

# THE LIT QUARTERLY

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SUMMER  
4  
2020



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*The Lit Quarterly*

*Heres and Nows*

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*Summer 2020*

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## Foreword

*'Unprecedented' is a word that has become an unprecedented nuisance to behold with our collectively sore eyes. Anybody who consumes news media, social media, internal corporate media, and so on, has suddenly become saturated, inundated even, with this hitherto perfunctory adjective. Circa this year, it has become a melodramatic, hyperbolic buzzword to enunciate on paper or in person to any reader, interlocutor or silent virtual meeting participant which I choose not to empower by hamming up any further than to say this: The Lit Quarterly, since its impromptu inception of June 2019, has never before received such an overwhelming number of submissions than this previous quarter, a momentous crescendo for us at the magazine—two hundred forty-seven unique authors, four hundred seventy-one individual pieces, and, I loathe to redouble your pains, so suffice it to say: we weren't expecting this.*

*Thanks to you, we have decided to move forward with several major ideas: beginning with the next quarter, we have appointed a small handful of volunteer readers; and, to coincide with our launch of the fourth edition of the print publication, we will be inducting a free-to-access digital supplement of the magazine on our website to further stretch our wings, celebrating at long last its first full entire year as a bona fide quarterly.*

*It goes without saying that working with everybody we reached consensus to print this time around has been a humbling, fulfilling experience. With this edition, we have opted to aim high and reach for the skies in deliberately publishing as diverse a selection of themes, authors, nationalities, and styles as we could, which is why we have decided to subtitle this quarter's edition as Heres and Nows.*

*The idea sprang from a reading of Aristotle whose Greek pluralization of 'now' has been of some note to philosophy researchers and classicists, and without deterring the uninitiated, it was this concept of plural 'nows' we thought best expressed the plurality of times and spaces represented across the combination poetry, fiction and non-fiction in this edition. It was chosen in hopes that, in light of the continually more and more exposed economic inequalities and political iniquities of the world at large, we can, through our*

*combined literary pursuits, come together to contribute to a true-to-life world literature.*

*It is my sincere desire that these poems and stories, in sum and in part, may furnish your mind with novel loci that serve your memory some superior pleasure and purpose in the years to come. This poetry and prose, with their collection of images, settings and characters, as they appear on our pages, tend each to their own expressions of feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Yet, as the whole may result in being greater than its parts, the intent is that in your here and now, these words give you the inspiration to carry forth into (what little precedent could forebode) uncertain times.*

*Faithfully yours,*

*Jay Miller, Editor  
Montreal  
June–September, 2020*

## Letter to The Editor

*Quod est in cordi sobrii, est in ore ebrii.*

Sir,

By the time this letter reaches you, the global pandemic—popularly known as COVID-19—shall be in full swing. Its impact has been most extraordinary on my occidental perch. The silence of the town gives an impression that would make one think one was back in the horse-powered thirties of rural Ireland. The characters of the town, who would usually be sitting atop barstools in the shadows of pubs, whilst throwing back an inordinate amount of ethanolic thirst quenchers, are now wandering about making idle conversation with whoever they meet. It is often the case that you might hear them singing with the birds during these sweet, sunny days or meet them slugging out of an open, indiscernible bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. Indeed, many a time now have I been entreated to a whiff of whiskey and a rousing rebel ballad as I passed these fellows by.

The bumble bees are busily buzzing along. The daffodils are in full bloom. The trees are budding around the Protestant mall, and the crows are roaming about in hungry murders. It seems their food supply has decreased as folk keep inside. I often see the crows fighting with the seagulls for fallen foodstuffs near bins. They have malice in their eyes, I tell you! When I espy them, I cross the road, keep my head down and carry on with a brisk pace. It is best not to become carrion for corvi, and I shall not have it said that avians were the cause of my death during a flittermouse flu outbreak!

Due to the present scourge, many compeers of mine were compelled to return from the nether regions of the Earth. I warned them to be wary of the homebound return. The Irish progenitor, you see, has a peculiar inclination—though one assumes all parents are disposed in



the same way—to love the returned exile for a while. This love, however, quickly turns to indifference, followed by irritation, vexation and open frustration. I can verily say that many returnees to my province are beginning to wish the train bridge at Athlone had fallen into the Shannon, with themselves on it. As for myself, I continue to work, think and write in isolation.

I wish to relay to your votaries, thoughts which arose in my mind on a particular night during the weekend of the shutting of the drinkeries of the meridional half of the island. My compeers and I were paying our evening devotions to Bacchus as, unbeknownst to ourselves, a woman was gawking into our snug. Her Balor-like gaze became acutely felt, so I stole a glance. She was sullen, blonde, long-haired, a nice old bag of tricks, by my reckoning. We tried to ignore her, but our attempts were shattered by the flight of a packet of crisps into our snug. We turned to see the blonde lady beaming at us with a full set of snow-white teeth and a happy, muddled complexion. We thanked the lady for her kindness. She gave us a wink in return. We continued to ignore her, but to no avail. Another packet of crisps was flung at us by this overly enthusiastic stool-astride siren; and so, we began to speak with her—or tried to. In her inarticulate mumblings, only a few things could be discerned: that she liked to drink, knew the County Sligo, had a child at sixteen and could speak a bit of Irish. She heartily accepted two cigarettes from myself in thanks for her generosity. When we turned our heads for a brief moment, she vanished.

With the inconspicuous departure of the crisp woman, we returned to our drinks and remarked upon her peculiarity. As the hours flew by, we fell deeper into our cups, and Fortuna blessed our hard hours of pinting with a lock-in. Once our immoderate cravings were satisfied, we staggered out on to the cold, tight streets of the town in search of food. My compeer espied, and steered us to, an unclosed chip-shop. The sight we beheld there was anarchic. Patrons hovered about the establishment like a whisper of moths thoroughly engaged in a hundred colloquies around a streetlamp. The scene was one large, young, cacophonous drama in which the stems of salty chips were simultaneously used as items of nutrition, instruction and intimidation. Except for ourselves and the chip merchants, there was no restraint of reason to be found in the shop; only an excess of sensual gratification by avaricious voluptuaries. Whilst awaiting our food, I found various discourses to observe. A merry, red-faced, spikey-haired man, who was a fair bit older than most in the eatery, was trying to court a bevy of sunkissed stagestruck skirts. He incurred their displeasure and the asperity of a spontaneously mustered guard of inebriated and lustful Formorian-looking fellows who,

no doubt, were hopeful of a carnal reward for their defensive action. Together, they declared him a 'weirdo' and drove him from the shop. I saw him dissipate into the darkness outside, with a downcast look, slow pace and pensive mood. I suspect something was revived in the disappointed bachelor that night, but it was not the spirit of love.

A yoke of youths were holding back a shorter member of their circle from a cross looking fellow I can only describe as rakishly unhand-some. An exchange of menacing words, perilous prose and threatening speech filled the streets. One of my compeers and I, captivated by the atmosphere, began to egg them on. Alas, the instigator, once his pride was thoroughly shamed, cowardly fled, giving the field to the cavalcade of cavaliers. Begod, I would take up too much space in the *Quarterly* if I were to mention all the antics and occasions of diversion I met with during that night's ramble! After taking leave of my compeers, I passed more night-ramblers and headed to an elderly oak which stood adjacent to a monument built to remember the Year of the French. I sat there under its branches. It grew late, and the two moons became one behind the white, star-flecked veil of my cigarette smoke. The night's occurrences occupied my attention. What I perceived stood in blatant opposition to my starry-eyed view of Ireland. It made me keenly consider my perceptions.

Under the tree, it occurred to me that Hibernia was not becoming a money-grubbing, derivative blur of Columbia and Britannia—it is that blur. It occurred to me that our fortunes rely on external phenomena, as opposed to the energies of our own self-confident philosophy. It occurred to me that the young and old are indifferent to, and dismiss the achievement of, independence. It occurred to me that the Irish tongue is payed béalghrá by the Irish nation and is left aptly clinging to the western shores of the island; for that is where the sun sets, and where the language of the Irish in a free Ireland shall too. It occurred to me that Irish people speak of their own interests phrased in sanctimonious words, expressing personal complaints or victimhood, with little interest for anything outside those matters of the self and the present moment. It occurred to me that their concern for the continuation of a characteristic mode of expression independent of the Anglosphere intellectually, culturally, socially and linguistically, has been lost (or was never existent) amidst the clamour of present-day *panem et circenses* (with a good bit of *cervisia* to boot). It occurred to me, finally, that I could not blame them. What worth could these abstractions, that can neither be underwritten nor dissolved, hold? What comfort could they provide in comparison to a full stomach, a healthy body and a happy mind? Bloody frivolities are what they are!

In brief, sir, the sights of that night compelled me to ruminate on issues which I mentioned in my last letter. In this case, howbeit, I am no longer certain that I can continue as a patriot, nationalist or Irishman, when the cause seems so surely lost and so trivial. My ideological edifice was already in a state of collapse four years ago, due to the nigh persistent theoretical sorties of Anthony Smith, Hans Kohn, Ernst Renan, Benedict Anderson, Ernst Gellner and Richard Rorty. I cannot continue to descend into the arena to face martyrdom. Not when embers remain of the burning fire that was once my view.

I feel to be on the verge of electing a course that simply has me be a welcoming, well-read, life-enjoying writer and nothing more. It would suit me best. I may commit myself to improving my 'penned art,' especially for this publication. If any votaries of *The Lit Quarterly* would like to convince me to hold firm, to dismiss the inconsistencies and illusory elements of the nationalist narrative, you may find my details with the Editor; though I suspect your efforts will be in vain.

I am, sir, your humble servant.

*Silas Ó Gusáin*

## Prospect Cottage, Dungeness

Returning from the sea we bend  
into a bright, splintered wind,  
clamber up the tilted shingle  
and trample over the tired prayers  
of freak, tubular plants  
to find your house, your garden,  
sleeping with the grizzled skipper  
and the sun baked *pygmaeola*,  
like a sunken gallery closed for lunch.  
On show a cast of shattered gears,  
lintels raised like crank warheads  
and a clutch of rusted coils fondling the  
warm tortoiseshell of a jimmied latch.  
Under the wire-sliced, cornflower sky  
a gabled page: *Saucy pedantic wretch*  
etched out on blackened timber,  
a reminder of the source that fires  
the silent, grey alchemy  
dividing The Garden of England  
from those boiling headland waters.

—Steve Rigley, Glasgow UK

## Hunger

no, we did not invent heartbreaks,  
    we found it while growing up, in rooms  
where we first named our bodies *beautiful*.  
    we called it *love*, the naming. & when  
the bonfire grew many tongues & lapped  
    at our early hands, we called it *a lesson in loving*—  
a lesson we picked from watching our mothers  
    whose bones our fathers broke daily, but who  
stayed & prayed because *love endures all things*—the fire, the flood, the fist.  
    isn't it funny how we language in the wrong,  
how we name all the rains rain, how we say *I love you*  
    when what we mean is *I'm hungry* or *I'm cold* or  
*the animal in my pants raises its head every time the bird in your throat sings?*  
    & what is desire if not death wearing a nice dress,  
ruin if not a body filled with morning? tell me,  
    what is it about hunger that keeps us coming?

—Ernest O. Ògúnýẹmí, 19, Lagos NI

## *The Tea Club and Barrovian Society*

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“**T**ell us the Christmas story, Grandpa,” the children chorused.  
“The one about the ghost.”

The old man settled into his chair before a roaring fire, shifting and stirring as his arthritic joints complained. His gnarled hands rested on his lap, cradling a mug of cocoa. He looked down and thought how once on that long-ago winter in the fields of France, his tin mug had held a Christmas ration of rum, and the hands that held it were young not old. His lungs were shot, ruined by the gas he breathed on the battlefields all those many years ago. Cold weather made him wheeze and cough. That part of the story he wouldn't be sharing with them.

The old man scratched his head, stalling, teasing his grandchildren “And which story would that be?” He smiled down at the six children gathered on the floor around his chair.

“You know, the one about him that wrote the Hobbit,” called one young lad, hair still wet from the bath and wrapped in a toweling robe over his pajamas.

“Father,” said one of his adult sons, “You must keep up the Christmas tradition of telling your story of Tolkien in the trenches. We're all waiting for it.”

I'd have been half their age then, he thought, looking at his two sons, sitting knees-up on the sofa, mugs of coffee in their hands. Their generation had their own war, he thought, but at least my boys were spared. He'd seen to it they were educated, unlike himself, pushed them to do well in school until they qualified for scholarships. University men, both of them, one a teacher, the other an engineer. He knew an education would keep them out of another war and he'd been right. Their jobs kept them safe from conscription. No point in enlisting as

an officer and dying quickly. In my war, he thought, junior officers only lasted a few weeks.

“Well, I was just a young’un then. Enlisted with all the other lads I knew from Lancashire. Off to have a grand adventure. To fight for King and Country. T’would be a lark and we’d all be home in time for Christmas. Or so we thought.” The old man paused, his eyes clouded with bad memories. The sound of the guns and the smell of the dead. Everything he’d seen. It never left you.

He took a sip of his hot cocoa and continued. “I’d been down the mines since I were fourteen, so the trenches felt that familiar to me. Mind you the constant bombin’ and shellin’, none of us were used to that. Never did. Most of them men, they’d been in the mills or worked the looms...” He took a deep breath and ploughed on. “Anyway, we were all that young and quite out of the way of things. The 11th Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, that was my regiment. We had a Colonel in charge—a right git he was—barkin’ out orders. Fancied he was back in the Boer War. One man in a thousand can lead... that’s what Lieutenant Tolkien used to say. Our Colonel, well, he wasn’t that man. The Lieutenant was our signal officer and I’d been assigned to him as his batman. I got to move to the Communications Trench, which was back from the front lines, so I were that grateful to be out of the thick of it. The Lieutenant, he were always direct and kind to everyone. Not many of the officers treated us lower-ranks too well, but he weren’t like the others. Man to man, you felt with him.

“Lieutenant Tolkien, he had three friends all stationed nearby. They’d been at school together. Formed some sort of group—Tea Club and Barrovian Society, they called it. TCBS for short. He said they used to meet in the school library, smuggle in bread, butter and jam and make tea over the fire.”

He took a sip of his cocoa, trying to warm his memories. He paused. “Now, where was I?” he asked his audience. “The Tea Club, Grandpa,” one of the younger children called out.

“Ah yes. Well, the lads had been writin’ back and forth to each other, even on the front lines. We had mail everyday, y’know. Important to the war effort. I brought him his letters—every blessed day they wrote. Don’t know which of ‘em came up with the idea. Lieutenant Tolkien said he’d forgotten. But one day, he came to find me all excited like and said, ‘Well, Bradman, we’re going to have one last meetin’ of the TCBS and I need your help.’ Well, of course, I says, I’d help in any way I could.

“Seems he were after butter. They’d all decided to come on the morrow, and he’d gotten bread from the Y canteen, and we’d our tea



and sugar rations, but he was still needin' butter. Couldn't find it anywhere. I'd no more luck than he and went back to tell him.

"He was in a rare good mood that day, jokin' with me and the men. He could take some dark turns, be real quiet like and not speak much. Some got like that with the shellin'.

"So, come the next day, bless me if his two friends didn't turn up just before lunch—that'd be Lieutenant Smith with the 3rd Salford Pals, just a few trenches down, Lieutenant Wiseman, on the Superb—in the Navy, he was— no bleedin' idea how he got there, but come he did, with a 24-hour pass an' all. All that were missing were Lieutenant Gilson.

"Lieutenant Smith were carrying a box, I remember. Bang down on the table he puts it and starts handin' tins to Lieutenant Tolkien. There was gooseberry jam and butter. Lieutenant Smith, he starts tellin' this long story about gettin' lost on patrol and findin' a root cellar full of tins in a bombed out house. He'd liberated a few, he said, afore the Procurement Officer got wind of it.

"Lieutenant Tolkien lit up like a Christmas tree, he were that happy to see his old mates. 'The staples of our secret library meetin's,' he said, 'bread, butter, jam and tea.' Then Lieutenant Gilson showed up—it were like one minute he were just there, just appeared in the bunker. Well, they were that glad to see him.

"They shared some of their food with me—bless me, the bread tasted like sawdust and the tea was that weak... Well, anyway, they still made a fine tea party. Sat and talked for hours about books, and poems, and writin' and such. I couldn't follow most of it. I just kept popping in an' out as me duties took me. We had a Big Push comin' and it were right good to have somethin' to take all our minds off it.

"Then the Colonel comes marching into the bunker. 'Lieutenant,' he says, 'who are these men?' Lieutenant Tolkien told him. Well, that did it! The Colonel he goes all red in the face... got right set off. 'This isn't some bloody country house weekend, Lieutenant, we're at war,' he says, 'I want these men back at their units within the hour.' He was goin' on about this is what comes of not usin' proper military men to fight a war, and stormed off, blusterin' on about tea parties at the front.

"Well, this is just like old times,' says Lieutenant Tolkien. 'Hidin' in the library, smugglin' in food, all of us in trouble with the Head Master. You three had better go on. Wait, where's Rob?' he says.

"He never could handle your strong tea, JR,' says Lieutenant Smith.

"I'll find him and explain. Well, Bradman,' he says to me, 'You'd better clear away the evidence.'

"I took the tins out and found the second post had come. There was a letter for the Lieutenant so I took it back for him. He ripped it open

and gave a strange cry. I asked him what were wrong and he said it was from Lieutenant Gilson's CO to tell him our young man has been killed in action. Well, I thought that was right strange—he'd just been there a few minutes before."

"And then young Lieutenant Gilson was there—just appeared sudden, like before."

The children were holding their breath, leaning forward eager to hear more.

"There you are, Rob,' says Lieutenant Tolkien, 'I've had this absurd letter sayin' you were killed. They've made a mistake.'

"No," says Lieutenant Gilson, "I went leadin' a charge over the top. I never felt a thing.' The ghost—'cause now I'm thinkin' this must be what he is—he's shakin' his head and lookin' real sad.

"I don't understand,' says the Lieutenant.

"That poor soul' he says to Lieutenant Tolkien, 'I didn't understand at first why I'd been held back, but now its clear. Your words. Your stories... it's your genius that'll light the world and bring it a new mythology in its darkest hour. You're the one who'll carry our light to future generations and give 'em hope. You'll make it worth all the sacrifice of the TCBS.'

"But it means nothing without all of you...' says Lieutenant Tolkien.

"Young Gilson goes on. 'Hear me, JR. The world is crying out for myth, for story. You're the man to give it to 'em. You must survive this war. Your regiment'll be lost. That must not include you, my dear Tolkien. This is why I was held back. I was given one more mission. One I could not refuse anymore than I could refuse a charge over the top.'

"As he's speakin, he's dissolvin' like and I can see the trench wall thru him. I were that terrified—I were rooted to the spot. Me tongue were frozen like, too.

"I can't see how I have any influence over this fate you see for me ... and now that I know that you're gone ahead of us... I'm not sure I want to,' says my Lieutenant.

"The spirit ('cause that's what he was) didn't answer but steps close to the Lieutenant and grabs his left shoulder with its hand. 'What have you done?' says Lieutenant Tolkien.

"I've given you a touch of the grave. It'll sicken but not kill you. You'll live a long time now,' says the ghost, 'Forgive me, old friend. You're too important to be left to history's whims.' That's what 'e said! 'History's whims.'

"And then, blimey, the ghost was just gone again.

“The Lieutenant, he went all grey. I went over and helped him sit. He was tremblin’ and burnin’ up with fever. He coughed and his whole body shook. ‘I don’t feel at all well,’ he says, ‘P’haps you had better go and fetch the doctor, Bradman.’

“Looks like trench fever,’ I told him. ‘This could be your Blighty ticket, Sir. Just think of it. Home to England! Where the hot buttered toast never runs out and there’s endless pots of good strong China tea.’”

“Father, that’s quite a tale,” said one of the sons. “Perhaps you should have become a writer as well.”

The old man’s face changed as a smile slowly crept across it. “I’m not done, yet. The story has a new part.”

“Go on, go on!” cried the children, elated. The sons raised their eyebrows, and glanced at each other wondering what he’d decided to add. The old man can still surprise, thought Bradman as he watched them and chuckled.

“Your gran and I were passin’ by that bookshop in the High Street and saw a great crowd of people inside. I looked in and there he was himself. Oh, he’s old now, hair gone white, but I still knew him straight away. Down to that blessed pipe he always carried. Hang on, I said to the missus, that’s my old Lieutenant Tolkien. She was all for not makin’ a fuss, not disturbin’ the great important man. But I went inside. Quite a turn out there was.

“Bradman,’ he called out when he spotted me and headed straight over. Even though he was a famous writer, he greeted me like a long, lost friend. ‘My good man, how wonderful to see you,’ he says and shook my hand. ‘How’ve you been keepin’ all these years?’ Well, sir, I says—’

“Bradman,’ he cut in, ‘we’re not in Kitchener’s Army anymore—please call me John or Tolkien, as my friends do.’

“He told me he often did public readings of the Hobbit. The curse of being popular, he said.

“We talked about the wives and the kids, catchin’ up like. Then I asked him straight out if he remembered about the ghost. He went all quiet. ‘Did you see him?’ he asked me. I told him of course I seen him, standing there large as life. He had thought it was the fever that made him see Lieutenant Gilson.

“I looked him straight in the eye. ‘No, he were real. I heard him tell you somethin’ about your books being important. How you had to live to write all your stories down. How our regiment would be wiped out. Which it was. He was standin’ right in front of you, and then he reached out and squeezed your shoulder. Then you took a turn and went all grey. Like that Frodo,’ I says.

“Ah, you caught that, did you?’

“Then they evacuated you, S—... *Mr. Tolkien*... back to England. And then you wrote those wonderful books, just like poor Lieutenant Gilson said you would. My kids—and the grandkids—love ‘em. They say your *Hobbit* is the greatest book of all time. That spirit knew what he was on about, eh?’

“He were silent. Then he says, ‘I want to honor him with one last tale. No one will believe it. No one except you. I’m very glad I met you again, Bradman.’

“Darn’t matter if they do or not. T’would be a nice memorial to him, all written down in one of your stories. We’ve only got the stories ‘cause of him.’

“And then he smiles. ‘What was it you said again just before the doctor came? Somethin’ about tea and toast? It all went a bit murky.’

“I didn’t even need time to think, what with tellin’ the tale to you lot every Christmas. ‘You’re going home to England. Where there’s good thick hot buttered toast that never runs out and endless cups of good strong China tea,’ I says.”

—Elizabeth Sinclair, 57, Melbourne AU

### Author’s Note:

*The Tea Club and Barrovian Society was a real group formed by Tolkien and three close school friends. All four TCBSers enlisted in the First World War. Two, Gilson and Smith, were killed. JRR Tolkien fought at the Battle of the Somme in France in 1916. He contracted trench fever and was sent back to England, where he had a long convalescence and served out the rest of the war in the Home Army. Tolkien’s regiment was later completely wiped out.*

## To Be Forgotten By Everything

if one could erase self from your lips,  
peel morpheme by morpheme, name from your teeth,  
one would & would not stop there.  
one would pick through your brain,  
pinch each memory of coming & going, eyes,  
feet shuffling through this broken earth, laughter,  
hands picking meadow stalks, holding hands, smoking blunts,  
every favourite song, the snores of a sleeping form, tears,  
& into forgetfulness, let them burn.  
one would drug you with myopia & amnesia,  
scrub every scent, every taste, every touch  
that could awaken within you a small memory.  
one would exit you so that when you pass  
& pass again an epitaph carved of marble,  
scripted with words telling different shades of lies,  
you will not stop to weep, stoop to pick weeds,  
plant flowers, you will only know that this one came,  
breathed, died like everything else.

