became one. The highway ramp was near and they were still good on time.

Screeeeeeeeech! The squealing of tires on asphalt penetrated the peace.

The car had reappeared.

Hooyo slammed on the brakes. This time Deeqo was prepared; she snatched at the seatbelt protecting her throat.

“*Xayawaan!*” Hooyo cursed, punching the horn aggressively.

They were inches away from the sedan—a black Honda Accord—now at the red light. Deeqo noticed something strange. The car was... shaking? No, that wasn’t it. But it was moving somehow. She couldn’t hear loud music, so how?

It was the trunk. Specifically, the rear corner headlight. The trunk shook again. As if something was hitting it from the inside. Just as she thought it, the headlight broke and clattered to the asphalt below.

Deeqo watched in horror as a pale, slim hand burst free from the opening. The hand twitched, flashing a reddened wrist that seemed to scream from underneath their car’s yellow beams.

The fingers grasped.

Desperately reached for the air.

Then it dawned on Deeqo.

“Oh my God!” Deeqo screamed. “Hooyo! HOOYO!”

But Hooyo had already seen what Deeqo was pointing at.

“*Allah rabbiyooo!*” she exclaimed, eyes bulging out of their sockets.
“*Gabar yar aa la xaday! Kid-nabbing!*”

Deeqo’s heart pounded in her chest. “We don’t know that! Maybe, maybe...”. She tried to rationalize the situation, find a possible excuse as to why a hand would be flailing desperately from a trunk at this hour of the morning.

Hooyo’s right. Someone’s been kidnapped. And we’re the only witnesses.

The light turned green and the Accord took off onto the highway ramp.

Hooyo gunned the gas.

Deeqo shrieked. “Hooyo! What are you doing?”

“We can’t let him get away, Deeqo!”

“Oka-ay,” Deeqo said shakily, eyes wide at the sharp, twisty ramp they were flying through, “I see your point, but what are you going to do? Follow him? Until when?”

“Until he stops! Someone’s daughter is in there!”

Deeqo shook her head, reeling from what was happening. Her mom was known to be impulsive, sometimes irrational, but it was usually Deeqo that found herself in the wrong situations at the wrong times. Doing stupid things like trying to save the day. Well. Now she knew where she got it from.

Deeqo didn't want to ask what would happen if the man stopped.
911. I need to call the cops.

She nearly smacked herself with how long it took for her to make the realization. Deeqo switched her phone to speaker.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Hi, my name is—"

"*KID-NABBING!*" Hooyo yelled, interrupting Deeqo. "WE SEE *KID-NABBING!*"

"I'm sorry?" the female operator asked.

"We're witnessing a live kidnapping on the I-90 right now." Deeqo sounded dramatic even to her own ears. And yet this was real.

"Kidnapping? Are you sure?"

The Accord was still speeding ahead and Hooyo was right behind him.

"WE SEE HER HAND—"

"Hooyo, please. I'll explain to her, focus on the road." There were a few cars already on the highway and many more to come no doubt. She spoke back into the phone.

“Hi, um, we were driving behind a black Honda Accord and a hand poked out from the rear headlights. The hand was waving around, as if calling for—ah!” Deeqo yelped as she nearly collided with the passenger window pane.

Hooyo was fully hunched over the steering wheel, eyes laser focused on the Accord not too far ahead. She used both arms to swerve left, then right, matching the car’s zigzag through the lanes. Visibility was still poor and Hooyo didn’t want to lose him in the increasing morning traffic. He was onto them now. Deeqo was sure of it.

The operator’s voice came back to her. “Who am I speaking with?”

“Deeqo Muhammed.”

“Okay, Miss Muhammed. Can you describe the current situation? You said you’re on the I-90, correct?” The authoritative tone in the woman’s voice put Deeqo on high alert. She looked around.

“Yes, we’ve been on it for maybe five minutes now.”

“And can you still see the Accord?”

“Yes, the headlights are off, but he’s still in sight.” Then Deeqo had a thought. “I can get you the license plate in a second.”

Hooyo was already ahead of her, speeding up so they could get a closer look. The other driver floored it, tires screeching. Deeqo gripped her door handle. Their Sienna roared in challenge, sprinting to catch up.

From her peripheral vision, Deeqo spotted a car approaching. Fast. Her breath caught. As if in slow motion, she saw the driver widen his eyes in horror, veering his car to the right to avoid their speeding van. His horn blasted at them, followed by many other horns, but they had already sped away. Deeqo peered at her mom but her eyes were still glued to the Accord. Hooyo hadn't even noticed the near accident.

"Miss Muhammed? I would advise you not to approach the car. Please keep your distance as this could be a very dangerous situation."

Try telling that to my mom, Deeqo wanted to say, but it was too late. They were gaining on him. Deeqo leaned onto the dashboard, forehead pushing against the cold window and squinting to see the license plate.

"It looks like an older model. License plate is XRZ-8723." Deeqo could hear the operator typing as she spoke. But what Deeqo saw made her breath hitch.

"The hand! The hand disappeared!" Deeqo said.

"*Maxaa dhacay?*" Hooyo said, questioning what happened, but not reducing their speed. She was hitting close to 95 mph, Deeqo noted in alarm.

"Ma'am? Is everything okay?" The operator asked.

"No, no the hand isn't sticking out anymore."

“Are you the one driving, ma’am?”

“I AM DRIVER!” Hooyo yelled back.

“That’s my mom,” Deeqo explained, “she’s driving. We’re staying close to the Accord. A-are you sending people?”

“I’m on it, but before I can do that I’m going to need the both of you to keep your distance,” she warned. “This is most likely a dangerous individual, and if they catch on to your pursuit I cannot guarantee your safety. This is a risk to the person kidnapped as well, so please stay back. Help will be on the way.”

Too late. There was no way the man wasn’t aware of their pursuit already. It was probably why he was driving like a maniac. To lose them.

Deeqo looked to Hooyo to see if she heard.

“Hooyo?”

Hooyo nodded. “I will slow down a little,” she said, nostrils flaring. Her chin rose up just a fraction. “But we will not lose him!”

Just as Hooyo began to build space between the vehicles, the Accord took advantage. Deeqo braced herself as Hooyo stayed in pursuit. She wasn’t sure how much more their van could handle, but Hooyo didn’t seem to care. It might as well have been a race car.

As the sun crept forward, more cars veered into the highway. Morning traffic had arrived. With growing horror, Deeqo watched

the Accord weave recklessly through the cars. From the middle, to the right, back to the leftmost lane.

The Accord squeezed between a 16-wheeler and a Prius. It was too tight. He was crazy. The truck was huge. One glance at Hooyo's strained eyes and Deeqo knew she was going for it.

The smell of burnt tires ignited Deeqo's nostrils and blaring horns assaulted her ears. Her eyes squeezed shut as she took in a lungful and screamed.

“HOOOOYYYYOOOO!!!” the last bit came out in a sob.

“*Naa aamus. I saw the truck, don't worry!*”

“Hello? Hello?” There was another voice calling, somewhere in the car. The operator. Deeqo had dropped the phone to grab the handle above the door for dear life.

She scrambled to grab it now, hastily gulping to clear her voice. The Accord veered right across the highway, crossing all lanes.

“Are you still in pursuit?” the operator asked.

“Yes!” There was no point in lying. “He’s headed for the exit! How far away are the cops?”

Hooyo swung her head right, throwing an arm across Deeqo’s chest, “MOVE!”

Car horns blared like trumpets, but somehow Hooyo made it across onto the exit ramp with only a car in between them and the Accord.

“Hello? Ma’am are you still there? What’s going on?”

Deeqo tried to catch her breath. “W-w-we just took the exit to Walney road. I can still see the Accord ahead of us.”

They were at a sleepy intersection. The early sun rays illuminated an empty gas station. Deeqo was familiar with the area. Ahead of them the road would reduce to only one lane through rolling hills. It was a rollercoaster of a ride.

But before that road was a—

“RED LIGHT, HOOYO RED LIGHT!”

At the last possible second, Hooyo slammed on her brakes. But the Accord had made it through. They watched in despair as a breath later, cars crossed the intersection and little by little they lost sight of the kidnapper.

No, wait.

As far as she knew, the road ahead was one-way. The man had no choice but to continue straight. He couldn’t have possibly known where he was going otherwise why make such a poor choice?

They weren’t out of this yet.

Deeqo relayed what she knew of the road to the operator.

“I understand, thank you. The cops have been dispatched but are still on the I-90. Thanks to your information, I’m sure they will be able to locate the vehicle. Now, I strongly advise you and your mom to stop pursuing and leave it to us.”

Stop? The thought hadn’t even occurred to Deeqo. But the operator was right. Sirens sounded in the far distance, but too faintly. At the speed the kidnapper was going, he could get far enough into the pockets of forest ahead. The police wouldn’t be able to track his location there.

Deeqo looked at Hooyo, an unspoken question on her lips. But Hooyo’s jaw was set. They had said their du’aaS already.

The light turned green and Hooyo drove on.

Barren tree limbs snaked downwards on either side of the lonely road, choking out the early morning light. The crest of the first hill made Deeqo’s stomach flip upside down. She fought back the nausea rising with the panic. It was like they had plunged into a dark ocean with rollicking waves. The only sounds filling their ears were the whooshing of the wind and her mother’s supplications.

The operator was gone. Deeqo had simply said okay and hung up the phone. She wouldn’t be of much help going forward. They were on their own now.

Their eyes swept left and right. The uneven roads had forced them to slow down significantly.

“Is that..?” Hooyo asked, pointing ahead.

Hooyo rolled the car off the road into the narrow dirt path at the foot of the forest. There was the Accord, engine shut off, driver side door left open.

The trunk was also open.

Deeqo and Hooyo crept up to the car. Their footfalls were that of an elephant’s. The hem of her skirt kept snagging on the debris.

Hooyo’s eyes darted everywhere and Deeqo tried to remain vigilant but she was shaking so badly from fear she decided to concentrate most of her efforts on clutching her skirt.

The trunk was empty except for a pair of red mittens, peeking through black garbage bags. Deeqo knew better than to touch anything. In the midst of the fear and panic, sadness settled in.

They were too late.

He had taken her.

Deeqo had assumed the victim was a woman from the little she saw of the hand. Dread weighed her down. She heard her mother sigh and Deeqo knew the same questions were running through her mother’s mind.

What was the likelihood the woman was still alive? To her untrained eyes, there was no blood. No obvious weapons. But she'd listened to enough true crime podcasts to know that didn't mean anything.

Hooyo pointed to the ground. *Look.*

Footsteps in the mud. Leading into the woods.

Deeqo heard it first, a rustling of the leaves that sounded suspiciously like dragging. She paused and grabbed a hold of her mom's overlong jilbaab. Deeqo pointed to her ear, then the direction in which she heard the sound.

There was no mistaking the muffled scream.

Fear took hold of her ankles, rooting her to her spot. This was real.

The woman was still alive. Deeqo scanned the woods, searching for any more clues. It wasn't in her mind. Hooyo had heard it too.

Oh no. Where was Hooyo?

A hand gripped her shoulder.

"Get in the car, Deeqo. Lock the doors."

Deeqo knew that look in her mother's eyes. It was the same one she'd had when the ambulance had carried away her father after the

accident. Eyes of steel, unwavering.

It was a look that said, “It’s all down to me now.”

Deeqo remained frozen, but Hooyo had run to the trunk and gotten out her younger brother’s baseball bat. It hung low on Hooyo’s side, clasped in her right hand.

Deeqo held her mother back. “I’m not letting you go alone.”

Quick as a flash, Hooyo threw off her hand and started down the forest trail. “No time!”

Deeqo had only a moment to look back and visually mark their location. *Ya Allah, please protect us.*

Hooyo was practically flying through the forest. Twigs and branches caught on her clothes and she tore away, not caring for the holes. Hooyo was right, there was no time for stealth. Straining her ears, Deeqo struggled to hear beyond the heavy footfalls and heavier breaths.

Hooyo gestured to the right where the forest rose to a slight hill.

“Let’s look from there!” Hooyo said then stumbled. Deeqo reached out to grab her mother by the elbow. Once again, Hooyo shrugged her off.

“No time, Deeqo! *Dhakhso!*” Hooyo hiked up her abaya and took giant leaps.

The cold engulfed them, numbing the tip of her nose and freezing her hands. Iced over dirt cracked beneath her boot. Every crunch sounded like a gunshot. No. Deeqo refused to let her mind clamber into a dark place. She scanned through the debris for a pale hand, any bodily shaped object. The woman had to still be alive. The man couldn’t have possibly had time to bury her.

The woman was here somewhere.

A drizzle started, enhancing the earthy scent of damp wood.

Hooyo hiked higher and higher up the forest, creating a path of her own through the terrain. Deeqo stayed close on her heels. Did she look down at the ground for signs or did she keep eyes glued ahead anticipating any attack on them? It occurred to her, if the driver had a gun they were as good as dead. She shoved those thoughts away.

Hooyo’s breathing became labored, small white clouds puffing from her chapped lips. They had already stopped for a break twice.

“Hooyo do you see anything?”

She shook her head as she gazed around. “Nothing. I will go down to see better.”

Down? Deeqo turned around. All that was behind them was a mess of icy rock, roots, and unanswered questions.

Deeqo thought again. “Hooyo, the police will be here any minute now. We did everything we could. The rain’s picking up, we should go back before it gets worse.”

Hooyo flung her head around, droplets trickling down her face.

“*Naa, bax!* What will I tell Allah on the Day of Judgment? That I saw someone getting hurt but got too scared and walked away?” She marched down the hill, the bat steady in her hands.

Deeqo followed her. “Allah is watching us now and is fully aware of the efforts we’ve made. We were scared, but we still pursued. Look at us now!” Deeqo paused, slightly panting and stretching her hands out, eyes wide. “We’re in the middle of a forest hunting down a dangerous kidnapper and potential killer with nothing but the clothes on our back and a wooden bat. It’s freezing cold, we have no clue where we are and we still tried!” She took another breath. “Wouldn’t you say that’s enough to answer with?”

Hooyo paused as well, looking up at the darkening sky for a moment. Deeqo was right and Hooyo knew it. Deeqo also wanted to continue, to find the kidnapped woman and possibly rescue her. But someone had to be rational here...right? It was all so confusing. Her quads pulsed, reminding her that she was not an athlete, only an undergrad skipping her Chem lab trying to be a hero.

Then she heard it. A heavy thump. Her mind jumped to an unsettling conclusion.

Hooyo looked Deeqo square in her eyes. “How about now? Is it still enough?”

Yes. We're not obligated to any of this. We could leave now.

But her body betrayed her. Looking at her mom—her warrior, her hero—Deeqo couldn't run away. Not after all this.

Deeqo went first down the hill, skidding here and there on the slippery ground despite her caution.

“*Maxaan ku sheegey? Gabadhaydi aa tahay,*” Hooyo muttered close behind her. *What'd I tell you? You're my daughter.*

Even through her terror and fear, Deeqo felt pride shine in her chest. This was her mom who had escaped the death helicopters of Mogadishu raining down destruction, the brutality of refugee camps and the uncertainty of starting anew in America.

One bad guy wouldn't - couldn't - stop her.

The sky cried heavily now. Distant thunder grumbled from beneath the stormy gray clouds. Not much else could be heard aside from the *dudu-dudu-dudu* of the rain and occasional bird cry. The forest was a maze of ragged brown bark and muddy habitats for insects and fungus. Everything looked the same.

But Deeqo and Hooyo kept going in the direction they had last heard the thump come from. They were close now, she could feel it.

Close to...what? she thought, but kept her feet moving. One in front of the other.

Something small skittered right in front of Deeqo and she nearly screamed, thinking it was a rat. Hooyo was right at her side, abaya clutched in her hand and jilbaab flowing stoically behind her. They walked in unison.

Then Hooyo fell.

“Hooyo!” Deeqo cried, reaching and failing to catch her.

Hooyo yelped and grabbed her ankle, wincing in pain. Deeqo kneeled down into the mushy, cold mud next to her, trying to inspect the injury. When Deeqo extended her arm, her elbow hit something hard. And bony.

But it wasn’t Hooyo’s leg she had bumped. It was someone else’s.

Deeqo stiffened, too shocked to move. Hooyo was faster. Her hands swept away sheets of caked dirt, exposing two slim legs clad in jeans.

“La hawla wa la quwata illa bilah!” Hooyo exclaimed in horror. *There’s no might or power except with Allah.*

The sound of Hooyo’s words snapped Deeqo out of it. She stood and took over, swiping the layer of dirt and mud concealing the top half.

The face-down body of a woman lay before them. A woman with a wrist that seemed to scream.

If she was dead... they needed to leave ASAP. This was no longer a live chase but a crime scene.

“*Ma neefsanaysa?*” Hooyo asked. *Is she breathing?*

Deeqo crouched next to the body, reaching to check for a pulse, but recoiled. The woman’s hand was so bruised and reddened, Deeqo was scared to touch her. But she had to do it. As gently as she could, Deeqo lifted the hand and put two fingers to it.

Just as she made contact with the woman, the woman’s body shuddered. Instantly, Deeqo dropped her hand.

“Flip her over!” Hooyo ordered, struggling to get herself up and closer.

“Hooyo, stay! I can do it.”

Scared, but not sure of what, Deeqo turned the woman over. Her chest rose, albeit slowly and shakily, but she was surely alive. The woman’s face was caked in mud, pale skin peeking through. The mud had entered her nostrils, framed her eyes. She must’ve been breathing through the slight gap of her open mouth. But she was unconscious.

Deeqo could see streaks of blood mixing with the dirt running down her face. It was difficult to tell where the injury was from; her dark

curls were matted with mud, blood, and rain.

Deeqo could only guess that she had a head injury of some sort and prayed that flipping her over hadn't been a mistake. Surely if they had left her alone, she would've eventually choked to death.

Something sounded from behind them. Deeqo snapped her head around so fast, something in her neck popped. The rain draped across her eyes, and no matter how fast she blinked she couldn't see anything nearby.

Her heart rate escalated, electrifying her nerves. Their situation was horrible. Behind Deeqo was her mother, sporting a sprained ankle and calling on Allah to help them. In between them was a victim barely alive whose ails and story were unknown to them both. But they had saved her nonetheless.

Deeqo was terrified and defenseless. *What should I do, what should I do?*

The baseball bat.

Deeqo searched the ground, where was it...there! She grabbed it and stood up straight, facing the direction of the sound. Facing the unknown enemy.

Deeqo recognized the sound. It was footsteps, plucking and un-plucking its way through the wet ground. The footsteps were hurried, bound to get closer any moment now.

The rain poured with a vengeance, darkening the sky and her hopes.

It soaked her clothes and joined fear in weighing her shoulders and legs down. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears and her hands shook. She gripped the baseball bat with the last of her willpower. Hooyo reached for her arm, and they glanced at each other.

Together. They were together.

Their day had begun with an innocent ride to school. A conversation about coffee. Now Deeqo stood, feet planted and molded into the drenched mud below her. Baseball bat positioned before her as though it were a sword.

Deeqo and her mom were no heroes; just regular Somali Muslim women that didn't know how to back down or run away. Now it was on Deeqo to protect them somehow. She had said her du'aas. With Allah watching them, surely they would prevail.

The rain pounded around her ears, washing away her doubts. Deeqo clenched her jaw, tightened her grip on the bat until she felt her palms pulse. She lasered her eyes and focused through the downpour. Evened out her breathing as best she could.

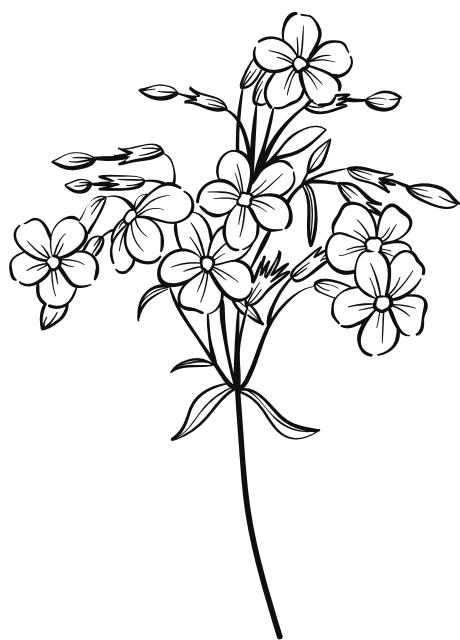
Pluck. Pluck.

The footsteps were close. Very close.

Deeqo blinked. A silhouette appeared from behind a tree trunk. It was a man.

Deeqo was ready.

Neena Halle are Somali-American sisters and writers whose stories center Muslim women living adventurous lives (with a dash of murder, suspense and sprinkles of romance). When they're not writing, or busy being professional adults, you can find Neena binging K-dramas and Halle catching up on true crime podcasts. They can be reached on Twitter @neena_halle.



Nossa Filho Vermelho de Fátima

Translation: Our Red Son of Fátima

by Salonee Verma

There are names and then there are *names*.

There was a kid in my sister's class named Ángel, but he was earthy and he walked barefoot on the soil outside the supermarket, chanting fiercely cut lullabies and Madonna's folk songs after thunderstorms. He might have been an angel. He might not have.

In that summer, it didn't really matter. There was something godly about the way he scratched through melodies anyway, like he was reclaiming them for himself. He used to love sitting on the roof and pretending to smoke—he had asthma, but he was mystified by the bewilderment of near-death. He would offer cigarettes to his friends, except they were really just rolled up Tootsie Rolls gone stale and solid.

Nobody knew where he came from, or where he went after he graduated. Everyone figured he would light the world on fire with that smile of his. To find out what happened to him would be to break the love spell he had cast over the entire goddamn town with his whispers.

