

The Hallelujah
by Maria Mathioudakis
Editor's Choice, Fiction

It was hidden for a reason. You have to look a little—but it's there—after the bridge at the end of the road. Midway to the ground there's a hole in the fence. It's not a very large opening. Just big enough for a cigarette, a kiss.

I heard about it from my grandmother. Everyone heard it from her first.

In the summer the house was full of flies and the roads were full of people. So there was always a believable excuse to give my grandfather. We must sit in the garden to peel potatoes under the grapevine, or water the bougainvillea, or sit in the sun to teach the child to needle point a scarlet letter.

They'd see us emerge and hurry to the gate, walking in with solemn expressions, so as not to aggravate her prematurely.

"How much you have bloomed child in only a day!" And they'd approach, chin down, eyes averted, hands clasped. "Like an angel's face. She is a cherub! Brasiliki, what a gift from God this child is to you!"

She'd gesture to let the old chickens sit. And there they'd stay for hours, jasmine filling their nostrils and making their breath smell like youth.

"This diabetes makes me not want to live." She'd reach a dry hand like a sponge to mop up the pain. "Ah, my ankle! I don't have one! That's the problem!"

They'd spend the afternoon clucking, chewing the basil and the honeysuckle together to make their gums tingle.

"The baker, I have seen him for three nights leave work with a red hat. He is a communist, you know? Since the government began to tax dry yeast."

I'd close my eyes and listen to her tongue spin.

"Every night this week I've had the insomnia. I feel the gardenias bloom. So I try to lay on my right, but I'll smell them still. I'll move to the left, or turn onto my back. But by then Nikolaus he is cursing the Virgin and calling fire down from heaven on my head. So I come out to the garden to see my flowers. And you know what? You see a lot more than flowers blooming in the moonlight!

Every night this week the older girls—Katina's daughters—have rolled up their skirts and walked over the bridge to the fence. The whole thing is shameful. The way they've taken to washing their sweaters in piping hot water, the wool sticking to their skin like static. The sway in their hips is shameful. They laugh. They squeal to get attention. Like pigs—it's shameful! The way they whisper adult ideas with lollipop stained lips, hoping their words will drift up over the fence and make some young buck's ears burn."

“Spiro, the doctor, tells me the soldiers fight over who will man the outpost by the bridge. They’ve taken to drawing straws. They huddle around making empty threats and spitting until they’re sent out.

At first they pretend to stand post—craning their necks—and holding up their binoculars to see over the fence. Only in moments of desperation allowing one another to climb down from the tower and walk the fence line, leaning against the fence to press their hips as long and as hard against the wires as possible.”

It’s easier to listen to her with my eyes closed. I don’t have to watch them drooling. I can just listen. Like the north wind fills the sails and guides the ships to the harbor. The words push me forward.

I can see him calling out over the fence for a cigarette. His eyes shifting, hoping for a wink, a smile maybe? The voice startles them and they stop laughing.

They stop walking, exchanging glances until the voice asks again.

I watch her take a few steps toward the fence before stopping to look back at her friends. Their round faces pale, their eyes glazed with naïveté. The gravel of the dirt road crunches under her feet until she reaches the hole in the fence.

A bead of sweat rolls down his back. He can smell the lily oil she had dotted behind her ears and on her wrists. The gold cross hanging on the chain around her neck and resting on her chest—it’s almost too much. **His fingers twitch. They fidget with the buttons above his pockets** because they can feel the zipper that runs up the front of her skirt.

He’s awake. He can feel her breath.

Without saying a word, she reaches through the hole in the fence and extends a cigarette. He takes it, and trying to seem confident, places it above his ear instead of in his mouth.