—Osahon Oka, 34, Benin City NI

## *How To Be an Out of Context Problem*

---

It's 80 years ago since you existed.  
Before that you were theorised  
or erased by morality. Copernicus.

Even 15 years ago, when you were taught  
of yourself, you were told  
you were more dangerous<sup>1</sup> to hold;

so sometimes, still, being held  
is a volatile act that you must not protest.  
You must unlearn the gravity of 30 years

of being wrong. Stranger, you must know  
you do not recognise the bodies in the water  
when you are drowning. This is the becoming of water,

I know a flood when I see one.  
You do not see a way out of this  
reflected in others because you have covered

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1     than others at least.

all the excuses you've heard. You do not see  
the problems you are facing in a hall of mirrors,<sup>2</sup>  
speaking both shattered glass and repair does not make you bilingual.

It's possible to mistranslate sight as being seen.  
If there is more past tense than a presence in your hands,  
I understand—I have been there before.

When you become, there will be waiting  
a list of ghosts who teach you everything<sup>3</sup>  
you have missed out on if you know where to look.<sup>4</sup>

—Sam J. Grudgings, 31, Bristol UK

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2 were you looking for yourself elsewhere / this is you, this is you / drowning  
in code, in code / you have left a fingerprint of yourself / on VCUs from behind  
the glass / ensure that your identity is secure / ensure that your identity is secured  
/ by encryptions of what you said and / what you really wanted to say.

3 terms and conditions apply

4 error 404: you are not a god; deity not found.



## Eternity

“If a young man meets a young lady under the right circumstances, he may be drawn to her by their common interest in literature, or the arts, or sports. This common interest toward a subject may deepen until they feel fondness and sympathy. The sympathy grows and, before they realize it, becomes attachment, which is deeper than sympathy or fondness. If nothing disturbs this harmony, it will become infatuation. Infatuation is not yet love, but it approaches love as it moves on to the stage of devotion and then to rapture—or adoration, which is already love. Love is the last stage. It can be tested by sacrifice. Real love is the capacity to endure any hardship for the beloved.”

“Is that how it started for us?” replied John, without peeling his eyes from the night sky.

“I got that from an old master, a book,” said Nick. “I read so much... the books said a lot of things. Remember the poem I sent you long ago? I still have it on my phone:

*She enters for the first time, and she smiles at me  
A look in her eyes  
Of eternal devotion...*

“... a heartbeat and she swirls.’ Yes. I remember. Did you think I wouldn’t, just because I don’t read? I can say it from memory, just like your note that came with it. I remember how that little Christmas present changed my holidays... never mind. Go on. But why don’t we make it about us? Say, *He swirls*, not *she*.”

“All right...”

*A heartbeat and he swirls.  
 Flames behind his hair  
 Things are blurred in reflections  
 Walls close in on me.  
 Want him?  
 Or worship him?  
 Is it love  
 Or lust?  
 Is he too young,  
 or too old?  
 Has it been centuries  
 or seconds?  
 Am I above  
 Or below him?  
 All of a sudden,  
 I can't remember not loving him.  
 Light fades from my eyes  
 Things overflow  
 What did I do wrong?  
 Is he mine? Was he ever?  
 Questions made in silence  
 Echo in walls  
 Of blue velvet  
 And futile folly.*

“Was that how it felt, meeting me? Why did you get attached to that poem? It’s about men and women. Like that quote from your teacher.”

“Every culture depends on three great bonds: love between men and women, love between mothers and children and camaraderie between men, a bond that used to be so strong it could move mountains. I acknowledge we—gay people—are the ones who broke it, who changed the trust between men.”

“So *that’s* what your books have taught you,” said John, frowning.

“Don’t give me that look. But yes... that poem is how it felt to meet you. How it still feels. I ask myself, how long has it been? It was high school... but I can’t remember what year. After school, there came the summers; so many summers lying down, melting under the sunbeams next to the clothesline, half awake, half asleep; what was the first one? What was the last one? They became one, they became endless. And... I still ask myself the same questions...”

“Of course. Be silent. Come here and listen.” John grabbed Nick, bringing him close. “I know what’s going through your head; I can see it like pictures, they scream so loud. *Do I want him ... or worship him? Is it love or lust? Is he too young or too old? Am I above or below him?* All this time, all these years, and you still can’t answer the most obvious questions.”

“And the biggest question—”

“*Do I love him?*” asked John. Nick shook his head.

“No. It’s *does he love me?*”

John looked at the stars.

“Right. Every known emotion has been confused for love. When we argued, when I avoided you, when I hated you, I wondered if it was love. Now I know. I know because I remember all the times we’ve had this conversation; I remember when we were young, and you asked me if we’d last. You said, ‘One day you won’t see me like you do now. One day something will change us.’ Love is always heightened by the presence of extreme pain or humiliation. As long as the possibility is there, at any time, to be completely destroyed, that’s love. To risk everything. Love, in the end, is to be captivated by its capacity to destroy you; whether by its loss, its disappointment, the involved parties changing, moving, dying, or your feeling just not being returned. Anyhow, any true love puts you in extreme risk of being destroyed physically and emotionally. Even if you live a totally perfect love for eighty years, the day will come when your partner gets cancer, and it’ll crush you. Pain will arrive. Every time you expressed this fear you were telling me you were willing to risk that much for me. When we started dating, I saw you struggle, be awkward, take risks that terrified you because you saw something of value in me which even I had trouble accepting. When I finally understood that—how incredibly sweet it is when someone takes the risk and tries getting close—I wanted to be vulnerable with you too. It’s the ultimate feeling of ‘I get it, you get it, and nobody else knows what we know.’ To love is to feel your feelings as if they were my own, to fail, to triumph and celebrate life with you. I think you know the answer to them, to your questions.”

“You’re right—it’s funny—you’re absolutely right. It’s so damn funny. But I just can’t shake off the feeling that I’m meeting you for the first time, so these questions keep on repeating. And you give me the answers every day.”

“Do you remember? How it felt, meeting me?”

“I remember... the school yard, and I called for your group, anxious to introduce myself. And you were so far away, the sun blurred my sight; you were like visions of white in the horizon, unreachable—I

kept reaching, reaching for the light, but no matter how much I ran, it kept getting further away. You couldn't hear me. Until you breached the distance, grabbed my arm, and stopped me in my tracks. You did listen. That's when the vision truly became blinding. All of my life, from then on—an eternity, now..."

—Martin Porro, *La Plata AR*

## *From My Mirror*

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My mirror watches me as I watch myself in it,  
Does not whisper “ugly” to me like I think she does,  
Is draped with fairy lights like a bride. I think one night  
She will finally stop me from berating my body like  
It is a disgraceful daughter and I am nothing but an angry mother  
She will sigh with weariness, fogging up the glass  
And tell me. Listen,  
Your body is not made up of the taunts thrown at you—  
It is not a catcall, a comment, an advice—  
Your thighs hold you up, their purpose is not to look  
Like the models’ in the magazine. Even she looks at herself in her mirror and  
Feels ashamed. Your body’s purpose is not the economic growth of  
An industry built upon shame.  
Your skin is not made for scrutinization. Your skin colour is not your legacy.  
Stop believing that your body is supposed to be anything more  
Than a vessel for your organs.  
Your eyes are not meant to be “drowned in,”  
Your lips are not “rosebuds,”  
Your hands are not someone’s muse. Your eyes are meant to see,  
Your lips are meant to speak in defiance, your hands will hold the world  
You’re not here to be pretty for anyone.

—Adrija Bhadra, 19, New Delhi IN

## Fascist Ennui

I am scared of getting used to fascism.  
I know it's happening, events and occurrences getting lost,  
Forgotten by the next thing.  
It's hard to keep track of everything that breaks around us:  
Every new inmate in prison,  
Every new student beaten up in the street,  
Every person asked to say a certain slogan that's in trend at the moment.  
I am scared of getting used to metro announcements saying that  
The train will not stop at a particular station,  
Because they will not offer mobility to people who  
Do not respect the State. They will not offer rights to people  
Who do not respect the Leader. They will not offer safety to people,  
Instead they will tell them to move to another country.  
I am scared of getting used to being told to go to another country.  
I am scared of getting used to complacency, the tiredness setting in my bones  
And reminding me that I don't necessarily have to fight. I can just sink into my privilege,  
A cushion of caste and class networks waiting for me. Be successful in a tower, while the  
Lower floors burn. I am scared that someday I might stop caring and give in.  
I am scared of getting used to fascism. But I don't know if my fear is enough.

—Adrija Bhadra, 19, New Delhi IN

## The Worshipers

Whenever this thing comes upon Sistah, she clasps her thighs firmly together and recites the pledge. She drags one shaky breath after another, afraid. The pressure of holding it off becomes obvious as her lips part slightly and her jaws glide over each other in an intricate dance of lovers. She fights with all her might as the waves hit her until they knock down her walls and the flood comes rushing in. She gives in reluctantly at first, slowly rocking herself back and forth. Then blissfully, twisting her waist round and round, grinding her bum into the cushion, running her hands all over herself as satisfaction washes over her.

Recently, she started using her fingers, too. The index one first, in slow, circular strokes just at the tip. And as the waves come in stronger, her middle finger joins the party and she goes faster and deeper and higher, each plane sweeter than the last. At the peak, her eyes roll back into her head as she breaks shore with a blood curdling scream of release, ecstasy and pleasure, all at once. That's how we know this thing has defeated her again. And once again, the pledge has failed.

As this thing leaves her, she caresses the twin peaks of her heavy bosom and basks in the last vestiges of pleasure before the guilt sets in. Minutes later, she's sobbing her heart out, her dog-eared black Bible open on the floor beside her.

I'm sorry, Lord, I'm sorry.

\*

Ordinarily, it shouldn't be a problem that this thing visits her, but the Lord does not like this thing. Neither does Mother. Or Sistah, when she's sober. Or the people living in the flat next to ours. And it wouldn't be of any concern to them if this thing only visited her in the quiet of our place, because then they wouldn't hear it, and if they did, they wouldn't know what it is because it never visits them. And I wouldn't tell.

But it doesn't. Instead, like an uncouth child, the paroxysms of this thing know not the concept of privacy. It comes as it pleases, ig-



noring sister's reputation as the model daughter of our family, and lead soprano chorister, and church-girl-in-chief, CAC, Àgbàrá iyanu.

Which is a very big problem because church girls—the good ones, not the ones who have given themselves over to artificial hair, facial paint, and bloody, witchlike lips—do not scream in pleasure, except when it is holy pleasure like when Pastor's voice reaches a certain ear-grating crescendo and the spirit descends like wildfire on their insensate bodies. Church girls—again, the good ones, like Sistah—measure their actions by the good book and adhere to every rule in the sacred book of conduct for girls.

*Thou shalt not sit with your legs apart lest you expose your treasure trove to the world.*

*Thou shalt not wear skirts high above your knees lest you tempt the brothers.*

*Thou shalt not add any attachments to your hair, face or any part of your body, because thou art perfect and holy in thy maker's sight and in the sight of the brothers whom thou dost tempt with these instruments of the devil.*

*Thou shalt not wear tight clothing lest the glorious undulations of your behind cause an unholy burgeoning in our brothers.*

And obviously, The Good Book, much like the Lord, does not like for girls to do much with their bodies or with the way they dress or anything really. Because when girls do things with themselves, it causes the brothers to fall and The Good Book loves the brothers. But of course, like any good book worth its weight in submission, The Book does not mind that girls do things at the behest of its overseer. So it is acceptable, expected even, that church girls hang on to every word that rolls off Pastor's lips like it's the very essence of life, and release their pent up excitement at deliverance sessions, rolling on the floor and screaming in all sorts of strange languages; partly from the holy fire burning in their hearts and partly from the other kind burning under their skirts.

And it is wrong and shameful for such a girl as proper and modest as this to yield herself to this unholy thing that makes one shiver with release and ecstasy and pleasure. Not only because of The Good Book and the Lord, but because we live in a city where it is shameful to speak of this thing. Regardless of the fact that everyone is doing it. But it wasn't so much the visitation as it was the screaming and the way this thing took complete control of Sistah, such that she was totally helpless whenever it visited.

Rumour has it that girls who lose control so often never find men to marry them because no man wants an uncontrollable woman. And that even the lucky ones who manage to secure a man are always

so insatiable they end up inviting strange men into their matrimonial home or becoming strange women in other women's matrimonial homes or worse, running around shamelessly with younger boys because this thing has rid them of all their shame and left the burden of shamefacedness on their weary relatives, particularly the mother. Because in our city, the burden of raising girls to perfection rests on austere mothers who, having gained control over all the whims of their body, are in the best position to teach their daughters how to gain control over theirs.

So it was, that it fell on my mother to handle this thing and teach her daughter how to control herself and if that were not possible as is the case now, she would find a way to exorcize her of this demon before things get worse.

\*

Once, this thing visited Sistah on a Saturday evening when my father and his friends and their older sons were in the living room, drinking beer and watching a Champions League match. We were with Mother in the kitchen, shredding onions and peppers and carrots for Sunday's jollof rice and peppered chicken. I noticed it first, saw her face change from her pleasant choir girl disposition into a grimace. Her thighs jostling each other inside her capacious skirt as she bobbed on her toes drawing one shaky breath after the other. I saw her struggle and I saw her lose. She dropped her knife and ran into the room. Before long, the whole house was awash with the sound of her groaning and the creaking of our old bed.

Mother was mortified. If she could, she would have willed the blackened kitchen floor to open up and swallow her right there but it didn't and she carried on cutting the onions.

I could not tell if her tears were from the onions or her shame.

\*

My mother, the leader of our church's good women's choir, an unabashedly loud woman who has mastered the art of handling everything around the house and somehow still giving room for Father to act like he's more than a sperm donor, has decided that Sistah should go for special deliverance—special deliverance because of our family image. Going for deliverance is bad enough, but if people were to know why, or if they were to hear the demons arguing with the deliverance minister as was often the case with stubborn demons, they would look upon our family with disdain. Our house would be canceled as a fellowship center and it would cease to be a hub for Sunday jollof rice, a good dose of the word of God and healthy church gossip. So special deliverance it is, all day, for seven days.

She arranges it with Pastor Philip, the pastor in charge of deliverance ministry.

Father, in his usual manner, stays out of it. He is not one to get involved in female matters like morning devotion, or monthly food shopping, or getting rid of evil spirits that make women do things. In fact, he is not one to do much other than leave in the morning with his brown leather bag tucked under his brown coat and arrive late in the night wearing that hackneyed look of wasted youth and smelling like ill-concealed beer and fornication. Sometimes, he—my father—with his beer belly jutting over his tiny waist, his fake gold chain hanging down his slim growth of neck, his receding hairline, booming voice and ever-roaming eye reminds me of the men Pastor Pee preaches against every Sunday. Men who drink beer and lie with prostitutes—children of perdition for whom the lake of fire burning with fury and brimstones has been prepared.

\*

On the first day of deliverance, Sistah does not have breakfast. Pastor Philip has instructed that she come fasting. She leaves home early in the morning and returns after sundown, a little too happy for someone who spent all day with an energetic man jumping around her, yelling exotic nothings while intermittently holding her head in a vice-like grip and shoving her in several different directions.

At the dinner table, when Mother asks her how the deliverance went, she smiles a tiny smile and says fine. I know immediately that something is wrong. Her eyes remain on her food throughout dinner as though she has not seen anything more interesting than the plate of beans and plantain before her. In the privacy of our room, I ask her how the deliverance really went and she answers again, fine.

On the evening of the third day, Sistah announces rather gleefully that Pastor Philip will no longer be in charge of her deliverance.

Why? We ask.

Nothing, she says.

I will go and see him tomorrow, Mother says.

On the morning of the fourth day, Mother goes to church with Sistah to see Pastor Philip but she is unable to see him, because he won't see her. Because he cannot look Sistah in the face, because she reminds him of his fall.

After the third day, two pastors are in charge of Sistah's deliverance. Pastor David, the minister in charge of music who sings his tongues in a soprano, and Pastor Bolu, Pastor Pee's first son and heir apparent to the throne. Together, they form the new face of our church officials and Pastor Pee's latest attempt at increasing the church's youth

population. Their tongues, unlike the older ministers', are light on the tongue and melodious to the ear. Much like the songs they sing. In fact, they are nothing like the other ministers. Instead of the regular oversized shirts with matching, roomy, holier-than-thou trousers, they wear flashy tees over fitted trousers tapered towards the end and stopping before their ankles.

Pastor Bolu keeps an afro while Pastor David wears his hair in the gallas style. Both hairstyles used to be banned for workers and only the university boys who were bold enough to defy Pastor Pee's fire and brimstone preaching ever wore them to church.

Now, with the presence of both pastors, more guys dared to wear their hair in these strange styles and their trousers tight at the crotch and tapered towards the hem. Even the sisters have started wearing their skirts shorter, their weaves longer and their makeup louder. Except Sistah and her friends.

Like the good girls that they are, they have refused to follow this new trend and instead tightened their grip on the principles laid down by their mothers. The good sisters of Àgbàrà iyanu—that's what they call themselves—created a WhatsApp group with the same name, where they send daily devotionals and admonitions approved by Pastor Pee's wife, Mama Pee, a miserable old woman who takes too much pleasure in pointing out sinful clothing on women and offering ugly brown scarves—to cover up, to help our brothers.

Among other things in the group, they chastise sisters who dress indecently. Such was their influence that any sister chastised on the good sisters forum either renders an apology or risks losing all close ties, privileges and position in the church. Seeing as almost all the sisters except Sistah and her friends have followed Pastor David and Pastor Bolu down the path to hell, it is just Sistah and her friends keeping the group alive.

\*

When Sistah arrives home on the evening of the fourth day, she's wearing a different look. One unlike I've ever seen on her. I do not know what to make of the extra bounce in her steps or extra swing of her waist. If Mother notices, she says nothing.

The hours pass in a blur. This thing has not visited in a while. Mother is happy, Father is his usual self, leaving every morning and returning at night with his brown suit and brown bag and adultery-is-me face.

Then the sixth day arrives and Sistah announces at the dining table, with a slight upward curve of her pretty, black lips, that Pastor Pee himself is coming for her final deliverance the next day.

Mother does not know what to do with this announcement. Whether to be excited or saddened by it. Pastor Pee does not usually attend small deliverance sessions like this, so if he's coming to conduct the deliverance by himself, it's either because the other pastors couldn't handle the demons inside Sistah, or, perhaps, because he just wants to conduct the last deliverance by himself, to perfect the delivery. Either way, he's giving her special attention and that's good.

Special attention from Pastor is always good. Even if it's just some extra shove of your head during deliverance service or a brief nod in your direction during the sermon, it's good.

On the final day of the deliverance, only Father eats breakfast. Mother has decided that we will all go for Sister's final deliverance. All of us except Father who has to go to work because if a typist refuses to go to work for a day, the whole Open University would stop running, because a typist is that important in an organization where there are no working typewriters.

We arrive at church early, early enough for Mother to go take a nap in the main auditorium.

Before long, Pastor David and Pastor Bolu arrive, both dressed in their signature vintage shirts, flashy pants and multicolored socks.

Brother John Mark, the most annoying prayer warrior in the history of prayer warriors, joins us, too. He should not be here because he is not a minister, but he is anyways. Because he shakes his head more vigorously than others during prayers; because he is the loudest prayer warrior even though he speaks in tatters as if inside his throat was a battle, as though silence and himself were slugging it out, so that his words come out with as much spit and force as would have made Galileo proud to have discovered projectile motion.

Pastor Pee joins us just as we begin singing.

We sing some of the songs Pastor David taught the church when he first arrived and still harboured thoughts of making our church into one of those trendy new-generation churches. Then we sing the more appropriate deliverance songs, with fire in our throats and thunder in our hands.

We sing for fire, for a purging, for deliverance. We sing until our throats dry up and our heads ache from all the noise and our shoulders nearly pop out of their sockets. Still we do not let up.

And while we are still singing, this thing joins us and takes over Sistah, and the meeting, and indeed, the whole building. So strong is its aura that even the pastors and Brother John cannot resist falling under its anointing. They try at first to resist it. Running around the room,

singing in their loudest voices then groaning in ecstasy when they finally unzip their pants in worship.

I join in too, and we stand together in one accord, releasing pent up worship. Worship that has laid dormant in us since the beginning of the ages, waiting for sweet release. The men give up every attempt at modesty and unbutton their shirts, worshipping at the top of their voice. With all their hearts, and all their souls, and both their hands. We release sweet symphonies into the atmosphere, Sistah in the center leading the congregation like the good chorister that she is.

And John Mark, being the most inexperienced in matters such as this, makes the most noise. Unlike the others, he had spent his teenage years with shame between his legs, living in fear of the scriptures his parents had drummed into his tiny head, and with a passive curiosity about how pleasurable it could get if he lingered longer while scrubbing his balls. And when, in his first year of university, he had fallen in with some boys who introduced him to women and other worldly pleasures, and had ended his first year on a third class, he vowed never to give in to his body and all the sinful pleasures it demanded. Because the thing between his ears was too weak to handle the thing between his legs, because he refused to control himself, because he was the kind of guy who needed the burden of a greater power to behave himself.

So when this thing hits him, after seven years of abstinence, his tap flows with so much force that his body shivers and his eyes roll deep into the back of his tiny head.

A most delightful sight. As the waves hit him and something rises within him, his usually pitiful face lights up with the joy of release like a bird escaping its cage for the first time. Then it turns ugly as this thing takes control of his entire body and he jerks all around the room, his face contorted into a caricature of its usual chubby self.

And so it was, that on the seventh day, the worshippers were worshipping and mere mortals were discovering God in the deepest, freest parts of themselves. And Mother, the true accuser of the brethren, heard the noise and awoke from her sleep in the main auditorium and hastened to the children's church only to find the shackles fallen and true worship in progress.

From the corner of my eye, I see her, mouth agape in a silent scream, arms raised to the high heavens as one crying in worship but the true worshippers carry on, shameless.

—Olákitán T. Aládéşuyì, 25, Lagos NI

## *Da Nang*

---

you were here once  
unaffected ingenuous  
like me now young  
ignorant

they told you to come  
or were going to  
so you offered  
on your own terms

stories were coaxed  
not offered  
the Lady Buddha  
overlooking the city

the longest night of your life  
waiting for violence  
to fulminate from the brushwood  
embracing a rifle  
like your mother  
before you left

silence rife with enmity  
the sounds of swaying grass  
bring your end  
or the wind

stateside you watch nine  
lie in pools of their own blood  
four die at Kent  
incomprehensible for all  
including young men  
home from war

unsure why  
years later  
I come

the city awakens  
and passers-by  
take me in  
on their way to work

unkempt rum-soaked  
tourist  
endured  
a means to an end

a bucket is passed  
I drink heartily wearily  
and watch the glow  
illuminate Son Tra

lying down  
I see her  
high above watching me  
like she did you

I retch my insides  
intertwine the sand  
inextricable  
tiny stones shaped by time

—Kyle Vaughan, 35, Edmonton AB

## *For Christopher Caudwell*

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*“The value of art to society is that by it an emotional adaptation is possible. Man’s instincts are pressed in art against the altered mould of reality, and by a specific organisation of the emotions thus generated, there is a new attitude, an adaptation.”*

—Christopher Caudwell

### I

Men are made  
 As geological imprints are made in  
 Sediment  
 By the process and conflict of  
 Time.  
 Even as men are gone,  
 Turned to the puppetmaster  
 Of mortality.  
 They exist in  
 Fingerprint stains  
 And ink etchings  
 On our collective soil.