He used to do that thing where he would speak softly, so you had to lean in deep to hear him. Then, you'd smell the thunder on his skin. Then, you'd find his eyes were the colour of soil in a forest fire. Then, you'd be enchanted for life.

The junior high classes had a running theory that his mother's feet were put on backwards. The elementary school thought he was the one who brought the hurricanes home. The cashiers at the market gossiped about his older brother, who had skipped town with his half-tree boyfriend last winter. Everyone was so entranced with his origins that they almost forgot to lower their voices when passing his roost on the market roof.

He was easier defined by things he wasn't, which is to say, he wasn't an iconoclast. He valued disruption, but he wore every sacred symbol he could find on his collarbone, close to his heart. Every weekend would find him holed up in some holy place or the other, clasped hands raised as a greeting. Never the same place twice. Sometimes we'd get wind of his presence in Vasco da Gama, the biggest city around, charming the rickshaws with his hips.

Ángel was almost a religion. We all had faith in the mythology of his charisma, so much so that even the churches and temples were sometimes filled with talk about him instead of God. It always seemed, no matter how sacrilegious, inevitable.

He was a God-fearing boy, most of the time. Other times, he grew into a quietly furious man. Not often, but often enough that the entire town would hear about it.

Did you hear? Ángel was on the roof again, screaming his songs. He said he was going to run away to join the revolution. Do you think he's serious? He said God wants it for him. Maybe he's serious. The girls would hate it. The boys, too. Maybe also the trees.

Didi had kissed Ángel once, but she told me he had tasted like the pineapples he sang about. No giant eyes draped across his body to speak of, either. Just soft brown skin and the scent of a storm brewing beneath his lungs.

Salonee Verma is a Bihari-American writer and the co-founder of antinarrative, a collaborative zine. Her work is published or is forthcoming in Backslash Lit, Pollux Journal, zindabad zine, Dishsoap Quarterly and more. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Find her online at saloneeverma.carrd.co.

The Opening and Birthing

by Kristen Kareem

content warning: details of traumatic labour

My mother and I rumble along Highway 5 through Minnesota wetlands before an incubating dawn. A haunting fog levitates over bodies of water. The frosted tips of prairie grasses stand stiff like silvery needles. They await the morning sun to thaw and resurrect them.

At a swollen thirty-nine weeks pregnant, I required an induction before my unborn baby and/or I die. A few hours before, I received several dreaded diagnoses: severe pre-eclampsia, cholestasis and HELLP. Pre-eclampsia causes you to seize and possibly die and it can also kill your baby. Cholestasis is your liver failing. It could lead to fetal distress due to low oxygen. HELLP, another prenatal condition, harms the liver, deteriorates your red blood cells, and lowers your platelets. This is ride or die.

The day before, a gut feeling told me that my itchy pregnant body might be more than skin stretching. Some people call it intuition, I call it God. He was reaching out to me, urging me to stop trying to be brave. It was him telling me it's okay, you can complain about your pregnancy.

It was a perfect pregnancy until then. I felt in control: my breech baby flipped her head down, I managed to exercise throughout the pregnancy, I gained only the recommended weight, and I didn't take a single pharmaceutical the whole time. I hailed my other two pregnancies as successful natural deliveries with no drugs or

interventions, but successful doesn't always mean perfect. Successful means something that causes a positive change.

Control. I thought I had control, then I was delivered a dose of humility. I'm not in control of anything. I let go of everything and handed it to God, and to the medical professionals. I can do this. It's like when people climb Everest and almost die on the way down. Their bodies are so depleted that they crawl. And now this is me crawling.

I feel like I'm not even on this Earth, like I am floating above it, like the fog we just passed. Is this a panic attack? Is this a seizure coming to claim me? My heart rate soars. I panic, thinking, "Who will die? Who will take care of my other kids if it is me?" Pregnancy is not just a physical endeavor, it is a test of your spiritual trust. What needs to be birthed? It is more than a body, but souls are delivered in this feat.

The country hospital sits silently. The hall echoes our footsteps. Night shift transitions into day shift.

The midwife runs several tests, checking my protein and liver enzymes. When the midwife attempts to loosen the amniotic sac, it does nothing. The sac remains firmly attached to me. Then we decide to do a balloon-type device that will help ripen the cervix. What am I? Some piece of fruit?

Once they start the magnesium sulfate drip for my preeclampsia, they transfer me over to the doctors. My doctor is small, smart, and analytical. She's a hero. She lays it out for me: I need the drugs

to prevent seizures and now I need Pitocin. I'm losing track of all the needles and tubes going into my body; two or three in the hand and one down below.

Did you know magnesium sulphate relaxes the body's skeletal muscles to prevent seizures and that Pitocin contracts uterine muscles? My body is fighting itself. My body is at war. Drip, drip, drip go the magical drugs that stop the chance of me slipping into a seizure. But the magnesium sulphate makes me feel groggy, like a birthing zombie. I ask the nurse if it is normal to feel so exhausted from this magnesium.

She says, "It's better than the alternative," which would be dying. The monitor routinely prints out fetal movements and uterine contractions. The blood pressure cuff revs in regular intervals, bursting my blood vessels with each mechanical inflation. My warm amniotic water both trickles and gushes out of me. I feel like a child, nothing in control.

I do not have several weeks or months required for c-section recovery. I must have a vaginal birth. The doctor says, "We can try."

One hour passes, then a day passes, and no baby. They double my Pitocin rate, but my labour stalls. With each contraction, I clutch the bedside rail and call to my Lord. I read Surat-Al-Fatihah to myself, also called The Opening. I must have said the surah at least a hundred times. *Open me up, God.* I say to myself. *Open this body both spiritually and physically.*

My mom chats with the doctor about football but comes to my side when I start screaming, “Mommy! Mama!” I am reduced to infantile requests, demanding popsicles and massages. No pain killers I urge, I need to feel this. I need to feel this closeness to life and death.

They amp up the Pitocin dangerously and fatally high. “It’s too much,” one nurse says. She refuses to give me more. She knows too much Pitocin can cause fetal distress and uterine rupture.

The only thing that comforts me is al-Fatihah, The Opening. At thirty-six hours of labour, I feel my life is being squeezed out of me, as if my body is splitting and I can’t go on.

Then my body opens and she is born. She is perfect. Alhamdulillah. I can’t believe another human just emerged out of me. I rejoice, but momentarily. The magnesium sulphate machine keeps dripping. For the next several days there is a risk of me having a seizure.

For you, my newborn baby, did you know I would die for you? Her warm rosy cheeks flush and she looks at me with big doe eyes and dark matted hair.

Death still hovers. I am scared to close my eyes. I am scared for that last seizure to take me away. I worry about seizing while breastfeeding, that I might accidentally harm or kill my baby.

I call to my Lord, “Don’t let me die tonight. Don’t let me harm my baby.”

My baby, when I birthed you, did you know you birthed me into a stronger believer of the Lord? It is The Opening that gave me strength and the opening that birthed two beings.



Kristen Kareem is a Muslim Convert who lives in Minnesota. When she is not homeschooling her three kids, she enjoys reading, writing, gardening and weight-lifting. Her works have been in *Blue Minaret*, *Muslim American Writers at Home*, *Women's Press Magazine* and more. You can connect with her on twitter: @KristenKareem or IG:@sagasofsabr

Escape

by Maryam Shadmehr

Ava's yellow beak flashed in the knife's gleaming glare.

Be patient. You still need to tell Mom.

Her caregiver, Sarah, placed the salmon she had neatly cut in the feeding area of the towering walk-in cage. She stroked Ava's silky feathers, then crawled her fingers to rest momentarily on Ava's back. Busy with her food, Ava missed the concerned frown forming on Sarah's face.

Ava hatched in the Birds of Prey section of the zoo and had spent the five years of her life in the same enormous cage. Growing up, her mother, Osyka, had told her stories, memories, of what it was like to soar in the endless blue sky and to dive, to free-fall, through the air. Imagining the sensation and dreaming about it had occupied Ava day and night. She glanced at the knife again before Sarah picked it up and left the cage, the metal door screeching behind her.

Osyka perched patiently on the highest branch of the caged trees. She flew down to eat once Sarah left. While she took her time with every bite, Ava devoured her own share.

“Mom, I have a plan.” She flapped her wings, dancing around her mother.

Osyka turned to face her with stern eyes, beak half open.

“Sarah's knife is our way out of here. If I grab it tomorrow morning, you'll be soaring through the skies again and I can know what it means to be me.”

“No.” Osyka continued to munch on the fish.

“Mom!” Ava craned her neck to face Osyka. “I've thought this through.”

“What if you get stuck in the net and hurt yourself? Besides, you don't even know how to live in that world.”

“You're going to be there with me.”

Osyka chortled, wiping her pale beak on the feathers of her shoulder. “Ava dear, even I've forgotten how to catch a fish after being fed for all these years. My wings are sore and tight. We won't make it out there.”

Ava sighed. “I will rip this cage open tomorrow and you're welcome to follow me.” She opened her wings and rose to the topmost branch where she usually passed the hours of the day observing the flying crows, hawks, and sometimes even fellow eagles. The free birds shared the sky without feeling crowded. They seemed oblivious to the caged ones and were preoccupied

with their spiral dance. Their slanted, circular meditation mystified any onlooker, especially one who was fenced in.

As night fell, Ava reviewed her plan, fluttering from one side of the cage to the other, tapping the network of wires with her beak to make sure she knew where it was most vulnerable. She remembered years of failed efforts when she had naively tried to cut the net open with her curved beak and talons and the day it had dawned on her that the straight steel knife was the appropriate tool.

Sarah walked inside, knife in one hand, dead rats in the other, but she was not alone. Moving aside the large ladder that was against the tall tree, she made space for the white-suited stranger.

Ava landed next to them, keeping her distance. She was busy envisioning the knife in her claws, when the new person approached her and, holding her firmly, examined her wings. She struggled to free herself, but relaxed when Sarah stroked her head.

“Yeah, there's definitely something there. She has maybe twenty-four hours left if we don't remove it.” The vet stood and continued, “The procedure's fairly straightforward. For wild ones, we're concerned about flight limitations, but it's not like this one needs to fly outside, and it won't restrict her in this cage.”

“Is she in pain?” Sarah held Ava's head in her hands and stroked her beak.

The vet shook his head. “That's the problem with this disease. They don't feel any pain until the very end. You were pretty sharp to notice the bump.”

Looking at Ava and patting her back, Sarah nodded. “Let's get it over with tomorrow.”

Ava wriggled free and flew back to the top branch. Osyka wrapped her wing around her. “I should have known.” She looked away, tears of regret brimming her eyes. “Your father had it too. But there was no one to save him.”

“At least he knew what it was like to fly free.” Ava gazed at the netted indigo sky, dreaming about free falls that lasted forever. From the day her young feathers had whiffled to lift her, she felt cramped in the lofty cage.

“I can't stay here and never know.”

Osyka pecked the feathers below Ava's prominent eyes. “You don't have to. If you grab the knife, you'll have twelve hours to experience life in the open.” She lifted her daughter's chin with her bony beak. Ava's eyes resembled her father's; they were the only remnant of Osyka's untethered past. She stared into them and said, “Just remember, I'll be waiting for you tomorrow night.”

When Sarah came the next morning, Ava spread her wide wings and floated down, the streak of brown feathers on her head fluttering in between the maturing white.

For weeks, she had studied the exact moment when Sarah placed the knife on the ground to arrange the fish slices. Today was no different; the moment the knife was set down, sending the glaring signal to Ava, she jumped at it and flew to the top of the cage where the net was most vulnerable.

“Ava come back!” Sarah climbed the ladder up the tallest tree.

Ava's attempts at slashing the angled net with the knife in her talons were futile. She placed the weapon on a wide branch to pick it up with her beak. Sarah, now on the last step, threw herself on the branch, reaching for the knife. Her fingers barely touched the blade. The knife tipped over and ripped through the air.

Ava looked at Sarah, wishing she could tell her somehow that she'll be back before nightfall. Sarah looked back pleadingly. For a moment, the young eagle wanted to take refuge in the arms that had cared for her for as long as she could remember, but this was her only chance to experience freedom.

Ava swooped towards the knife, grabbed the handle, and flapped her wings to pull the blade that was lodged in the ground. Sarah was back on the ground when the knife finally gave in and Ava zoomed back up. This time she went straight for the wide branch, placed the knife in her beak, and slashed the net until a large piece collapsed, missing Sarah's face by a few inches. Osyka calmly observed from the corner of the high branch as her daughter whizzed through the hole, barely missing the sharp thorns of the broken net.

Ava stretched her wings, embracing the entire universe. Freedom roamed the hills around the zoo. Sheep and cattle, horses, even petty squirrels had more space than she had ever imagined. Ava glided over the small town, rising into cooler skies, then floating back down into the warm atmosphere of the orange-roofed houses. Now she knew, felt, why the birds she had observed every day spent tireless hours among the clouds. The sensation of weightlessly circling the skies was interwoven into her wings, her aerodynamic beak, her pointed tail. And though experiencing it for the first time, she had always known this sensation, the memories of her ancestors being preserved in her genes.

After a few hours of drifting, Ava tried to find the lake where her parents used to live. She discovered the potential of her eyes for the first time and spotted a lake in the middle of a forested area. Resting on top of a towering redwood, she noticed three eaglets on a nearby tree, daring each other to step to the edge of their nest. The braver one stepped up and attempted flight. The eaglet tried to keep himself lifted, but his miniature wings gave in to gravity and he hurtled down. Ava leaped to save him. The mother, who had been observing on another branch, dove for her baby, catching him only inches from the ground. Eaglet in her beak, she glared at Ava and flew back to the nest. Not long after, the father flew in with fresh trout in his beak.

So this is what a family looks like.

Waving her wings again, Ava approached the lake and focused her eyes. Her vision surprised her once again as she examined every little creature on the surface of the water from a mile above. She

discovered a pattern in the movement of the fins. It was time to dive. As the air slipped over her beak, rippled through her feathers, and shot over her tail, she advanced on the fish and pierced the cool water with her talons. She missed. Splashing her wings against the refreshing surface of the lake, she regained elevation.

Ava plummeted towards the lake again, focusing more on developing her diving skills than on catching food. The excitement of free-falling had taken away all sense of hunger. Nevertheless, after many failed attempts, she clasped her talons around a slippery body and delivered it to a large rock.

A swoosh of wings startled her and in a glimpse of an eye, the fish was gone. The mother eagle was flying away with her catch. Ava sprang in the air and reached the rival bird, first hesitating then attacking her in mid-air, clasping her claws around the fish and pulling. Mother eagle pivoted and the birds were face to face, their talons entangled, the corpse slipping out.

“Give it back!”

“I don't want to see you around my nest again.”

“I was trying to save your baby!”

“My babies have a mother, show off!” Mother eagle dove and flew away to her nest, holding on to the fish.

Bewildered at the speed of events, Ava floated down to the rock again. She thought about the food that had always been set out for

her, even cut into small pieces.

Her sharp talons yearned for the sensation of ripping through their prey. Ava took flight once again, this time going higher, focusing harder, diving faster, and piercing deeper into the cold water.

She brought a wrestling fish to the rock and knocked it out with her beak. Digging through the skin, she clawed at the champagne-colored meat. It surprised her, contrasting the vibrant pink offered to her every morning. She devoured the fish that carried in its flesh the taste of pride and accomplishment, something the luxuriously cut-up fish at the zoo lacked.

As Ava finished her belated lunch, the afternoon sun dried her wet feathers. She rose to the same redwood she had visited earlier. Perching on its highest branch, she wondered about all the life decisions of which the zoo had deprived her. Her contemplation was interrupted when a shiver ran through her back and her spine went into spasm.

I have to head back before it's too late.

She looked around, taking in every little detail.

Do you want to live in that cage knowing you can never truly fly again, dive again, even if you escaped?

The sun kissed the smooth surface of the lake. Ava opened her wings to fly back, but pain shot through to the very tip of her

feathers. She swayed her neck to relieve some of the pain, but to no avail. Her brows united at the increased throbbing; she flew away anyway. Just a few flaps outside the forest she had to land on a high balcony to rest. A comforting chant was flowing out stained-glass windows.

“Laaaa-ilahaaa-ilalaah.”

I have to go back. For Mom.

She took another leap. Agony accompanied every flap of her wings and blinded her vision. Her feathers had turned to rocks. Screeching into enclosing darkness, she made out the wooden entrance sign of the zoo amidst the town buildings.

Ava glided over the fenced areas, but consciousness failed her as she saw the net that she had ripped open earlier. She fell, freely for the last time, into the arms of a desolate Sarah, who was staring at the sky, the last drops of hope draining through her feet. Osyka shrieked from inside. Sarah laid Ava down and ran to get the vet.

Maryam Shadmehr is an emerging writer who lives in Emeryville, California with her husband and daughter. Her work has been published in *Masque* and *Spectacle* and *Cider Press Review* and is forthcoming in *Ethel*.

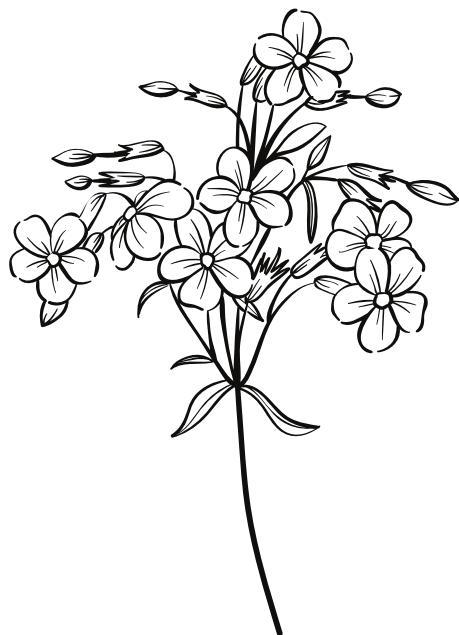


How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who publish peace

by Morning-meadow Jones



A textile and embroidery piece, featuring a Celtic knot design and fragment of Welsh text. It is a quote from a famous verse from the book of Isaiah in the Bible. The English translation is: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who publish peace".



Morning-meadow Jones is an American junior high school dropout, who later went on to realise her full potential and drop out of university too. She is a mother, migrant, and multi medium creative, working from her home in Wales, UK. Morning-meadow views her art as a means to explore and give expression to the inner self, the voice of spirit.

the embers are burning

by Rushda N

Yesterday I was at the park again; you were leaning against the old oak, fiddling with the low-hanging branches as you fought back tears. I don't know how it happened — one wrong turn on the trip down memory lane and I wound up in the same spot yet again.

There was something I wanted to say, something about faith and freedom and flames of hope, but I've forgotten what it was now; a fistful of promises, I think; I can't be sure because the words lost shape when I choked on them all those years ago. I promise you I tried; I was collecting courage to stash away in a cookie jar, a currency to trade with during bleaker days.

We were afraid, weren't we, fumbling in the dark, tripping over rosebushes scattered with thorns. Something came tumbling out of our pockets when we fell: loose change, sugar-free gum, anger three years past its sell-by date.

'So the rosebush stands in as a metaphor for our faith?' you ask. I don't respond. How many more failed attempts at conviction before we bleed out from wounds that had never healed? We went looking for answers, but I think we lost ourselves along the way.

People talk about the *pursuit of happiness* and I wonder what I've

missed, because I never really went looking for happiness. I didn't just want to be happy, I wanted to be in the right. To fight the good fight, to do so fearlessly, with small means and big purpose; to spit out my words despite my stutter, to use my pen as a weapon and my faith as armour.

So I left home to study my faith in another land, but then things got murky. My college, it turned out, lived off a curriculum of sectarian prejudice and religiously disguised misogyny, and in its sprawling, state-of-the-art classrooms, I discovered the darker corners of a world I thought I'd loved. When they spoke of our ontological inferiority as women (always in subtext, mind you), I heard the broken edges of the words *faith* and *God* ricochet off the walls. Slashed my skin against the shards with each new dictum: resistance is a sin, the Jews had it coming, and we're the flag bearers of justice. *Here's some doublethink for you; we gift-wrapped it in piety.*

The classroom was stifling, but it had nothing to do with the desert sun. My objections were unwelcome. *You can't fight scripture*, they said. I wasn't, but I almost believed I was.

I've been so angry. It gets more insistent as you grow older—someone should've told me that. I was bursting at the seams—with this quiet desperation, with a purpose that eluded me, with all the words that scorched my tongue when I struggled to give them a voice. Perhaps I should've simmered in silence, but silence was one thing I could never pull off. It's funny when you think of it: I'm so afraid of letting my stutter hold me back that I'll overcompensate for my fears by never shutting up. Heck, I really thought I could

tear down the injustices of a whole millennium if my words were sharp enough.

In hindsight, I was blinded by my own arrogance. They say when you're fighting a war it's easy to become the very thing you wanted to destroy. I was a goddamn idiot. I never did have the moral high ground. In a war like this, nobody does.

Yet, I cannot help but wonder if there is a place for me in our weary world, somewhere between self-righteous disdain and selfish disregard, a kitchen table where words are felt more than spoken and sincerity drowns out pretentious bombast. I'm still torn between rage and hollow yearning, still trying to crawl out from under the weight of a guilty conscience. Someone called me smart and I almost snapped at them for mistaking my confusion for intelligence.

My country is burning, yours and mine; our people are dying. And here I am on the other side of the Arabian Sea fuming over the sexist nonsense in my religious coursebooks. It does not change the world to make sarcastic retorts to bigoted remarks in class, but I do it anyway, if only for my own sanity. I wonder if this is what it means to hold on to burning embers.

There is a better way, I know, but this is a war I didn't want to fight — not ever. There is too much at stake; courage and cowardice reduced to a blur, faith and liberty made mortal enemies under a moonless sky. I have been far too bitter, for far too long, to think clearly; I refuse to admit that my defiance is a thinly veiled plea for help.

But you know this, don't you; you have the scars to show for it. Burning embers clutched in your palms, fears cloaked in existential humour. You wrap it around you on your greyest nights and walk into the storm with an unfaltering gait. I want to say, *don't give in, don't let them get you down*, but nobody needs to tell you that.

When the storm passes, we will do it again. We will fall to the ground, forehead in the sand, stay there a while, turn our pleas of desperation into prayers of gratitude. Our prayer mats will flutter in the breeze, and your voice will be trailed by birdsong as you recite your favourite verses under a sky full of stars. There will be time for adventure, for laughter and tears, for the journeys you wanted to make, and the battles you were meant to fight.

Because you're a fighter, a home, a haven, a woman with reckless grit and a lifetime's worth of undeserved guilt. I promise you, things will be okay. There's a cookie jar on your bookshelf that you saved for later. I called it courage, you called it faith.

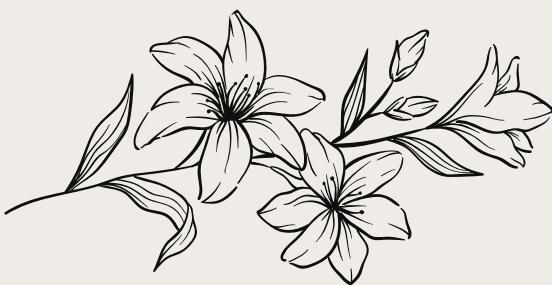
Go on, crack it open.

اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الْأَذْيَنَ إِنَّمَّا يُخْرِجُهُمْ مِّنَ الظُّلْمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ

“Allah is the protector of those who have faith: from the depths of darkness
He will lead them forth into light.”

(Al Qur'an 2:257)

Rushda is a graduate student of applied Islamic ethics and an undergraduate student of physics based in Malaysia. She writes—or more accurately, rambles—for her website, newdawn.space, on spirituality, society, science and current affairs. She also writes for The Qarawiyyin Project, an initiative aimed at reviving Islamic discourse among Muslim women. When she's not inflicting her opinions on other people, she can be found stargazing, playing chess, or adding to her assortment of equestrian-related injuries. You can catch her at @catgotmythumbs on Twitter.



Nancy

by Marc Isaac Potter

Nancy is lying here, is she in a coma? No, this is disassociation—meaning that, in order to survive the dust storm, she has separated from both her selves—that is to say from her ... mind—and from her soul and all three have long left her wrinkled living corpse. A man was passing by in his car was going by so "passingly" that:

- a) he did not stop to assist the supposed corpse, and
- b) he smashed his foot against the big gas pedal, saying something,

The man in the sharp Italian suit said this, quoting Psalm 23:

"Certainly goodness and mercy— oh really?" he interrupted himself, mocking himself, mocking God. He continued in the mocking tone: "... shall be with you all the days of your life..."

Since there was no one around to complain about it, God decided to work some magic. Nancy lay there days and nights with nothing. When Teddy and Brewster came by in their 1953 Green International Pick Up, they picked her up gently and put her in the truck bed. These two kind-hearted lads took Nancy back to wherever they came from - where Praise the Lord, Lucillia was yelling at the kids and taking tortillas out of the IceBox.

When she saw Nancy, Lucillia knew there was no hope. She had

heard of a Father Benjamin way up in Prescott who was said to heal the sick and yes bring the dead back to life - Thank God for cell phones.

Father Ben, “FB” as his close friends called him, knew this was the first of his visions. He put the parish in the care of Sister Beatricia and left for Bisbee. Being a forceful, ugly, careful, meticulous, nurturing, caring man he demanded that the family leave their home immediately and go survive in the desert for one and a half days. “36 hours of penance”

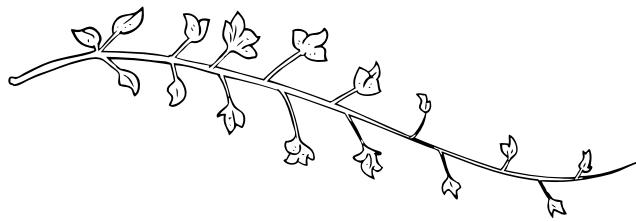
Lucillia had heard rumours of this odd “Father Benjamin” behaviour; unbeknownst to FB, Lucille had provisions hidden in the mountain nearby.

Everything that FB did, I am not at liberty to say. But know, unmistakably, that the Fernandez-Martinez household became the holiest place on earth for a few hours. THE LORD arrived in a clear, visceral vision, and HE SAT—robes flowing—in the off-white chair that He had created.

“Ben,” He said, “this woman has a special place in this world. She is part of my design. As I bring her back to health—better health than you or she or anyone has ever known—please understand that you will serve her all the days of your life, world without end.”

Ben fell fully on the dirt floor, crying and shaking.

Marc Isaac Potter (they/them) is a differently-abled writer living in the SF Bay Area. They have been published in Fiery Scribe Review, Feral A Journal of Poetry and Art, Poetic Sun Poetry, and Provenance Journal. Twitter is @marcisaacpotter.



The Windmill of Hartbruck

by Lisa Voorhees

On breezeless days such as this one, Mirte Doevelaar nudged the windmill's sails into action with the gentlest command from her fingertips. By careful manipulation of her power, a light wind whispered through the sails. The drive shaft creaked, spinning the gears that rotated the giant millstone on the stone floor. Below, her brother Emiel measured out the flour in burlap sacks.

This far into the country, no one could detect her wind handling.

The Usurper had outlawed the use of magic in the city of Auberlon, but the village of Hartbruck lay well outside its limits. On the westernmost boundary, the Doevelaar farm sat surrounded by acres of uninhabited forestland. Though her family had owned the farmland for generations and the windmill for the past two, the Usurper's encroachment on outlying villages threatened the Doevelaars' livelihood more with each passing month.

The Usurper's obsession with power had driven him to round up any women capable of handling magic and imprison them indefinitely. Rumors regarding events at the Royal Prison swept across the countryside. A stage had been constructed outside the walls, and as the number of beheadings rose, so did the question of the Usurper's sanity.

Far from being able to use their power to help nourish and work the land so it would continue to produce fruit and nurture livestock, women were being slaughtered by the hundreds.

The Usurper would not share his rule with those denizens of the Devil, or so he professed. How he expected to rule a kingdom without their help was beyond Mirte.

She kept steady pressure on the sails, lifting the hem of her skirt to descend the several flights of wooden steps to the stone floor below ground where Emiel worked.

Twenty-seven years old, with broad shoulders accustomed to hauling sacks of grain and plowing the fields, he was still her little brother, minus the baby fat. Their parents had died of the plague when she was sixteen. She'd cared for him since he was eight years old, her mothering instincts sharply honed where he was concerned.

Once they acquired sufficient savings, they would flee west, far from Auberlon and the Usurper's reach. Ekaria's queen was a master water handler of the highest order. Mirte's ability would be welcomed; she would be free to practice her magic for the good of the land and its people.

The ladder took her the last few steps below ground. Emiel glanced up at her, a fine white dust coating the front of his cotton shirt and work-worn trousers.

“Not too much,” he said as a warning, lifting his chin toward the

sails. “There’s no wind today. If anyone passes by...”

“They won’t,” Mirte said. “Not now that harvest is past.”

Emiel tied off a sack and tossed it aside with the others before positioning a new bag and opening the lever to fill another. “The mild weather won’t last much longer,” he said. “We should think about leaving soon. Before the frosts arrive.”

“I’m aware. Why do you think I push the mill? We need guilders for the journey.”

Emiel frowned. “Money is one thing, but it’s not what’s most important. You don’t travel into Hartbruck, Mirte, you don’t realize. The streets are crawling with Inquisitors, inspecting every tradesman’s shop and tavern for women who can handle magic. It’s only a matter of time before they’ll sweep the countryside and search the farms.”

Mirte focused on the wind lacing through her fingertips, powering the mighty sails. She resisted the urge to turn the sails faster, to pour more grain through the millstone, to produce more flour that they could sell.

The Usurper and his Inquisitors had no right to any of it.

“If He would see fit to send the storm winds, I wouldn’t have to resort to this,” she said, glowering, holding up her hands.

Emiel pressed his lips into a thin line. His faith was staunch, even

in times of difficulty.

She'd uncovered more than one crucifix buried underneath his pillow whenever she washed the sheets. "He will provide. He always has."

Mirte scoffed. "Listen to you. Wanting to flee with what little savings we have, yet insisting on God's provision. We work for what we need, and without any storm wind," she said, gesturing upward while maintaining her hold on her power, "He might as well have abandoned us when we need Him most."

Emiel clucked his tongue. "Don't say such things." He tied off a bag of flour and reached for another empty sack. The soles of his felt boots were nearly worn through, the side stitching unraveled at the ankle. He'd need a new pair before they left.

"Many have not been so fortunate as us," he continued. "The Bremmers, for instance."

"Why? What's happened to them?"

Emiel adjusted the bag under the chute and opened the lever. Milled grain flowed into the bag. He met her gaze. "Eliza was arrested and taken to Auberlon. Hans hasn't been able to sell any of the milk without her purifying power. The untreated milk makes everyone sick.

Inquisitors have shut down operation of the farm and sold the cows. Hans and the children have nowhere to go. They will starve

this winter, with only bark from the trees to boil for food.”

“I had no idea,” Mirte said, power leaching from her fingertips as her heart sank. She’d lost focus; the sails ground slowly to a halt.

With her release, the gears ceased their wooden clattering, and Emiel pricked up his ears. He held out one hand and touched a finger to his lips. “Listen,” he said. “Do you hear that?”

Mirte hastened up the ladder to the ground floor and peered through the doorway, Emiel close behind her. A cloud of dust at the end of the road signalled a pair of riders.

Darkly clad men with flowing red capes on well-muscled war horses. Inquisitors.

“No, it can’t be,” Mirte whispered, her heart drumming out a tangled beat.

“I told you they’d arrived in Hartbruck,” her brother said. “Didn’t you believe me? We’re out of time, sister! We were out of time weeks ago.”

We didn’t have any savings a few weeks ago. Mirte clutched the doorframe. Best not to remind Emiel how dire their situation was. He would lose heart, and she would need that heart to help sustain both of them on the arduous journey through the Severed Hills.

Mirte gathered her courage. “Hide the flour and sweep up the remains. Fast,” she hissed, shooing him inside. “I’ll deal with the

Inquisitors.”

Emiel hurried down the ladder, transported the newly-filled bags to a hidden recess in the floor, and slid a loose stone over the hole. He had barely finished cleaning by the time the Inquisitors reined in their war horses.

Metal braces on the mens' arms glinted in the sunlight. Tall and solidly built, the cruelty in the Chief Inquisitor's steel-coloured eyes mimicked the sneer on his lips. His horse frothed at the mouth and stamped polished hooves on the ground, kicking up dust. His red cape hung to his breeches, sunlight reflecting off the shine of his knee-high leather boots.

He dismounted, swept his gaze over the fields where the sheep grazed, up the arms of the windmill, and finally down, settling on Mirte. He approached her, stopping inches from her face.

Mirte's mouth went dry.

He held a finger in the air. “Not a trace of wind today,” he said in a gravelly voice. “Yet the windmill was turning as I exited the woods.” The Chief Inquisitor stared into her eyes.

“I can’t imagine why,” Mirte said. “We have no—”

He backhanded her across the face and Mirte gasped, her cheek burning. The Inquisitor grabbed a fistful of her raven-coloured hair and yanked her head up. “Mirte Doevelaar,” he rasped. “If you’re lying to me, I have ways of finding out.”

The second Inquisitor moved to back him up, should she protest.

“Let her go,” Emiel said from behind, pleading.

A slow smile stretched across the Inquisitor’s face, the rims of his teeth lined with a layer of finely sharpened silver. “You must be Emiel.”

“I am. Take your hands off her.”

The Inquisitor chuckled, a soft, sinister sound. He released his grasp on her hair, and Mirte massaged her neck.

“I’m sure you won’t mind if I have a look around,” he said, backing up a step, his gaze lingering on the entrance to the mill. “Since you both have nothing to hide.” Again, he stared into her eyes.

Emiel stepped in front of Mirte, shielding her. “Go ahead. We will wait while you make your inspection.”

The second Inquisitor curled his lip in a mirthless smile. “If we discover you’ve been using magic to hoard flour for yourselves, you’ll answer to the Magistrate of Auberlon. He’s not known for leniency.”

Mirte stiffened. Emiel touched her hand, and she remained silent. The Inquisitors stepped past them into the heart of the windmill, sniffing the air.

By sundown, the Inquisitors had not left. Their horses were stabled in the barn alongside the Doevelaars' two draft horses. Seated at the head of the long oak table in the kitchen, the unwelcome guests watched as Mirte prepared soup.

Emiel sliced a loaf of fresh bread, buttered two pieces, and set them in front of the men.

Mirte stirred the pot above the fire in the stone hearth, attuned to Emiel's efforts at getting the Inquisitors to speak. Her brother's face was drained of colour, and as the afternoon dragged on, his mounting anxiety was palpable.

He wanted the Inquisitors out of their house as much as she did. She ladled soup into wooden bowls and placed them in front of the intruders. After serving the rest of the soup, she and Emiel took seats opposite each other.

The Chief Inquisitor dunked his bread in the steaming broth and finished the slice in one messy slurp. Mirte forced down each spoonful, sick with fear. Emiel wasn't faring much better.

When he finished eating, the Chief Inquisitor wiped his mouth and set his napkin on the table. "Not bad for country fare," he said. "Though I'm struck by the amount of mutton. The Doevelaar farm has not suffered from the stormlack as others have, isn't that true?"

Mirte locked gazes with Emiel, then turned to the Inquisitors. "We wanted you to have your fill," she said, glancing briefly at each of them. "The herd is half the usual size."

“Not by my count. We allowed ourselves a glance through your records,” he said. “The figures were quite astonishing. Tell me, how do you come by those kinds of profits in times like these?” The silver lining on his teeth glinted in the firelight.

God help her, the man was pure evil, a viper poised to strike. Emiel started to speak and Mirte silenced him with a warning glare. She would handle this. Emiel tended to be too honest for his own good. “We ran through our reserves of grain at the start of summer,” she said, “and have struggled to maintain the herd since. We’re managing, but poorly.”

A deep laugh rumbled in the man’s chest. “You make excellent soup, Mirte, but you’re a lousy liar.” A dark flash passed through his eyes; he dashed the empty bowl aside with a quick sweep of his arm, the steel brace hitting the table with a thud. “Those pale blue eyes of yours would mark you anywhere, girl. You’re a wind handler.”

He lunged forward and grabbed her by the shoulders, hauling her off her feet. His strength was brutal, his clasp that of an enraged bear, his nails digging into her flesh.

“Put her down,” Emiel yelled, reaching for a knife.

The Chief Inquisitor threw her to the ground and turned on Emiel. He wrestled the knife from her brother and thrust it into the table. “Stupid boy,” he hissed, punching him in the stomach.

Emiel doubled over, wheezing in pain.

“You’re lucky I haven’t arrested your sister already. But I’m kinder than I appear, and I have my weaknesses. One of them is a good meal. The other...” His gaze travelled over Mirte, huddled on the floor. She shrank into the corner. A shiver laced up her arms and shot through her spine, bolting her in place.

He knelt down, propped his elbows on his knees, then ran one cold finger along her cheek, pinching her chin, forcing her to look at him. “I could be convinced to give the Doevelaar farm a pass under certain... conditions.”

“Never,” Mirte growled, prepared to spit in his face. She scrambled to her feet and smoothed her skirts.

“What do you want from us?” Emiel stepped up behind her, his breath ragged.

The Chief Inquisitor smirked. He yanked the knife from the table, spun the tip of the blade on his finger, then tapped it against his palm. “You’ll both spend the night in the barn. We’ve not yet completed our search. Whatever means of production you’re hiding, we will find out.”

One knife against both their backs, the Chief marched them out to the barn. The second Inquisitor rolled the door shut with a bang. The heavy wooden bolt shuddered into place.

Mirte and Emiel were shrouded in darkness.

Emiel coughed, a sharp, hacking sound, rousing Mirte from a restless slumber. Nightmarish visions had plagued her rest; the countryside in flames, the soil turned to ash. She pressed thumbs to her eyes, to rid them of dust. Beside her in the darkness, Emiel spoke.

“Did you sleep?”

“Well enough,” she lied. “You?”

Her brother sighed through his nose. “Yeah.” Emiel was a terrible liar.

Mirte stifled a bitter laugh. “We’ll need rest to face what’s coming.”

“What’s that? Have you had a vision in your dreams?”

Foretelling or premonition, Mirte could never be sure which. In either case, a storm was brewing on the horizon. It was time for her and Emiel to flee, and in order to do that, they’d need to make a plan. The Inquisitors wouldn’t keep them locked in the barn forever.

The first blush of dawn illuminated the crack at the bottom of the barn door, and with the light came the sound of approaching hoofbeats on the road outside.

Mirte hurried to the barn door and peered through the opening. Emiel followed close behind. “Who is it?” he asked, anxious to peek through the opening himself.

“The Inquisitors. They’re meeting someone on the road.”

“What are they doing?”

Mirte hushed him. “I’m trying to see.”

She watched as the Chief Inquisitor handed the new arrival a canvas bag. The receiver was similarly dressed, black-clad with a flowing red cape, but otherwise like no creature she’d ever seen. His flesh and form were more lizard-like than human. Giant teeth lined his jaws, his massive reptilian hands rimmed with curved, saber-like claws.

“Dear God,” she whispered, a chill creeping through her at the sight of those instruments of torture. “It’s an Extractor.”

Emiel gently pushed her aside to glance through. He stiffened, then turned to her, pale. “Mirte...” His lip trembled.

Mirte’s voice froze in her throat. She had no way of comforting her brother, much less herself. Once those vicious claws pierced her skin, the beast would siphon her magic away from her, taking it into himself and destroying it. She would not only be stripped of her power, she would be permanently weakened, better off left for dead.

She spied through the opening again. The Chief Inquisitor placed the canvas sack inside the Extractor’s saddlebag before the whole lot of them turned and approached the barn.

“He’ll strip you of your magic,” Emiel said, “and likely kill you if you resist. You have to run. Let me deal with them.”

Mirte squeezed his palm, willing her hand not to tremble. “Fight,” she said. “Fight and don’t back down. I’m not going anywhere without you.”

The wooden bolt slammed open and the barn door squealed on its hinges. Mirte squinted against the sudden wash of early morning light.

“Lovely morning, isn’t it?” The Chief Inquisitor strolled inside, followed by his second-in-command, their boots scuffing the dirt floor.

She and Emiel moved out of the way.

The Extractor’s shadow loomed in the doorway. He grunted softly, the breath of his nostrils fetid, filling the air with the smell of rotted meat.

“You have no right to detain us,” Emiel said, stepping up to face the Inquisitors, “or keep us from our work. We’ve done nothing wrong.”

The Chief Inquisitor sniggered, then fixed Emiel with a cold gaze. “I disagree. I believe we’ve a witch in our midst.” He glared at Mirte and raised his hand. A snap of his fingers, and the Extractor lunged for Mirte.

Sharpened claws brushed against her flesh. He twisted her into an armlock and pressed the tip of one claw to her throat. Mirte gasped, both from the pain in her shoulders and the sense that she was steadily being drained of her abiding knowledge of the wind's presence, even though she wasn't handling it.

Emiel leapt toward the Extractor, and the Chief Inquisitor punched him in the gut. The second-in-command picked up a loose piece of lumber and dealt a sickening blow to the side of her brother's head.

Mirte screamed as the giant lizard dragged her out into the barnyard. Her brother's cries filled her mind, blinding her to the pain of the Extractor's grasp, his relentless hold on her power.

The beating inside the barn continued, Emiel's agonized shouts quieting to whimpers. The harder she fought against the Extractor, the more profound his draw on her power. She tasted blood; she'd bitten her tongue.

With a savage effort, she attempted to wrest herself from the Extractor's clutches. A set of iron manacles clanked at his side, and with one clawed hand, he grappled for them while keeping a firm grip on her.

If he cuffed her, she was doomed, as was Emiel.

With the last of her energy, Mirte reached out in a sensing. If a drop of her power remained, she would feel the wind, even if it was miles away. A faint tremor resonated deep inside her chest and

Mirte's heart leapt. If the Extractor sensed what she had, he would draw even harder on her power. Breathless, she stilled her heart and cast a quick glance at the horizon, her vision watery, her muscles wracked with pain.

Lightning forked across the sky, the horizon purple as a bruise. Thunder rumbled and a curtain of rain drifted beneath the clouds, bathing the forest several hundred yards away.

Hope surged inside Mirte, blunting the putrid odor emanating from the Extractor's mouth as he breathed in her ear, tightening his claws at her throat, piercing her skin.

"You're done for, witch," he growled.

Mirte clung to the last remnant of her power and, through sheer force of will, snatched at the wind as it whistled past.

God in Heaven, thank you.

The thread of power grew to the thickness of a rope, and as she bit back a cry, the Extractor's grip on her wrists loosened. With a roar, she twisted out of his grasp, sensing a stinging sensation at her throat followed by the warm trickle of blood down the front of her neck.

Mirte concentrated on her wind handling. With her last breath, she would save Emiel and flee this place, whether they died during the escape or not.

She maintained her hold on the wind, gathering it inside herself. With one hand, she forced the Extractor back, and with the other, she set the sails on the windmill spinning. The drive shaft could only tolerate so much torque before it would snap, releasing the sails.

Mirte funnelled the bulk of the stormwind into the sails. The closer the storm drew, the more wind she handled, and the faster the sails spun.