### II

I wonder if he thought of his own etching he would make on that  
 riverbank in Spain?  
 A mark so beautiful and random  
 As a child’s first painting in art class.  
  
 Are we all to leave a human stain?  
 Small figures of consciousness, vanishing from sight into  
 The love of the  
 Human community of  
 Collective marks  
 On that riverbank of the Jarama in Spain.

—Adrian Frey, 19, Oneonta NY



## Something Queer in Your Bed Again

---

She's there, in your bed  
 again, and you didn't ask for it.  
 You didn't tell her not to,  
 not this time,  
 and you know that from your chipped nail polish  
 to your cracking lips,  
 your body wanted her there too.

You think there was maybe  
 a time when you had potential, a time  
 when loving her was like the kind of talent  
 that you make your college major,  
 before you realize, all too quickly, that it can't turn a profit.

Eventually life makes us all dismiss our dreams.

She's sleeping, and perhaps you should be  
 too, but it's easier to breathe without her  
 body so close to yours.  
 She reaches out her hands like a lost child  
 seeking her home.

Maybe,  
 if this had gone differently,  
 you could have loved each other better.

Maybe, you could have even been *good* for each other  
 in a way that makes sense. But she never  
 makes sense, and you *have* no sense when  
 she slips her hands into your back pockets and whispers  
 into your ear that it doesn't *matter* who's  
 looking—she'll touch you anywhere.

And that,  
 you think,  
 is when your brain shuts down for a while.

And so she's there, in your bed, again,  
 asleep in the way cats sleep when they know they have no worries,  
 knowing that their person will be there  
 to feed them and shelter them  
 and love them.

But if loving was a class you think you failed it halfway through,  
 too much homework.

The tests were always full of trick questions and no one taught you how to  
 study.

—Laura B. Henry, 30, Eugene OR

## Drought

I dreamt that I was jogging by a road. It looked like rural southeast Australia, like a place we used to stop at on road trips. My brother was running up ahead, and I thought that we must have been having a race. Neither of us were moving; we simply ran on the spot like marionettes. The sun had set. I walked into the train station; a train was waiting for me. I got on to the first carriage, which was empty. As I found a seat, a horn sounded and the doors beeped shut. The train moved off. I heard a commotion behind me and turned, a woman was being asked to present a valid ticket by some inspectors. Fuck, I thought, I didn't have one. I knew instinctively that legally they could not stop me if I ran, so I bolted towards the doors by the train driver's cabin. A police dog barked and jumped at me, but it was chained to the wall so it couldn't reach me. As I ran, I saw that there were more inspectors up ahead. I ran straight through them and made it to the door. It would not open, even though the train had come to a stop at another station. Outside the doors was the ocean, there was a storm raging and an oil tanker sat swaying in the distance. I turned and ran back through the inspectors and police dog, turned to the right and opened a door leading down a spiralling flight of stairs. I recognised the stairs and thought that if I could just make it to the bottom, I would be home and hosed. Sprinting down the stairs I could hear a pack of dogs behind me, but I tripped and fell and I couldn't stop myself as I went head first through a window. My head had been guillotined from my body by the glass, and I vomited up litres of blood. The blood engulfed me from all sides and I looked up. In the building across from me I could see my brother, who had also fallen through a window, a mirror image of myself. I tried to call out to him, but the blood solidified in my throat. A cup of water sat on the window sill, if only I could reach it, I was so thirsty. But I didn't have a body, it had sunk in the blood-sea. I just needed a mouthful to wash

clean my throat. The dogs' barking got closer and closer. They were on me. I woke up.

Friday morning 6:24 am, a cold sweat, day heating up already. For some reason I thought about Forrest. He would be finishing up work in half an hour. I hadn't seen him in a while. I walked over to the basin and washed my face, stepping over my packed duffle bag as I did. I chucked on my nice shirt and a pair of jeans I hadn't packed. I gave Forrest a call. We organised to meet at work at 7:00 and get coffee. I walked into my undecorated kitchen and stared intensely at a box of oats for five minutes before deciding I couldn't eat any. The dream had left me uneasy. Maybe that's why I wanted to see him. I took a deodorant shower, scraped my everyday carry off my desk and locked up. On the way out I saw I had a message from my girlfriend. She had sent me her details for the long weekend. After dating long distance for two-and-a-bit months I was heading up to hers for the first time, taking the train up to Sydney at 10:00. I felt like I should have been more nervous. I remembered a time, back in high school, when I walked a girl to the bus stop after our second date. I had kissed her goodbye and I remember laughing as I walked back to my parents' house. I remembered taking a shower afterwards. That was before the drought. The feeling of running water on my skin. I checked the time. Time to keep walking.

—There you are mate, Forrest said as we shook hands.

—How are you, long night?

—Yeah, as usual. 7/11?

—Yeah let's go.

—We walked in silence to the coffee spot. We were both tired, which was hardly fair as he had worked the night shift on the phones. It had been 35 degrees plus each day this week, and it must have shown in my dead eyes that I just couldn't take much more of it.

—How about the heat? He asked.

—Yeah, it's fucked.

—You look bad. Remember I've got to sleep in this weather.

—How do you live like that?

—Running on fumes.

—Work going alright?

—Nup.

—No surprises.

—Yeah, had another client kill himself last night. Drank his own pesticide. Wife found him. Young family I was told.

—Fuck.

—Fifth this month.

It was the 9th of February. We worked for the government, helping farmers access drought relief funds. Phones were manned 24 hours, seven days a week, it was that serious. So-called relief funds didn't seem to be doing these people much good anyway. Our funds were limited, water was limited, the budget was limited. They really didn't stand a chance. No one donated anymore, and god knew we needed it. The drought had entered its fifth year. Forrest poured himself a one-dollar cup. With the weather as it was, I went for a Red Bull, sugar-free.

—I've got it, I said.

—Really? Thanks man... Office was in a bit of a shambles too. Pay peanuts you get monkeys; these nightshift guys are something else.

—Yeah...

—Can't jump ship to the corporates now though can I.

—If it's any consolation, they're shit too.

—Yeah, I bet they are.

—Plans for the long weekend?

—Not too much, just trying to recover from this week and wait out the heatwave. How about yourself?

—Going up to Sydney actually, seeing a girl there.

—How come you're seeing a girl from Sydney.

—We met on Twitter.

—Wow, you're a real e-boy.

—I think I'm a little too old to be one of those, Forrest.

Over our drinks we finished our quiet conversation, mainly talking about work. The drought hid beneath every thought we had, every minute of our waking, and maybe dreaming, lives. With Forrest and me in the industry, that wasn't so great of a surprise. I wasn't sure whether the rest of the country felt that way too. I finished my can and put it in the recycling bin. We remembered lost futures and lost pasts. Forrest lit a cigarette. His train home was in five minutes, and we walked down the block to the station. We didn't make eye contact as we shook hands, he boarded the train and I stood there. It was like I was waiting for something, as I noticed the sweat beading on my forehead and beneath my nose.

Back at the unit, I realised that I needed to pick a few things up. I was meant to head down to Southern Cross at 9:00 to leave myself some extra time, so I had to hustle. First order of business. I went through the empty drawers of the bathroom sink until I found an old string of LifeStyles regulars, bought in misplaced hope some months back. I chucked them in the side pocket of the duffle bag and headed out.

She liked books, so down I headed to the local second hand bookstore to pick one up as a gift. The owner asked me whether I needed some help choosing, but I said that I thought that I was fine. I decided to get *Moby Dick*, one of the black spine Penguin Classics. My dad had given me a copy when I graduated from university, and I didn't really get it at first. But to this day, I remember just how numb the ending made me feel, so I was fairly sure it was a good book. She didn't really read classics, she said, but I figured that this was all the more reason to buy it because she wouldn't already have a copy. I asked the owner whether she could wrap it. She said they didn't, and I said oh well, paid and left.

I felt thirsty. There was an old grocer next door. I ducked in there to look around. As I walked around the store, I noticed the fruit and veg section. All the produce had a deflated, off-coloured look about it. Withered, I thought. I wasn't sure whether it was the heat or the growing conditions or a combination of both that caused this. It wasn't always like this. The old fans on the ceiling ineffectually rotated. I took one of those small cans of Thai Red Bull, which I had always meant to try. Leaving with the drink, I noted to myself that I was only thirsty because of the first Red Bull I had had, with Forrest, and that it had just dried my mouth out. Must have been high 20s already; of course, that didn't help. The extra caffeine wasn't going to do me any favours, but I drank the Thai Red Bull anyway on the way back. By the time I got home, I had to immediately grab my duffle and leave. On the way out, I swiped a water bottle off the counter, it was half empty. Holding the book in one hand and my bottle in the other, bag over my shoulder, I walked down to the tram. It turned up within a minute of me, a closer call than I would have liked. I got on, without a ticket of course. I thought about my dream from that morning. I sat down, sweating, not just because of the heat.

It was a good thing that I left plenty of time to get down to the terminal. The traffic in Melbourne was bad. Might have had something to do with all the country folk fleeing ghost towns, which I remember seeing somewhere. I didn't blame them, no one did. The worst growing conditions on record, year after year. Ruined the traffic though, at least so I guessed. I didn't know any figures.

I got to the station with ten minutes to departure. Realising that more caffeine would do me no favours, I decided to go fill up my water bottle in the bathroom. Additionally, I needed to piss as a result of the morning's Red Bulls. I tapped my 25-cent entry fee to the bathroom. The turnstiles at public toilets were so ubiquitous you forgot they were only introduced a couple of years ago. They were ostensibly to cover

the costs of upkeep, but in reality, I suspected that they were used to discourage unnecessary toilet use and water wastage. Stranger things had been trialled by the government. There were posters up about water saving tips. One proclaimed the virtues of the two-minute shower. I was pretty sure that the cotton industry was doing more damage to the water table than me taking a five-minute shower. I don't think the rest of the population even paid attention to these posters. Only guys like me and Forrest actually perceived them with our eyes, being more or less on the front line of it. Having filled up my water bottle and taken a piss with my duffle bag slung over my shoulder, I headed back out to the platform and eventually boarded the train. I had a valid e-ticket for this trip, which was nice. I was sweating anyway because it had hit 30 on my way in. My antiperspirant was ineffectual. I would be a mess by the time I met the girl at the station. In economy class I was sceptical about the availability of air conditioning, which I thought must have been illegal. I hoped that by tonight a cool change would have come through. My water bottle was lukewarm. My shirt had a sweat patch over my shoulder from the bag. I wasn't happy. The complimentary wi-fi wasn't working, so I had to hotspot the Kindle app. I had started *No Country for Old Men*. It dawned on me, three pages in, that in fact I had forgotten to turn the lights off at home. Whatever, I thought. I kept reading.

By the time I was 120 pages in, the sun had passed over the train and was getting in my eyes. The curtains were missing. I couldn't move to another module, they were all taken, so I had to find some sunscreen. I had a grey Carhartt cap in my bag which made life easier. I didn't know whether the diner car would have any sunscreen, but it was worth a shot. I pocket checked myself for my wallet and keys and got up. In the diner car, I asked the server if they had any. He said that they did not, sorry mate. As I turned, an old man enjoying a cup of coffee beckoned to me.

—I've got some, son, he said. He was English, judging by his accent.

—Oh, thanks. I'm going to burn to death back there.

—I believe you. Are you heading up to Sydney?

—I am, yes.

—What brings you there.

—I'm seeing my girlfriend.

—How nice. I'm seeing my granddaughter; I came over from London. Stayed a few days in Melbourne, a great city.

—For sure, I nodded, looking at his bag, trying to hint at him to get the sunscreen. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate the conversation, I

just wasn't in the mood. Whenever I read a lot, I couldn't click back into reality very quickly. I was still in the story. I just wanted my sun protection. The old man understood, and gave me a tube of SPF 50+. I rubbed it on quickly.

—Thanks mate, I said as I returned it.

—Any time, he said, and he returned to his cup.

With that, I quit the diner car. In my mind's eye, I ran through scenes from *No Country*, scenes from the book but acted out by the characters from the film. It felt strange. I sat back on my seat, and some black plastic which had been heating in the sun stung me. I leaned into the boiling spot harder, and it faded away. The sting sufficiently woke me from my daze.

I looked outside, and was paralysed by the barren landscape. Under the sun, I could see every grain on the ground for kilometres. It didn't seem like anything was alive. We sped past a dry creek, further down from which was the husk of a tree standing, leaning from the bank, a scarecrow warding off anyone who might want to grow something out there. The tree faded into the distance as a crow landed on its uppermost branches, the lord of the wasteland.

There were no livestock to be seen. Not really like how deserts were in the old cartoons, but close enough. No cow skeletons anyway. I assumed these farmers didn't let their livestock go to waste out there in the fields, and slaughtered them for their meat years ago. That explained the price of meat now, I thought. Milk too. The reality was just that you couldn't produce as much here anymore. We had to import a lot now.

We still exported coal and natural gas, as far as I knew. You could make out coal seam gas exploration rigs out on the plains as we moved, left to rust once everything had been extracted.

Whole rivers had been contaminated by fracking; I remember years back that schools of fish were dying *en masse* in the Murray-Darling river because of it. Or maybe that was because of cotton farmers stealing water. Whatever it was, I thought, it was fucked. People forgot about the fish pretty quickly, it got caught up in the media cycle and spat out the other end. No one went to jail, as far as I could recall, and no politicians lost their seats. People forgot so quickly, shit, even I didn't remember about it until just then. I inhaled and exhaled deeply.

I remembered hiking one time, with my family. We'd gone on a bushwalk, Good Friday morning, early start. The green of the bush was overwhelming, and my brother and I walked ahead of our parents, talking about something or other. Maybe we were doing sword fights with sticks we found by the side of the trail, or maybe that was a time before.

We used to love doing that. I was always a bit taller and a bit faster, but he always put up a good challenge and I was never really trying to win too hard. At noon, it was still cool, with the dew still perched atop every blade of verdant grass, as we walked through a field back to where the car was parked.

I noclipped out of that memory and into another. I was sitting on a plane, flying from Perth to Melbourne, sitting next to a coughing fat man who smelled like cigarettes and cologne and sweat all at once.

My eyes refocused on the land before me and I returned to the present. I think that that same cologne pervaded the carriage faintly.

A road had begun to run alongside the train, and we passed a gate, with a small house sitting down a long dirt driveway behind it. The mud of the driveway had cracked under the heat. An Elders Real Estate sign stood alongside the gate, reading *For Sale*. I wondered who had sold up. They wouldn't get a very good price for it, the whole area was socially and literally barren from what I could see. Maybe it was an estate sale, someone might have died.

I thought about the farmer Forrest told me about, who killed himself the night before. Couldn't have been him, I thought, the estate wouldn't have had time to organise a sale of the property.

The train sped on, and more houses emerged from the baking horizon before passing swiftly from my vision and my thoughts.

But as we moved, Forrest's words about the deceased farmer rang in my ears, and the stark warning of the Australian countryside etched itself into my mind's eye. My head was thudding from the heat, and I hadn't been drinking my water. My bottle tasted like warm plastic soup. I bought myself a new bottle from the diner car, said hello again to the old man, and slowly sipped it, mulling over the journey's sights.

I got my book up. By the time I was 240 pages in, there was an evening redness in the west, and the sun had begun to lose its sting. Darkness descended over that dry land, and I knew that it was not too much further until we began to hit the furthest outskirts of the sprawling city.

Houses began to spring out of the dusk. Bunnings Warehouses, car dealerships, factories. Newly built suburbs, the latest instalment of the Australian dream. I quietly thanked God that my girlfriend didn't live in one of those. She lived in Ashfield, a nice suburb, according to Google. I was equally excited and terrified. The prospect of a genuine emotional and physical connection with another human being appealed to me greatly. My terror stemmed from my nausea at seeing someone's personality and life unfold before my very eyes, realising that they have an equally nuanced and complex relationship with the world around



them as I do. That their experiences were ultimately unknowable to me and that I could only vaguely come to understand it through interacting with them. I grew to like them more and more, I craved to know their reality more and more, which I realised was impossible to fully do. It terrified me, no hyperbole. I saw the lotus of human life bloom, a flower that I could never pick, or even smell. It just sat there. I had no idea how to dispel these feelings, to actually feel a sense of oneness with someone else. The feeling of terror sat atop my eager anticipation like an oil spill on an ocean, coating me and suffocating me like a sea bird trapped under toxic waves. So I thought as the day reached its end, and the sun's redness became purple and then lilac and then nothing at all.

Houses came thick and fast. I was sure that the train wasn't going to get there until 22:00, and it was about 21:00, and this train was going fast. I never really realised just how spread out Sydney was.

I had driven up here with a friend, just after finishing high school; it had grown remarkably since then. We had stayed in Lakemba, in a shitty Airbnb, which had been a mistake. We had only been given one key card, which didn't even work on the entrance door, and we were pretty sure that we had witnessed two stabbings. We had to break into the place once just to get to our room. Ashfield would have been nicer. We had seen a Playboi Carti concert—one of the more chaotic, but nevertheless enjoyable weekends of my life.

He had driven up all the way because I hadn't gotten my licence yet. I distinctly remember his Kia Sorento decelerating at 4500 rpm as we climbed a hill on the drive, being overtaken by a woman driving a Winnebago. I had hardly been able to make out her personalised number plate as smoke from the bushfires blanketed the Hume, and I think he and I were both delirious from smoke inhalation. We enjoyed that trip up immensely, although he had total control of the aux. We listened to nothing but Drum 'n' Bass, Bassline and Jungle for 12 hours, including a lunch break and two coffee breaks.

I wondered where he was now. If he was still in Melbourne, or in Sydney, which was quickly expanding before my eyes, or somewhere else entirely. We had all taken our own paths, for better or for worse I could not say.

As the approaching lights of the city appeared like constellations before me, my disquiet grew. As suburban housing was replaced with larger and larger buildings, I sat less and less comfortably in my brightly patterned seat. I focused on the shapes on the back of the seat in front, patterns repeated over and over on every seat in the carriage. I checked Google Maps; we were closing in on Kings Cross. I didn't think that I wanted to get off once we arrived. The desire to keep going north was

something I had always had, kind of like a compass needle, or a goose migrating as summer began.

As we pulled through urban Sydney, I looked at my fellow passengers, who seemed to be calm as ever. I wondered if they could sense my fear. Other animals could. Dogs could, of that I was sure. We dipped under a tunnel, and we were at Kings Cross, and a new chapter awaited me.

The air was still warm and dry, uncomfortably so, and I thought that I could smell my own sweat. That wasn't good. The mythology of our desert-country stayed with me as I stepped off the train, and I spied her standing across the platform.

—Jesse Bant, 19, Melbourne

## Somewhere

a dead  
body covers  
its nudity. a body shape-  
shifts into the southern river that  
capybaras cross wearing their pups on  
their backs. a vulture  
exchanges gold teeth for money  
at a pawn shop. a felt  
pen marks the vertebrae  
that hands cannot reach. an  
eye forms a slit beside spark-  
ling charcoal fire. a mother  
starves to be the bearer  
of the news. a male sea-  
horse opens his brood  
pouch to receive  
fertile eggs.  
stale fingers  
press against  
the wall.  
a therapist  
strokes the spine  
of her dead  
client

—Isaac O. Daramola, 19, Ibadan, NI

## Grindr

Folabi sat alone at one of the bars at the international wing of the Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Ikeja, sipping from a tall glass of beer and scrolling through his phone.

“Hello,” a voice called out to him. He turned his head as the voice continued.

“Aha, bros. How you dey,” the man said and stretched his hands for a shake. The owner of the voice was wearing a black suit over a navy-blue turtleneck with a sparkling brown shoe. Folabi’s eyes swept through the intruder’s figure and he chuckled to himself. “Overdressed as usual.”

“Saw you checking in, so I raced after you to say hi.”

“Oh, thanks. Hi, right back at you,” Folabi said smiling and returned his gaze back to his phone.

“Thought you were looking right at me for a second there, didn’t imagine that you didn’t see me.”

“I saw you.”

“And you didn’t think to say hi or wave or something?”

“No.”

The intruder looked smaller than he had been the last time Folabi saw him. He also noticed the big round bags hiding under the intruder’s eyes like fugitives.

“I called your number last night, but you didn’t pick, so I called Adeola. That’s her name, isn’t it? Adeola or Adebola, I am always mixing it up.”

“Adeola,” Folabi replied as he removed his eyes from the phone and levelled it with the intruder.

“We talked a bit. Adeola and I. About this and that. She said she missed sucking my dick. Can you believe that girl?”

“No. She didn’t!” Folabi’s voice came out calm while his eyes went back to his phone.

"You don't know your sister very well," the intruder said. He grabbed a chair from the next table and set it in front of Folabi's. He sat down, watching Folabi as though he was watching a telenovela.

"I am not interested in this conversation. Can you leave please?" Folabi said.

"No, I can't. They have not announced my flight yet," the intruder replied, pointing to the speaker that hung just above the bar.

"Leave now, I mean it."

"I'll leave soon; my flight is in fifteen minutes. Why didn't you reply my calls?"

There was something soothing about the intruder, something that made it hard to get angry with him. Folabi wondered whether it was that spark about him, the way he carried himself, his brilliant mix of the local accent with the British one. No matter how mad Folabi was with him, he had never been able to execute any threat he made to him, not when they were together, not even now. Folabi spied the skin of his fingers, glowing in contrast to the dark colour of his suit.

One evening after dinner at a restaurant they dined at every last Friday of the month, the intruder had stopped under the white lights of a fluorescent, waiting for Folabi to bring the car from the car park. Folabi had seen him standing there and wondered how any human could be so majestic and beautiful and it had made him smile, a smile of satisfaction knowing that he would be going home with this creature.

"I read your book."

It had been a memoir. He had spent most of his early years struggling to make headway in his writing. The first manuscript he submitted to a publisher, he had received a rejection and an advice to never submit anything to the publishing house again. The second manuscript he sent to another publishing firm had never received an acknowledgement or reply. From then, Folabi had relegated his writing career to the backseat since nothing he did seemed to work. He had thrown himself into his law career, since it seemed like the only thing in his life that was working. Then, the breakup with the intruder happened, and everything about him had crashed. He had tried to kill himself and after then, he had been committed to an asylum where he was encouraged to keep a journal. This journal was what he transformed into his first book after an agent contacted him, claiming that his doctors had recommended that she take a look at it. This book had won him a Lambda and an African Prize for creative nonfiction. He was on his way to Abidjan for the event where he would receive his new award and a cash prize of forty-five thousand dollars.

“Folabi,” the intruder said. “Tell me something. What did you do with that ticket I sent you to come spend some time with me in Cape Town? Do you still have it?”

“I don’t.”

“It would have been great if you still did. Tickets costs a fortune these days, what with the exchange rate and this Buhari economy? Anyways, I can always buy you another. This time, it will be Barbados. Do you remember our trip to Accra?”

“Of course.”

“I doubt if you would remember it the way I do.”

“It’s your memory, not mine.” The words came out of Folabi like a hiss.

“That hotel in Osu where we had cigarettes and kisses for breakfast. Do you remember our kisses?”

Folabi didn’t answer.