The Extractor tipped his head back and howled, a warning cry. The two Inquisitors appeared at the doorway to the barn.

With an ear-splitting crack, the drive shaft gave way and the rotating limbs of the windmill took flight. They crashed to the ground in a maelstrom of timber and heavy canvas, impaling the Chief Inquisitor beneath one massive beam and crushing the others.

Exhausted, Mirte fell to her knees. The clouds burst, unleashing torrential rain. A choked cry escaped her throat, her tears mingling with the rainwater dripping from her chin. “Emiel,” she gasped, forcing herself to her feet and staggering past the wreckage.

She collapsed against the barn door and squinted into the darkness. Her brother lay in a bloody heap on the floor. Mirte rushed to his side, gripped his head in her hands.

His swollen eyes fluttered open. He brushed his hand against hers. “You did it,” he whispered.

Mirte kissed his forehead. “God did it,” she said. “He sent the storm.”

From one of the stalls, a horse nickered, mirroring her anticipation of their impending flight from Hartbruck.

The storm raged for another hour, long enough for Mirte to retrieve their savings from the Extractor’s saddlebag, prepare the horses, and pack what few leftover provisions they had. She bound Emiel’s broken ribs and tended to the wounds on his face. Grimacing in pain, he squinted at her out of one eye and smiled as she helped him to his feet. They would ride together.

When the rain ceased, they fled for the Severed Hills.



A Jersey girl at heart, when Lisa's not writing, she's usually listening to hard rock, bouldering, or sipping amaretto sours. Before she started writing novels, she earned her doctorate in veterinary medicine from Tufts University. Find out more about her at <https://lisa.voorhe.es> or <http://facebook.com/lisavorheesauthor>.

would you like peace? I would, at least

by Cherry Wong

Part I: Proposing a Christmas violation

Infoslide: You are a Western liberal democracy in a four-year long brutal and bloody war of attrition against an imperialistic dictatorship. Every Christmas, there is a football match between the two sides and a ceasefire. Attending the match are high ranking political and military persons of both sides (Achte Minute, 2020).

Motion: This House Would violate the ceasefire and kill the leaders (Achte Minute, 2020).

Panel, as Prime Minister I will first go over the framework and definitions of this debate before moving on to the actual arguments. On Opening Government, this House represents a Western liberal democracy engaged in a four-year-long brutal and bloody war of attrition against an imperialistic dictatorship. We define Western Liberal Democracy as a political system that believes in freedom, equality, and liberalism, while the imperialistic dictatorship in question is the country suppressing the democracy, having used force to acquire control and power over important officials who have recognizable power in the latter. Given the situation that every Christmas there is a ceasefire, defined as an agreement to stop fighting to allow discussions about peace, in the form of a football match, with high ranking political and military personnel such as lieutenants, commanders, chief ministers, and chancellors from both sides attending, this House would violate the ceasefire and kill the leaders. The key question in this debate is whether or not to violate the ceasefire. If the

can prove to you beyond reasonable doubt that violating the ceasefire will do more good than harm, then this House wins this debate.

Moving on to my substantive material, I will first explain why the violation can effectively end the war. I will then move on to the unnecessary nature of the ceasefire. My Deputy Prime Minister will further elaborate on the negative impacts of not ending the ceasefire.

To begin with, violating the ceasefire can effectively accelerate the pace of the war and potentially lead to the ending of the war, something that is most desired. Indisputably, the ceasefire violation will result in escalated conflict. As the Western liberal democrats, we will wait until the football match is going smoothly, with a peaceful atmosphere in place. Then, we will take action to ruin the concord and wreak havoc.

There are two potential tactics we may take. We can either stamp out onto the field and assault the army of the imperialistic dictatorship without warning. The army will react to our surprise attack quickly through violence, and our attack will either succeed or fail. Or, we can attempt to assassinate the enemy leaders, who are the bearers of all the concentrated power in the enemy's military and government. If we succeed, the enemy will be leaderless and overwhelmed. Their army will fall into chaos and confusion, and our democratic army can seize the opportunity to launch our attack on them. If we fail, our act of assassination will trigger an aggressive response from the enemy's army without question. Of course, the best scenario is to end on a high note – that is, to win the war by violating the ceasefire. Whereas even if the violation ends in failure and we lose the war, we still benefit to a great degree as the war will end. Note that the war has already dragged on for four years, and our side has been suffering from grave casualties, heavy military expenditure, and drainage of

national resources ever since the war began. With the burdening costs of war, there is no reason to allow it to drag on for a fifth year. Therefore, based on the goal of ending the war as soon as possible, it is only reasonable that we violate the ceasefire.

Secondly, the ceasefire is unnecessary. Ceasefires are established to allow peace negotiations. Yet if the Christmas ceasefires in this war had been effective, the war would have ended four years ago when the first ceasefire was held. Ceasefires have been held annually for three consecutive years, and the two sides are still engaged in warfare up to this date. This proves that the past ceasefires were nothing more than temporary festive luxuries for the soldiers trapped in this whirlpool of chaos and bloodshed. They created charming illusions for the soldiers, that the war had ended, that peace had returned, and that the fighting was over. But right after the end of the ceasefires, the soldiers were roused from their daze, only to realize the war had not ended and they were forced to return to the world of combat and blood again.

This year's ceasefire will be no different. It will provide nothing more than false hope for the soldiers. It will meddle with their mentalities and deceive them. It will harm the soldiers on the inside. Not to mention in the aftermath of the ceasefire, the soldiers will be forced to go against their morale and shoot the very same people who played football with them not long before. The guilt that comes with such will tear them apart and torture them within. The initial purpose of the ceasefire to bring peace is completely defeated for it does nothing more than prolong the war and wound the soldiers mentally. Hence, we can conclude that the ceasefire is pointless. By violating the ceasefire and ending the war quicker, we see a much more ideal scenario: the soldiers can play football in their respective homelands with no belated fighting to worry about.

In conclusion, the violation of the ceasefire can bring about an accelerated ending of the war, which is crucial to the restoration of peace and stability on both sides. The ceasefire itself also has no purpose and can be seen as unnecessary. For the reasons mentioned, this House is proud to propose.

Part II: That's humanity, and that's Christmas

24th December 1914

I was over the top.

One by one, we leaped out of our trenches – tentatively, hesitantly, yet...

It was happening.

Along with my English comrades, I rolled down onto the gravel field of No Man's Land and laid flat on the ground. I remained static for a second, but the world enveloped me, refusing to remain silent, vibrating with a whirl of energy I had never sensed before.

Our squadrons moved forward, as the men from the other side advanced towards us little by little. They were not like us, I had always told myself. They were callous, and they were eager to spill our blood. They were not soldiers the way we were, as we fought simply to uphold the honorable cause of defending our country. They were soulless monsters, tramping the earth like machines, with no guilt or sympathy. Therefore, I had every right to kill them.

But now I saw the Germans soldiers – the youth, kicking at pebbles along the way, scratching at their tufts of hair, surging forward in almost what seemed like... excitement. They looked ecstatic. I could feel the bliss blooming from them and see the sunlight smiles on their faces from afar. They had emotions, just like us. Without their usual pointy helmets and murky viridescent jackets, they looked every bit like us. We were humans all the same. The monstrous beasts I had been trying to kill a day ago were gone.

Yet they could be acting. The evils of their sins and souls concealed deep beneath their friendly faces. Their rifles and firearms hid behind their backs, waiting to blow our heads off. Using the ceasefire as an attempt to start a massacre. We would be foolish to fall for their trap.

All of a sudden, a cheer erupted across the field. Both our sniper and that of the Germans were clambering down onto the ragged piece of No Man's Land, unarmed. A soft breeze blew past our heads. The wind brewed, fizzling with a hint of thrill. We all wrapped our coats around ourselves more tightly and inched through the snow in huddles, reducing our distance from the opposing side.

At some point, a pair of luminous eyes glimmering blue found mine in recognition. He had curly, chestnut hair and a long nose, small palms, and skinny limbs. A sling was applied to his left arm. I silently condemned myself for what I had done the day before.

But there was no hatred in the eyes of the boy. Instead, there was blessing.

My raw feelings and muddled thoughts melted into the dirt as the balmy rays of light sliced through the air, warming my throat, dissolving the acrid in its midst.

I was sick and tired of the meaningless war. Let it fade away behind me. No longer did I care about the authenticity of the breathtaking smell of peace placed before me. If I were to die, I wanted to die a happy man.

This was our hour.

Our liberation from the atrocities of the world.

Our moment of humanity.

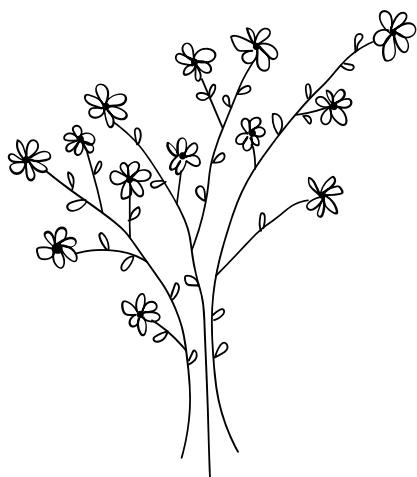
Our state of peace.

A football was produced as champagne spilled, gleaming in the hearth of Christmas.

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Cherry Wong is a 15-year-old high school senior from Hong Kong. She is the Founder and President of the Teen Writers Club Hong Kong Branch (TWCHK) under the international TWC and hopes to spread her love for creative writing with students in Hong Kong. Apart from writing, she also has a great passion for law and loves mooting and mock trial. She aspires to become both a renowned author and an outstanding lawyer when she grows up.

My Sister Promised Me Not to Die

by Moshkur Ajikobi

I have always wanted to write about my adorable sister. I wanted to express my endless gratitude for the strong bond that binds us together. For the unmatched brotherhood that unites us. For the pure blood we share together. For the selfless love we grant each other. And for how she promised me not to die.

The day was the most difficult moment out of many others that we had sailed through together holding hands like couples. It was a turbulent time that I thought I would lose her, the second part of me, to the cold hands of Grim Reaper. I was in an intense fight with death. We were dragging her poor soul like she and I used to drag rope in tug of war as children. I was fighting with my sweat and my tears. I didn't want to lose a darling sister like her even if I'm surrounded by many.

She promised me something on that unfortunate day when a doctor had to operate on her and remove the silly appendix that had seized her cheerful health. Because I was still young, I thought any surgery in Nigerian hospitals, as depicted by the Nollywood films, was between life and death. And in the end, the doctor would tell the patient's family that he had tried his best, but we were from God and unto Him we shall return. Several scenes like that in the films I had seen together with her were visiting my mind in a fiery

recurrence, and I got sunk in my tears. So before the operation, she held my hand and said, “Boda Shina, stop crying. I promise you not to die”.

I didn't want to lean too much on the promise even though I had always believed her whenever she promised to do something. I thought it was a fake promise because she didn't want me to know the Angel of Death was waiting for her in the theater room.

I saw the Angel of Death, too. It was the doctor on duty that bad day. He wore his white coat holding the different knives he would use to expose my sister's intestines before killing her off, and there she was feeding me false hope. She was sad because the thought of losing her enslaved my heart. I was crying because I could see my sister being unconsciously dragged into the den of death. Then I remembered that those who died in the film promised not to die too. So I didn't buy the promise from her. I was waiting for the doctor to call our father and embolden him to take heart like in the films.

For some hours, I became a prayer warrior. I had dropped our senseless fights and childish arguments in the bin of forgetfulness. I faced the Qibla to have a one-on-one conversation with her Creator. I believed that I was facing Allah directly without any obstruction. Then I bowed down in sujood, pleading with Him to guide the doctor. I told Him how much I would miss her should He instruct Malakul Maut to take her sole soul to Him. I told Him about our poor parents and how hard it would be for them to bear the loss. I reminded Him that our mother struggled to have just four of us, she would not like to bury one like a plant. I didn't

receive any response from her Creator except the usual silence but I believed He had answered my sincere prayer.

Few hours later, the doctor called our father. My heart was beating fast, echoing; I could hear it loud and clear. I thought it was time to announce her demise, but alhamdulillah, the announcement was about the success of the surgery. I rushed in to check what was going on. I found my sister lying on the bed helplessly. She held my hand again and said, “Boda Shina, stop crying. I promised you not to die”.



Moshkur Ajikobi (fondly called P-Seven) is a Nigerian poet and writer. His work appears or forthcoming in Punk Noir Magazine, Lunch Break Zine, Rather Quiet, Coven Poetry, Riverbed Review, Brown Bag Online, Eremite Poetry, OneBlackBoyLikeThat Review and elsewhere. You can find him on twitter @almoshkur and Instagram @peeseven20

The Light of a New Parish

by Alexander Orozco

For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

—1Corinthians 4:15

He questioned whether he could still love. To serve the parish was a blessing, but to echo the word of God produced a feeling that he couldn't quite describe. For decades, the parishioners entered with their arms open to God. For centuries, the same sermon and the same liturgies were professed, but the parishioners never grew weary. He recited the same sermons and liturgies echoed by Father Emilio in 1967; rest in peace. Ever since Father Lucas was anointed for Priesthood at twenty-three, he continued preaching.

Father Lucas scribbled in his notebook. His office was lit with four candles the size of his head. The scratching of pen and paper was iambic as it travelled down the page. His glasses slipped off his face constantly and the only remedy was to adjust them back into position, breaking the music made by the pen and paper. Father Lucas opened the cabinet behind him and, checking the door, poured himself a cup of his favorite mezcal. His office, located in an ambulatory location next to the high altar, was his sanctuary. When he inherited the office from Father Emilio, it was decorated with figures and candids of *El Señor del Amparo*. Many of the figures were made with corn stalks, but some were bronze. Little by little, the figures were transported from the office and the candids and pictures were moved as well.

Father Lucas tilted the bottle until it was vertical. He shook it trying to drain the last few drops of mezcal. He sighed. It didn't matter. He made progress with his writing. He developed two characters and settled on a location. He continued scribbling in his notebook when he heard the anxious footsteps crossing the aisle to his chamber.

“Father Lucas! Father Lucas!” the voice said, “Come quick!” He heard a banging on the door and saw a little flame of the candle emitting from under the door. Father Lucas closed the notebook and asked who it was.

“Father Lucas! Please, you must come. Please hurry!” said the voice.

“Yes, José. What is it?” replied Father Lucas.

“Oh Father! It’s the flowers. The Red Dahlias are destroyed,” replied Brother José. He could be heard pacing back and forth waiting for the door to open. Father Lucas rubbed his eyes. Of all the times Brother José could have pestered him with pettiness, he chose this moment. Father Lucas told Brother José he should stop worrying. He intended to open the notebook again when Brother José replied, “Oh but, Father Lucas, tomorrow little Juliana is getting baptized! It is a special moment for her.”

“She is three,” replied Father Lucas.

“What must we do?” asked Brother José. Father Lucas hid the notebook under drafts of sermons that were heavily marked in red. He opened the door. Brother José tugged on Father Lucas’s sleeve, imploring him to move quicker. From *San Jeronimo*’s dusty parish windows, the sky turned orange, evicting the last remnants of blue. Brother José ran to

the front while Father Lucas strolled. He noticed just how dusty it was. The pews were chipped and limp. The lights were either dim or still being replaced. The stone walls echoed the sorrows of the dead. But the parish still stood. No matter how many raids, the parish would always be here.

Father Lucas walked through the front entrance. He did not realize how loud it was inside once he stood in the courtyard. He turned to look at the parish's two bell towers. The bells were gone. All that was left were two black holes that stared back at him. The feeling was too intense. He walked along San Jeronimo's perimeter. He smelled nothing but the cold dry air of a dying season. The Red Dahlias were there behind the parish. It appeared as if someone stomped on them. Father Lucas stood awhile, staring at the crippled Red Dahlias. They'll be replaced soon enough, not by him, but by Brother José.

I'll give them to Señora Isabela. She'll make good use of this for her vegetable garden, he thought. Father Lucas chuckled. *The flowers have a better fate than I.*

The next day, Father Lucas rode his bike to San Jeronimo's. He adored the small town of *Huandacareo*. He enjoyed riding at dawn when the sky looked comfortable enough to walk towards it. He rode alongside the roads of the corn fields. During summer, Father Lucas enjoyed greeting the farmers strolling alongside the cornfields and they would greet back. They carried hoes, shovels, pickaxes, buckets, canisters of water, and high spirits. The farmers lived another day and reminded themselves of what can easily be taken away. Father Lucas agreed. The raid changed the townspeople's sentiments.

The fields were empty. Without the cornstalks, Father Lucas could see

San Jeronimo's bell towers. His coat flapped behind him as he picked up speed. The scarf wrapped around his face either slid too far up or too far down. Father Lucas felt warm. It was not because of the coat or the scarf, but the gentle wind. He invited the warmth. Winter was dying and spring was to be reborn. Father Lucas slowed down. Farther ahead, a group of farmers were tilling the soil. One man drove the machine hauling a plow that opened the soil and another man dropped fertilizer into it. In these teams, they sowed the field with nutrients. He admired the work they were doing. Farmers working for a common cause. Only ruled by the plow, which worked for the farmers and their fields. Father Lucas pedalled away.

The plaza across the street from *San Jeronimo's* parish was bustling with people. Fruit and meat stands were surrounded like hummingbirds to Pot Marigolds. The same ones that Doña Lucia sold everyday right in front of the parish's courtyard. Trees older than the town adorned the plaza providing wonderful shade during the summer. The plaza square was enclosed by the parish on one side and municipal buildings on the other three sides. Many of the windows were still boarded up, yet to be replaced. A few children, who were supposed to be helping their mothers at the fruit and meat stands, played inside and around the central gazebo. Señor Silva called to them so they could buy diced fruits from his shop. Father Lucas walked his bike past the plaza. Cars zipped by with no concern. Working men delivered fruits and vegetables fresh from the fields to the produce stands.

Father Lucas walked into the courtyard of the parish. Brother José was sweeping the front steps to *San Jeronimo's*. He noticed the priest, dropped his broom, and ran to him. He held a letter in front of him. He placed the letter in Father Lucas's hand. He opened the letter and

read:

Dear Father Lucas Alvaró,

It is with greatest esteem that I write to you and proclaim a wonderful plan for the advancements of our Catholic mission. We have heard of the devastation that has reduced your community of Huandacareo. As archbishop, I've taken full liberty of meeting with His Holiness and finding a resolution for your community. As a part of our Catholic mission in Mexico, I am overseeing methods of expansion in the municipality and to the occidental states. I promise, with His Holiness's blessing, I will rebuild your parish and make it twice fold the parish it once was. With faith, anything can be accomplished. Of course, we must think pragmatically and can only execute our goals using local resources. Thus, allocating the necessary funds for the aggrandization of San Jeronimo's parish. I have also taken the liberty of wiring the money from the municipality.

May God bless you, Father,

Archbishop Ruben Quintero

Father Lucas walked back to his office, letter in hand. Brother José followed him exclaiming of the wonderous news that the parish would be repaired. Father Lucas looked at damages to the parish. He made note that it smelled grey inside. Of course, it did. Brother José and himself were the only ones willing to stay here.

They entered his office. Regarding space, it was ample for Father Lucas who was the only person entering and occupying the space but for two there was no room. The shelf adjacent to the desk was crammed with classic literature and science fiction novels. One of the science fiction books on his desk was titled, *The Mutant Capybaras from Deep Space*. Brother José noticed it, chuckled, and asked to see the novel.

“What crazy things kids read these days,” Brother José said. “Did one of the children leave it in the pew?”

“No. It is mine. I am reading it,” Father Lucas said.

“Oh... I see,” said Brother José. He set the novel down saying nothing more.

There is more to life than sermons, Father Lucas wanted to say, but instead he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes.

“Father, I believe what the archbishop is doing will do us good.”

“And how is that?” replied Father Lucas.

“Well, it can restore the faith. And restored faith leads to a better community,” said Brother Lucas.

“José, where is the motivation once they find out they are being played for fools? How much faith do you need then?” said Father Lucas.

“No, but God always has a plan and—”

“Plan? José, what plan? A plan for more churches? More money? More disdain?” said Father Lucas, “It is giving me a headache.”

“Well, it is the only thing we have at the moment. They can take our money but never our hopes!” said Brother José. He stormed off. The priest sat staring at the letter. He tore it in two pieces and placed it in the waste basket. A drink would be nice, but there was none left in his office. Father Lucas opened his science fiction book and began to read.

The following Sunday, Brother José poured the wine and set the eucharist on the table next to the podium. Father Lucas held the eucharist in the air with both hands. He recited a passage followed by a prayer. He stared into the circular disc when he heard trotting horses and savage yelling. It sounded like a wild herd of nineteenth century trains let loose with bellowing whistles. Some of the men stood up in their distressed jeans and sweat stained shirts to see who was making all that noise. One man donned his aviator sunglasses on and pushed open both doors. He walked out and was shot twice. Mothers screamed and braced their children. Some of the men did their best to huddle the women and children into cover.

Pedro Perez rose slowly from his seat. He withdrew his pistol faster than it could shoot. He aimed at the door. He twisted his face and snarled the same way dogs do when they sense a bad presence. Except Pedro Perez knew the bad presence. It was inevitable that he'd be back. It was one of the raiders that managed to escape. He was wounded; Pedro made sure of it. He would have liked to have his guts exposed and his blood drained that same day the bandits raided Huandacareo. Today was the day God answered his prayers.

A man sauntered inside San Jeronimo's, resting his foot on the dead man's blood-soaked chest. More blood flowed from his mouth. The man looked around and smiled as the parishioners cowered. Pedro steadied his aim when a raider beside him rose to his feet and poked Pedro's ribs with the barrel of a pistol. Pedro snarled at the raider in the doorway and at the goon that smelled of dried winter sweat. Father Lucas dropped the eucharist.