The intruder signaled to one of the bar attendants and ordered a small bottle of Heineken. When the bar attendant wanted to help him open the bottle, he told her he preferred opening his beer bottles by himself. So he did, with the black steel ring on his wedding finger.

“I see you don’t drink Heineken anymore.”

“I prefer my beer cheap, thank you.”

“Cheap beers are too harsh for me. I can never survive them.”

“Good for you.”

He was caressing the bottle of Heineken and looking into Folabi’s eyes as if he was searching for something.

“So how is Adeola? She told me she had a baby. Is she happy?”

“She is very happy.”

“That’s nice. And you, you have a new man now, don’t you?”

“I do. He is an engineer.”

“Awww an engineer. Isn’t that everything? He must have such good hands. Engineers always know how to use their hands. Does he though?”

“He’ll rock your world,” Folabi hissed.

“A man with perfect hands, I can picture them. Do you guys have your baths together? Does he massage those tight knots of yours? Or do you still hate it when people touch you?”

“You know what? You are disgusting.”

“You don’t know how to give yourself wholly to anybody and that is your problem.”

Folabi answered with a frown. He wanted to talk but he couldn’t trust himself to be able to say what he needed to say.

“How old are you now? Thirty or thirty-one? You still think you are a child and that is another problem with you.”

"You are so versed with many of my problems, aren't you?"

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"How is your wife?"

"She is great. She sends her regards. Says she can't wait to see you join us on one of our vacation trips.

Folabi hesitated. He had been trying to shift the power dynamics of the conversation and it was landing back on his face.

"What is his name? Your boyfriend."

"Steve."

"You love him, don't you?"

"He makes me happy."

"Did you ever love me, Folabi?"

"I thought you were divine. I thought you were my soulmate. I'd never loved anyone else as much."

"It didn't feel like it. Felt like you were using me for my money, like I was your ticket out of here."

"I adored you."

"I knew that."

"Was that why you married the first woman who showed up on your radar?"

"Christie and I have been in and out for years, I thought you knew that."

"So you were cheating on her with me then?"

"No, it was not like that."

"Oh, tell me what it was like then."

"It was my dad. He knew about us. You and I."

"My dad knew about you, I didn't stick my dick into the first woman I met while I was with you, now did I?"

"You can't understand."

"Why did you do it then? Make me understand."

"I didn't know money and misery were best friends. I thought my money could ensure my happiness."

Folabi looked at him as if this was the first time he was seeing him. He saw how his caramel skin glowed as though he had just applied a moisturizer.

"Isn't that right? You have money now, so you would understand my decision."

"Don't be an idiot. What do you know about happiness and money? You have always had money and even the happiness. We were happy. As far as I can remember. We were."

"Yes," Bolaji said. "With you, everything was simple."

Folabi returned his gaze to his phone, he wasn't sure about the emotion coursing through his body any longer.

"You are on Grindr right now, ain't you? Looking for your next lay."

"Fuck you."

"Do you remember the first time we met?"

Folabi didn't answer.

"I was so afraid you were one of those homophobic ass-hats posing on Grindr to lure men like me into danger. I was so sceptical about how real you were?"

Folabi didn't answer.

"You were too beautiful to be true. Were you ever sceptical about meeting me?"

"We live in Nigeria. Of course I was."

"What was a beautiful guy like you doing on Grindr anyway?"

"You have asked me before and I answered you."

"Humour me again, please."

"The same thing you were looking for."

"Was I a good lay though?"

"The best."

"You were my best though. Don't think I will ever do better than you."

"Good for you."

"Do you remember our first time?"

"You were clumsy."

"I was. I couldn't believe my luck."

"It was a good day. Now let's say goodbye and forget each other. We've done it for two years and it was good."

"Your mum still calls to ask when I'll come do the responsible thing and ask your sister's hand in marriage."

"Liar."

"I can show you my call log."

"Mummy died. What kind of person tells lies about a dead person?"

"I didn't know. She called me around January."

"She died in February."

The bar attendant serving them walked over and asked if they wanted more beer. Folabi said no, rummaging through his pockets for his wallets so he could pay. He removed his international passport and put it on the table as he leafed through his wallet.

"Let me pay."

"No. I ordered my beer and I will pay for it. Thank you."

"I miss taking care of you, you know."

"You have a wife."



“You have a man.”

The speaker above them croaked as the announcer’s voice called Folabi’s flight for boarding. Folabi gathered his things and started towards the door of the bar. The intruder stretched his hands and held him by his arm. The familiar feel of his finger left Folabi gasping for breath. He could not hold on to his thoughts.

—Tolu Daniel, 31, Abeokuta NI

## Racing Fate

*Charles Carrington  
Happy Valley Racecourse, Hong Kong  
February 26, 1918*

Squinting through the multitude, I caught a glimpse of the favourite: a muscular grey. My man on the mainland thought him a certainty for the China Stakes. As the murmurings of the spectators grew, I noticed my heart quicken, just as it had done before we charged into battle in Flanders. Thankfully, I had managed to outrun that particular conflict.

While I was no racing expert, I'd never been afraid of risking my hand. You can do that when you know what it's like to have nothing; when you've seen the man next to you cut in two by machine-gun fire and wondered why it was him and not you. I didn't have a clear view from the trackside and would have to fight for a seat in the stands, but I endeavoured to put everything on that horse.

I felt a world away from the cool greens of East Anglia. The humid air in Happy Valley made one sluggish. The circuit was penned in by tall hills, and the 'grandstand' was nothing more than a ramshackle bamboo structure. I fanned myself with the racecard, watching the couples deep in conversation and the groups of Chinese exchanging predictions and banknotes. A photographer from the South China newspaper with his head under the cover trained his camera on the race day scene.

As I readied my final hundred-dollar notes to make the bet, I cursed the fact I was there without support. My uncle, who had acted as my mentor and guide in the Orient, had used his half of the shipping company as collateral to secure credit, and then absconded. Just thinking about him holed up in some den of iniquity with my family's money made me shake with rage.

I took one final look at the runners and ventured towards a Chinese bookmaker and his apprentice.

“Carrington. Carrington, old boy.”

I turned to see Nathaniel Stones, heir to his father’s sizeable trading company, waving a newspaper in my direction. His gut protruded over his trousers, however much he attempted to cover it by puffing out his chest.

“Nathaniel,” I said, tipping my hat as graciously as I could manage.

He slapped me on the shoulder. “Missed you at the club last week. Got tired of losing at bridge?”

I longed to play cards with people other than clean-collared buffoons, but in Hong Kong, socialising with the right types was just as important as balancing your books.

“Had a few issues...” I said.

He grinned. “I heard about your uncle. The scoundrel!”

There was a silence.

“If you need anything, all you have to do is ask,” he said. Stones thrived on moments like that—offering crumbs to the starving to recoup his share of the crop in years to come. I wished I could have asked someone else, but my uncle had worn out all of our friends’ good graces. Henrietta and the children might never be able to make the trip to join me unless my fortunes changed.

“Glad I can count on you, Stones. Us ‘White devils’ ought to stick together.”

Another silence.

I checked my father’s old pocket watch. With fifteen minutes to go, I had ample time to make the bet. “Could I borrow a sum for the big race? Got an iron-clad tip from a client of mine who trains horses up in The New Territories.”

In truth, the tip wasn’t the only reason I had resorted to gambling. I’d been to see a soothsayer in the market. A man in my predicament might have tried anything. He read my troubles through the unsteadiness of my hands, through my soldier’s stare. He mentioned the significance of silver and told me that a game of chance would offer salvation. And here I was about to bet on the grey.

Stones removed his straw hat and fanned himself. “How much are we talking?”

Papa and I would spend no more than a few shillings on the Grand National, but now I needed fast cash, shillings wouldn’t do. “Eight hundred dollars or so...”

His piggy eyes made their calculations. “Quite the pickle you’re in, Carrington.” Stones didn’t know the half of it: interest payments, veiled threats from the Triads, and a court-martial awaiting me in England.

“Let’s make it an even thousand dollars at three per cent monthly,” he said with another whack on the shoulder. One hundred pounds was no small sum of money. Stones, however, seemed unfazed. “I’ll wave the interest if you pay within a week.”

I wrote him a promissory note before he changed his mind. “You know I’d do the same if—”

“Don’t mention it, old boy. Just ensure you win the bloody wager.” He turned and left without asking the name of the horse I intended to bet my life on.

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*Jeffrey Huang*  
*February 21, 2018*

I checked the money in my bag one more time. It was all there. The stands were full and the lights burned bright on the concourse. My dream of owning a racehorse seemed both closer and further away than ever. After the next race, I’d finally know what it felt like to be more than a spectator in life.

That morning, Vanessa and I had gone over wedding costs for what felt like the tenth time.

“If we don’t pay the next instalment, we lose our deposit,” she said.

I earned a good salary as a senior shipping clerk, but she’d recently been made redundant. “You know I’ve got some other savings,” I said.

“Jeffrey, I could never... you’ve had that fund since you were a boy.”

“We’ll make it work, my love. You’ll see.” I kissed her forehead and left for the office.

The money was a legacy from Jack, my father, the man who had first taken me to the stadium on Hong Kong Island. From the first time I heard the thunder of hooves, felt the red-hot atmosphere, I was hooked. Investing the fund into the future of a living, breathing being would help me keep that connection alive.

With only a quarter of an hour to go, my heart was pumping as hard as that first time I ever watched a live race. Spectators in the grandstand sat with their heads buried in the form section of the South China Morning Post. I preferred to view the horses in the paddock, looking for signs that others missed. I clutched my bag, heavy with notes, and watched as the runners were led out.

The events that led me to take my entire savings fund to the track started on the way to work. The first tram to arrive was the Eight, my lucky number. At the office, I received a phone call from a school friend

who worked in the Lui stables up in The New Territories. He was confident about the chances of their charge Born in China.

When I checked the racing section in the paper I found the perfect investment: a syndicate looking for a new member to buy into a promising three-year-old gelding of top-quality lineage. I couldn't believe the name when I saw it. Captain Jack. The share was half a million Hong Kong Dollars—way out of my budget, but I knew it was the horse I'd been waiting for.

The horses entered the paddock one by one. Most were nervous and flighty due to the noise, but the favourite, Born in China, with his jockey in red and yellow silks, trotted nonchalantly, as if it were just another day. They had done a marvelous job preparing him for the trophy race; every muscle bulging, his coat gleaming silver.

I checked the odds for the horse on the big screen across the turf. One point nine. I'd need to pair it with another runner in a two-horse quinella to make enough for the wedding costs and the syndicate buy-in. I unzipped the bag and stared at the bundles of notes inside. I'd be going home with it full or empty.

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### *Charles Carrington*

Before I could place the bet and take my place in the stand, I heard an almighty crash. It was a sound of war—the kind that would make even the most hardened veteran turn and run. The thunderous crack of the grandstand structure failing was followed by the cries of the hundreds underneath. Upon turning, I saw the final stage of its collapse from three levels to one.

There was shock and confusion. We scrambled backwards to the rail, unable to take our eyes off the tragedy, unable even to draw breath. Debris flew and thick dust choked the air. When the last pole toppled, the noise began—an orchestra of cries.

A brave few ran towards the fractured mess of bamboo and bodies, attempting to help those at the edge. A young vendor wearing a coolie hat emerged with a stout, bearded gentleman. The injured man screamed in agony as he tried to stand on a broken leg, and pointed back towards the pile. "*Ma femme! Mes enfants! A l'aide!*" The on-duty police formed a hasty cordon around the area to prevent further injuries.

I looked across the sea of people rushing for the exit and saw Stones clutching the rail, stripped of his usual self-confidence. During my con-

scription, I'd seen enough fresh Tommies to recognise a man witnessing his first death. I grabbed his shoulders and shouted above the panic. "We've got to get in there and help. There'll be hundreds trapped."

Stones stared in horror at the flattened stands. "It's too dangerous, man. We'll be crushed." When I pulled at his shirt, he gripped the rail even tighter.

I swore that I would never run from a battle again, but I never thought I'd face death again so soon. Fighting against the current of the crowd, I reached the edge and peered in, looking for outstretched arms, straining my ears to hear the slightest call. Limbs and bodies scrambled from atop the mess, competing to reach the safety of ground level.

Smoke began to filter through from the back of the fallen stand where the food vendors had their carts. The cries of those trapped became muffled and choked. Soon, the angry smell of burning raced through to where I stood alongside the others in the rescue effort. The Chinese vendor who had dragged the French man away removed his hat in a futile show of respect.

Rapidly advancing flames forced us to retreat a few paces, then a few more. The heat was fierce and before long, the blaze ate up the bamboo, the wood, the food carts, and all of those poor souls trapped inside. Smoke rose high into the valley, above the mountains and out into the bay. I withdrew to the safety of the middle of the track, away from the awful sounds. Away from the smell. There was nothing I could do but watch through the waves of heat. It could have been me. It could have been my family. In around twenty minutes, the blaze had claimed everything and died its death. I was only minutes away from ruin that day, but for many, there would be no salvation.

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### *Jeffrey Huang*

The horses walked around the circle of the paddock. Number One, Archippus, looked calm and capable. Purton was a champion jockey, but the horse was carrying too much weight. As I looked on, a hunched pensioner tapped me with his racecard. The front page read *Remembering Happy Valley: The centenary of a tragedy*. The man could have been a hundred years old himself, but his eyes still had that same race-night sparkle my father had.

"Look at the grey horse," he said. "Nobody will beat those legs today."

I smiled and tapped him back on the arm. "You're right, old man. He's pure class and his stable say he's in peak condition. Not much money in the win stakes though."

He looked at me in horror for even suggesting betting 'win'. It was the hundred-to-one combinations that kept racegoers like him coming back every week.

"Any other tips?" he asked.

"Follow your own signs," I said. "That's what my father used to say."

As he went off to make his bet, I fixed my gaze on the Australian gelding coming next. House of Fun was anything but consistent, but the trainer, John Size, had been successful since moving to Hong Kong. The animal's slender legs twitched with every step and the steward riding alongside pulled hard at the reins to keep him straight. All of those punters watching a screen or with their head buried in the statistics missed the reality of racing—the pure animalism of the horses, the natural desire. Those sparks of nervous energy made the difference in sprint races and gave the mounts their staying power. The horse would run in stall number eight—another sign.

Inside, I filled out my betting form and stared down at the number of zeros. To Vanessa, racing was mathematical wizardry, but to me, it was beautiful order. Was I really going to do this? That decision was the first time I'd ever wielded any real power. The clocks ticked down to race time and the queue inched forward.

Eventually, it was my turn at the window. The clerk snatched the paper and fed it into the machine. Just another bet. A message appeared on the clerk's screen and she turned and spoke to her manager. The manager glanced at the sheet in her hands—banned gamblers and suspicious odds. Even though the building was air-conditioned, the room was suddenly sweltering. Beads of sweat trickled down my back.

The pensioner from the paddock appeared at the window next to mine. "Now this must be a sign," he said, looking at me as if I were a treasured family member. "What are you going for?"

"Two and eight," I replied, over the voices of the other gamblers. "Betting my future on it actually." Meanwhile, the clerk tapped on the glass to indicate her manager had approved the bet.

He looked back with a knowing smile. "I've done that a few times." His face showed unwavering trust. "I'll go with two and eight as well." He completed his slip and handed it to the clerk.

People behind me in the queue were getting impatient, inching forward to apply the pressure. I dropped the stacks of notes on the counter and slid them under the window.

The old man registered no surprise at the size of the bet. According to him, I was the wise one. He pushed his own pile of notes under the window and made his bet. The man stepped aside from the queue and nodded goodbye, leaving me alone with my ticket, the most expensive piece of paper I'd ever held.

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*Charles Carrington*

For a good while, nobody spoke more than a few words. Police and ambulance men gave orders and we obeyed. Hours passed. The first encounter with charred remains or a faceless body showed on the expression of every volunteer there. Darkness began to hamper our efforts clearing the debris, so we waited for electric lighting to arrive. That time shuffling around, waiting to find a survivor, someone who could be helped, took me back to those dark hours watching the German line. Not a soul would move but your mind played tricks every damned minute.

We formed a chain to separate the fallen structure from the people that had occupied it. Every now and then, a gust of wind kicked up the ash and sent everyone into coughing fits. Before long, my shirt was blackened and I felt light headed from the work. All I'd had to drink that day was a few pulls on the brandy in my hip flask.

Ambulance men erected triage tents on the infield and loaded the wounded onto stretchers. Others were dumped into wooden carts to be identified later. The smell that came with them was something that would stay with me forever. The death toll must have reached hundreds, and the wounded more like a thousand.

At some point, I rested on the grass and looked up at the night sky. I had nothing more to give. When I'd arrived in Asia, the stars had offered the promise of a great future. Uncle's shipping business had been ticking along, and I'd soon found my feet with the expatriate British. I'd imagined the children going to school in hats to shield them from the heat. Henrietta would have enjoyed trips to the islands and walking along the shoreline. But now...

Hours later, I awoke to a chill, still on the grass in my smoke-stained shirt and trousers. Most had abandoned the rescue effort by small hours. Staying would have been a meaningless gesture. Besides, the fire was a clear message about my future on the continent. While I hated playing the role of deserter once more, my only hope of seeing my



family again depended on it. I dusted myself off and hailed a carriage to take me to the waterfront.

The thousand dollars Stones had lent me would buy me a head start anywhere I chose. Hong Kong was filling up rapidly, and there was nothing left for me to put a flag in and call my own. Although I was less sure about myself, the city would recover. Years from now, these hills would be covered in buildings. I was destined to leave before then.

The tragedy would provide ample cover for me to slip away from my creditors. Stones was the only soul who knew I hadn't been taken by the fire, and I would see to it that his money was repaid when I got on my feet. I owed him that much.

I settled on Australia. Mining, ranching, and construction. *There* was a place that required a man who understood how to procure things, a man with contacts and shipping know-how like me. I could get word to Henrietta when I arrived.

At the docks, I purchased a berth on a steamer leaving that afternoon and spent the morning buying clean clothes and a suitcase. I'd arrive with fewer possessions than when I shipped out to war, yet, from what I had heard, Australia was a country where people started out with nothing more than fresh ideas for a better life. The old fortune-teller was right about my lucky escape, and now it was up to me to make the most of my final chance. I owed it to the people who weren't so fortunate that day.

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*Jeffrey Huang*

My father and I used to stand at the rail, as close to the finish line as we could get, but I was too nervous to watch this race. If my gamble came off, I could watch from the members' enclosure next time as an owner. If it didn't, I would have to own that decision.

In order to avoid the screens, I entered the gift shop and studied the framed photographs of the track over the years. The area was different then—green hills and colonial outposts. A beautiful black and white print showed the racecourse before the fire. The stadium seemed so open, with just one wooden structure for spectators. Ladies with parasols and gentlemen in waistcoats completed the scene.

I can tell you the winning time of that race to the nearest hundredth, the jockey of each of the horses and the colours they wore that evening, but I didn't stand at the rail, cheering them on. It didn't feel right without Jack.

When I heard the roar of the crowd, I knew the favourite had won. Born in China came home three lengths ahead, as expected, but I needed to know if my lucky number eight had got second. I dared not speak to anyone, I kept my focus on the photographs until the heat of the crowd had died down, then finally went to check the big screen for the placings. The ticket in my pocket was everything or nothing—the wedding that Vanessa deserved, or the end of my dream to play a part in this sport.

The screen was blank. Processing. I waited. The losing punters returned to their seats and switched their focus to the next race. Winners double-checked their tickets and started mentally spending the winnings. Finally, the result emerged. First was Born in China in a time of 1:09:11, second was number eight, House of Fun in 1:09:48. When I saw the number, a blaze of excitement raced through my body. I clutched the rail and let out a war cry. I had done it!

The quinella payout was almost nine times what I'd bet. When the jockey brought the winner down the track for his victory lap, he was barely sweating although I was still clinging on, taking deep breaths.

After the jockeys weighed in and the result was confirmed, I headed to the grandstand. I checked to see if the pensioner was there, but he'd been swallowed up by the other thousands of racegoers. I'll never forget how the betting clerk counted out my winnings in silence as I waited to stow it in my bag. The first thing I did was to rush to the gift shop and buy that black and white photograph of Happy Valley.

On my way out, I phoned Vanessa to tell her our wedding troubles were over. Then I called the breeder to confirm my investment in the Captain Jack syndicate. I rode the MTR home holding my bag to me as if it were my baby. The next day, I was the proud part-owner of a very good horse.

I've told the story to the syndicate so many times I've lost count. "How could you risk everything?" they ask. They mock me and call me Lucky Jeffrey, but in truth, I made the choice. I trusted the signs that showed me the path.

The picture hangs in our hall, a monument to our success and to my eternal bond with my father. Each time Captain Jack races, I tap the frame on the way out, in remembrance of the people who died. It helps to keep my luck alive.

—Philip Charter, 35, Chichester UK

## Plot C33, Cemetery 3

I imagine the Rhode Island cemetery  
where my great-great-great grandparents'

rest is chilly, even in summer.

I've never been to Rhode Island, don't know  
the weather, barely know my ancestors' names.

Still, I carry their marrow in

my joints, more dirt than cartilage—enough  
to grow flowers in my elbows and hips and knees,

enough to bury what sings.

What they left behind in Germany the whole  
world knows. What they left behind in me

I'm left to wonder. I recently

noticed that when I smile it's tinged with  
frown—one corner of my mouth forgets to

rise with the other. Did this come from  
Chaya, ancestor of a gentile turned Jew, lost

and back again? Chaya means *life*,

but I only know of her burial in the old  
Jewish cemetery, her bones dust by now.

I imagine it's cold there tonight.

—Madison Zehmer, 22, New York

## *Australia (terra nullius)*

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It's where I met the ghost of Banjo Paterson  
resting my feet in ponds of baby crocodile teeth  
who led me to the perimeter of Lake Jindabyne—

where I read a book on the tongues in dragon's verse.  
My body a curled-up Kelpie sleeping on the shore  
I hear songs of assimilation—a shipwrecked sermon  
filling the break in the waves;

swimming with the keys to giant clams  
a canopy of red oysters—for this paradise  
on earthly plains a savanna without the blue  
where they mistake quokkas for giant rats.

Looked into the canvas where sea and shoreline—fit  
a lone figure dressed in an infantry shirt.  
It's where I let imagination consume itself,  
among watery lines of sandy boulder & ocean dirt.

Land of rainmakers where the sky father  
meets the rainbow serpents in bars with swinging doors  
dressed in the pulling seaweed of the sea—  
we draw images of dreamtime on loose seeds gathered.

—Matt Duggan, 48, Newport WAL

## Midsummer Nostalgia (真夏のノスタルジア)

call of cicadas  
has always remained in ears  
but great summer trees  
pollinate the seeds of a  
nostalgic summer zeitgeist

## Lillies of the Mountain (山のユリ)

in isolation  
he begins the highest climb  
as rocks fall and strike  
a shower of rejection  
that the man must overcome  
for when he does so  
there exists a reward that  
transcends expression  
そこには  
目を刺激する  
睡蓮畑  
(Over there is an eye-shocking  
Field of water lillies)

—Ryunosuke Hashimoto, 16, Chiba Prefecture JP

## *A Head Full of Hair*

from: Ifeoluwakiitan Adebajo <ifeoluwakiitan95@gmail.com>  
to: Iteoluwakiishi Adebajo <iteoluwakiishi93@gmail.com>  
date: 29 May 2020, 6:29  
subject: So excited to meet you!  
mailed-by: gmail.com

Dear Baby,

Not much to say by way of salutation because I just got off the phone with you and your mother. When I was learning to write letters in primary school, most of my letters began with “how are you and the rest of the family?” These days, in official emails, it’s “I hope this mail meets you well.”

The first thing your mother said was you have a head full of hair. She focused her phone camera on your new face to show me. She’s not wrong about your hair: it’s curly, slick and full, touching the nape of your neck and falling almost across your forehead. It felt like I had known you for a while, the newness of your expression slowly disappearing under my gaze. Was this what God meant when he said, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you”? Then there’s your eyes. Your mother said your eyes are like your father’s. I don’t see it. What I see is a smile. Has anyone else seen the barely-there smile sitting in your barely-there eyes? What do your smiling eyes see? A blurry face or the face of your soon-to-be favourite aunt in the world, her blonde locs packed up, her pink glasses sitting on her nose. I once read somewhere that babies can smile before and shortly after they’re born, but that these are reflex smiles, not real smiles. The research goes that newborns like you can’t express a lot of emotions, that you do not have enough

social experience to interact. So whatever smile etched across your face or plastered in your eyes is nothing but a reflex.

What if it's not?

Your real smile will come in two or three months, that's what research says. If it's anything like mine or your mother's, it will be full and infectious, stretching your eyes into a squint.

Around me, the stickiness of the night is lifting. Crickets sing, competing with the small hum of a damaged light bulb somewhere in my home. It's only six am. I don't know what your mother's ward looks like, but I imagine that just outside it, birds are chirping around the window. Maybe the sky is a burst of sunlight, streaks of orange lines hiding the blue. And maybe the flowers bloomed the moment you arrived, exploding into several colours—purple, yellow, red, pink—their fragrances twirling in invisible forms in the air: it's that season—not quite summer, but almost the end of spring. One article explaining the seasons of the year to key stage one kids describes the weather in spring as 'warmer': *trees begin to grow their leaves, plants start to flower and young animals such as chicks and lambs are born*. A baby is born: you.

You were born at one in the morning, but I got the news by two when your other aunt, Olaoluwakiisha—Aunty Kiisha called to tell me to check the family WhatsApp group (when asked why she was up in the middle of the night, she said she was knitting a blanket to send to you.) It was your grandfather who broke the news to us, calling you princess in his message—his first grandchild. There's some truth to this: we are princesses, even you baby, born in a city far from home.

Google estimates the distance between our hometown and the city you're born in to be 6,740.5 kilometers and breaks down how to get there by road—a trip of 96 hours. I doubt that's possible. You can only get to the small unknown town in Ibadan by taking one airplane from the UK to Lagos, then getting in a bus from a carpark in Lagos to Ibadan. From there, I'm not so sure. I've lived in this country my entire life and have never gone to the village where I would've been princess. Your mother hasn't been there either. In some ways, a chunk of your history was lost way before you arrived. If you ever want to apportion blames, consider this Yoruba proverb: "*Dìẹ̀ dìẹ̀ nímú ẹ̀lẹ̀ dẹ̀ẹ̀ fí nń wogbà.*" It literally means "little by little is how the pig's nose enters the yard"—figuratively, it means that we should attend to a small problem before it

becomes uncontrollable. This is my way of attending to the problem of preserving our history: writing a letter to your mother to read to you.

Our history as I know it starts with my great-grandfather, your great-great-grandfather, the heir to a throne in Ibadan. His name was Victor and he died when your great-grandfather, Francis was two. Our last name starts with Adé: the crown. Adébánjò means ‘the crown agrees with me’ but does the crown really agree with us?

The story goes that after Victor was killed, your great-grandfather had to leave with your great-great-grandmother, Vivian Amoke Akakpo, a half-Nigerian, half-Togolese trader to Lagos, where we mostly all live now. Do babies bring any knowledge with them? I once read a paper that explained that babies are far from helpless and clueless. According to the paper, studies indicate that infant brains come equipped with knowledge of intuitive physics. This means you have a basic understanding of how the world works. But do you have any knowledge of the past? Of who your ancestors are? As a child, I wondered if we picked our families before we were born and regretted picking the Adébánjò family every time your grandmother yelled at me.

I don’t want to be presumptuous in saying: ‘you can’t know this yet’—I can already tell how intelligent you are: the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree—but I’ll go on anyway: your mother is named after your great-great-grandmother: Vivian Amoke (Iteoluwakiishi which means the throne of God cannot be moved was an addition made by your grandmother). Your great-grandfather, Francis gave your mother the name in honour of his mother. That’s why we joke that she’s an old person. One time when we were young, neighbours came over to the house to play jackpot with Whot cards. During the game, your mother laughed a throaty laugh, pressed her hands to her chest and said, ‘this is such a juvenile game’. Everyone assumed that she was sending a signal to her partner, a la the rules of the game. She wasn’t. She went into the room we shared with your grandmother’s mother (Alice) and they sat together, staring into space, singing an old hymn that we all didn’t know. This isn’t half of it. Your mother has weird music tastes: she doesn’t listen to Beyoncé, Wizkid or Rihanna. Instead, she keeps Rex Lawson and Ebenezer Obey records on repeat when she’s working out. FYI, she’s not 30+ yet. You’ll find out more about this soon.

Before you came, I imagined you’d also be an old soul. This has nothing to do with your mother. You’re born in an interesting time. The



world around us seems to be falling apart; there's a pandemic. A virus is moving around cities and countries, taking people, changing the world in previously unforeseen ways. It came to our extended family, stealing your great-uncle (your maternal grandfather's brother) who had been a doctor working the frontlines of the pandemic. Because it was so close to your birth and because a huge part of me is fascinated by reincarnation, I assumed you would come to the world a boy—our dear uncle. That was a small comfort, until your paternal grandfather died. Not from the virus. He took a nap one afternoon and the last word he said to your paternal grandmother was, 'goodbye'—which reminds me of the last words of my paternal grandmother (your great-grandmother, Susan Adébánjò). When an ambulance crew tried to resuscitate her on her deathbed, she said, "I'm in my room, leave me alone."

When your paternal grandfather died, I imagined you'd be a twin: one of you would represent our uncle, the other would be your paternal grandfather. Twin boys. I sent a text to your mother to ask if she was sure she wasn't having twins. She called, laughing her throaty laughter, which annoyed me. Later that evening, she sent a text to tell me that she was pretty sure you were just one baby inside her, gender unknown. I once read about the longest interval between twin births in the Guinness World Records. 87 days apart in Ireland. The first baby was born premature in June and the second baby was born at the end of August. It was fascinating, but not as fascinating as another story I read in one of the Guinness World Record Books your mother won in a competition in high school. It was about this woman with 69 children—this was in the 18th century, at least 300 years before you are born. The woman whose name I don't remember, who is referred to as a 'peasant from Russia' gave birth to 16 pairs of twins, seven sets of triplets and four sets of quadruplets. I still don't believe it.

Do we also get to choose our identity before we come?

I am swooning, in love with you after seeing your face and your head full of hair. Perhaps in my next letter, I'll tell you why hair is important to us.

Lots of love,  
Aunty Kiitan

For your mother Kiisa: Sisi, I'm proud of you. Please get as much rest as you can. I'll call in the afternoon.

from: Ifeoluwakiitan Adebajo <ifeoluwakiitan95@gmail.com>  
 to: Iteoluwakiishi Adebajo <iteoluwakiishi93@gmail.com>  
 date: 1 June 2020, 13:42  
 subject: The world is on fire the year you are born :(  
 mailed-by: gmail.com

Dear Baby,

When I woke up this morning, all I could think about was December 31st, 2019. A lot has happened since then. I wondered if anyone had a hunch that wild things were coming as we prayed and sang. In the church your grandparents attend—which is where your Auntie Kiisa and I spend the crossover—there’s a song they like to sing the moment the clock strikes 00:00. It goes like this: “*Inu mi dun wipe mo rojọ oni. Inu mi dun wipe oni soju mi. Congratulation ọrẹ mọwọ ẹ wa.*” I’m not sure what all of it means, and when I checked Google, there was no translation. I hope your father can help (not your mother, her Yoruba is just as bad as mine!) The first line is an expression of happiness at living to see a particular day, in this case, the New Year.

Before your mother got married and left the fold, Christmas and New Year holidays held special traditions: singing and dancing to songs from the 80s and 90s—‘Everybody’ by Backstreet Boys, ‘Dance With Somebody’ by Whitney Houston, ‘Girls Just Want To Have Fun’ by Cyndi Lauper—decorating the parlour of your grandfather’s house with a Christmas tree, sitting at the terrace upstairs at night, staring at the moon, dreaming things about a future we now see. This last December was different, but not large enough to notice; the difference had accumulated over the years, so we had just our nostalgia: the memories and digital archives.

In January, just a few days after your mother told us over a video call that you were coming, a third state of emergency was declared in Australia due to the severity of the fires. Your grandmother went from randomly dancing at every opportunity she got to staring gravely at the television. We watched the news on CNN in the morning, still wearing wrappers tied across our chest. Your grandmother mumbled something about the end coming and called a cousin who lives in Australia.

The cousin who lives in the Northern Territory managed to convince your grandmother that she was fine and that there was no fire in her city. Your grandmother thanked God a dozen times on the call. Then on January 7, a few hours after I returned to my home in Ikoyi, I read about a virus known as 2019-nCoV that had been identified in China on my Twitter feed. I disregarded it; China was a far, abstract place that I had read about in Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*. In fact, I was more concerned when the next afternoon as I sat eating ewa agoyin and bread in the office lounge, I read that Prince Harry and Meghan Markle were stepping down from their duties as senior royals in Buckingham Palace. I shared that on a group chat with my closest friends.

On January 20th, my fiancé, your soon-to-be uncle, Kevin and I had our first big fight. It was about honeymoon destinations in May after our wedding on April 30: London, where I could see you or Maldives, where we both always wanted to go. We conceded only a few days after: Santorini, after which I'd fly to London via British Airways. In the evening, your uncle had a near breakdown when we heard about Kobe Bryant's death. We cried as we ate 3000 naira suya from Glover Court.

In February, a few weeks after the WHO named the coronavirus, *Covid-19*, the first case of the virus was announced in Lagos. That same day, I was terribly blue about something, so I called your Auntie Kiisa and we talked about 'Grey's Anatomy' and old Nollywood films like 'Full Moon' and 'Living In Bondage' until I fell asleep. The pandemic is the reason your grandparents aren't with you. It is the reason Kevin and I had to postpone our wedding indefinitely. I'm not even going to get started on everything that happened this week, before and after you were born, everything from America killing people of our skin colour to the genocide in Kaduna and the poor girl who was raped and murdered in the church in Edo. Did you see me flinch when your father said you were "Black" (as in dark skinned, chocolate, caramel) on the call this morning? I flinched not because you're not Black but because to be racially Black in the world right now is no easy fit.

I'm not trying to cause any fear or anxiety by telling you all of these things. I'm just trying to explain that your birth is a blessing that has brought us so much joy and because of that, I wonder what we'll call you.

In our culture, babies are named eight days after they're born. Typically, Yoruba babies have a ton of names from different relatives. We believe the name given to a child can influence his life, so names are chosen carefully. There are certain names given to a newborn that depend on the circumstances of their birth—we call these *orúko àmútòrunwá*: a predestined name. For example, if you had been a twin (as I wanted you to be) and were the first to come out of the two, your name would have been *Táíwò* and your twin's name would have been *Kéhìndé*. When I was in primary school, a teacher who was a twin told us how the twin names worked. *Táíwò* who came out first isn't really the first born. In the womb, *Kéhìndé* tells *Táíwò* to come out first in order to check out the world and announce that *Kéhìndé* is coming. So *Táíwò* literally means 'to taste the world,' and although she comes out first, she's actually the second child.

*PSA: Your late paternal grandfather was Kéhìndé, only that his Táíwò decided to go back a few minutes after tasting the world for him. I'm sure your father would tell you more about this.*

I recently had a conversation about twin names with a friend who is *Táíwò*. We've been friends for years, but never really spoke about it. He thinks that the concept is just a Yoruba myth. He might be right. There are several Yoruba myths that are normalized even in modern culture. Some might say reincarnation is a myth, but I'd argue with them about that. Your great-grandmother, Alice—who we also called Alice in Wonderland—once told me when I was young that if I drank coke after eating mango, I'd die. Then there are a few I worried about while your mother was pregnant: her use of safety pins, someone crossing over her legs, her walking out in the afternoon—all myths that promise some kind of evil.

I wonder what you'll think about myths. Being far from home means that you might be removed from culture, but will you search for it? Will you attempt to find its face while trying to create an identity for yourself?

I have a Zoom call with some clients shortly. When I finished med school in 2017, I had no idea I'd go into finance. As a child, I wanted to be a lawyer, then a teacher, but look at me now, using terms like assets and liabilities, reading 30K word articles on investment scams. We never really know what life holds, do we?

All my love,  
Aunty Kiitan

For your mother Kiisa: Please show Baby a video of the SpaceX rocket being launched to orbit. It's fascinating. She'll love it.

from: Ifeoluwakiitan Adebajo <ifeoluwakiitan95@gmail.com>  
to: Iteoluwakiishi Adebajo <iteoluwakiishi93@gmail.com>  
date: 3 June, 2020, 7:29  
subject: My new goal in life is to make you a feminist ninja.  
mailed-by: gmail.com

Dear baby,

I spent the past three hours on the phone with my mother (who now prefers to be called Grandma). It's a rainy Wednesday morning and Kevin (who asked yesterday after he saw a picture of you, "Babies come with this much hair?" and then called you Samson) is sleeping right across from me. He usually sleeps in on Wednesday mornings; it's his off day.

Your grandmother and I talked about you, about your mother, about the future. She said what everyone has said so far, that you have a head full of hair. "Have you seen it?" she asked me. She said you're a big baby, just like I was. "Almost 4.5kg," she said and told me for the first time that I was 4.7kg, only two kilograms bigger than you are. Cheers to having one thing in common.

I haven't seen your grandmother in weeks, no thanks to the Covid-19 situation. When I see her again, I wonder if she'll look like a grandmother—and not just like my mother. We go through life wearing different hats. It's different when you're a woman because a woman's identity is often tied to someone else's. First you're a girl, then you become not-quite-girl, not-quite-woman (just a heads-up about menstruation), then you become a woman. Now here's where it gets tricky: you become someone's wife, taking on the person's surname—Yoruba people would call you, 'Iyawo Lagbaja' which means 'Wife of X'. After that, you become someone's mother—Yoruba people would call you 'Iya/Mama Lagbabja' which means 'X's mother'. I've promised not to call your mother that. It's the same way Kevin and I have agreed that I won't be changing my surname after we get married. Your mother is not a

feminist, but I've ordered a copy of *We Should All Be Feminists* for you. I want her to read it to you as often as possible. I never want you to feel small or less than you are because you're a girl.

Before your mother even started to date your father, we had arguments all the time about feminism. Your mother says she believes in the equality of women, but that she doesn't believe in feminism. I know she'll read this letter to you, but talking to her about feminism feels like talking to a blockhead (yes, Kiisi, you're a blockhead). She's so adamant about her own views that I no longer argue with her about it. Which is funny because before your parent's traditional wedding in August 2018, we told the Alagas—the hosts of the ceremony—that they were not to use any songs/adages/practices that made your sister seem like she was being sold off to your father. During the rehearsal ceremony, the Alaga on the groom's side almost made your mother kneel for your father. Under the glare of your grandparents and other relatives, your mother was about to, then she saw my face and stood still. We argued about it with your grandmother after the ceremony. I was accused of wanting to bring shame to the family. I was too tired to school anyone on feminism that night, so I crept into bed and wept. This is one of several experiences I want to ensure you avoid.

Today, I'm going to make baked moinmoin and do some reading. I'm currently reading 'I'm Telling The Truth But I'm Lying'—a fantastic read on mental health by Bassey Ikpi. It's my third time reading it. Here's something you should know: we're all readers in this family. Whenever you come to Nigeria, I'll show you what it means to be born around books.

Too much love,  
Kiitan.

For your mother, Kiisa: my oven baked moinmoin recipe:

Beans  
Stock  
1 Onion  
2 Tablespoons of Vegetable Oil  
2 Tablespoons of Palm Oil  
1 Tatashe and 1 Ata Rodo  
1 stock cube  
Corned beef

I'm not using any boiled eggs because they nauseate Kevin  
Salt

Am I leaving anything out? Will Facetime you when I'm about to  
get started.

from: Ifeoluwakiitan Adebajo <ifeoluwakiitan95@gmail.com>  
to: Iteoluwakiishi Adebajo <iteoluwakiishi93@gmail.com>  
date: 5 June, 2020, 14:22  
subject: We're giving you a name (or ten) today.  
mailed-by: gmail.com

Dear Baby,

There's so much I want to tell you about identity. It's such a big and political thing in the world we live in that there's something known as identity crisis. Let me start by talking to you about why hair is so important to us. I promised you this in my first letter, but it slipped my mind until this morning when I was doing the dishes and had the most random memory ever. When I was 6 and your mother was 8, she took out my cornrows and started to braid my hair the way we braided our doll, Lisa's hair. Lisa was a gift your grandmother's sister brought to Nigeria from London in August 2000. Months before, we watched *Life-Sized*, the movie with Lindsay Lohan and Tyra Banks in which Lindsay Lohan used magic to attempt resurrecting her late mother. She ended up bringing a doll (Tyra Banks) to life. So when Lisa came, we tried to make her human. We painted her nails, braided her hair, gave her our old clothes and made her sleep on the bed with us at night. When we realised she was never going to become human, we channeled that energy to each other. That's why on that midterm afternoon, your mother was taking out my newly done cornrows and attempting to weave my hair while your great-grandmother, Alice, slept.

I'd never forget that afternoon. In some ways, it's the beginning of our collective hair struggles in the family. It might seem insignificant to you and to your mother, but to me it's not just any other day. The house was dark, I remember that clearly, so we sat by the sliding door leading to the balcony to get light from outside. Your grandmother arrived home in her green sixth generation Honda Civic (she was a lecturer back then) and saw your mother braiding my hair. It felt like we

had been caught doing the unimaginable: stealing meat from her pot, watching an adult movie, playing outside in the sand. You should have seen her eyes! After staring at us for a while, she told us to put on our slippers and get in the car. I don't remember much about the car ride and I'm not sure if I protested when we got to the saloon. All I know is, one minute we had hair, the next we were bald. It wasn't exactly shocking—there had been threats to cut our hair in the past. Throughout the rest of the school year, I behaved like a boy; I thought I was a boy. While my classmates had pretty beaded hair for school pictures and parties, I had a round, big, egghead with zero hair and elf ears.

We started growing our hair a year later. The hair that grew out of mine was stubborn: 4c. At first, we tried using kiko as protective hairstyling to tame it. That didn't work. One day a few years after, your grandmother called my hair a forest and said she was tired of the hours spent detangling and washing—natural hair products weren't as popular then—so we walked to a saloon across from our old house in Amen street to get my hair retouched. I was excited about it at first. Silky, straight hair was the hair every girl was wearing—if you wanted to be like Agbani Darego, you needed it. But within seconds of applying it, it began peppering my scalp. On Monday, I went to school with a beret because there were scabs all over my scalp. It was my first day in secondary school.

Your Auntie Kiisa's experience with hair is slightly different. She was born when me and your mother didn't have hair, so your grandmother never bothered with her hair i.e., Kiisa never grew her hair out. However, when she went for an internship in London in June 2017, she decided to start growing it out and girl, how it grew. Most mornings while in London, she sent us pictures of her hair, styled with flower crowns, inspired by Frida Kahlo. In July, her supervisor complained about her 'fro. She said it was untidy and unprofessional. Poor Kiisa cut her hair after getting a query for failing to do something about her hair (i.e., straighten it, relax it, braid it) after several warnings and complaints. She wore a wig that entire summer and didn't stop wearing a wig even when she returned to Nigeria.

You know what helped us in those days? India Arie's *Not My Hair*. We listened to it a lot when it first came out in 2005. But when Kiisa's depression came, it was only fitting to scream, *I am not my hair, I am not this skin, I am the soul that lives within* without necessarily knowing the rest of the lyrics. You know me, I couldn't resist the urge to write an es-



say about the need to redefine beauty, while referencing the song, Black hair politics and the hair discrimination Kiisa experienced. Imagine my heightened fascination when late last year, I discovered that the India Arie song was written for women who had lost their hair due to cancer.

This is why hair is important to us. We're not the biggest fans of politics, except your grandfather who has a political blog called 'Democracy' where he breaks down Nigerian politics. The right of every Black woman to do with her hair as she pleases and not face any stigma, discrimination or pressure conform to some Western idea of beauty is something we're passionate about. My goal is to ensure that you consistently have a safe space to be you, head full of hair or not.

Speaking of passion, there's something I need to tell you about me. Yesterday, I was talking to my friend Osagené about you and she asked me why I was so excited about you given the fact that I'm not a big fan of children—I never wanted kids growing up (but then, I also never wanted to get married, but look at me now). I told her one fact: your mother and Auntie Kiisa are my best friends. We do not get along all the time, but we are as tightly knit as it gets. What's theirs is mine and what's mine is theirs—you're more than a niece to me. Then there's the other thing I didn't tell her, which is difficult for me to talk about, usually. I already got permission from your mother to write to you about it. I'm not telling you so that you feel sorry for me. I'm telling you because I want to be that aunt that doesn't keep any secrets from her niece.

A few years ago, I was terribly sick and had to have surgery. Long story short: it got bad and they had to remove my ovaries. This means I can't have children of my own. I know I didn't want children, but I'd have liked to have the option, to make the decision on my own and not due to a disease. I've had relatives send me flyers to attend church events for barren women. I can't just wrap my head around those words 'barren woman'. Is that how they see me? Sometimes I stare at myself in front of the mirror and I start to see myself that way. I imagine getting old, owning 30 cats and 40 pet plants. No dogs because Kevin is scared of them.

Your grandmother is praying for a miracle to happen, while Kevin and I are open to adopting. If you asked me last year what I thought about miracles, I'd have frowned and said what a waste of time. I believe in them now. You're a miracle.

Lol. I'm so emotional right now. It's your Zoom naming ceremony in a bit. Can't wait.

Too much love,  
Kiitan.

For your mother, Kiisa: I told you it was not too early to start reading my letters to Baby. See this See this article <<https://www.baby-centre.co.uk/a25015135/reading-to-your-baby-when-to-start-and-how-to-do-it>>!!

from: Ifeoluwakiitan Adebajo <ifeoluwakiitan95@gmail.com>  
to: Iteoluwakiishi Adebajo <iteoluwakiishi93@gmail.com>  
date: 5 June, 2020, 17:22  
subject: Re: We're giving you a name (or ten) today.  
mailed-by: gmail.com

Dear Baby,

It just hit me that in a few minutes, you'll no longer be Baby. You'll have a name! The pastor officiating your naming ceremony is going to read out the names after this prayer session (look at me opening my eyes and not saying amen like a heathen.) I don't know how I feel. I really like the idea of calling you Baby until you can decide what you want to be called. 'Baby' reminds me of the baby from 'Half Of A Yellow Sun'. People talk about Olanna and Kainene, but never talk about Baby who was born around the time of the civil war.