He muttered a prayer and asked what the stranger wanted. The man continued to stand there in the doorway. It felt like a cruel joke. The

man was statuesque until he opened his mouth.

“This,” he said, “All of this. Not just this but that. And those over there.” He swept his hand encompassing everything that was Huandacareo. His goons woohooed and hurrahed while shooting their rifles in the air. There appeared to be a couple dozen outside in the courtyard. Their horses snorted and reared constantly.

“Chente! You goddamned cur!” Pedro said. He lunged but was detained by the armed raider.

“Shut up, old man. I ought to teach you something about respect,” Chente said, “Everyone get up and get out.” Chente stepped aside and motioned with his hands to exit.

“Wait, everyone, stop. Don’t—” pleaded Father Lucas.

“Ahhh shut up you too, old man. God can’t save you here,” Chente said. Everyone cowered and whimpered as they shuffled to the courtyard. Once everyone was in the courtyard, Chente began to speak. He sat on his horse.

“I know about the archbishop’s letter. He made some promises. He gave some blessings. He said there is money floating around,” Chente said, “but when did you, the people, ever enter the conversation?” The parishioners nodded, motioning him to continue.

“But what about your homes? Your shops? Your schools? The plaza? Did he ever mention anything about Huandacareo itself? What’s more important, rebuilding the parts of the town that sustains you or this place that looks like it was built on second thoughts?”

“Everyone! He’s the man who caused all of this in the first place!” Father Lucas said.

“What? Can’t I have a change of heart?” Chente replied. The men and women, who had their homes and businesses wrecked, were considering Chente as an option. What if they contest? To many of the townspeople there were two options: a complacent one or a bloody one. Wounds from the last time were still fresh. The winds picked up and brought dry cold air that whipped their faces. One man stood up and decided to join Chente. And then another and then another. Eventually, even the most hesitant at least began to mull it over. Father Lucas choked on his words. He couldn’t regurgitate them. Chente and the parishioners left.

Pedro growled and sat down in the pews. He fidgeted with his three rings. One of his rings displayed horseshoes on its face, the second ring displayed two pistols forming an X on its face, and the last was a landscape of mountains. He rubbed his face with open palms. Father Lucas approached him.

“Pedro, what will you do?” Father Lucas said.

“Do? I can’t do anything if everyone is siding with the bastard. Besides, I’m getting old. An old man like me can’t keep fighting like this,” Pedro said. Father Lucas felt likewise. To see the same people that listened to him preach and respected him as a leader walk away demoralized him.

Father Lucas sat next to Pedro in the pews. The two men looked defeated. Both sat silent for a while. Within the parish, the warm winds of spring swirled. Pedro felt uncomfortable but spoke.

“Father, I attend mass every week. At times I question why you are still a priest and then I question why I still come,” Pedro said.

“Because it is our duty to God,” Father Lucas said.

“Is He doing a service to us or are we to Him?” Pedro replied, looking around the parish, “I fear what happened last year will be worse. Chente... he’s different than the rest of those bandits. He uses his head. Sure, maybe he can help us for a while. But how long would that last?” Pedro said. He stared at the crucified Christ behind the altar.

“I don’t know what will happen, but we must not lose faith,” Father Lucas said.

“It has become conditional, hasn’t it?” Pedro said, “I guess it has after so many years.”

He left. Father Lucas remained in the parish. He felt warm in his priestly robes. He felt a choking suppressive heat that made him sweat profusely.

The calendar marked the beginning of warmer days when the flowers started to bud, and fauna emerged from hiding. Even though it was April, the people in town weren’t filled with the energy and warmth of spring. The houses were left untouched, the businesses were still rubble, the schools were hazardous, and the people were left with little. Archbishop Ruben’s money was gone at the same time Chente’s castle was built. Most of the other resources like money, labor, and material went to fortifying the town. Walls were erected and guards were never at rest. The plaza that was once lively was dead. Even the gazebo that

was used for musicians to perform was fitted with a guard surrounded by barbed wire. The people were never told as to what Chente planned, but everyone knew that if Mexico ever noticed the small town, another onslaught would occur.

Every Thursday, Chente walked into Father Lucas's small office, with an edited and revised version of Sunday's liturgy and sermon. Father Lucas hated what revisions were recommended by the archbishops, but the revisions from Chente sparked rage in Father Lucas's soul. Father Lucas would nod his head when Chente tossed the revised sermons onto his desk. When Chente would leave, Father Lucas would rub his eyes, release a sigh, and begin reading the revisions. Much of the revisions were emphasizing trusting God and unity in the community. It sounded good at first. Father Lucas flipped the pages and noticed a message written on the last sheet. It read: *Convincing the people to accept unity and to live by my beliefs is the first step. Now, you must convince them to spread their beliefs. Enforce them on others. It is the only way.*

Six in the evening never felt so late to him. The bottle was empty. Father Lucas recalled when Father Emiliano gave the bottle of mezcal to him as a gift. Two weeks later, he passed away. He saw Father Lucas as a young bull, bursting with energy and ready to spread good. Over the years, as Father Lucas grew familiar in his role of being a priest, he realized that Father Emiliano was a fool. He thought of him, not as a follower of the parish, but as tolerable of it. Father Lucas vowed not to be like him.

The light bulb flickered in intervals of three, but he didn't care to change it. The revisions were completed to Chente's liking. Father Lucas reached for the bottle of mezcal. He tried refilling his glass but noticed it was empty. *The Mutant Capybaras from Deep Space*, was in the

waste basket. It didn't matter anyway, it got stale halfway. Father Lucas laid *Pride and Prejudice* on his desk and stared at the bottle. All the memories of Father Emiliano flooded his brain. It was odd because the memories moved so fast, he couldn't grasp any of them. They flowed around and intermingled into one amalgamated memory. He put down the bottle and wept.

Easter Sunday arrived. The parish was full. Men, women, and children sat quietly with their hands folded on their laps as they waited for the priest. They wore their best with their humble means. In his office, Father Lucas adjusted the white chasuble. The vestments of the priest were speckled with little bundles of threads attached to the outer lining. It looked scratchy and somewhat stiff. The white colors seemed stressed and the golden stole that once sparkled only hinted at its forgone magnificence.

The parish might as well have been empty for not a peep nor a cough was released. This lack of commotion scared Father Lucas. He stood behind the door separating parishioners from preacher and stared at the floor without purpose. It was a hollow stare and yet his eyes paced back and forth.

It's rather warm today, he thought, it's burning, actually.

He walked to the altar with his hands clasped and head bowed. Brother José pinched the organ player to commence playing. She awoke and began playing. Nothing about today could lift any one's spirit. The solemnity of the parishioners matched that of the poor old lady's slow and solemn organ playing. Father Lucas stood at the altar, raised his head and said, "All rise..."

Halfway through mass, Father Lucas lifted the eucharist in the air. Everyone stood with hands clasped as they repeated what Father Lucas orated. He broke the eucharist in half. *San Jeronimo's* trembled and the roof appeared to have shifted. The parish trembled again. Three men entered, pushing men and women to exit the parish. They waved their arms around to herd the parishioners.

“Come on, hurry! Get out! Come on!” they yelled. Father Lucas dropped the eucharist and ran outside. The courtyard’s brick pavement was uprooted, leaving dirt. The fence surrounding the parish was demolished. Wagons, carts, and trucks were used to haul bricks, scrap metal, and wood. The sky was brighter than usual and the winds hot. Birds were songless and the wild dogs were far off and forgotten. Everything disappeared.

One of Chente’s men held a blueprint for Chente. With one finger, Chente traced what he wanted his workers to harvest from *San Jeronimo's*. With the other finger, he pointed where to begin working. He never opened his mouth. With a wag of his finger or a nod of his head, he commanded the two-hundred men carrying ladders, shovels, picks, and saws. Two men carried a ladder and positioned it in front of the right belltower. One of them peered into the hollow socket of the belltower and exclaimed that there was no bell.

“That’s fine. Start inside. The lights hanging from the crossbeams, and make sure to get the Christ hanging behind the altar. Careful, that thing must weigh one-hundred kilos,” ordered Chente. The two men excused themselves immediately. Father Lucas looked around. He saw Chente’s men excavating the paved courtyard, ripping apart the roof, and loading the pews into a truck. Father Lucas objected but the shrill pleads were smothered by the panic of the parishioners and the

commotion around the parish. He wanted to yell. He scratched the outside of his hand as he watched his entire life being ripped stone by stone for a war effort.

“It’s what we have to do. Mexico wants war. I’ll give them war,” Chente said. His men hurrahed. Two men dragged Jesus Christ outside. The giant bronze Jesus would suit well as a cannon. Father Lucas felt hot. He was suffocated. His blood boiled.

“God damn you!” Father Lucas tore the vestments from his body. The ripping fabric caught the attention of the workers and the parishioners. Chente looked up from the blueprint. Everyone stared in silence as the priest pulled and ripped his vestments. Holding it in his hands, Father Lucas threw them on the ground and stomped on them. No one dared intervene. Only the sounds of the hot winds whistled. The poor priest panted, red-faced, as he analysed the crowd around him.

“You damned monster,” said Father Lucas, “Look at what you’ve done!”

“What don’t you understand that *THIS*, all of this is a part of something greater, you selfish runt of a man,” Chente said. He was red-faced as well.

“No, you fool! It doesn’t have to be this way! None of this has to be this way. You dig, and dig, and dig, and dig deeper but never once thought of starting a new hole,” Father Lucas said.

Everyone retreated from him. He lunged at Chente. He knocked him off his feet and wrestled him. Chente, albeit younger and stronger than Father Lucas, failed to restrain the priest. He punched the priest, but Father Lucas felt nothing. There was an unquenchable rage that helped

Father Lucas. Once Chente was under him, Father Lucas beat at the bandit's face and chest. He continued until blood spattered and an unnerving squishing sound boomed throughout. No one dared to intervene. It could have been because they feared the priest, or maybe because they also lost their sense of proportion. Father Lucas stopped. On the ground, he left a body with its face opened and chest caved in. A pool of blood soaked into the courtyard's paved floor. It traveled between the cracks of each brick. The air smelled hot, rich, and putrid. He touched his face and felt warm streams of blood trickling into his eyes and around the crevices of his wrinkled face. The blood mixed with the sweat and dirt into an amalgamation of maroon clumps.

Father Lucas looked at his hands. Exhaustion settled in his muscles. The crowd muttered words to each other. Everyone was afraid that they could be next. Pedro Perez approached the bloodied, panting man.

“Father...,” said Pedro. He reached for his shoulder but meant to go deeper than that. “You’re not okay Father, you are bleeding. Does anyone have a rag?” A young child brought an old rag. Pedro ripped it into one long strip. As his hand touched Father Lucas’s shoulder, the poor old man winced. He dropped on the ground. Pedro retreated his hand as if he himself was hurt. Father Lucas covered his ears. The dreadful sound of the ripping convulsed the priest’s back. No one touched him. The parishioners and Chente’s men left. Lucas thought of the day he donned the vestments for the first time. Was it worth it? Maybe it was, Lucas was unsure, but he was sure of the relief brought upon him for the first time in years.

That evening the sky turned orange and then purple. *San Jeronimo’s*

was barren. Half of it was on pallets on the ground. Most of the roof was torn off. Behind the parish was the small office that protruded from the building that was demolished as well. Father Lucas woke up and observed what they had done to his parish. Hot spring winds swirled into the parish and suffocated him. From the courtyard, the clonking of horse hooves alerted the priest.

There were twelve men. Each one was clothed in prestigious uniforms, shiny black boots, and equally shiny Hills Hats. They had badges that read Policia del Ministerio Público. One of the men, an older man, but more composed, looked down at the priest. He was covered in badges and pins. He made the other eleven seem inferior and unworthy of the rank they held. The man stood with his hands folded behind his back and feet shoulder width apart.

“Lucas Álvaro, you are under arrest,” said the captain, his moustache covering his lips. Father Lucas did not protest. He remained on the ground. The captain turned to his men and nodded. Four police agents rushed to the priest, each taking a limb to restrain. The police agents almost launched him into the air. They underestimated the frail man’s weight. Lucas looked up at the captain. Even after seeing Lucas’s defeated eyes, he remained stern. He slapped him.

“I’m arresting you,” said Captain Obregón, “Move him, now.”

“No, you must not!” said Lucas, “Please forgive me.”

“Me? Forgive you? I’m not the one you should be begging for forgiveness.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him! He— He was going to kill us all!” Lucas said.

“Does that make you a hero?” said Captain Obregón. Lucas remained silent.

“I’m sorry,” said Lucas Álvaro.

“Señor Álvaro. Under the law, you are facing twenty years in jail. Perhaps more, but never less. But I have something more fitting for you. You killed a man, very true. But you killed a bad man. An enemy of the state, in fact. Under law, you are both criminals. Instead, I’ll offer you terms in which you can, with some luck, see freedom much sooner,” Captain Obregón said. Lucas Álvaro nodded. Even Obregón’s men waited to hear what the captain had to say.

“I won’t send you to jail, but I will drop you off in the hills. You can take three things. If you live, well, consider it mercy. If you die, consider it a punishment well deserved,” he said.

Lucas never travelled this far in a long time since he left the seminary. *What good days those were*, he thought. He looked out the car window. A never-ending pasture with green grasses as tall as the fencing and Red Dahlias speckled throughout like fairies. Fate works in most unexpected ways. The cows moved through the grass like whales at sea.

Lucas observed. How much vivacity there is. How much beauty, he thought. The sun was awake and alert in the middle of the sky. Father Lucas rather appreciated the warmth of the sun.

The vehicle stopped abruptly. Father Lucas could not see the cows, the pasture, nor the fence. What he saw was the beginning of large hills. It seemed never-ending as well. Father Lucas was fearless though.

“Move,” said Captain Obregón. Lucas was not sure who the captain referred to, but it mattered little for the captain’s men had restrained him. They threw him out of the vehicle.

“Señor Álvaro, this is it. I’d wish you luck, but I’d rather never hear from you again,” said Captain Obregón. The vehicle drove away leaving a trail of dust in the air.

Once the vehicle was out of sight, Lucas turned to the hills. He smiled. Although it will be a difficult journey, Lucas was not worried. He didn’t bring anything with him from the parish. Not the vestments, not the eucharist, not a candle, not even a cross. When he was choosing his items for his punishment, he decided on an item that would not be above him. He carried his personal Bible, not as authority but as guidance. That authority was within him, not as a priest, but as a child of God.



Alexander Orozco is an undergraduate at Barry University, where he studies Professional Writing with a minor in Spanish. He is a member of Sigma Tau Delta. He loves dressing up with his dog and going for walks. Alexander has been published in Alchemy Literary Magazine and Alebrijes Review.

It Rains When I Talk to God

by Emma McCoy

content warning: mention of suicide

The world is beautiful when it rains. I love watching it fall and run off, how it coats everything, making things a shade the slightest step to the left of blue.

In *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson writes “I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do.”

I, too, have been finding this hard to do.

I’ve read that rain falls with an acceleration of 9.8m/s. That kind of force bends leaves, hits the ocean, and convinces me someone is tapping on my shoulder.

Yes, I chose to move away from home. No, I am not making friends. Yes, I am lonely. No, I will not elaborate. A clam prised open knows dying is guaranteed.

My mother’s mother died fourteen years before I was born. Her name was Ann Jackson. I suppose lung cancer can catch anyone by surprise. Cancer is never, but always, personal. I was born knowing I would never smoke, not give my body even the slightest chance to betray itself.

If you go onto the US Health Department’s website, it says that social isolation can cause as much damage as 15 cigarettes a day.

That night I went to bed with the taste of smoke in my mouth.

I think lonely people often go looking for God because when you reach the end of yourself, there aren't other ways to turn. This can imply that looking for God is passive, the last option in a long series of last-ditch attempts to feel something. Although I've tried to feel lots of things, nothing could be further from the truth. Searching for God is rarely passive and never free from anger-- it's why I've got a shovel and one hell of an attitude.

Genesis 2:18 “It is not good for man to be alone.”

For three months, I had to drive over an hour on I-5 twice a week in heavy traffic to make all my physical therapy appointments in Chula Vista. It was just me listening to the highway, then rotator cuff exercises, then driving back to an empty room. The hum of the highway saying alone alone alone. There wasn't a drive where I didn't cry.

The CDC says social isolation is associated with about a 50% percent increased risk of dementia, 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke. It also says, word for word, that “social isolation significantly increases a person's risk of premature death from all causes” and though I doubt that loneliness can increase your risk of death via car crash, crazier things have happened.

Elijah was a prophet. I like Elijah, because he heard God's voice and did what had to be done to get Israel to listen (Israel means “wrestles with God”). He got up on top of the mountain and set up God's altar where everyone could see. That's not to say Elijah never failed but he did kill

800 false prophets and, while horrific and obscene, it appeals to my sense of grief-inspired violence.

I still hate the section of I-5 between San Diego and Chula Vista.

“The thing that makes you exceptional is inevitably that which makes you lonely.” I don’t think Lorraine Hansberry fully thought that through. Has she ever been truly lonely? Shouldn’t we be loved entirely, without the condition of mutilation? If I am exceptional, I don’t want my future to always be lonely. I don’t want to cut that part of myself off to survive, like the mouse in a glue trap that gnaws through his own leg to get to safety. I would if I had to, but what person would willingly walk into that? Only the people who have never been lonely would choose brilliance over love.

I should say it’s not that I wasn’t loved, or that I’ve always been lonely. I would just like to say it is hard to find the dignity in always eating alone.

When my mother hit that point in her 40’s when she’d officially outlived her own mother, she spent the year tracing her family tree and cried easily.

Lamentations 2:11 “I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground.”

I became frustrated with my own brain. It happens sometimes when you have no one else to talk to. I sat down and made a declaration to God: if you won’t help me feel something real, then I’ll read your Bible cover to cover and find out who you are for myself. A literature major

knows nothing if not how to read. A book can be an excellent shovel. Side effects include forgetting to eat or sleep.

Sometimes when I'm tired of reading, I go digging for clams, just to ask them if they've seen God recently.

Simon van Booy said "For lonely people, rain is a chance to be touched." That explains a lot.

Being alone and being lonely are two different things separated by a desperate crevice. If I am alone, I enjoy my thoughts. If I am lonely, I want nothing more than to never think again.

Anne Sexton described her journey as an awful rowing toward God. I am not rowing (awful as that would be) because I rather like the water. Instead, I am digging. Digging in the foothills of the Old Testament like a grave robber looking for the bones of a God came to earth. I am sweaty, dirty, wondering what's the use of a rowboat in the desert.

Deuteronomy 30:4- "Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back"

Elijah didn't need a rowboat. Rain came pouring onto the whole country after years of drought, flooding God's altar and washing away the blood of the false prophets he killed. Elijah ran into the mountains, afraid of what Queen Jezebel would do to him. He begged God to kill him, but God gave him food and put him to sleep. When I start yelling at God, I find a snack and take a nap.

Crouching on the beach with sand in my hands, I ask the clams if God knows my name, am I allowed to know God's name? "Those are questions for later" is their reply.

Clams know a lot, but are rarely helpful.

I was driving on a section of I-5 up north when rain came out of nowhere. I couldn't see out of my windshield, couldn't see the car in front of me. I hydroplaned on a turn and wondered if I would crash. Would I flip into a ditch? A median? Hit the car in front? The next lane over? Right as I hit the rumble strips, the tires caught traction. I drove the rest of the way in silence, remembering long stretches of road with no one to talk to.

One time I asked my mother how she knew she would marry my father. Her answer? "He knew how to dream." I wish I could learn to dream again. I think I used to, but when I try to become a child again, I get stuck somewhere around grade six. I'm too scared to ask her about God. The words get stuck. Am I doing this right? I now understand what it means when people say that food can turn to ashes in your mouth.

Did God create man because He was lonely?

When digging for clams, speed is essential because if clams feel the shift of the shovel in the sand, they'll dig even faster underground and you'll never catch them. Thankfully, I am much slower than a clam and I'm already at bedrock with nowhere to go.

From my journal entries, aged 11, "Today I could not be more lonely."

Paul Simon wrote that “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls.” I think Elijah would write on subway walls. I’d be some years older on the way to work when I’d hear the hiss of spray paint. I’d turn and he’d be there, spraying the word of God in neon pink and orange. Paint dripping to the sound of high heels and dress shoes clicking on the subway floor. Elijah, I would ask, how did you bear being lonely in the wilderness? Three years of drought?

“When I set up God’s altar, I found the *matar*” would be his clam-like reply.

I would have to look up the ancient Hebrew later, but maybe my mind would be filled with visions of rain.

James 5:17-18 “Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

Kids are great at internalizing things. When I was eleven, all the girls decided to ignore me. It was like a game, except I didn’t know the rules. It almost would have been better if they had yelled at me, made faces, or called me names. At least I would’ve had something to react to.

Deuteronomy 30:19 “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life.”

Anne Sexton killed herself by sitting in her car, turning on the engine, and closing the garage door. Perhaps her rowing toward God wasn’t successful in the end, or perhaps it was—it can’t be known. Either way,

it's not uncommon to find the desperately lonely in their garages with the car on. I have never been lonely enough to close the garage, although I do cough and exhale smoke and jam the door open with a rusty shovel that still holds the dirt of the desert.

Did man create God because he was lonely?

I've read that babies cue off their mothers so instinctively that if the mom doesn't give an emotional reaction at all, the baby becomes distraught. It isn't the happy, sad, or angry faces that make a baby respond violently, it's the lack of any emotion at all. They start to cry, wave their arms, and wail to get any reaction out of mom.

Tonight I make clam chowder, stirring as I make faces at God.