You know, I used to hate my name. Your grandmother must have been feeling a bit clever when she gave us these names: Kiisi, Kiitan, Kiisa. I hated it because people either mispronounced it or never knew whose name belonged to whom. Most times, I got called Kiisi, sometimes, Kiisa, other times, Kitty Cat (by foolish classmates). So I decided that I'd call myself Cake. For an entire month when I was 7, I would only respond to people who called me Cake. My report card that year had a comment about this: "*She only prefers to be called Cake, might need psychological evaluation.*" Your grandmother in her infinite wisdom tore it up and hissed. Since then, I've come to accept my name. The literal meaning of Ifṣṣolúwakiítán is 'God's love never ends'. I've come to see it as an extension of my person. When I love, I love quite thoroughly.

You see how I sign my letters to you? I actually mean it when I say ‘too much love’.

Kevin is nudging me to focus on the names the pastor is about to call (I hope he doesn’t blunder the Yoruba names). The pastor says that there are 15 names (just one’s from me and your Aunty Kiisa). I had 15 names too, but I don’t know any apart from the three on my birth certificate. Your grandparents don’t remember any of them. This tends to happen when you have a ton of names. You know what, I’ll save all the names for you in an archive somewhere. If there are any English names, I can’t promise to remember them for reasons I’ll explain in a future letter.

That said, this is obviously not my last letter to you. It’s probably the last letter where I’ll call you Baby or ‘Head Full of Hair’ sha. Who knows?

All my love,  
Aunty Kiitan.

For your mother, Kiisa: I told you you shouldn’t wear those joggers and that Oxford University sweatshirt. You look like a sophomore.

—Ope Adedeji, 25, Lagos NI

## Kiss Me Sobriety

Lately, sobriety has been my newest God.  
 I get drunk more often than I breathe. I forgive my Momma's God;  
 the one she taught me to run to in prayer. I let him say *please, come back to me Son*.  
 The priest I go to don't know guilt like I do.  
 Pessimism is an advanced idol he sees in me.  
 He calls me sinner. I call him absolver.  
 He calls me sinner again although he makes the sign of the cross like a sinner.  
 He let me say *Our Father* and tell me to repeat *forgive us our trespasses* more often as I  
 get drunk.  
 He doesn't understand his capability of absolving my sins is a gift.  
 He sees it as a means to feed me with guilt.  
 When I get drunk I say *Father, lead me not into temptation* as a way of owning my sins.  
 I go outside. I kiss the sun more than I have kissed the man I love.  
 The man whose name is Henry. Henry who could be toxic at times but most clingy.  
 I bet he loves me more than I love me and forces me to keep from the things  
 that smirks at me with betrayal. I'm so angry I get pissed at him.  
 I'm so sorry that I push him slowly out of my life.  
 It's all about retribution, all about the punishments I have inflicted in me;  
 twice it was for suicide: slashing my wrists, dying in deep bass.  
 Blood gushing out from its source; staining the white sheet, staining the white floor.  
 Because God was forgiving me more than I prayed, I survived.  
 I was alive in the arms of a man who loved me.  
 When happiness supples, I become a sun-filled god.  
 I let Henry make nasty love to me. He touches me in places no one has ever.  
 I scream his name more than anyone has ever.  
 Then we practice forgiveness when he fucks me hard,  
 all the pain throttles round in my head.  
 I kind of go crazy sometimes. I think about my Momma having a  
 man who loved her. We all try for love. We all try to keep men our sobriety cannot keep.  
 We try for forgiveness when they fail to forgive themselves.

—Ugonna-Ora Owoh, 20, Enugu NI

# *The Book of Sorrow*

## **Chapter 1**

### Jabez the Aramite

In the land of Aram, that being, 'Low-place,' there was a man known by some as Jabez. This man was considered pious by all his neighbours; and thought to be of good standing with the Lord, their God. And despite what they thought of his many works, Jabez was aware of his shortcomings, and so would continually pray for forgiveness, beating his chest quietly under the heavens. And it came to pass that Jabez found a young woman named Isabel, daughter of Losiah the High Chief of Aram, whom he did marry after having agreed to care for her in all her days. Jabez begat many children; he begat seven sons of high virtue, and three daughters; each taking after their parents. The names of the sons of Jabez by order of the eldest first were, Eleazar, Noamuel, Zedariah, Elishar, Sachan, Omjah, Emaniah. The names of the daughters of Jabez were, Jemah, Rebecca,

Mariam. For each child he gave thanks to the Lord, yet the heavens were silent. Jabez came from that of lowly vagabonds, and so toiled under the sun for many of his days as an hireling, working to build up an honest household. And so it came to pass that Jabez did expand his dwelling space, adding a house for each one of his sons, exceeding in total that of a day's journey across the land of Aram. Jabez did build a large enclosure, housing a great number of sheep, cows, and camels wherefrom he would sell their product across all of Aram and often times as far as the borders of Labeth. And when it came to be that Jabez did finish the construction of the dwelling place, he could not travel the twenty-and-two furlongs to the temple of Aram for the heat of the sun shone harshly upon that low land. Not seeking to stir up anger in the Lord, Jabez did lower and prostrate himself towards the Lord, his God, facing the temple in its distance, and with thankful words sent praises up to him, yet the heavens were silent. The sons

of Jabez would hold a feast to the Lord daily within their holdings, and they would send for all in Aram to come and partake with them, even that of publicans and known harlots. And when it came that the feast should end, Jabez would rise and give thanks to the Lord for such bounties he was able to share among his people, yet the heavens were silent. On the next day, early in the morning would Jabez arise and make way for the temple of Aram, producing many offerings according to the number of all in his household, for Jabez thought to himself, "Truly, I know that I fall short before the laws of the Lord, my God, as kept on the bronze plates, and it may likewise be that my household does so in ignorance too. Thus do I pray and offer continually to the Lord, my God, for I suffer them not to gnash the teeth within the grave." In all this, the heavens remained silent.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Sorrows of Jabez**

One day whilst some of the children of Jabez were drinking wine within the eldest son's holding, Jabez did rise and give thanks to the Lord for all that he had been gifted throughout his many days. Before Jabez could finish his words of thanks, the sharp sound of a horse and that of a man's shouting could be heard from the

outside. Jabez did hastily ask of the Lord to forgive his short ending of thanks in order to attend the strange matter outside. Upon leaving the holding for the outside, they did see that of the ravaged body of one of Jabez's loyal servants, Anaiah, clinging weakly onto the exhausted horse. Anaiah did lift his face towards Jabez, and let out what words he could, considering the weakness of his soul, saying, "the soldiers of the king of Zaman did take your livestock and carry them away, yet they had no delight in just the animals and so razed your other holdings; setting the flame to all, and slew many of your children and all of the servants by the curved edge of their swords..." And after speaking such words, Anaiah did give up the ghost. Upon hearing that of the horrors of Anaiah and bearing witness to his last breath, the face of Jabez did become full of bitter grief. He fell down to his knees, crying out to the heavens, and tore his clothes apart, and did proceed to fall down in complete submission to the Lord, his God. He rose back up whilst remaining on his knees and spoke in much sorrow to all that were with him, "Long ago did I come from the womb of my mother naked and without substance, and to the grave shall I return likewise. By his grace, the Lord has given, and by his grace, the Lord has taken away: Blessed be the name of the Lord." In all this Jabez did not sin,

nor accuse the Lord, his God, for wrongdoing, but instead lay down in tears, praying, yet the heavens were silent.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The Debasing of Jabez**

Three days later Jabez did feel upon the sole of his foot a strong burning and so he did lift up the foot and after laying his eyes upon it, he did see that he had many sores. And Jabez did fall down and pray to the Lord, yet the heavens were silent. On returning back to his dwelling space, the remnants of his children saw his sorry state, and his daughter, Jemah, did speak to him, saying, "Father, what are those red marks upon your skin? Have you been with the lepers?" The body of Jabez was covered in sores. "Oh Father, depart from our sight, or we shall do so to save our health." Jabez replied not, and instead took some cloth with which to cover his sores, and sat amongst the ashes of his former holding. And so the children of Jabez did leave him and made way for the land of Labeth where they did sojourn for many years. Again, Jabez did fall down and pray to the Lord, yet the heavens were silent. Upon seeing her husband in complete submission to the Lord, the wife of Jabez did kick him, and spoke harsh words to him, saying, "Why do you still persist in this nonsense? Curse

that Lord, or end your pathetic life now and spare yourself of further humiliation." To the disgust of Isabel, Jabez did look up, and said to her, "My beloved wife, do you fail to understand? Are we only to receive grace and blessings at the hands of the Lord, and shall we not receive any evil?" And so Isabel did leave Jabez, putting him to shame, and made way for the land of her father in the west of Aram. In all this, Jabez did not sin, holding fast to the Lord, his God, yet the heavens were silent.

### **Chapter 4**

#### **The Friends of Jabez**

The word of the sufferings of Jabez did spread far throughout all the nations, even up to the borders of Labeth. The friends of Jabez did hear of his sorrows, and so made way for Aram to comfort and mourn with him. The friends of Jabez were Ezias the Koramite, Lemuel the Ormanite, and Halma the Saradite. Riding each on his own horse towards the dwelling place of Jabez, none could recognise the broken man that did lay far off in the distance, but upon nearing the man, they all did recognise he who lay on the dust of the ground before them. "O Jabez, my dear friend!" Lemuel did cry out in sadness. Each man got off his horse, wept, and did tear his own clothes, covering themselves in the dust of the ground as did

Jabez. The friends of Jabez did sit with him upon the barren ground for seven days and seven nights. No man dared speak a word to Jabez, for they could all see that his sorrow was great.

## Chapter 5

### The Lament of Jabez

After the many days of silence, Jabez did rise up from the dust of the ground, and did lift up his voice like a trumpet, saying to the Lord,

*“O Lord, I ask of thee this,  
Let the day wherein I was conceived be left to  
Perish, may thou split it asunder!*

*Let nothing save the darkness of death fall  
Upon that day,  
May darkened clouds roar with thunder!*

*Let the stars of heaven which oft do shine  
In the twilight, fade away, and may the  
Dawning of the day be met with blood!*

*O Lord, pray tell me,  
Why upon this earth dost thou hide thyself?  
Why was I brought forth into such sorrow?  
Why have I perished not in my grief?  
Why do I yet live to see the morrow?*

*For what reason are days added on to  
Those in bitter grief, whose souls do but  
Yearn to be at peace?  
In the grave do earthly sufferings perish,  
May thou make all of this cease!*

*O Lord my God,*

*O Divine and Holy One,  
All my life have I prayed to thee  
All my life have I given thanks to thee  
Never in my life have I asked thee:  
Must I suffer under the silence of heaven?”*

As Jabez did sit down in much sorrow, Ezias did stand up, and said to him, “My dear friend, may I speak concerning your troubles?” Jabez did slowly nod, and faced towards Ezias.

## Chapter 6

### Ezias Accuses Jabez

“O Jabez, can you not recount of the many times that the words of your mouth uplifted the weary spirits of men? Truly, you once did strengthen my own weak hands and feeble knees! But now that it has come upon yourself, you are faint and deeply troubled. We people of Koram have heard of your good works: you claim to honour the Lord, your God, so why fail in your faith now? Is it not said by the elders in the temple of Aram, ‘Did ever any trust in the Lord, and was confounded? Did ever any innocent perish by the hand of the Lord?’ By the Heavenly Father I bear witness to the proverb of the people of Koram, that those who reap iniquity, do sow the same. It is said too by the people of our dear Halma, in Sarad, that ‘what may go around in the land, does surely come around.’ And so by the thun-



der of Heavenly Father do the unjust perish, and by his winds are their iniquities swept away. For it is said by the prophets of my people that the Heavenly Father is far from those who do sin, but that he hears only the prayers of the righteous. And so I ask of you to look upon your soul, my dear Jabez, which one of us seems far from the Heavenly Father? Thus, I say, you are without much doubt deep within sin, you are far from holy. And so I beg of you Jabez, turn! Turn from your evil ways if you seek to end the silence of the Heavenly Father!”

## **Chapter 7**

### **Jabez Responds to Ezias**

And so Ezias did sit down content, feeling as though his words had spoken much truth. Jabez did not stay seated; eager to defend himself, he did rise up, saying to Ezias, “O Ezias, you speak so surely of destruction. Oh that I might have my request, and that the Lord, my God, would grant me the thing that I long for! My sorrows are unbearable, they are heavier than that of all the water of the sea; all joy within my soul is lost, yet in all my days, I did never deny the Lord, my God, his due. Brother Ezias, you claim to bear witness to my sinfulness, and such sinfulness as warranting the silence of the heavens? I have studied under the last grandson

of Zoramiah, I know the words of your own prophets, is it not said by your own prophets that ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of the Heavenly Father,’ and that, ‘there is not a just man upon the earth, that works righteousness, and sins not.’ And so, who of us is without sin? You speak of being closer to the heavens than me, yet your own prophets testify against you. Teach me, and I will hold my tongue: cause me to understand wherein I have gone astray from the will of the Lord, my God. How powerful are honest words, yet what will your hypocrisy reprove?” And so Jabez did sit down again, awaiting the response of his friends.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Lemuel Accuses Jabez**

Lemuel did rise before the friends, and before he spoke concerning the sufferings of Jabez, he did wash his face and holy areas three times over, as was the custom of the Ormanites when speaking about matters concerning their God. “O Jabez, my dear friend!” cried Lemuel, “How much I do long for your sufferings to cease! I was once in bitter pain too, for I had once lost much profit on my products! Such despair it was, truly. I could not feed my household for three days. Yet whilst I was in such despair, I hearkened to the words of my prophets,

wherein the Most Merciful does say in elegance, "Those who serve the Most Merciful are those who walk upon the earth in humility. When our punishment reached the arrogant, why did they not humble themselves?" You ask to be taught, and I will teach you truth. It is evident as to why the Most Merciful hides his voice from your ears, for you are one with a dark pride within your heart: thinking yourself to be high in the sight of the Most Merciful! Truly, the Most Merciful did reveal to my prophets that one must be humble in their dealings, for the one who has even a seed's worth of arrogance within his heart will toil all the days of his life and gnash his teeth within the grave! O my dear friend, you seek the pure words of the Most Merciful, and yet you walk upon the earth with pride, you are nothing before the Most Merciful!" And so Lemuel did sit down upon the ground, and finished his words with a prayer of thanks to his God, feeling as though he had answered the concern of Jabez.

## Chapter 9

### Jabez Responds to Lemuel

Jabez did sigh a deep sigh, and rose up once again to defend himself before the friends. "O Lemuel, truly do I know that I am nothing before the Lord, my God; daily would I lower myself

before him, singing prayers of thanks up to the heavens regardless of what was given to me by him. Throughout all the days of my life have I sought to lower myself before the Lord, my God. And now I am accused at my lowest of sufferings by the men whom I call friends? O Lemuel, I ask of you this: within the flock of sheep that a shepherd tends to, are some sheep with more favour than the others? Is the shepherd a respecter of certain sheep? Does he only tend to those great in wool, ignoring those who bare little? Does he only tend to those most likely to gain a profit, ignoring those who are worthless in the markets? Or does he preside over his whole flock?" And so Jabez did sit down again, after defending himself before his friends.

## Chapter 10

### The Testing of God

And so it came to pass that the friends of Jabez sought to answer the silence of the heavens, and Lemuel did rise and offer up a test, saying, "It is said by my prophets that only a false god shows silence before prayers, and if there be any doubt as to whether a god is false, one must simply pray and see if he hear a response from the heavens." Jabez did see much error in this, and so gave warning to Lemuel, saying, "What does it profit a man to test his

God?" Lemuel ignored the words of Jabez, and went on to wash his face and holy areas three times over, in order to pray correctly to the Most Merciful, his God. And so Lemuel did pray to the Most Merciful, bringing himself to tears for he had never prayed in such a pure way before, yet once he had finished his prayer, the heavens remained silent still. A hot anger was kindled within the heart of Lemuel, and he did accuse Jabez of being a bad omen, and so Lemuel did sit back down and refused to speak further concerning the silence of the heavens. Ezias did see the ever increasing sorrow of Jabez, and so he did rise, and said to Jabez, "Brother Jabez, I shall call upon Heavenly Father, he will answer my prayer for he led my people out of the distant land of the Gipusites, the land bearing the river as large as the snake which does hold up the earth as told of by the elders at the temple of Koram." And so Ezias did pray to the Heavenly Father, his God, and Ezias said to Jabez, "O Jabez my brother! I can feel the Heavenly Father coming!" And yet the heavens remained silent still. Unlike that of Lemuel, who had accused Jabez of bringing bad fortune, Ezias did no such thing, but instead sat back down in shame, and refused to speak concerning the silence of the heavens.

## Chapter 11

### Halma Speaks to the Friends

After witnessing the friends of Jabez attempt to speak concerning the silence of heaven towards Jabez, Halma could no longer hold his peace for he dreaded to see his dear friend Jabez suffer so greatly under the false answers of the friends. And so Halma lifted himself up before the friends, and began to speak, saying, "My dear friends, and my dear Jabez, much arguing have you all done concerning the silence of heaven, and yet the heavens remain silent still. O Ezias, my dear friend, you believe sin to hinder our relation to the heavens? Jabez spoke rightly, we all fall short before our God and so we are to always pray for our forgiveness for only God can give us rest when in the grave. O Lemuel, my dear friend, you believe God to not care for our souls due to his greatness? Truly, it is as Jabez said, do you see the shepherd have respect for certain sheep and not others? O my dear friends, truly do we all turn to the same God, and yet we cause strife over the names as if they were different gods? Nothing save foolishness! O Lemuel and Ezias, my dear friends, what profit did you think would come in the testing of God? Jabez spoke rightly when he warned you, but your pride hindered you and so you fell. All of you must realise this truth, as

taught by the elders in the temple at Sarad: through God all things were made; by his hands were the high mountains established, and by his hands were the low seas brought down. And yet, you believe the heavens to be silent? By his hands do the clouds fly up above, and by his hands do the stars stay fixed among the heavens. And yet, you believe the heavens to be silent? By his hands was fire separated from water, and by his hands was earth separated from air. And yet, you believe the heavens to be silent? By his hands was man made male and female, perfect for each other yet imperfect without the other. And yet, you believe the heavens to be silent? The world does truly proclaim the workmanship of his hands. Ask of the animals, and they will teach you; ask of the birds up in the sky, and they will tell you; or, speak to the fish down in the sea, and they shall inform you. Which of all these is the work of God's hands not seen in? Truly, you must have ears to hear, and eyes to see." And so Halma did sit back down upon the ground among the friends.

## Chapter 12

### Jabez Responds to Halma

Jabez was astonished by the words of the elders of the temple at Sarad, as spoken of by Halma, and so Jabez did rise and speak to Halma in praise, saying, "O

Halma, my beloved friend, true are your words. You speak nothing but the truth of God. For it is true, when I myself have looked upon the land I did only ever see the work of God. I did see the beauty of his workmanship when I gazed upon the birds of the sky, each having a wide array of colourful feathers, or upon the fish of the sea, each having many beautiful scales glisten under the light of the sun. It cannot be said, that the world is not the work of God. But, my dear Halma, I am still yet troubled. For as the many wonders of this world may very well teach me much about the wonders of God himself, yet I am left in silence when I call directly upon him, when in previous generations God spoke to my ancestors and to the prophets without restraint. Why, O Halma, do the heavens then remain silent now?" And so Jabez did sit back down once more.

## Chapter 13

### The Friends Curse Jabez

The friends of Jabez walked a furlong away from where he did sit, and spoke amongst themselves concerning the matter of Jabez: "We cannot seem to find an answer as to why the heavens are silent, none of what we said stands strong," spoke Ezias. "We have each given him a true answer, he is dull in the mind!"

spoke Lemuel. "We have shown him where to look, he is ignorant!" The friends of Jabez were tired and wanted to return to their lands, and so Halma spoke, saying, "Jabez will perish by the hand of the Lord no matter what answer we provide him. Jabez has sinned, Jabez has cast down bad fortunes, Jabez has made us test God, Jabez has wrought famine upon his children and dear wife. We are still yet holy and right in the sight of God, it is best we leave Jabez, and curse him for wasting many of our days!" And so the friends of Jabez did walk back to where Jabez was sitting, and there they did strike Jabez with their rods, cursing him until the sun did set. And so it was that the friends of Jabez did each return to his own land, never to set foot in that part of Aram again.

## **Chapter 14**

### **The Last Prayer of Jabez**

And so it came to pass, that Jabez, who was once established by the hands of God, did soon fall by them. Jabez was ransacked and pillaged by the Zamanites, he was mocked and deserted by his surviving children, he was kicked and divorced by his wife, he was

cursed and beaten by his friends. Yet in all this, Jabez did not sin, and kept his faith in God, crying out to the heavens begging for them to cease their silence. And so Jabez prayed a final prayer up to God, while he sat amongst the ashes of his former dwelling place, bruised and with sores all over his wretched body. Jabez did lay his head down upon the ground, and turned his face towards the heavens one final time. And Jabez did give up the ghost.

—Jack F., 18, London UK

## *At William Blake's Grave: Simultaneous Thoughts*

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The Holy worldly wind  
stopped.

I grieve upon your grave,  
& crave for what you gave.

It is a sunny, heavy day  
in London;

Squirrels play & pigeons laugh  
over your stony bed;  
The trees, they grow, oh, so slowly,  
so tenderly,  
delicate shadows for  
the years to come.

I know you can hear their greenness,  
shining over your head,  
like the sun through  
the stained glass in us,  
poetic cathedrals.

I am speechless, but remember  
so many words.

Concrete and horns near  
my eyes & ears;

Once your words were thrown,  
they knew no transition,  
no calmness, nor wars;  
neutral in their arbitrary  
bone-structured ink—

eternal stones falling,

one

by

one

in the river,

rippling souls & skins.

My kingdom of nothing  
is your time machine.

—Alexandre Ferrere, 30, Cherbourg-en-Cotentin FR

## *The Rugged Beauty of Ken Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion*

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In the heart of the Pacific Northwest, along the winding forest road of Highway 26 in the northwest corner of Oregon, I cut through the mist in my shoddy Jeep Cherokee, headlights peering through a thick fog hanging stagnant in the air—fog that mutes the bold colors of the rich green and brown foliage and drops a hazy curtain between a wall of trees and me. It was late December; I was home in Portland for winter break, and felt an unrelenting sense of post-Christmas aimlessness, a boredom that provoked me to take a spontaneous trip alone: a drive to the rugged Oregon coast, to stand and breathe and watch the waves roll in, to see the ocean after being away from it for so long.

Something else was on my mind during this trip: Ken Kesey. I can't help but think of him whenever I travel to the coast, largely due to his epic, sprawling novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, which perfectly captures the unique landscape of the state's coastal region: vast rivers and towering trees and rolling hills and relentless rain. The book sits in the seat beside me, my lone passenger. I finished it roughly a year ago, and figured an anniversary was all the more reason to take a trip to the coast, an excuse for an outing made in Kesey's honor. I passed over a short bridge in the Jeep, above the rolling streams and tributaries, the cool water rushing silver over smooth rock alongside forest floors blanketed with ferns and tangles of stick and straw. Likewise, Kesey opens his novel with a description of a river:

*"Along the western slopes of the Oregon Coastal Range... come look: the hysterical crashing of tributaries as they merge into the Wakonda Auga River... the first little washes flashing like thick rushing winds through sheep sorrel and clover, ghost fern and nettle, sheering, cutting... forming branches. Then,*

through bearberry and salmonberry, blueberry and blackberry, the branches crashing into creeks, into streams.”