I offer Elijah a bowl, and we sip in silence as it grows dark outside. "How's your Hebrew research going?" Well, I'm getting around to it. Today was occupied by clam chowder and the gathering rain clouds outside my kitchen window.

In the movie *Holes*, a woman with rattlesnake venom fingernails runs a youth detention camp. The juvies have to dig holes six feet deep in this wasteland in order to "build character" or some other nonsense that adults tell teenagers. Eventually, we find out there was buried treasure on the land, and this woman was using desert-digging teens to find it. The digging wasn't quite so pointless after all.

Sometime in the late summer I found myself on the beach before anyone else had woken up. My tent was behind me, the ocean in front, with a huge swath of fog rolling down the hill and spilling out across

the beach. It started raining, warm and thick and I couldn't bring myself to find shelter. It's easier to find God when it's raining because it's impossible to be desperately lonely when someone is tapping on your shoulder. Besides, I've never been the type to clam up when someone asks how I'm doing.

Matar, מטר (Hebrew) noun- rain, the blessing of God in the presence of rain.

"We are all at times unconscious prophets," said Charles Spurgeon. When I read that, I frowned. "What is it?" says Elijah from the breakfast table. I look over orange juice and wheat toast, the newspaper he's holding that has the future foretold. Could your work be anything less than deliberate? I ask. A pause. "Would God create anything less than enough?"

Lorraine Hansberry ought to stand, alone, in a glue trap, and see if she still feels exceptional.

My mother and I lay on a big bed with blue sheets. A borrowed bed, in a borrowed vacation house that we visit in winter. It's about to rain, but I've always loved watching the rain hit the ocean surface.

We're in a blue sheeted bed up high in a room like a bird's nest, windows facing outward. In my mind I am on the beach digging for clams like I would as a kid, bright colored buckets and plastic shovels. In my body I am in a bed with my mother and I tell her I am looking for God. I'm worried I'm not doing it right.

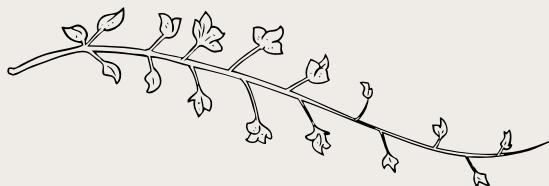
She looks at me with a face like a revelation and says, “You will always be more than enough.”

Do I believe her?

Deuteronomy 31:6 “Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Do I believe Him?

It to
starts rain.



Emma McCoy is a poet and essayist with love for the old stories. She is the assistant editor for Whale Road Review, a co-editor of Driftwood, and a poetry reader for the Minison project. She's the author of "In Case I Live Forever" (2022) and honestly, just wants to write poems so beautiful that people have to go outside and sit in the rain for a little bit. Catch her on Twitter: @poetrybyemma

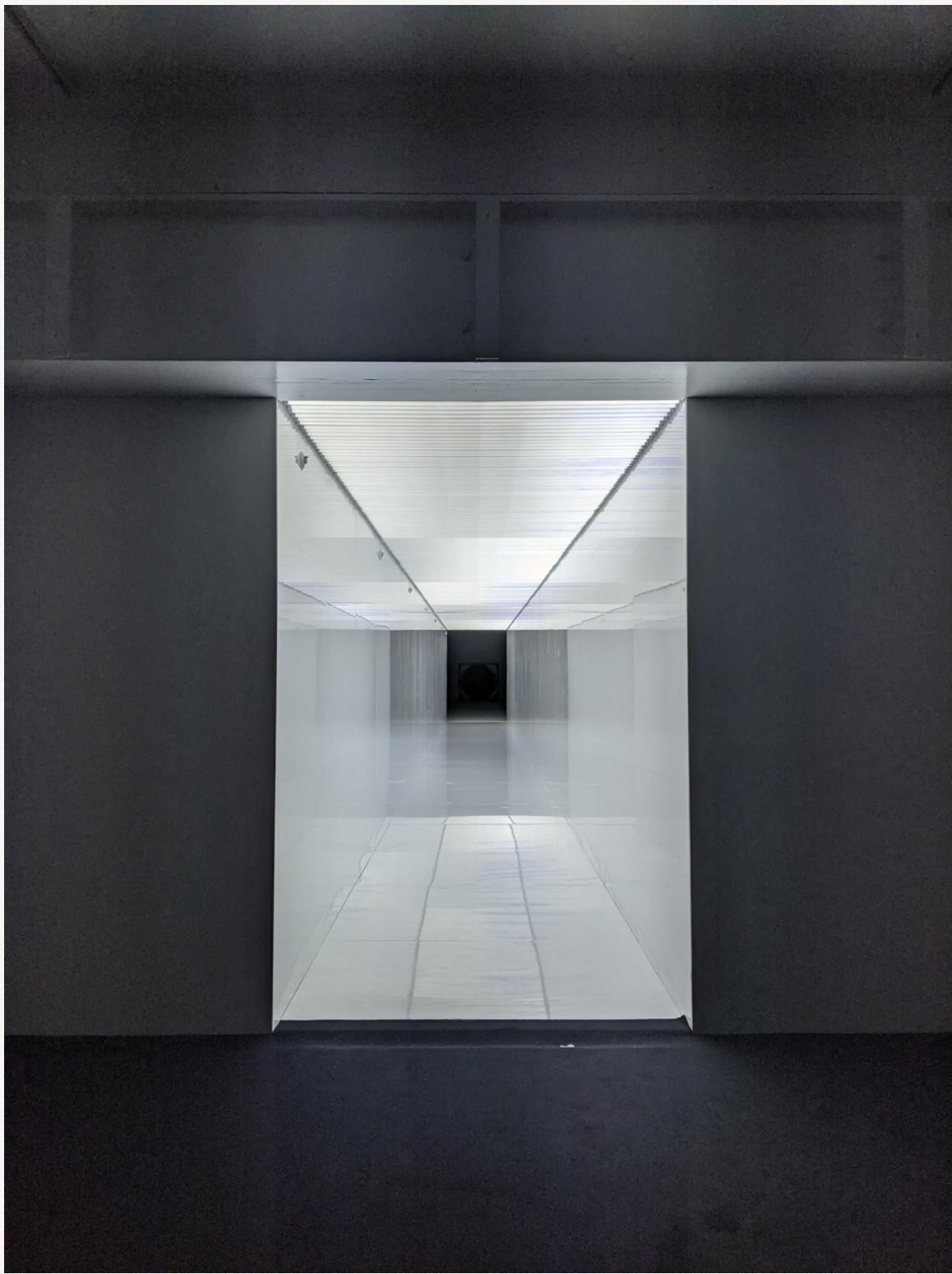
Colour Stream

by Fatema Johra



Abyss

by Fatema Johra



Reverie

by Fatema Johra



Colour Stream

Taken on Google phone - The sun seeping through the stained glass window at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, the warmth like the hum of hymns and a choir slowly building up to the chorus. My sister in this photo brings to mind the two religions I studied in detail and the interconnection between the two faiths.

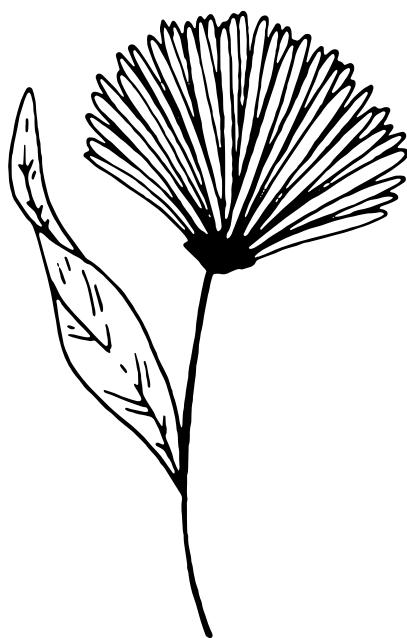
Abyss

Taken on Google phone - A tunnel of white light as part of the Ryoji Ikeda exhibition, playing around with audio and visual, walking through this with a buzz of static playing created an uncomfortable and strange feeling; almost a point of blank void away from life itself.

Reverie

Taken on Kodak Disposable camera - Peaceful but overwhelming vision. I feel this is relatable to how faith and one's relationship with faith can be; at times overwhelming but under the cover of a peaceful mindset I can collect my thoughts and explore faith in a constructive way.

Fatema Johra is a Cancer MDT Coordinator within the NHS and has been de-stressing by experimenting with different mediums to capture London and sentiments towards her hometown. Fatema is inspired by artists such as Ai Wei Wei and what kickstarted her interest in using disposable cameras again was the MyLondon Photo Project. A series of photographs snapped by homeless people across London while supporting and raising money for them and other rough sleepers. She has recently been working on capturing the brightness of summer, playing with colour filters to capture the City of London and beyond.



Where the Grass is Greener

by Ibrahim Babátúnédé Ibrahim

It was the first week in a new academic session. The faculty of law was a buzzing hive of new and returning students, all dressed in black and white, according to the official faculty dress code. Tawakalitu stood out of the multitude, also dressed in black and white, albeit in native attire —white bùbá and black ịró, with a towering black gèlè—a joke to most of the other students. At first, she thought it was the height of her gèlè, but the laughs hardly subsided even after she replaced it with her hijab. It wasn't only her first time in the city. In fact, it was her first time away from her small, ancient village in Kwara State.

The other students laughed when she pushed on the knob of the tap instead of twisting it, and when she put aside the cutleries and drove her fingers in her plate of soup at the cafeteria. They laughed when she pressed her ears to the ATM to make out what the person inside was saying, and every time she knocked on car doors at the taxi park, waiting for someone from within to open.

On her fourth day on campus, while she stood in line waiting her turn for a taxi at the park, a mild drama caught her attention. A young man who wore his hair in locks was pushing at a crying lady. Her makeup smudged, she was pleading and clutching at him while he kept jerking his arm, trying to shake her loose from his sleeve.

Tawakalitu had seen this lady before. While marveling at the tall buildings in the school on her first day, she bumped into a scantily

dressed lady in a low-necked top and faded denim shorts. She found it weird that the cold harmattan morning had shivers running through her body, but this person had most of her body unclad. She had been quick to apologize, but the lady waved it off like it was nothing.

Here was the same lady again at the park. Her hair was a mess, and tears had her face wet and glistening as she begged the agitated locked-hair man.

Tawakalitu watched the spectacle, just like everybody else. Her pulse raced in a fury, seeing that no one seemed to have a problem with the young man treating a woman with such aggression in public.

“I will slap you o,” the young man warned. “If you come near me, you idiot!”

Everyone watched the show. Some held up their phones, capturing the moment.

“You punched your number into his phone, didn’t you?” he continued.
“I saw you! You did! Unbelievable!”

The lady’s wailing grew louder. She pleaded and clutched at his clothes.

“I will slap you o.”

He pushed, and she staggered backwards. She stepped forward and reached for him again, and his waving palm caught her wholly on the cheek.

She stopped and placed her palm to the side of her cheek, her eyes

wide in shock. Before she could recover, he grabbed and shoved her to the ground.

The small crowd in the park came alive. A section cheered, saying she got what she deserved. Another disapproved, saying the boy had taken it too far.

In the confusion, Tawakalitu snuck up and planted a light tap on the young man's shoulder. His locks swayed as he turned to face her. His face ran into a battering, caught by a series of powerful jabs from her lightning fists.

More cameras appeared as she stood over the dazed man like a proud hunter with her dead game. Her white bùbá, black ìró, and velvety hijab became more popular after that.

Nobody ever laughed at her again, and she even became friends with the lady, Aminat—Natty, to her friends.

Natty let Tawakalitu move in with her at no cost and guided the newbie through school. Tawakalitu sunk into Natty's lush bed whenever she laid on it. It was nothing like the bare floor of the school mosque where she had slept for the first couple of days.

Natty showed Tawakalitu the ways of the city, and she quickly learned how to navigate it like the rest of the locals. Natty's tutelage excited her, but it never got beneath the cocoon of iman and her strict upbringing guiding her conduct.

When Natty talked about men, an overpowering sense of shyness always crawled over and held her. The two ladies had different mindsets, as far apart as two extremes of a continuum. Tawakalitu's unbreached virginity contrasted Natty's body count, so high that the actual number remained lost even to her.

"Small boys are immature," Natty advised while pulling a brush through her hair.

"The older men are the real deal. They don't call the enjoyment of your body love like the small boys. They give you good money, take you to beautiful places and spoil you silly. Abeg, which one better pass?"

"Eh ehn?" Tawakalitu said, nodding in amazement.

"Yes o. How do you think I get the money to live like this and look this pretty, Babe? Sebi I told you I'm also from a village. How do you think I'm funding my trip to Dubai next week? You think it's from my school fees?"

She indeed was from a village, not too far from Tawakalitu's. She came to the city, an innocent, undiluted, naïve, little Muslim girl too. She told tales of her first year and how she too had struggled to get in tune with this place before eventually becoming a pro at it.

Tawakalitu re-lived her own experience in her mind. Coming to the city to attend university was only a wishful dream until that evening when the Imam's lips parted to sound off her name, announcing her as the winner of the mosque's fully funded scholarship. This was great news, though her parents had been nursing other plans.

Who wastes such a huge amount of money on someone who would eventually become the master of another man's kitchen, sucking, and backing his babies, when instead they could just continue to groom her and wait for a suitor to someday walk in and pay a handsome price on her head? At eighteen, she was just the right age.

Getting to and trying to adapt to the city was a different story.

From strange hairstyles; long, curved, and multi-colored nails; long, bushy eyelashes; smooth and shiny made-up faces; and painted lips on the ladies; to plaited, locked and dyed hair, and sometimes earrings on the men, it was all very different from the village. She couldn't understand why the ladies cared little about covering up or why the men drove their *motos* past with the volume of the music turned so loud, seizing the atmosphere, and forcing everyone to listen with them to their *gbu gbu gbu* songs.

The place was more interesting than the village, yes, but the strangeness of the people was unsettling. They stared, stared, and stared—eyes boring into her from everywhere when she walked past. Nobody was trying to show her the right way when she goofed. Rather, they laughed out loud and infected other people with their mockery.

They laughed at everything, from the steps in her stride to her accented English. She was the butt of many jokes, until that fateful afternoon at the car park and the friendship with Natty that birthed from it.

"You look nothing like a fillage geh sha," Tawakalitu said to Natty.

"That's the idea, Babe. We all come from different small villages, but

once we are here, we drop our local names like this Tawakalitu you're clinging to and adopt nicer ones like the Tatyana I've been asking you to adopt."

The idea sounded interesting, but the core of Tawakalitu's inner person reminded her that she could never truly forge out of her true form. She knew these strange leanings really were her father's fear, but she could never abandon the good examples of the virtuous women in the Quran. If only he trusted her.

Natty was going to sit in an airplane in a week, and this also was a wish very close to Tawakalitu's heart. If she agreed to call a man Natty spoke to her about, she could sit in an airplane too, but no, she wouldn't. God willing, one day, she too would fly in one of those big, noisy birds, even if it's just for Hajj.

"Haff you efer thought of marrying; settling down?" Tawakalitu asked with animated curiosity.

Natty gave a sarcastic laugh and walked away. Tawakalitu tried to ask again, but she dodged the question each time and was soon off to Dubai.

When she returned, there were boxes and boxes of goodies. Tawakalitu chewed on different types of *sokolate* as Natty chatted away about her memorable trip.

Jealousy had Tawakalitu green all over. She replayed it all in her mind just as narrated; only she replaced Natty with herself in her version.

"Where'd you get this?" Natty's question pulled her out of her

daydream to see Natty holding up a shiny white flute with a red ribbon around its neck.

“It was by the door yestaday when I arrife from school, with a sealed note. I think an admirer levf it for you.”

Natty picked up the note and after examining it, sighed. “It is Bariu, my first toaster. We were friends in my first year when I was a village girl like you. I loved him, but he is just too boring and has no money.”

“If you loff ‘im, these other things shouldn’t matter, you know.”

“Going back to him now would be hard,” she replied in a resigned tone.

“Hao is that?”

“Do you remember that idiot you saved me from at the park?”

Tilting her head to one side, she nodded and continued to listen.

“Bariu caught me in bed with him. He was pained but was willing to take me back if I would marry him. I stupidly picked the idiot over him. He has hated me since then. I’m not sure why he sent this, but I’m sure he won’t be sending anymore gifts if I tell him I’ve graduated to older men now.”

Tawakalitu breathed a sigh and nodded again.

“You can have the flute if you want. I have no use for it,” the words trailed Natty as she walked out of the room.

“Hao about the note?” Tawakalitu asked after her.

“You can have that too.”

Here Tawakalitu was, still waiting patiently to have someone, anyone, tell her hi, while Natty turned down even the one she claimed to love.

Curiosity seized her. She tore open the note and its content crept a daze over her face.

Dear Tawakalitu,

I'm so sorry to disturb you, but the thought would continue to disturb me if I do not bare my mind to you.

It's my fourth year in this school, and I've seen many like you—young, pretty, undiluted Yoruba beauties. But soon after they arrive here, they change their names and start to become more city than the city itself.

It is mid-semester and you're still donning your white and black bùbá and iró to class, and your hijab is still shielding your hair. Your nails are still unpainted, and your lashes are as free as a feathered hand-fan.

You whistled a nice tune to yourself in class the other night. It was low, but I was close enough to hear it was prayers for the Prophet (S.A.W.).

I whistle too, and I've since grown into playing the flute. I hope you might be interested in that too. If you need someone to teach you, I'll gladly be available.

The bottom line is I'd love to be your friend.

If you bring the flute to reading class tomorrow, I'll take it as a yes. If you don't, I'll respect your refusal and stay away.

I'm patiently at the mercy of your decision.

*Faithfully,
Bariu.*

She stood rooted to the ground with the note loosely atop her shaky fingers; a hoard of butterflies rumbling in her belly and her head floating in the clouds.

She told Natty about it later, but first, that night, she left for night reading class with nothing but the flute in her hand. She sat proudly at her usual spot, waiting for her ‘Prince Bariu’ to emerge on a glorious white horse and whisk her away to happily ever after. There was no horse when he came eventually. She did not even hear him arrive. He slipped into the seat next to her from the shadows surrounding the dim light of the class, his shiny black flute clutched in his grip, and a childish grin fluttering on his handsome face.

His lips parted, starting to say something. She held his gaze and waited for the words, but nothing came out. He blinked and looked down at his flute, still grinning. She could see light trembles running through his fingers.

He looked nothing like the city boys in his ànkàrá bùbá and sóró, and a filà abetí-ajá to match, but very much like the familiar ones she left behind in the village. She was sure she had seen him before.

She turned in her seat, so her whole body was facing him, and said,

“Salam alaykum.”

“Wa alaykum salam,” he said shyly, still looking down. “I’m sorry; I honestly didn’t think you’d come. I’m still short of words.”

“Well, you can sayf the words vor later. Let’s leafe the class, because me, I’m hia to learn hao to play the vlude.”

Natty hadn’t exactly taken the news of Tawakalitu’s relationship with Bariu well when it started. At first, she said it was fine, but then one of her sugar daddies dumped her the next morning after Tawakalitu broke the news. She changed her tune after that, accusing Tawakalitu of betraying their friendship.

Tawakalitu decided to tell Bariu that it couldn’t work between them, and then, Natty was singing a different tune again, saying she was only acting out the frustration of her breakup and didn’t mean what she said. She gave the relationship her blessing and even appointed herself as a relationship guide for Tawakalitu at times.

About a year later, after Bariu had graduated, he and Tawakalitu had a beautiful Nikkah. She was in her second year of five.

She had to deal with occasional accusations of betrayal whenever one of Natty’s relationships hit a rock. She became used to it. She had experienced Bariu, gotten to love him deeply, and so she learned not to allow Natty’s fluctuations get to her or affect what she shared with her husband.

Despite this, school was many more years of overseas travel for Natty,

and many more years of jealousy for Tawakalitu. Benefactors struggled to outdo themselves for Natty. The world kissed the tips of her toes. Tawakalitu had the best man in Bariu, but the grass always seemed greener on Natty's side.

One time, in Natty's final year, she was beaten up badly, and Tawakalitu thought she had it coming. The children of her Dubai sugar daddy came to town, waylaid her and taught her a lesson: if their mother was too busy battling cancer to care, they would take it upon themselves to help her battle the rest of her problems.

Natty had to live in a hospital bed for over a week, her head swollen and laced in stitches.

She laughed so hard some months after when she called with the news that the sugar daddy had proposed. Cancer finally claimed his wife, and he was going to make her his new wife. She moved away from the small city into his mansion in the much bigger city of Lagos. *Lucky baskad*, Tawakalitu thought.

Jealousy's green coat stayed stuck on her back because even though she was happy and at peace with Bariu, things were really tough. Bariu's job closed after a robbery occurred there and claimed three lives.

Tawakalitu had a son already, born in her third year, and this made things tougher. Natty didn't want kids yet. *They would ruin the fun*, she said.

To make matters worse, while Tawakalitu struggled to prepare for her final exam prior to graduation, she started to throw up and swallow back much saliva—another pregnancy.

Pregnant and broke, she sat on one end of the phone, asking Natty for help on the other. Natty would let her have some money but not without berating her for the pregnancy first. “It is stupid o, to get pregnant again before you’ve even finished saving enough to care for the first one.”

Tawakalitu coated her dry tongue with saliva, rolled it around in her mouth before swallowing with the lump of pride wedged in her throat.

“After this one, come let me give you the medication I’m using. It seals up the place, so you can have all the fun you want until you’re ready...”

All through the phone-call, Tawakalitu pushed back the lava building up in her. She kept it festering in her nauseous gut until she could spew it all over poor Bariu. It was Thursday, so he was fasting as usual. He made nothing of her anger and reassured her that Allah would answer both their prayers soon.