I stopped briefly at Camp 18, an impressive log cabin-style restaurant and logging museum off the highway in the small coastal town of Elsie, Oregon. Throughout my childhood, my family made a point to visit Camp 18 every time we traveled to the coast—to sit alongside the grand fireplace in the restaurant’s roomy interior and dine on the massive tables built from old-growth tree stumps. It feels homey and warm, a small slice of Oregon I’ve always held dear. Outside, the surrounding land is littered with old logging equipment: antiquated machines resting in damp soil and moist air, rusted and paralyzed in time, serving as mementos from the past.

Kesey, who is known mostly for his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, published *Sometimes a Great Notion* in 1964. The book, which spans over 600 pages, takes place in the fictional Oregon coast logging town of Wakonda in the 1960s, and centers on the Stammers: a fierce, hard-headed family who operates their own logging business. Their house, located on the bank of the Wakonda Auga River, stands unwavering—like the Stamper family themselves—despite a receding shoreline that caused other nearby homes to slide into the water.

I thought of the Stammers as I stood next to the wood carvings of loggers in front of the steps that lead up to the restaurant, and gazed at the bulky machinery sitting nearby. Across the gravel lot, I noticed a building tucked away in a far corner: A Loggers’ Memorial, a tribute to the men who lost their lives on the job. I walked in quietly, expecting someone to greet me, and quickly discovered I was alone. The building felt like a minuscule version of the log-cabin restaurant, with slabs of Douglas fir hoisted up in the air, displaying pictures and plaques of deceased men. The centerpiece of the space was a bronze statue depicting a logger at work. I paced quickly throughout the room, sensing an eeriness in my solitude, in a space reserved for the memorialization of the dead. But I couldn’t help but pause to read a logging-themed poem entitled, “A Different Breed of Cat,” and a framed newspaper clipping from the 1960s, hailing the Pacific Northwest as the ideal location for the admirable career of a gyppo logger: “Independent loggers work hard, live hard and are fiercely proud of their heritage. They are certainly among the last of the truly rugged individuals to be found in this country.”

Perhaps this—the popular notion that loggers were considered to be the “last of the individualists”—was what inspired Kesey to conceive of a story about a logging family in such a raw, complicated, Shakespearean manner. In his novel, the Stammers consist of Henry, the



staunch, fierce patriarch and elder head of the family; Hank, the first son of Henry, who is tough and resilient like his father; Joe Ben, nephew to Henry and cousin to Hank, who optimistically helps Hank run the family business; Leland, Hank's half-brother, a spiteful East Coast intellectual who returns to Oregon after years away to help with the family business and seek revenge on Hank, after discovering he had an affair with his mother who recently committed suicide; and Viv, Hank's wife, a compassionate woman who grows discontent with her marriage and role as a housewife, and the prime target of Leland's planned vengeance against his half-brother in a scheme to seduce her and lure her away from the family.

Structurally, the book begins where the story ends—with rain and haze filling the gray sky, the Stamper house resting haphazardly on the edge of the riverbank, and an amputated human arm dangling visibly from the attic. Throughout the novel, the town's logging workers unionize to strike against the Wakonda Pacific Labor Company; yet, the Stampers stand in defiance by continuing to work, despite the union's unrelenting efforts to undermine the family's business. Meanwhile, the Stampers grapple with their own conflict due to the inner-family rivalry of half-brothers Hank and Leland. As the story progresses, tension builds between the town, the union, and the family. And when events take a tragic turn for the Stampers at the novel's climax, the group presses on together, determined neither to falter nor back down, undeterred by the family's sustained brotherly conflict. This reflects key themes of Kesey's novel: to stand united in the face of adversity, to battle against opposing forces, and to fight for what you believe in, ultimately living up to the family mantra, "Never Give A Inch."

After I spent a few minutes eying the photographs of the men in the Loggers' Memorial, their bodies drenched in rain and mud, standing proudly beside their massive hauls of lumber, I turned back onto Highway 26 and headed west: past hemlock and spruce trees with trunks covered in mossy green and alongside the clear-cut lands that expose artificial sections of space. I decided my destination on this trip would be Cannon Beach, a section of the coast my family tended to favor, even though it had become commercialized over the past few years, a faux town and tourist destination rather than a place where people live year-round.

A few miles from the beach, I turned off the highway to visit Ecola State Park, a viewpoint on the Tillamook Head that showcases an expansive view of the ocean from high above. I parked and walked along the paved trail to the bluff's rocky edge, then looked south: the coast is expansive, but fosters small pockets of space—coves and nooks behind

sea stacks, walls of mountains that jet toward the sky, groves and valleys that nestle in between.

Kesey's book is a lot like this: vast like the landscape it portrays, sometimes meandering, and full of unique spaces, petty drama, and small wisdoms. Prose flows like streams of consciousness and points of view shift throughout the novel, frequently and often without warning: in one paragraph, you have the steadfast first-person perspective of Hank; a few lines later, the perspective switches to that of an omniscient third-person narrator, presumably Kesey himself; and in the next paragraph, you read Leland's rambling first-person point of view. Because of Kesey's attention to detail and shifting perspectives throughout the course of the novel, every character—including the union's two leaders, Floyd Evenwrite and Jonathan Draeger, the owner of the town's local bar, and the multitude of the story's minor players—has their own backstory, their own depth. Hank is vulnerable, despite his resolute exterior; Leland is insecure, despite his intellectual gravitas. Kesey's writing is multi-layered and complicated, accurately reflecting the conflict of the strike in town and the complexities of the drama that plagues the Stamper family.

Shortly after the release of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1962, Kesey relocated his family to the coastal town of Florence, Oregon, to research and write the pages that would eventually become *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Originally drawn to the region due to its high suicide rates, Kesey explored and studied the community, spent time with loggers on the job, and read books and journals from the local history museum, all amid the relentless, constant crashing of waves and the brutal climate that comes with the territory.

Kesey spent a total of two years on *Sometimes a Great Notion*, working uninterrupted, and reportedly wrote hundreds of pages of notes for the novel, plotting its structure, tracing its shifting perspectives, mapping the characters and their development. Kesey himself was unsure how his ambitious novel would turn out, writing early in his notes, "It's going to be hard. Maybe impossible. Maybe I'm trying too much, like in *Cuckoo's Nest* when I tried to push two things, the faces and the machinery [. . .] I'm still groping for everything in this book. Maybe I should get the style first and let the plot come. I kind of think so. It'd be easier." In subsequent notes, he poses the question, "I have how many distinguishing forms at once?" before listing the novel's various perspectives, and how he planned to keep track of them all.

Kesey was raised in Oregon, on a farm in Springfield, about 45 minutes south of Corvallis, the small rural college town where I attend college. Growing up, Kesey spent his days in the Willamette Valley

fishing, hunting, swimming, boxing, and wrestling. In many ways, he epitomizes Oregon culture: a spirited and burly man, a storyteller, a champion wrestler at the University of Oregon; an eccentric individual, a key figure in the 1960s counterculture movement, an advocate of psychedelic drugs, a Merry Prankster, a central character in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

The latter description seems to be the popular image of Kesey, or at least, the national image of Kesey—the man who rode Further, a school bus painted in Day-Glo paint, across the country while high on LSD, and whose name is frequently mentioned in the same breath as Beat Generation icons like Neal Cassady and other hippie leaders of the psychedelic '60s. Admittedly, Kesey wrote the first few pages of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* while high on peyote, and wrote sections of *Sometimes a Great Notion* on mushrooms. Yet, Kesey said he never saw himself as the “Father of Counterculture” that many claim him to be, and instead seemed slightly bothered by his popular image and the light it cast on his writing. In a 1993 interview, Kesey said, “I wouldn't have let Tom Wolfe do [*Acid Test*] if I had known what I do now [ . . . ] It's different than if you're writing as a stranger. When I was doing *Sometimes a Great Notion*, my personality was in it, but my personality was not something anybody knew.”

That personality, though, is certainly what lends to Kesey's unique prose, and his brilliant and authentic illustration of the Oregon coast itself. As I peered over the ledge at the rolling hills of fir trees at Ecola State Park, I recalled Kesey's descriptions of “seaside trees permanently bent by a wind that blows everlastingly across all Oregon beaches,” and his imagery of a winter downpour, “a dreamy smear of blue-gray that wipes over the land instead of falling on it.” His most accurate comparison, however, is the likeness of Oregon rain to an old gray aunt who visits your home and overstays her welcome: “You learn to live with her. You learn to reconcile yourself to the little inconveniences and not get annoyed.” These examples, among others, are some of the ways Kesey captures what it means to truly live among the vibrant, and often brutal, expansive Oregon landscape.

Because of its ambitious depth, unique structure, and pivoting perspectives, it can certainly be said that *Sometimes a Great Notion* is Kesey's greatest accomplishment, despite the critical acclaim of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Many authors native to the Northwest share a similar sentiment—Seattle writer Bruce Barcott called the book “the heavyweight champion of Northwest novels,” adding that the story is “unrivaled, unchallenged, unsurpassed.” And when *Sometimes a Great Notion* was named one of the “12 Essential Northwest Books” by the

*Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in 1997, Kesey himself noted, “I think *Sometimes a Great Notion* is the best thing I’ll ever write.”

But while often hailed as the quintessential Northwest novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion* received mixed reviews at the time of its publication in 1964, including a negative review in *The New York Times*, which complained of the work’s length and Kesey’s unconventional writing: “[Kesey’s] monstrous book is the most insufferably pretentious and most totally tiresome novel I have had to read in my many years [. . .] Not even to satisfy curiosity or to keep informed of what our younger authors are up to is it worth the struggle of making the long safari through the verbal jungles of Mr. Kesey’s prose.” An interesting review considering the themes of the novel, and the themes of Kesey’s previous work, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*: both books juxtapose notions of conformity and individuality, pitting ideas of normality against liberation, against personal freedom. Kesey’s writing is unconventional, yes—but that’s what makes it admirable. It represents, at its core, who Kesey was—and, especially in the case of *Sometimes a Great Notion*, the environment that surrounded him.

I made my way down from the peak, through the coastal rainforest and back to the main road. I drove to Tolovana Beach, toward the Oregon coast’s iconic Haystack Rock. As I cruised down the beachy streets, I thought about the past year, and how I felt it was better than the last. I first began reading *Sometimes a Great Notion* prior to my third year of college in Corvallis, with hesitant plans to graduate early, and no direction of where to go next. I was stuck—discontent—and naively convinced leaving school would make me happy. I felt out of control due to a series of tumultuous situations, some similar to those in Kesey’s book—lost friends, unexpected circumstances—and had grown tired of the weather, tired of Oregon, tired of uncertainty.

I found refuge in Kesey’s novel, in his honest and accurate descriptions of my home state. And I found myself relating to Kesey’s characters—not just to their environments, but to their dilemmas—like when the third-person narrator addresses Hank’s personal sense of unhappiness: “In spite of all these things so enjoyable, there was something off-kilter. He couldn’t say exactly what was off, but after days of denying what it was he was finally grudgingly admitting that him and the world were just not seeing eye to eye.” Or, when Hank reflects in first-person on the loss of his childhood pet pine squirrel named Omar, who lived in his davenport but lost faith and familiarity in the space when a red plaid blanket was placed over the outside: “Instead of trying to incorporate the plaid exterior into the scheme of his world he moved to the rainspout at the back of the house and was drowned in the first

fall shower, probably still blaming that blanket: damn this world that just won't hold still for us! Damn it anyway!" It was because of this epic story—one of gyppo loggers, a town in conflict, and a struggle to maintain independence, along with Kesey's eloquent, poetic descriptions of the story's Oregon backdrop—that I discovered a newfound appreciation for a rainy season I had begun to loathe, and a landscape I had taken for granted.

I stepped onto the wet sand, bundled in a thick parka, wind biting my exposed cheeks. The tide was high, the beach slim. It was overcast, with outstretched gray clouds sweeping across the sky. Waves of blue-green toppled forward, bright and luminous, before pulling grains of gray sand back to sea. White mist splashed against driftwood, and the tide crashed against red and gray rock as ripples of foam gathered in the spaces between. The land is rich, bold—you can feel it. I'm not sure I did before Kesey—maybe as a child—but I certainly do now. There's beauty in the unique climate of the Willamette Valley, and in the cold setting of the state's coastal lands: the hazy fog that coats the nearby hills, the chill of salt water as it splashes against your skin, the blasting winds at your back as you walk down its shores. The weather is often relentless, sometimes uncomfortable, but nevertheless, beautiful.

I'm finishing my last year of school in Corvallis now. I decided not to graduate early. And as I stood on the Oregon coast that day, unsure of what lies ahead—and certainly not as confident or as steadfast as a Stamper—I couldn't help but feel content with my place and my decision to stay in Oregon over the past few years. I'm glad I can appreciate it, and appreciate it in a way I didn't before. Kesey taught me this: even on a gray day like today, when the mood is bleak and the future uncertain, the coast can still be colorful.

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—Jada Krening, 22, Portland OR

# *University of Hard Knocks*

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by Paa Kwesi Arko Cee

## CHAPTER ONE

Imagine the anxieties of an unemployed single teenage mother, with a triplet to feed and the man, who put her in the family way, nowhere to be located. Think of the state of mind of a weary mother, asking of malaria drugs in a pharmacy, only to find out that the prices are too high and her money cannot get them. Imagine the face of that mother, weeping on the streets of the city, because relief workers could not find her children and her beloved ill mother, after a flood which shooed hundreds into the sea.

Consider again the stress of that same woman, sentenced to jail while still mourning her lost boys.

Abject poverty is life threatening. It means not having enough food, water, or fuel, as well as lacking adequate shelter, healthcare, and education. It affects one billion people worldwide, roughly the equivalent of the entire population of the Americas. Yet, most people in places like Western Europe and North America have never known a person in extreme poverty. So let me tell you about me.

My name is Yaa Boatemah. I had my first child when I was nineteen and jobless. What could I do? My family was as poor as a chapel mouse. My father had passed away when we were young. Thus, our sustenance became the prerogative of our mother only. She sold wood logs to caterers before we could get food on the table. All four of us occupied a small one-room apartment, which our late father inherited from his late father in their family house.

Mother was illiterate, but she was smart in her business. She was born in British Gold Coast, as Ghana was formerly called. Education was largely informal. Knowledge, competencies and skills were passed on by word of mouth and through apprenticeship. Book-based education was later introduced by European missionaries and the colonial administration, to only train people as clerks and secretaries, but it was

monopolized by children of chiefs and those from wealthy homes. Girls were taught the art and science of taking care of the home and men.

This was the climate in which my mother, a beautiful African woman, was born. Because my father passed away before I grew up, I knew very little of him.

An incident occurred one day when Mother was working which changed the fate of our already impoverished life. She was arranging woodlots in heaps along the road for sale when a log dislodged from the summit of the heap and fell directly on her foot. The initial fall let the other logs loose and they came down in their numbers. Neighbors rushed to her aid and took her to the hospital.

The first examination showed multiple broken and crushed bones. The nerves were also damaged in those parts. An amputation of the leg was necessary as that part was no longer functioning.

Had it not been that Mother was on a national health insurance program, I cannot say how we were going to raise the entire wherewithal for her hospitalization, treatment and subsequent medication. Her relatives visited us but with only foodstuff and words of consolation. How to get money and feed the family became a mirage.

At this point, being a teenage girl, I wound up becoming vulnerable to exploitation.

My little sister and I often went and watched television in the room of a man in our neighborhood, whose apartment was only two blocks from ours. Telenovelas were my favorite and I could watch for hours at a time in the night.

This man had given me presents before. After Mother's incidents, I went to his house after the rains one night to watch a popular Mexican telenovela translated into Twi. At some point, the stillness of the cold night seduced my sister to sleep, leaving me and the man. Out of the blues, she turned out the light. I felt his strong arms go around me and what happened next was quite explicit for a child of my age. In the end, he told me not to say a word about it to anybody, and that if I did, he was going to murder me. He took from his pocket a cedi note and gave it to me so that I could use it to buy something. The act of defilement climaxed by resulting in my pregnancy. My education fell to tatters.

It did not just happen once, but several times, each time I went to watch television at his place. At a certain point, I wasn't going by with little sister any longer, because her presence complicated things. He rewarded me with money, which sustained my interest in him.

After about six months I fell pregnant. But he could not marry me, because he had a wife somewhere. He even wanted me to destroy the



pregnancy, but my mother disapproved of it when she came to find out. He did not want the pregnancy, but saw me through with money till the end. Then boom! I delivered triplets. When I delivered, he ran away, and we never found him afterwards.

My mother was there to help me take care of the children. Because of the meager income, we usually had one meal a day. I feared that my children were going to grow malnourished when it came time to introduce solid food to them. That compelled me to find work helping a woman bake bread and sell it. But she was aging and had problems working with fire every day, so there was no work for many days, especially in the dry season, and when that happened, we had no food at all to eat. I got out when that happened, because I couldn't bear listening to my children crying for food.

The austerity pushed me to be in a relationship with a man who would also pass for my children's father. I did it because he cared about my children and provided support financially. He wanted to have a child with me, but I did not let him, at the urgings of my mother.

We remained concubines for over a year until I found out he was married with children, who were all older than me, then my mother called off the relationship. It was regretful.

I later prepared *Abgelekakro*, a local snack made from cassava dough molded into small balls and fried in oil, which can be eaten with coconut or can be taken alone. I later changed the business because my children could eat so much that it could have put me in debt. I started selling firewood. It was a tedious task. I bent over and over all day gathering pieces of firewood on people's farms and carried them home, where I waited for people to buy. This was a seasonal job, because the farmers had to clear their lands before I would get firewood. I shared the money I got from the firewood equally with the farm owners. When my sons were old enough to attend school, I searched for a new job.

When a friend told me that a Chinese mining firm was looking for casual workers in one of the nearby villages, I went there and I was hired. It was more hectic and tedious than any labor I had ever done in my entire life.

I was recruited to carry excavated alluvial gold dust on my head to a river where they were refined with chemicals to get the pure gold. The river was as red as blood because of the disturbance and toxins used by the Chinese. Notwithstanding, I earned better wages to take care of my three children and infirm mother.

I soon discovered that *galamsey* mining had not come to stay. For as soon as the Chinese discovered that they had mined all the gold there

was, they departed with their equipment, leaving us with the polluted waters. I then had to find another job.

The force of poverty drove me to make a decision to migrate to the city, where I thought life could be a little easier for my children and me.

I knew friends who lived in the city and began searching for their addresses.

## CHAPTER TWO

I had left my children with my feeble mother for Accra. Accra is the capital city of the Republic of Ghana with an estimated urban population of 2.2 million. It is thousands of times the size of my village, with business districts, a collection of shopping malls, hotels and supermarkets. The city is also a hub for nightclubs, embassies, state departments, universities, colleges and an international airport.

It was my first time in any city. My eyes moved between sights of tall and neat buildings, skyscrapers and restaurants. I was in awe of how different the city looks from the village. I knew from travelers and news that Accra was the best place in the country, but I also never realized how populous it could be.

At nightfall I spread boxes on pavements or on the benches at the bus stops and lay down. I rotated sleeping places according to the weather conditions. And anxious to avoid kidnapping, I never slept in the same place too often.

In the daytime, I carried frozen water and sold along the streets of Nkrumah Circle for passengers and pedestrians. Meanwhile, the government of Ghana was embarking on a massive road expansion project on the networks of road in the area, making Nkrumah Circle a rather congested zone.

Albeit it was risky, I was able to send some money home to my mother to take care of my angels, while setting aside some for myself to rent accommodation. In seven months' time, I had raised enough to acquire a kiosk at Odorna. The place was situated in the middle of several waterways. Sometimes, the rain fell, shooing us from the kiosk. The neighborhood was unconventionally used for both settlement and garbage dumping. It had no toilet and people sneaked in the night to dispose feces kept in black plastic bags, and this polluted the air so much so that, as a result, the children always got sick. The tap water was inconsistent. So, we spent hours searching for water at night to be used the next day.

After two years, I felt it was time to bring my mother and the children with me. The one room apartment kiosk was to harbor us all.

Soon we were a family of five sharing a dilapidated building with a leaky roof and no electricity.

When the next academic year began, I enrolled my three boys into the Adabraka Community Cluster of Schools. The school was so crowded that I had to make desks for them so they could attend.

On weekends and holidays, we worked the roadside where I sold roasted plantains, yams and fish. They would take some in pans and hawk along the streets. They were very clever at school and often made extravagant promises to build me a house and buy me a car when they grew up, when we were having conversations.

As little as they were, their dreams inspired me to give them all my best. During one Mother's Day, they surprised me with a pair of shoes from a contribution they all made together and, unfortunately, I could not wear them because they were oversized. They were very active and mastered the Azonto and al-Qaida dance moves within a short time from friends.

On Wednesday night, the 3rd of June, 2015, Accra was alarmed by the indignation of an approaching downpour. I hurried with the cooking as we had no veranda and we ate together from the same bowl.

Around 7 PM, a storm approached and the city darkened. After a short while, all the lights in the city went out and the sky went completely dark. In Ghana, light outages are part of almost every rainstorm. Lightning advanced with vivid flashes in quick succession. They were followed by slow and distant thunder. Everyone in our neighborhood went indoors. Soon the rain began to fall. The raindrops came in single tiny balls at first then, very soon after, they were falling in large masses. Rapid streams of running water ran around every corner.

Our abode began to leak. It rained for over three hours and then took a rest. The atmosphere brightened and a strong breeze rewarded us with some fresh air. Peals of thunder began to roar angrily in the sky, followed by another intensified shower of torrential rains. Minutes passed stretching into hours. The water overflowed everywhere, threading in front of our kiosk with speed. By midnight, the area was flooded waist-high. We had to evacuate our kiosk.

I saw brave men offering backrides for children to safety, but soon the waters formed a wilderness and became so wild that they could not carry a person through. So, we took to the roofs of our kiosks. We stood up there helplessly and watched as the neighborhood turned into a sea of floods, submerging all our kiosks. When the current shoed us, it set my children and my old lady and I apart. Those who could garner

the courage to swim did, but none of us. The waters pressed us on in the black inky night to wherever it wanted to take us.

I found myself floating on the surface of the waters in Nkrumah Circle where the government of Ghana was embarking on a road expansion project that put many gutters into a deplorable state. The gutters and all the drainage systems had become incapacitated.

Terrifying lightning bolts flashed and thunderstorms barked. I spotted a popular gasoline station at Nkrumah Circle and I maneuvered toward it. I saw hundreds of flood refugees standing on top of parked vehicles and high tables and I joined them believing that I was safe, at least for now.

The rain did not show any symptom of slowing down. Once in a while, dry yaps of lightning flashed and we could see those we were standing with.

At 10 PM, wildly and mysteriously, a lightning strike hit the station. A rain of petrol and diesel burst out quickly around the vicinity, mixing immiscibly with the murky flood waters. The explosion distributed fire and set the entire fuel station ablaze.

All I saw was fire and frightened people scattering helplessly in all directions into the fiery water. I did not look ready to fight for my life. I sunk into the water whose surface was burning, fearful and convinced that it was my end. Once I submerged in the watery and fiery grave, my hair caught fire and dirty waters quickly seized the entry of air into my lungs. Then boom! An unknown arm finally pulled me out of the flood in my half-death half-life state.

### CHAPTER THREE

I regained consciousness in the morning hours in a hospital with an oxygen mask on me.

The incident was all over the news. Thousands of homes had been destroyed. The flood had taken many innocent lives in the city and hundreds were still missing. My mother and my children were, too. It was sickening. Schools and businesses in the main districts of Accra were shut down because of the incident. Countless people were missing and thousands of homes had been destroyed.