The research for Tawakalitu’s final project meant she spent a lot of time on the internet, and there she discovered a world of possibilities. She had signed Bariu up to a recruitment website, and already, they found him an opening. It was just one week after when he received a call up to a job interview in Lagos.

The job came with a big house, a car, a driver, a fat salary and a lot more. Maybe they both could even afford to pay for Hajj and sit in an airplane together. The only problem was how to get to Lagos. So, again she looked up Natty’s number on her phone and pressed on the green button. Only this time, it went unanswered.

Bariu made ablution and climbed onto his mat to ask God for help.

After Jumat service the next day, Tawakalitu rushed from the women's section to find Bariu, her face bubbling with excitement. The Imam had announced a bus would be leaving for the Lekki Central Mosque in Lagos, and there were empty spaces for interested members of the congregation.

"This is Allah's answer to our prayers," Bariu said.

When the bus left Lagos on Sunday morning, it carried members who had fulfilled their reasons for going to Lagos. Tawakalitu hadn't, so she and her family stayed back at the Lekki Central Mosque.

Monday morning seemed a little too distant, but it crawled in eventually, and just when Bariu planted a goodbye kiss on Tawakalitu's forehead before heading to his interview, her phone dinged.

It was a message from Natty: *My husbnd is dead! Am finishd!*

The words morphed into a mountain of shock for both her and him, but he had to leave for the interview.

Tawakalitu was soon out with her boy strapped to her back, tracing the address Natty sent after she called to console her.

She walked from street to street, checking her phone for the address.

Although she carried the sorrow of her friend's loss in her heart, she drooled at how much the place made her small city look like an upscale slum, with the sizes and remarkable architecture of the houses here.

Several seconds after she paused to take in the most beautiful home

she'd seen, the number pasted on the wall snapped her out of her drool when she suddenly realized it was the same one on Natty's address.

The compound was opulent, decorated with all kinds of exotic cars sitting idly on the lawn, a large speedboat wedged between them. It had trees shooting very high into the sky, and a lush carpet of green interrupted in places by tiled pavements cascading the ground.

Natty only traifed wea the grass is greener than the rest, she reminded herself.

At the entrance to the main building was a large portrait of the dead man, a huge gold chain beaming from his neck and a big smile stretching the corners of his face to reveal a set of big, bright teeth. He looked every inch more alive than everyone else standing around.

After finding a space to scribble a note among the sea of messages in the register, Tawakalitu rushed in to find her friend nestled on the biggest chair in the room, wearing a black, flowing, satin gown, a black veil wrapped around her head, partially concealing her swollen face. There were a few other people seated. Just like Tawakalitu, they had come to offer their condolences.

As they hugged, she pressed Natty close to her. She could feel her friend's sobs shaking her entire body. They both lowered themselves onto the big chair. Tawakalitu's little boy settled next to her.

"My vriend, I can't beliff this."

"Chief's heart failed, Tawa," Natty's quivering voice managed to say.

“I’m so sorry. He’s Kristen, right? What are the arrangements and how can I be of ‘epp?’”

Her wet eyes brightened a little. Talking just a little above a whisper, she said, “Nothing scares me more than the arrangements.”

“Wai?”

“Because I’m dead meat as I’m sitting here. You told me to get pregnant or, I refused.”

“Oh... Does that avect anything?”

“Of course, it does, you idiot! If I don’t have a child from him, how do I get to inherit any of these? I sealed up my place, remember?”

Tawakalitu sighed.

“Remember his kids that came to beat me up in school?” she continued. “They live in America, and they are on their way back to Nigeria as we speak. Do you imagine they won’t throw me out when they arrive?”

“Don’t be like that, Natty. At leas’ you guys wea legally married.”

“Yes, we were, and all I have to back it up is a ring,” she sobbed, fingering the dazzling stone on the ring adorning her left hand. “If only I had listened to you, I would have a little him right now, like your boy,” she paused and looked at Tawakalitu’s son for the first time since he had been there. “He looks so much like Bariu.”

Then she chuckled, hiding her face away from the other sympathizers.

“That could have been me, you know. With a fine son for Bariu, but I threw it all away.” She started to sob again.

Tawakalitu was beginning to feel a little irritated, but she tried not to show it.

“I could have stayed in school and made a better grade. I can’t even practice as a lawyer. I didn’t pass the bar because I was never there.”

Natty cried and cried and wallowed in regrets as Tawakalitu spent all afternoon trying her best to calm her friend down. Natty eventually called her an Uber for the short distance and stuffed a thick wad of naira notes into her palms.

One thing was clear to her as she left that day, Natty’s days in that house were numbered and fast racing down like the flipping digits on a stopwatch. She played back some of Natty’s numerous escapades. She remembered how they always made her jealous. Now, she realized how much her life with Bariu had been green in its own way.

He always gave without taking and did everything for her like a duty. He was more patient than her father was with her mother, gentler too. They both still played their flutes together, and while other people thought that was weird, it made their little boy laugh every time.

Her mind broke into a flurry of Audhubillahs, Astagfirullahs and Alhamdulillahs. She pulled her boy close and made a silent pledge to water and nourish her grass dutifully from that moment. Her open palm ran tenderly over her tummy, an apology of sorts, laced into a pledge to be better for her unborn baby.

She pictured her happy family and couldn't wait to graduate, deliver her baby and sign herself up to the online agency so she could find a job too. More than anything, she couldn't wait to be able to support her husband.

She had always hated the fact that her father thought all a girl child was good for was bearing and rearing children like that wasn't already much more than any of his sons could manage. She would put her education to good use and make herself a shining example of how wrong he and other fathers in her village were.

The Uber pulled to a stop at the main gate of the Lekki Central Mosque. Her heart missed a beat and began to race as she saw Bariu's lonesome figure standing by the gate. Her tears would rain seconds after when he showed her the white envelope resting in his grateful hands. A new beginning where the grass was greenest awaited the young family on the other side of tomorrow.



After he was forcibly sent to science-class in high-school, it took **Ibrahim** 20 years to find his way back to his passion, in 2019, when he left a successful ten-year career in media & entertainment to become a writer. In that time, his work has been published in Typehouse Magazine, JMWW, Ake Review, Zone 3, Agbowó Magazine, Landlocked Magazine, Popula, and more. He was longlisted for the 2020 Dzanc Diverse Voices Prize, the 2022 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and named a finalist for 2021 Moon City Short Fiction Award. He won second runner-up place in Goge Africa's #GogeAfrica20 Writing Contest, and fourth runner-up place in Ibua Journal's Pack Light Series. He has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and multiple times for the Best of the Net anthology. Ibrahim's work explores the human experience from an African perspective. He's @heemthewriter across social media.

To Cherish and Exhaust

by Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

I think I finally understand what Billie Armstrong meant when he sang *It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right.*

I decided to take a walk today, the first one in a month. I spent a majority of the last month in the hospital and, once discharged, within the confines of my home. I had a fracture in my leg. Nothing that prevented me from moving around, but the doctor did say being “out and about” could aggravate it. My ribs hurt. And the headaches came more frequently than I would have liked.

But I was informed that most of what I was experiencing – fluctuating blood pressure, nausea, breathing issues (which have always been there, but now were off the charts) – were psychosomatic. I had strange dreams; even though I was asked to not think about the incident that landed me in the hospital, I often found myself reaching for it. Like that painful, infected tooth you can’t help tonguing.

So, after weeks of what I would call captivity (my wife, the voice of reason in my life, would disagree), today I decided to step out.
“Just going for some fresh air,” I’d told her on my way out. Before I could hear her protests, I closed the door behind me.
Marriage, I tell you. Like walking on eggshells.

I came to the park I’ve always enjoyed. I missed it. Taking a nice stroll in the evening, the colour seeping out from the sky, quietness

engulfing the day in its eerie yet beautiful embrace, and the bizarrely comforting creaking of the crickets. Things I never thought were of any consequence.

And here I am, thinking how I could give up everything I have for this moment. A part of me desperately wishes it could last a lifetime. I pull in a lungful of the damp air. It's sweet. It's... green. Sweat slicks my back, but it doesn't bother me. A drop of it runs down my forehead and into my eye. I brush it away. Somewhere nearby, I hear cheering. A group of boys playing cricket, from the sounds of it. They cry out. Maybe a wicket fell.

Back to the other side of the park, around the path where I'm walking, the grass has been allowed to grow wildly. Maybe they'll cut it after the rains next month. The evening breeze caresses my sweaty face; its coolness feels blissful. I close my eyes, feel the air travelling down my lungs, the muscles invigorating with its freshness, and I feel...

Exhausted.

When I was trapped in my car as the world around me collapsed, all thoughts escaped me. The road in front of me was covered in debris, rendering it unpassable, from a gigantic boulder that had broken loose from the hills above and rolled past not fifty yards ahead of my car. What had followed was a shower of large pebbles and stones raining on my car's roof. They splattered all over. Barring the many dents on my roof and a couple that broke through my rolled-up windows (one that landed on my rib, cracking it, and another that hit squarely on my leg), I guess you could say I was lucky to escape the disaster. For an entire day, I was caged in a car damaged enough to not start, a road in front of me that was impeded, and rocks raining all

around me (making it impossible to get out and seek help), utterly terrified. I wondered if I'd even survive.

No matter how much logic there is to the idea, I don't want to believe it was blind luck that helped me. There was something more... something that's indescribable. Intangible, invisible. A force of some sort. Maybe it was my will to keep hanging on, to live to see my family, to see another day.

And now that I am here, healthy and alive, tiredness seeps within me. Maybe it's not so much as tiredness as it is emptiness.

When I was in the hospital, drugged up with medications, I wondered if I would live to see another day. Of course, if you asked my doctor, it was paranoia; the stress, the exhaustion, the trauma of what I'd been through.

"There's no light of optimism down in that pit," he'd said. But what my wife said left a deeper impression on me.

"You were lucky, you know," she said. "I don't care what that doctor says. You better cherish life from now."

And in the next week that I couldn't step out of my house, I did exactly that. I cherished life. Aggressively, I should say. More than my physical strength, I endeavoured to build my optimism. To trust myself more. To not let mere inconveniences bog me down. To find that silver lining behind every dark cloud.

But as I stand here, trying to cherish these commonplace activities, I wonder how long can I keep exhausting myself to live each day as if it's

my last?

A man walks past me, his face contorted in unshakeable determination, his eyes focused straight ahead, his nostrils flaring. I want to grab him by the shoulders and yell at him. Not out of rage. The accident somehow drove anger out of me.

But in desperation, the driving need to tell him...

Tell him what?

To tell him all *this* is painfully exhausting. Be it the unending worry over the silliest of things, or the ceaseless anxiety of trying to make every moment count, of finding happiness – that silver lining – in everything.

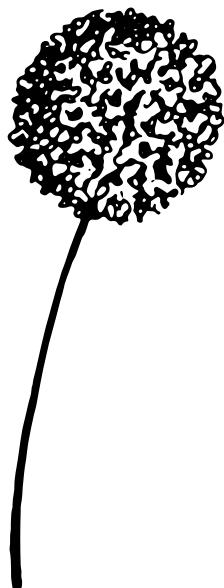
Of living like it's your last day.

Maybe real happiness is in letting go. Taking your hands off the steering.

Of shedding all inhibitions and dancing in the rain.

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<https://honeyfirelit.com/untold/f/to-cherish-and-exhaust-%7C-shaurya-arya>



Shaurya Arya-Kanojia is the author of the novella, End of the Rope. He likes sports (cricket, mostly), eating out, and watching reruns of The Office and Everybody Loves Raymond. His social media handles include @shauryaticks (Twitter) and @main.hoon.ek.sharara (Instagram), and more about him can be found at shauryaak.com

God's Equation

by Narimaan Shafi

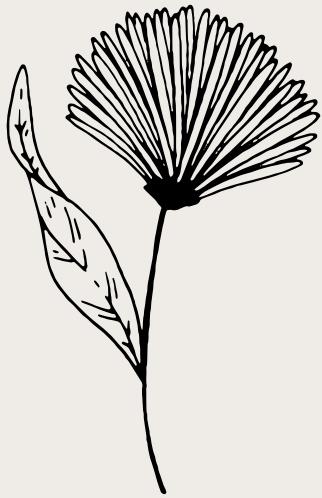
I emerge from weeks of research into hurricanes and tornadoes, destined never to feel sure of or dismiss a grey sky again. Previously, my eyes would glance skyward and mourn the absence of blue sky and sun. Now, I look at the leaden sky and no longer see a monotone mass devoid of personality. I can see it is composed of an infinite number of shades of grey, most certainly not a homogenous entity.

This multi-tinted and multi-toned mass is formed from individual clouds moving and morphing into and out of each other. They have an energy, a mind of their own it seems. In gathering themselves, they gather pace urged on by extraordinary winds.

Winds powered by hot ground and cold air are seemingly innocent, but when they come together, catastrophic swirling gusts can arise. These colossal weather phenomena can rip your life up by its roots. They'll spin it around at immense speeds with immeasurable force and throw it all back down again so even you don't recognise it. Known as Acts of God, they occur with greater frequency than ever before, are more powerful and cannot be reasoned with.

We interact with our beautiful, bounteous and balanced planet. Consequently, we increase some variables, decrease others and add more. God's equation executes and creates balance once again. Creating balance causes turmoil but it will equalise the system. It will prevail.

Narimaan Shafi has been scribbling away in the North of England since the age of four. Her particular passion is flash fiction, both reading and writing it. The question on her mind: Will the ever-growing pile of flash fiction anthologies in the room turn sentient and say something? You can find her on Twitter @thenormanshaft



(another short story about god)

by Lily Nobel

Day broke late and was put back together early and the inner walls of the eggshell are white-- no, pearlescent-- no, gray. Doesn't matter: the girl driving the car can barely see the sky through the mist, barely see the mist through the rain. She's squinting hard, nose bunched up far enough that the top of her wire glasses frames rub against her eyebrows and annoy her. Her socks are wet and her hair is brown, her nails fresh bitten so each edge is pulpy. In her shoes, her toes curl all the way up. She bares her teeth. Her knuckles grip white on the wheel.

The car crashes through another puddle, water flaring up in twin angel wings alongside the vehicle, like it's preparing for take off. The girl closes her eyes for just a moment. As she opens them, a woman leaps in front of her car. All in white, her delicate body arcs. She rips the steering wheel to the side like one side of the Red Sea washing away from Moses. Her vision goes black even before she hits the tree.

Day broke late and was put back together early and the inner walls of the eggshell are white-- no, pearlescent-- no, gray. Kathy is taking the elevator down from the bank building for what her boss has decided will be the last time. She bought new shoes for this job, and she looks down at them now. The elevator stutters and the plant from her desk trips off of the stack of folders she carries. It plummets and the terracotta shatters on contact with the scuffed tile. She leaves it there when she leaves the elevator. A woman she doesn't recognize steps on to the platform and around the dirt. She smiles, polite and guarded, at Kathy.

“Going up?” The elevator asks in its automated voice.

The girl with the brown hair just bought a new car. She just got a new girlfriend, too, and bought from a shop online a knit dress with sleeves that will now never fall past her wrists, but would’ve. She has a little brother named Michael, a cousin named Kev, a cat named Elsa after the princess. In the hospital, the doctors will stand over her broken body. One will think she looks a little bit like Natalie Portman.

On the street, firefighters will dig through the crumpled shell of her car to find her phone, her wallet, her emergency contacts. The rain has started to turn to snow, which smothers away the young roar of the fire from the engine. The firefighters never even need to unroll their hose. The road is too empty to warrant a blockade, and besides-- by this time of night, most everyone is home in houses and apartments, windows glowing sure and endless against the dark.

Day broke late and was put back together early and the inner walls of the eggshell are white-- no, pearlescent-- no, gray. A woman leaps in front of a car and for her millisecond of decision, then milliseconds of flight, she becomes God. She pinches the flame of the candle. She turns the light.

The day is quiet. It’s raining. God jumps in front of a car. This is probably the only universe where she does. But here, the record player trips in its grooves. God does it again, and again, and again. No one is going up.



Lily Beck Q. Nobel is a poet, novelist, and student living in the Rocky Mountains. Often hungry and presently trapped in a stalactite cave. It's beautiful here, but please send a telegram if you have any ideas on how to get out.



Life's Essence

by Aini Butt



Life's Essence

A3 piece of sketching paper using Derwent sketching pencils only.



Aini Butt reflects on her lived experiences through her writing and Art. Each art piece can be interpreted through a range of lenses, which allows the audience to experience a reflective process within themselves.

Belief

by Saptarshi Bhowmick

Life works weirdly. The concatenation of living decides randomly how people would react to life and its ways. Sometimes a human being fails to recognize it, and sometimes it goes beyond the limit of mortal recognition. The circle of life is thus turbulent; from birth to death, it never succumbs to stability. People, though stable by the continuous daily routine they maintain, burn out even before they reach their prime. With sombre thoughts, they exhaust half of their lives, and the other half goes over contemplating it. In the end, nothing comes out but the reluctance and convulsions of self-pity. Even their passions and dreams perish when they start to compromise for stability. One person, well-settled in life, spends his remaining days gambling with chances. The balance he sustains is like the Japanese Musubi thread, too thick to even pull him out of his own mess. Although he lives thinking that it is all balanced, in reality, he is just tangled up between the proximity of living and its dangers. The danger only concludes when he ultimately realizes his situation. As time plays the role of a wizard, it brings out its wand to dictate a spell, and all of a sudden, every self-doubt and lamentation existing in his soul jumps out of his mundane heart. Only the void remains, duly created by the monotonous endeavours of his life's struggle.

Sitting on a bench, when I hear the echo of their empty shells, it speaks to me directly. Their pangs and pains vivify the meaning of my existence. These vociferations oblige me to come to them. But it is not in my hand to do so.

I, Belief, a word with six letters and two syllables, appear occasionally to a human mind when someone dares to oppose normality. But most of the time, it fails to mark its allegiance. It fails when religions collide, it fails when superstitions divulge, and it fails when people expect too much from each other. But today, I am not here to discuss those failures; they are common, and it is too hard for a commoner to take them in. I am a commoner and I notice uncommon things easily. Though it takes a while to realize them, I cannot swear if there is any premonition about it. A person lives and dies with me in their mind, many even shun the idea of my existence. But I never left them. All it takes is a little detour for them to find me. And I wait as the horizon waits with open hands to welcome them in. Between my hands where peace nullifies the infamous weird ways of Life itself. Some have already found me, some are struggling to have a glimpse of me, and some are still neglecting me even after doing all the hard work to find me.

I exist before you,

I exist behind you;

I may stay by you

I may forgive you.

But it is all you

Not me

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I

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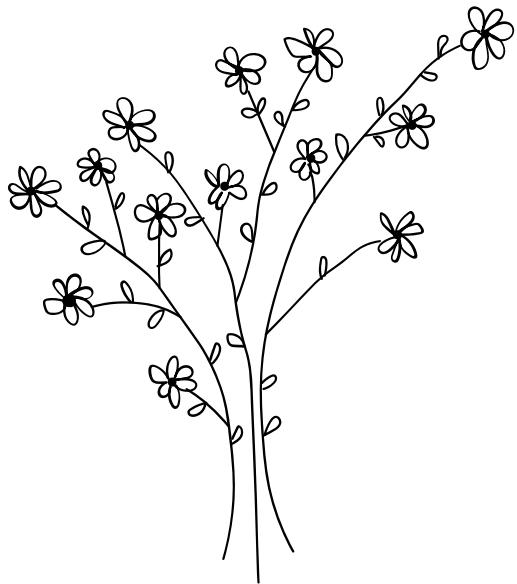
F

That would seek,

As For you I shall live

And for you I give!

Everything..



Curating the solid imageries taken from real-life experiences, **Saptarshi Bhowmick** makes his sanctuary of sublime poems. Each of them toils to tell you a different story, but only a few try actually to comprehend it. And the little praises he collects fuel him further to write one. Aside from being famous for his bilingual poems, Saptarshi got published in many International Magazines, including The Rainbow Poems, Tofu Ink Art Press, The Antonym, Wingless Dreamers, Sparked Literary Magazine, MOIDA, The Compass Magazine, SeaGlass Lit, Aster Lit, Firefly_Archives, The Graveyard Zine, The Dried Review, Meadow Mouse. (He also featured two flash fictions in Overtly Lit, and he is really proud of it)

My People Hurt People

by Morning-meadow Jones

The earth speaks to me each morning; I open my eyes and breathe. I stretch my thoughts up to the sky beyond the wooded hill behind me, give thanks because I'm awake now and aware that I'm alive.

I can feel the trees on the hill; they're awake and alive as well. They're good trees. They are guardians: strong, calm, benevolent, just. I often feel them breathe with me. Their exhale is my inhale; we pass this breath between us in a dance of lungs, we bow and curtsy, we dip and sway.

Sometimes I'm ashamed to dance with them; I know my people hurt the trees.

“Breathe, sister,” they admonish. “Don’t hide from yourself; we are one. Trees and humans are two branches of the same root. Grieve if you must, but take this breath from us. Heal yourself, and we heal together.”

“Don’t you despise me?”

“What a newb,” they chuckle, a dry rustling of leaves.

“Sister, we are of the earth. Our memory is as old as time, our knowledge is as deep. We support every life, accept every season. We fear nothing, envy nothing, resent nothing. We are eternal, we are love.

“It’s our power and joy to make the air sweet. What is your power and joy? Do it, and live this day with us.”

I breathe, I rise.

My love for my children is my power and joy; I prepare their food, I help my youngest daughter wash her hair.

My high school student needs to rant. She’s neurodivergent, pursuing her education in a system designed for neurotypical people. The stress is tremendous, relentless. I see the constant struggle grinding her down, causing her to internalize ideas about being *Inadequate*, being *A Problem*.

I listen, I commiserate. We discuss potential solutions, we dream of possible alternatives, we end the conversation knowing nothing will change. She’ll carry on white-knuckling and surviving until graduation. We have no money to access other services or systems. We hope the next phase of her education will be more flexible.

I’m proud of her. She already surpasses me in her strength, her courage. I dropped out of seventh grade, stayed under the radar, avoided high school altogether.

My daughter’s burden is a weight on my heart; my people hurt young people.

My adult son calls to ask a question about finding employment. We joke about the strange process of distilling one’s entire self into a few ticked boxes on an application. We mock this weird life, we laugh. My high school student teases her brother, he responds in kind. They pass this spark between them like a dance, lunge and parry, feint and block.

She asks her brother if he'll keep her company over the phone, while she does the school stuff that hurts.

“Sister, breathe. Of course I will. We are one family, your success is a success for us all.”

And I breathe too, I rise. Because my children are eternal, they are love, they are beautiful. They are my hope and comfort.

I pray. I feel life around me, under me, running through me. The earth is awake and alive. I close my eyes, see the spirits who care for me. I speak my joy, my truth, my longing. I see myself held in the world's embrace, and the spinning world nestled in the arms of the universe. The universe is awake and alive, and sees me. I feel connected, I feel peace.

I feel thirsty. I drink water, prepare food for my family again.

The sun is shining. Outside, people are doing people things: walking dogs, watering flowers, watching phones.

Inside, I'm also doing people things. I procrastinate washing the dishes. I turn on my computer and work on a writing task instead.

Headlines stab my eyes. A politician was viewing pornography during an official government meeting. My people hurt people they've sworn to serve.

A war has separated families and orphaned children. My people hurt the vulnerable, the innocent.

I put on music. I breathe, I sing. My soul rises with each note. Beauty is accessible, it is real. Beauty is human, too.

The task is to create a biographical sketch of an ancestor. I smile and reach for my ancestors, I feel them smile and reach for me. I think of all our generations, stretching back to the first humans. I think of their names, their stories. I think of writing about great-great-grandfather Phineas, a veteran of the Civil War.

Then I know I'll be writing about great-great-uncle Fred, veteran of the Illinois State Pen.

"Yes! Fred, Fred, Fred," sing my ancestors brightly, insistently, so I can't doubt myself or misunderstand.

I can't feel Fred, we don't communicate. But I see him stand with the ancestors, and we acknowledge each other. I know his face, perceive the outline of his life. His disturbing, painful life.

I think about his boyhood: destitution, dysfunction, disgrace. I think of his father, jailed for domestic abuse; his mother, dead in a mental institution; his sisters, taken away by strangers. Fred and his brother left alone, expected by their society to "shift for themselves" at the ages of twelve and fifteen. I think of his later life: his violent choice, the terrible consequences. Things lost and destroyed for his victim and himself.

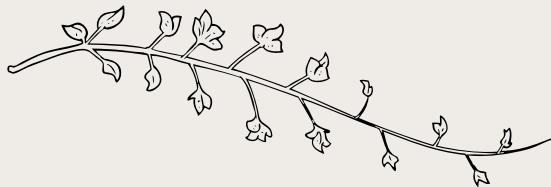
My people hurt my people.

"It's true," says Lydia, my great-grandmother. She loves her brother Fred. "We are one blood, one spirit. When we hurt one, we hurt all."

“How do we stop it, Grandma? How do we change?”

“Oh, my darling newb,” she says.

“Oh my darling newb, we are love!” sing the ancestors, swirling, full of light. Smiling, they encircle me all around, swaying me in their dance. “Breathe, Child. Rise. You’re doing it.”



Morning-meadow Jones is an American junior high school dropout, who later went on to realise her full potential and drop out of university too. She is a mother, migrant, and multi medium creative, working from her home in Wales, UK. Morning-meadow views her art as a means to explore and give expression to the inner self, the voice of spirit.

The Near Death Experience

by Sadia Akhtar

“You always do this – you add so much pressure on me. Do this,” Ahmed made exaggerated gestures with his hands as he spoke, “Do that. Get this, get that. Nothing I do is good enough, Saira.” His voice softened as he sat on the sofa and whispered, “What do you want?”

Saira cried as she rocked their daughter, Laila, in her arms. Her tears streamed, but she was unable to wipe them. She did not want her daughter to feel uncomfortable in any way.

“I want you home, Ahmed. I want to see you more. It’s so difficult to raise two children; I gave birth four months ago and I am struggling.”

“Saira, what do you want me to do? I am trying. Do you think I want to run around like a mad man? I want to be at home: sat with my wife at night, taking my son to football, hear my daughter’s first word, see my mother, and just have time.” Ahmed stared at the carpet, his eyes following the zigzag of the carpet. “The mortgage, bills, and our expenses won’t pay for themselves; I am tired. I can’t remember the last time I slept a full eight hours.”

Saira appreciated her husband. It was because of his work that they were able to afford their luxurious lifestyle. But, as every day passed by, she felt like a single mother. He was here, but he wasn’t. She understood that he was tired; she had dinner ready for him after work and made sure the children were quiet when he returned. He did everything to make sure he was comfortable at home – why couldn’t

he make the effort when he was well-rested? Saira felt too exhausted to ask him the same question – she did not want to hear the same answer, again. “I need to go work now, do you need anything?”

Saira could not help it, she rolled her eyes.

“What is it, Saira?” Ahmed asked impatiently.

“Your family is coming today. YOU took a day off to celebrate your son’s sixth birthday, why are you going to work?”

“Because duty calls.”

Saira scoffed, “You have booked this day as a holiday – you will be getting paid regardless. For the last time – and for the love of Allah, tell me the truth – why are you going to work?”

“I have to, Saira. This is an important project. Being an investment banker is hard.”

“Don’t walk out that door. You are not going to work on your son’s birthday when you don’t need to.” Laila squirmed as he heard her mother’s voice increase. “You’re going because you’re selfish, because you want to be away from your family, because you don’t want to be home!”

Ahmed looked at Saira in shock with a hint of pain. “Don’t, Saira. Don’t speak like this in front of our children or raise your voice, please. We don’t do that. I am going so I can finish this project and have more time at home. This project is causing late evenings, overnight trips,

and, clearly, hiccups at home.” Ahmed brushed his hair back with his fingers.

Saira thought: he’s aged a lot.

“I am not going into work on purpose. I love you, Saira. I love our family. Our home. I love life with you. I just want to complete this so I can appreciate and show you how much I love you all.”

Saira wanted to understand, he was being reasonable. Ahmed was always reasonable – it was her favourite trait of his. She understood the demands of his job – she knew this was the biggest deal his employer had ever had. Once he closes it, he can stay at home longer. But she needed him today. She was exhausted. She glanced in the mirror. Her hijab had patches of wetness, her abaya had vomit stains, she felt bloated, and she felt ugly. She needed her husband today. She could not look after her children and host his family – not feeling like this. With Ahmed here, she could conquer the world.

“You’re not leaving, Ahmed.” Saira placed Laila in her cot. She began to pick up the toys and called for Kareen, their seven-year-old son, to clean up.

“Saira,” Ahmed placed his hand on her shoulder. He brushed strands of her hair back under her hijab. He gave her a soft smile: the smile she fell in love with.

“I’m sorry. I can tell you’re exhausted, I am so sorry. I’ll tell everyone not to come. I’ll finalise this project today and come home to our family to celebrate, I promise.”

“You’re selfish, Ahmed,” Saira shouted. “A bad father. A bad husband. Leave. Come back whenever you want, I am tired of waiting for you.” Ahmed frowned, he stroked Saira’s left cheek. Saira pushed his hand away.

Laila began to cry along with Saira. Saira picked up her daughter and rocked her.

“Leave, Ahmed,” Saira said. Eventually the sound of Saira’s and Laila’s cries matched.

Ahmed could not bear it anymore. He kissed his son’s head.

“I promise everything will be okay. InshAllah I’ll be home for good after this. I love you, Saira.” Ahmed said as he walked out the door. He stopped by his car as he heard Saira shout, ‘I hate you.’ He put his hand to his chest as he felt a sharp pain. He prayed to Allah for ease before he drove to work.

“Wow, Mum! Blue and red lights are flashing, I can see them through our curtains.” Kareen excitedly shouted as he ran to the window to watch.

Saira frowned and put her hijab on. Saira’s house was on private land and they were the only house. Saira watched the police car parked next to hers. She watched the man and woman walk towards her door. She looked behind them to see if her husband was in trouble, but only leaves were flying behind them.

“Kareen, please go sit by your sister. Don’t wake her, don’t move. Just sit and watch TV, okay?”

Kareen nodded and ran to sit on the sofa, picking the left side as it was closer to his sister’s cot.

Saira felt uneasy. She put her hand to her chest and prayed to Allah for ease. Something did not feel right. She did not ring Ahmed, he did not ring her. She felt a heavy weight on her chest, one only Ahmed could lift now. A knock, that felt like her heartbeat, can be heard. That knock drowned out every noise: her son babbling, the TV, the music coming from the kitchen, the hum of the oven.

Saira opened the door and could not speak.

“Good evening, Mrs Rahman. I am Inspector Danielle, and this is my colleague Rory.” They showed their badges. “Is this the home of Ahmed Rahman?” Saira blinked.

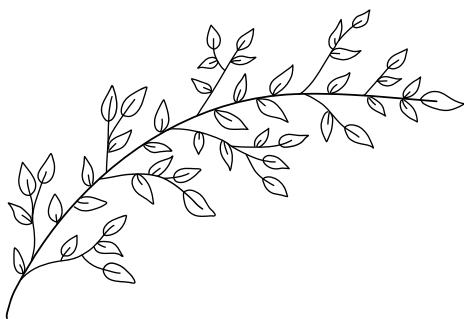
“I am so sorry, Mrs Rahman. Your husband was in a car accident. He was unresponsive at the scene. The doctors tried their best but he had a—” Saira closed the door and fell to the floor. She felt as though she had died.

She heard the police knock, her son calling her, and her daughter’s soft cries but all that resonated with her was:

“InshAllah I’ll be home for good after this. I love you, Saira.”

God did not will for Ahmed to come home and Saira felt responsible.

They say life flashes before your eyes when you die. Saira saw every moment between her and Ahmed flash: their first meeting, their wedding, the birth of their children, and every argument she had with Ahmed. She remembered each word she spat at him before he left. Saira didn't die but it felt as though she did.



Sadia is a journalist, an avid reader, and an aspiring writer. She is originally from England but lives in Scotland. You can find her on Instagram as @sadia.reads where she shares her book reviews, podcast episodes, travels, and literary work.

A Mountain of String

by Jowell Tan

Three ladies — one blind, one mute, and one deaf — are unspooling a ball of yarn.

The blind one rolls out the string with one hand and guides it with the other. The mute one continues pulling the string, letting it run across her palms to make a coil at her feet. When the time is right, she takes one palm off the string, pressing the string between her thumb and finger. The deaf one, alerted by her sister's tap on her shoulder, brings up a pair of scissors to the spot where the mute one is pinching and — *snip*. The rest of the string falls to the floor, where the mute one then kicks it to the pile behind her. A hill of cut string of varying lengths, each lying atop another in a messy heap, short and long mingling together, end upon end.

The blind one senses my presence before the other two. “*Come out from the shadows, dearie,*” she says, “*we don't bite.*”

The deaf one says, “*Who might you be, dearest? Come, come closer, we don't bite. Isn't that right, sisters?*”

The mute one grunts. She pinches another spot on the string and taps the deaf one on the shoulder. “*Oh, time for the trimmer again,*” and the scissors go up and — *snip*. I pick up the string and I see: this time it's so much shorter than the last one. I measure it from the tip of my finger and it barely crosses over into my palm. “*That was a baby, that was,*” the

deaf one says. Her cackle is rough and scratchy, resembling more like a smoker's cough. Her voice echoes off unseen walls, fades away into the emptiness around us.

"What are you making?" I ask quietly. This elicits a loud howl from the three ladies. They bend over at their waists laughing, lean on their knees to stop themselves falling. When their laughter gets softer and their bodies stop shaking, they pick up the ball of yarn and the scissors off the floor.

"We don't make anything, my dear," replies the blind one. *"We're more of the finishing kind, if you catch my meaning."*

The deaf one sings, out of tune:

*snip snip, snip snip!
you won't see it coming!
we're the ones who cut the string!
we see the end of everything!*

"One day, this ball of yarn I'm holding," the blind one continues, *"Will unroll itself fully and we will have no more string left to cut. And when that day comes, we will pick everything up off the floor and tie all the ends together to make a new ball. And we will continue on, as if there was never a pause at all."*

The mute one grunts. She points upwards behind me. I turn to see a small, round, white-bright spot. The circle is expanding rapidly. The deaf one, looking up, shouts: *"The light!"*

The blind one smiles. *"It seems it's almost time for you to leave us, dearest.*

Such a pity — I'd hoped to talk with you more. But it seems there are other plans in store for you. Though, before you leave us — Will you lend an ear to a piece of advice from each of us?"

I turn back to the three ladies who have stopped unspooling, stopped pinching, and stopped cutting. They look at me, waiting for my reply. I hesitate for a moment. I sense the white light approaching me at speed. I nod, crossing my fingers to hear their counsel before the light takes me.

The blind one says, "*Do not walk in the paths chosen for you; instead, carve your own journey through the forests.*"

The deaf one says, "*Do not heed the words of those out to deceive you; instead, find your own truth.*"

The mute one does not speak. She only stares, deep into my eyes.

The light arrives from behind me. The ladies return to their work as I see the blinding light creep slowly into my vision from the sides, blotting out everything I see. The blind one speaks one more time, the black of their silhouettes slowly melting into the whiteness, becoming lost to time:

"We are endless. We are always here. If you are lucky, you will see us again once more. We will be exactly where we will be."

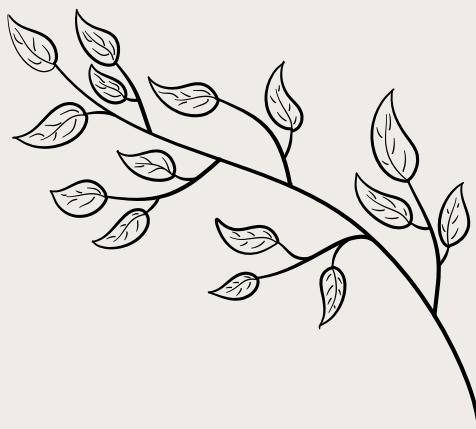
Three ladies — one blind, one mute, and one deaf — are unspooling a ball of yarn.

The blind one does not cast judgement on the length of the string.

The mute one does not intercede on behalf of the string.

The deaf one does not hear the voices pleading for more time.

And so it goes; the three ladies continue toiling away, unknown to all, a mountain of tangled string lying behind them.



Jowell Tan writes. He thanks you for reading, and he appreciates your time.

jwlltn.carrd.co

Learning to Unlearn

by Aini Butt

“Why do you do this to yourself?” my friend laughed.

It had been a painstakingly slow start to another piece of art as I spent over an hour calculating where each letter of the Quranic quote would start and end. *Anything less than perfect wouldn't be right*, I kept telling myself every time I had to start all over again. This was my first attempt at Arabic calligraphy on a large canvas and I couldn't let myself down. During the several hours working on the art, I kept coming back to the question, “Why do you do this to yourself?” This suggests that it is my choice and within my control to change this thought that anything less than perfect would not be acceptable. If this were true then surely it is just a matter of unlearning this belief? One thought led to another; a reflective process was set in motion.

Like a mirror that reflects everything, the inner reflection exposed parts of me that I have been trying to filter out. One of the most important and most difficult things to accept was how control and emotional manipulation had changed the younger me and her perspective on life and what success truly meant. If this were the case then ‘finding myself’ was not going to be about returning to who I was before. It would require a deeper exploration of emotions to understand the values and core beliefs underpinning those thoughts and behaviours that allowed me to stay in a place where I had lost myself. It was not about learning new ways of life, but recognising those beliefs and habits that I would have to unlearn to be at peace with

myself and finally living my motto to ‘Bloom Unapologetically’.

As I learnt at the beginning of my reflective writing journey two years ago, unconditional loyalty and blind love were one of the core beliefs that did not serve me well for almost fifteen years. Slowly unpicking where and when this belief had been ingrained and became a core value, I realised that this was just the tip of the iceberg of generational curses. We are often brought up with a set of core values. Some are taught verbally then silently reinforced through the witnessing and practising of daily habits while some are formed as a result of a lived experience.

One habit that I am slowly learning to change and avail to my advantage rather than letting it become a self-sabotaging behaviour is ‘over thinking’. To this day, I do not like to call anyone (or myself) an overthinker as it has such negative connotations. It was after a chat with a friend who was struggling with ‘over-thinking’ that I started digging deeper. I have often beaten myself up for being an “over-thinker” and I have played conversations and situations over and over again in my head until I could picture the catastrophised version. I was taught to always think of the best and worst outcome as it would allow me to make informed decisions, which served me well for several years. However, this same habit ended up feeding the distorted reality following on from living with coercive control and emotional manipulation for over a decade. Where I had silenced my inner voice for so long, having the ability to listen to my thoughts and feelings without distortion gave me a new sense of freedom.

However, I had to attune my listening skills and adapt by unlearning the habit of thinking of every possible (often disastrous) scenario. Although the unlearning of habits ingrained over the years does not

happen overnight, it was nothing short of an epiphany when I was able to recognise its origin. It was during one of my ‘over-thinking’ cycles—which I prefer to call self reflections—that it finally hit me! Visualising the catastrophised outcomes allowed me to create a mental and emotional comfort zone with boundaries to safeguard me from further harm. Recognising the hold my past had over my present was painful, but ‘These pains you feel are messengers. Listen to them.’ Rumi’s pearls of wisdom had never made more sense than today when I could feel the pain and its hidden message: forgive yourself! Forgive yourself for those habits that were merely a survival mechanism—your mind and heart’s attempt at safeguarding you at all cost.

The truth was that the emotions were merely a messenger and it became even harder when the emotions were in direct conflict with each other. If I didn’t want to continue living my life in survival mode, I had no option but to unlearn this habit.

Almost two years on and it has been a journey far from easy and I now accept that I will be a work in progress for as long as I continue to strive for a better version of myself.

Aini Butt reflects on her lived experiences through her writing and Art. Each art piece can be interpreted through a range of lenses, which allows the audience to experience a reflective process within themselves.

The Wall in My Therapist's Office

by Hazel J. Hall

At the end of every appointment, I drag myself from her office, walking past the vibrant banners. Each flag is illustrated with its own colours and flown by its own people. Like a lighthouse, they guide the lost home. Like a moon on the water, they create peace amongst the chaos of the world.

The hall is always quiet when I walk out of my therapist's office, though every chair is filled. Every person, every husk, looks forward, their eyes locked onto the monotonous greyness of the cinder block walls. They're all wondering, *When will it stop hurting?*

While they are thinking this, they sit, losing themselves in the endless loop of our existences. Waiting and waiting and waiting. Not living, not standing, not leaving the hallway. Just waiting. Waiting and tired of waiting. Waiting for everything to become okay.

The world is cruel like this. It breathes down our necks and bears upon us. The very same ground that we press our feet into rises above our heads and crushes us, falling down and breaking our bones. Letting our flesh meet with the earth of our makers. This is why the very same rainbow flags that hang down our own walls are nailed into the crevices of the cinder blocks here. Because we are terrified. Terrified that this waiting will never cease.

I let out a silent sigh and continue to walk down the long hallway. It is

filled with the empty hopes and dreams of my peers.

In what world should love ever lead to this? To us, sitting in chairs, looking up into the cinder block walls and wishing, just wishing, that we were beyond them.

It is evil. This universe is evil. Its children and their children's children are evil: evil for making us walk down this hall. Evil for not being able to understand, in the way that we must understand. Evil in how it picks and chooses those who must walk down this hall. Evil in that it cannot decide to either be indiscriminate in its gift of suffering or merciful in its choice of infinite happiness for everyone. For all of the people who are already so finite.

Do they not understand? Does Evil not know what it brings? Does it not see The Wall?

I approach The Wall, as I do at the beginning and end of every appointment. I slow as I get closer, gazing up at The Wall just before the entrance and exit to this place. To this evil place.

The Wall is a section of cinder blocks, a mural that has been covered with handprints. Every palm is another patient.

I pick out my own handprint with ease. Amongst the sea of fingers and hand pressings, mine looks like a star. An eternal glimmer into the brevity of my existence.

From a few feet back, I stare into the clumps of paint that make up the whole mural.

People made this. A person put their hand here; they reached out and asked to be held, because, despite every horror, they were still scared of letting go of this. Of this evil, evil place.

I press my hand against The Wall. I let my fingers fit against one small handprint. The print is ancient, and the white paint is dusty.

Hands cover The Wall all the way to the top. Each palm is different, though all of them say the same thing:

"We're here. We existed once."

Every time I gaze up at The Wall, I can imagine hundreds of beautiful voices echoing in my ears. As I look up at the disconnected and disjointed pieces of a people, many eyes stare back. Every hand understands as I, too, understand. They gently pull me closer, holding me in their arms and saying, "We know you're scared. It's okay. We reached out once, too. We were terrified, like you are. But the pressings of our hands here are proof: this is just a blink. One instant of our little forever."

"You will survive this."

Hazel J. Hall is an 18-year-old disabled-queer creator seeking to publish more creative writings as an emerging author and poet. Hazel has had work shared previously in After the Pause, Quail Bell Magazine, and Celestite Poetry with future pieces coming out in Breath & Shadow, Réapparition Journal, and Scribe *MICRO*Fiction, and hopes to continue to grow as an emerging author.



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