The Environmental Protection Agency and security services embarked on a massive search for lost victims in a joint operation. I spent three weeks in hospital. The President of the Republic of Ghana and opposition leaders visited us in the hospital for encouragement and solidarity. I always prayed for my children. I knew there was nothing

that I could do in my condition to find them, so I relied on my faith in God and the search teams.

After three weeks, I was standing in Odorna where I lived with my four children a month before. Everything was gone. Not by the rain but by the government's order to demolish all settlements in waterways in the city of Accra. With this, many parts of Accra underwent demolition.

I searched for my children everyday. And everyday, drowned bodies were recovered under bridges and in underground waterways. I turned into a mad woman roaming the streets of the city. I cried as I walked and I hardly took any food.

Reports by radio and television stations on discovered bodies were made everyday. I longed to hear that my children had been found alive but it never came to pass. My nights were long and sleepless. My days were restless and full of disappointments.

One afternoon, I heard a radio show program interviewing a young flood victim, called Sefa. In an instant, I believed he was my son. With no wherewithal on me, I went to the radio station walking and running with my face brimming with tears. People parted as I walked because they thought I was insane. Others yet turned and watched me with meaningful glances. They had no idea how fragile I was at that moment.

The FM station was a mile away in Achimotah Mile 7. It was situated on the fourth floor of a seven storey plaza with banks and other private businesses occupying the other floors. Before I entered and took the stairs, I paused and looked at my appearance, guessing whether I would be allowed entry or even be considered sane. A fever of nostalgia began to descend upon me.

There were many visitors who had also come to find their lost relatives or to give a survival interview. I was suddenly intercepted by the security men, but when we spoke and they realized I was a normal woman, they apologized. I was given a place to sit among those other people at the reception. Their glances and looks and expression made me felt very uncomfortable. I must have looked too dirty and unconventional to them. Minutes later, I was invited into the corporate manager's office.

I saw Sefa there with the other men. Tears ran all down my cheeks when I set my eyes on him in that moment. Right then and there, I knew I had lost his brothers. The fever of nostalgia was too severe.

As the days passed by, the pieces of Sefa's survival story became clearer to me. We cried as he narrated how he was carried by the flood under bridges and how he was rescued after two days by marine police with a long rope and a boat.

I massaged his bruises and cuts for weeks until he was okay.

The search continued to uncover more dead bodies in gutters and obscured waterways, but my boys were never found. The conclusion was that they may have been shooed into the sea.

After a week, the state agreed on a national memorial service for the one hundred and fifty victims who passed away in the twin disaster of flood and fire on that Wednesday night. The interfaith, interdenominational national memorial service was held at Independence Square.

The President and the Vice President of Ghana, two former heads of state, opposition leaders and the Mayor of Accra were in attendance to mourn the victims with their relatives. It was a red-letter day indeed. Hundred and fifty caskets for victims who drowned or had burned were paraded at the court of the Independence Square in Accra. The clergy, politicians, dignitaries and NGOs were in their numbers. Sefa and I attended.

The Reverend Minister who presided over the service told the biblical story about Lazarus who died, and on the third day after, was resurrected by Jesus. After the Minister, people with copies of the Holy Bible read John 11:38-44. In the end, he concluded that when we die righteous, we die for the Lord and must have the same hope Lazarus had. He then urged all Christians to lead a good life befitting disciples of Christ in order to attain the everlasting life promised to righteous people.

The National Chief Imam also performed an Islamic liturgy for victims who were of Islamic faith.

In Ghana there is a remarkable friendship between Christians and Muslims.

At the end of the program, the whole congregation rose to sing the Christian hymn Trust and Obey.

The Independence Square was full of tears. It was the voice of grief for a mass burial of innocent men and women of all ages who perished from a midnight natural disaster.

As we sang, I remembered the moment I sunk beneath the murky waters at the fuel station. That could have counted me part of the number of bodies awaiting burial after the funeral service. I got so entangled with the lyrics, I had to stop singing and I could not lift up my face. I held my remaining son tightly as if to stop him from being taken away from me. He was as silent as death during the whole event.

The Government of the Republic of Ghana announced a GHC50 million disaster fund for all the victims and survivors to support us. Some local and international NGOs also came to our aid.

With the support money from government, I managed to rent a standard accommodation in Kasoa on the outskirts of Accra. It is one of the rapidly growing settlements in Ghana with less flood concerns. I was able to enroll Sefa in one of its public schools. I spent the remainder on the beef trade, which I went to Makola market to sell at every day, except on Tuesdays and Fridays, when I went to Kasoa market to sell.

## CHAPTER FOUR

All my life, my experience had been only bitterness without happiness. Reflecting on that pushed me to consider suicide because I felt that would end it all. The idea appeared very appealing to me and the next thing I knew, I was suspended in the air of the room with a rope dangling from the ceiling. I was noosed so tightly in it that I did not feel the pain. I gradually sank into a fathomless darkness.

I was found 'dead' with bulging eyes, pale face and blood oozing from my nose and mouth. They cut me down and rushed me into a taxi to a hospital. There was a divine injunction on my death. I regained consciousness after six hours in an intensive care unit.

My next door neighbor, Awonye, said she came to my veranda to take some salt. Mistrusting the silence in my apartment with my slippers at the doorway, she budged into my room and found me at death's door.

I was under twenty-four-seven surveillance so that I could not repeat the same thing again. I had problems with the muscles in my neck but my vision, which had seared, gradually returned. The doctors and nurses were very nice to me. They were full of smiles and how-are-yous.

I spent three weeks in the hospital and on the day I was discharged, the police were outside the ward with handcuffs. It is a criminal act to attempt taking your life in Ghana, seen as just like taking the life of someone else. The arrest was so humiliating that I blamed God for not letting me die.

The court awarded my case a custodial sentence. I started serving at Nsawam Prisons. It was a place worse than death. I lost faith in God; I was disappointed in the legal system. Everyday was even worse than what it had been. Prison officers yelled at me all the time, and I slept, bathed and passed excrement in the same room.

I felt it was selfish for people to rescue me from death. They just didn't want me to die but they didn't want to help me either, and I felt that I was worth much more dead than alive. I contemplated leaving the world once and for all once I got out of jail.

During my third month in prison, Awonye and another lady visited me. Awonye had taken foster care of Sefa since I was taken to hospital. I didn't want to meet them or talk to them. All I needed, all I asked for was my children and a better life, and if that wasn't possible, then I would settle for death.

Eventually I decided to act on the urgings of the inmates and talk to the lady.

She introduced me to Miss Akua Sanderson from the Network for Anti-Suicide and Crisis Prevention and that was the first time I heard about the agency. She was full of smiles. Outwardly, I was attentive to her lectures, but inwardly I was dark with anger. She was in her forties and looked very beautiful.

They promised to return, and return they did, in a week's time, and again the next week.

By the fourth visit, I had become receptive and was returning her smiles. We could now engage in a conversation. The fifth week, she came alone and when she was about to leave, I broke into tears. She touched my hand and asked me why I was crying. I told her as best as I could that I was sorry for what I did and that I wanted get out of prison and start a new life.

That was the result of the psychological therapy she had been giving to me on her visits.

Three months after meeting Akua, as I later came to call her, I was released from prison, but no longer wishing for death. A blue van from their network came for me and took me home from prison.

With support from the network, I was able to begin a new life. Every day, personnel from the network came to visit me for an hour for a period of six months while I regained my composure.

In June, 2016, during the national annual commemoration of the flood and fire disaster, I received an invitation to be present and share my experience with the public. I wept bitterly.

The Network for Anti-Corruption and Crime Prevention invited me to their headquarters in Accra in August. Akua Sanderson was in her office, a big room with a table and chairs. When I entered, she was busily writing in a file sitting before her so she did not notice me. I smiled and cleared my throat to get her attention. She happily rose to embrace me. She was full of compliments like, "You are looking good," "you look beautiful," "how many men approached you for your number?"



After hours of talking and laughing and arguing, Miss Akua passed a document in front of me.

“We want to employ you.” she said.

“Me?” I fired back, mistrusting her words.

“But I can’t read and write well. I stopped school early. I stopped school at J.H.S.”

“You lack the academics but you have mastered the experience. You have passed through the University of Hard Knocks. And it’s fetching you a job today which is what we are discussing right now, right here.”

She stretched out a pen for me, sounding and looking serious, but I shook my head.

“Your people won’t like to work with me.”

Right then and there, she called a man on phone. He soon joined us. Together they convinced me to accept, to become part of their anti-suicide counseling team. I cried in reaction of the token of respect they had shown me.

At present, I am receiving a wonderful salary and have become a capable woman which I never dreamt of. I spend hours everyday talking to people who woefully tried and failed suicide that suicide isn’t a solution to hardships. I talk to depressed people and the afflicted that there is hope as long as there is life, and killing yourself is an irresponsible method to deal with life’s problems.

Now I am spearheading a petition to send before parliament that people who try and fail to commit suicide must not be convicted in prison as criminals. Committing suicide is not a criminal act but a psychological irregularity that can be fixed when the victim is assisted.

Rehabilitation is preferable to imprisonment. Suicide victims are a special type of psychological patient and deserve rehabilitation, counseling and upliftment from their troubles.

My mission has been fantastic. I have saved the life of many who hear my story and I have given thousands who sustained serious damages in accidents, people whose relationships boomeranged, and those who lost all they had to disasters, a way to believe that life must not be tampered with no matter what. I am a living testimony to that notion and I make people smile. I see today as a gift, that is why it is called present. Regret for life lost incurs deeper loss and is a waste of time.

I personally have a new outlook on life now and I have learnt a lesson from the University of Hard Knocks. I had never taken warnings to not dwell in waterways seriously until I became a victim one night and lost two of my potential future leaders.

Moving forward, I appreciate from the perspective of my survival of the flood that strength is not a requirement for survival nor is weak-

ness a death sentence in times of danger. Death is a property of the universe that can come at any uneventful time when the conditions are favorable for it. Every single day is a bonus point you get like playing a game.

Sefa is in second year in Accra Academy and he comes home on vacations to see his happy mother. We are both happy to live and see the way things have changed. He has been asking of his father in recent times, as all his friends talk of their fathers, and I hope to tell him what I told you about my early days. I hope he learns from my strengths and weaknesses and becomes an even better person because of it in the future.

—Paa Kwesi Arko Cee, 27, Accra GH

## Smoking in Bed

by Bill Whitten

From one angle, Freddie was strikingly handsome. From another, he was ugly. It was his teeth and forehead; they were too big. One could imagine him disarticulating prey with those oversized teeth. His eyes, on the other hand, were beautiful. Pale blue, they stared at you from somewhere far away, from infinity.

Dagmar loved the canals and the Zattere waterfront and sometimes when the voices stopped speaking to her, she would sit and watch the light play on the waves. A woman always surrounded by water—that was Dagmar.

They met on the south side of the Ponte dei Lavraneri.

“With my burned hand I write about the nature of fire.”

Like a dog alert to its master's tone, he was smart enough to understand she was quoting someone or something important. And like a dog, his great size and fine appearance distracted attention from his poor character and breeding.

She was twenty pounds overweight with prematurely graying hair, a clubfoot and scoliosis of the spine. In the spring and the fall, she swam five times a week in the *piscina comunale*. As if a damaged body was the only remaining site of the sublime, she was fascinated with trauma, abjection and death.

When Freddie was thirteen, he witnessed the murder of his uncle. Afterward, he didn't speak again for two years. He'd despised his uncle and had feared being left alone with him. In his heart the feeling lingered that he'd somehow made a compact with the murderer.

She wrote in German and had been translated into nearly a dozen languages. When the postman came to her flat on the Giudecca canal, not far from the Palanca vaporetto stop, he was more likely than not delivering an invitation to speak at this or that prestigious institution, or a notification that she'd won yet another literary prize.

While Dagmar wrote, Freddie spent his time at Marziano's, a bar on the Rio del Ponte Lungo. Marziano claimed he'd learned English out of respect for those men who suffered from the 'English disease'. They had

always been welcome in his city, the second home of Venus. Marziano was an ex-communist, a one-time informer who'd sold secrets to both the SID and the Soviet Union. Like Freddie, he'd been to prison.

Pockets stuffed with her money, Freddie was fond of saying: "I can write better than she can." He would point at his temple. "It's all up here. Stories that would curl your hair. She steals everything from me."

Following one of his periodic outrages, a remorseful Freddie would often go to confession at the Chiesa del Santissimo Redentore, and from there continue on to the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, to contemplate the paintings of Giovanni Bellini. The paintings calmed him, he would say. Dagmar assumed he went there to meet his drug dealer. She pictured him beneath his favorite—*Dead Christ Supported by Madonna and St. John*—trading a wad of folded bills for a bag of white powder.

Freddie and Dagmar were made for each other in the same way a lamprey and a trout were made for each other.

\*

Swann's train was stuck between Innsbruck Hauptbahnhof and Verona. There were signal problems. He bided his time reading Dagmar's novel *First Timeness*. It was about a man living in America who was on the run from his brother. There was a briefcase full of cash that both brothers wanted. The man on the run was missing four fingers from his left hand and was either terminally ill or pretending to be.

Swann was reading the U.S. edition and felt something must have been left out by the translator. The writing was stiff and not very convincing. She seemed to know nothing of America, nor, perhaps, even of life itself. Yet, there was an energy to it as if it had been written quickly.

When he finally put it down, he was filled with a kind of unease as if something had gone wrong with his own life. She had transmitted dread into him. Not for the first time did he think that literature was reducible to a simple recitation of catastrophes.

Five hours later he was in Venice, at the St. Lucia station in Cannaregio. He asked directions in a confused mixture of English, French, and Italian. The *pensione* where he'd reserved a room was not far from the Redentore. As he stepped onto the vaporetto he dug in his rucksack for a scarf and turned up the collar of his denim jacket. Winter was coming down from the Friulian mountains.

He'd been to Venice once before. His memories consisted of jumbled images of the bars and cafés surrounding the Frari church. It took many visits before a city would unlock its secrets and reveal itself to him. It was the same with people. A half-dozen interactions were necessary before he could remember a person's name.

\*

Marriage was an impossible institution. Impossible for a man who thinks and wants something for himself. Freddie waited for Dagmar in Marziano's. With her limp it might take her forty minutes before she pulled open the door to the bar. No matter; today was the day he would propose to her. He'd borrowed money from Marziano to buy her a ring. Paying him back would be awkward; he would have to ask Dagmar for the money—an annoying detail. It was his intention that mattered. Almost forty, Dagmar had never married; it would be proof of Freddie's seriousness, of his appreciation for her.

“Optimism is a survival trait. In the face of hardship one has to be able to picture something better, one has to believe in it.”

Swann took a sip of Carlsberg. Freddie was speaking to a pair of American men at a small table by the window. Marziano was positioned behind the bar, arms folded over his great belly, ash stubble decorating his sallow, puffy face. He had a bad liver, he never slept. Dagmar had yet to appear; she was no doubt lost in reverie somewhere in the green, slippery city.

“Confronted by misery and bad luck, life becomes a series of improvisations. Unless you have a vision, a happy vision, you will remain in bad circumstances. That was how I survived maximum security prison in Florida. With the gift of optimism.”

Swann had been in the bar thirty minutes. He was confident he could make the judgement that both reason and narrative continuity were lacking from Freddie's young life.

One of the Americans asked: “How was it that you came to Venice, Freddie?”

“An inheritance from my uncle. It ran out not long after I arrived at the lagoon.” He smiled. “I consider myself very lucky to have been stranded amongst such a kind and welcoming people as the Venetians.”

\*

They were dining at the new hotel on the north side of the island. Tables were wreathed by tobacco smoke, voices rose in the air above them like the beating of wings. In the rear of the restaurant men carried in styrofoam coolers filled with fish. The ring didn't fit, of course. It was too small. She reached across the table and touched his folded hands. He'd pocketed it, assuring her he would get it resized.

“What joy it would bring me, Freddie, to look into your idiot eyes every day for the rest of my life.” Everything was a joke to her.

A pregnant woman hiccupped at the table next to them.

He looked at Dagmar: “That will never be you.”

Her eyes widened. There was mirth in her voice. “What are you saying Freddie? Tell me what you mean.”

It was her fault. Her fingers were too fat. And now she was toying with him, trying her best to anger him. He could get mad and knock her around, but that was exactly what she wanted. There was no solution.

He rubbed a hand over his brow. “You’re going to give me stomach cancer. I’m being eaten up inside. I’m not smart enough to compete with you.”

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself.” She pointed at her glass. Freddie lifted the bottle and poured out the remaining wine.

He had the expression—pride in defeat—that he sometimes wore after losing money at cards. She smiled. “The look on your face... have you ever run a firm hand down the back of a faithful dog?”

He threw down his napkin and walked away. He didn’t know how to fight. He could break things, but that wasn’t really fighting. She signaled to the waiter for another bottle. Freddie would wait for her. He had nowhere else to go.

He spoke quickly as if he was afraid she might hang-up. “Hello, my name is Swann. I believe Gérard called and told you that I would be coming to Venice to pick up the script...”

“Swann?”

“Yes...”

“A friend of Gérard? You sound like an American.”

“I’m not a friend exactly. He sent me to pick up the script.”

“How is Gérard’s wife?”

Swann sighed. “She’s in Switzerland acting in a film for...”

“... I stop work at five. You can come by then for a drink. 46 Calle Ferrando. Do you know where that is?”

“I can find it. See you then.”

Instead of returning the ring to the jeweler he threw it into the canal.

“She’ll give me the money, Marziano. We both know that.”

“People like you force those around them to act according to cliché.”

Freddie pulled a scrap of paper from the pocket of his blazer and read from it: "His every movement, his every action preserved the constancy of the amount of energy in the universe." Eyes wide, he shrugged. "What does that mean?" His affect was flat, he seemed to playact at being dumb. "Why would she write that down? And why did I bother to pick it up?" He crumpled the piece of paper and dropped it at his feet on the floor of the bar. "The money will be in your hands shortly."

Marziano rubbed the back of his neck. Almost sixty and the hair on his head was still black and thick as the pelt of an animal. "You said that a week ago, Freddie. How did you ever get to be thirty years old?"

He leaned his large body against the bar and lifted his glass. "Oh come on, Marziano. Ever since I've known you, when have I let you down?" He was as light-hearted as a bird.

In the habit of bartenders everywhere, Marziano studied his fingernails. He was like an ambulance driver or morgue attendant—he'd lost the ability to experience disgust. Still, he was a man with a sense of humor, a man who liked women, and practical jokes.

"While you're young, Freddie, you should leave Venice. Leave that miserable writer behind and start over somewhere new."

Freddie looked up from an old Teatro La Fenice program that had been left on the bar. His eyes were calm, the color of morning sky. "Leave Dagmar? I could never do that, Marziano. I don't have the guts."

\*

Like a boxer she had a fresh cut at the apex of the orbital cavity above her left eye. And there was a burn on the knuckle of her right hand. The air smelled acrid. Something plastic had recently been on fire. She poured bourbon into a water glass and handed it to Swann. She poured out another for herself.

There was a sense of melancholy that allowed the afflicted to see into the future. From one look at her, he knew things were not going to work out.

Everything in the room was a shade of white. It was clean. Ferns and ficuses bent toward the bright windows. A TV occupied the third step of a spiral library ladder. He took a seat on a wicker fan-back chair. Pushing aside papers she fell back onto the long white couch. Cigarette burns, like tribal markings, dotted both of its arms. She screwed a filter-less Nazionali into a horn holder and struck a match. In the window behind her was the ever-present St. Mark's.

"You're very young." Her eyes were a watery blue beneath brown horn-rims. Her voice was low. "What's Paris like these days?" Swann thought the correct word to describe it was *smoky*.

"I don't see much of it anymore. I'm usually on location. Too much travel." The smell was so bad he knew his clothes would reek after he left. "It sounds good on paper until you realize it really means constantly being in transit, constantly on the move..."

"Men are like cannon-balls or swinging pendulums." She blew smoke at the ceiling. "I like your mustache. I like blonde men with mustaches."

Swann was not a grip, nor an electrician. He did not work in wardrobe and had nothing to do with cameras or the discovery of exotic locations. Throughout history there had always been men and women like him—sorcerer's apprentices who abetted creation.

For one director, he'd raised money for a film by smuggling heroin from Capri to Marseilles. Another *auteur* was having difficulties with the unions. Swann sent a van-load of goons to Ypres and let them loose on the set of a film about the Great War. A sense of the miraculous was in the air as the violence that had been so carefully choreographed in front of the camera spilled beyond the frame into real life. After a long day, under the folded wing of night, the difficulties with the unions were resolved...

Swann sipped at his drink and smiled at Dagmar. Gérard had paid her a small fortune from his own pocket to write the script. He'd discovered too late that she was a terrible procrastinator. The script was nearly a year overdue. Swann had been warned it wouldn't be a matter of her simply handing him an envelope. Something drastic might be required, like camping out in her flat to make sure she wrote or spiriting her off to a sanitarium so she could recover her health. In any case, Gérard wanted any and all distractions to be removed from her environment. The principle distraction was the man named Freddie.

As if she'd overheard his thoughts, she leaned forward and tapped her cigarette into an ashtray. "I found Freddie on a park bench, sitting there looking lost, as if he'd just emerged from a crevice in the earth."

He continued to smile. "Who's Freddie?"

"Freddie didn't speak a single word for two years. How do we make a film about that? Well, of course, we put a witch in it—she can account for any kind of destitution. To regain his voice, the witch must die. That's the plot. I told Gérard: if you dare to make this movie you'll come to love me—like all my readers—not for my words but for my failings and impenitence."



“What’s the name of it?” If there was a centre of the world, Swann knew he was far from it.

“*Smoking in Bed.*”

Dagmar’s jaw jutted forward, her shoulders sagged. “I’m wondering if I can convince Gérard to allow Freddie to play himself..”

Swann’s abilities, such as they were, sprang from a certain lack of faith and a bred-in-the-bone ruthlessness. “I have the greatest admiration for anyone who creates.” His was a naiveté of greater than average magnitude. Simply put, he was not a divided man.

“Freddie would make a great actor. When he walks into a room it’s like he’s being led out of nothingness into bright light. He’s all surface, a sun without shadow. But he literally can’t do anything. I don’t know how he ties his shoes, how he shaves his face without cutting his throat. What would happen to him if he lost his hair or his looks?”

Swann shrugged.

“Do you have a finished copy?” His reputation would suffer when he returned to Paris without the script. Word would get out that somewhere in the streets of the floating city, he’d lost his touch.

She pointed to a stack of paper on her desk. “My typist Olga will be here tomorrow morning. It will take her no more than two or three hours.”

As Swann stared at the stack of papers on her desk, Dagmar’s eyes drooped, as did the hand that held the cigarette. Its red end was millimeters from the arm of the couch.

Two men on a Vespa. Gulls and meringue clouds floated above them. They were servants who took money to commit acts of violence. The Vespa made a U-turn and stopped across the street from Marziano’s. Faces hidden by the black plastic visors of their helmets, they appeared as automata; dispositions unknowable; in no hurry, without thoughts. The man who gripped the handlebars pushed back the sleeve of his navy windbreaker to look at his watch. The man on the back, in a black leather jacket zipped to his throat, was unmoving, inert.

The door of Marziano’s opened.

Freddie, in a dark blazer, blue jeans and oxblood loafers walked out. He moved slowly and, perhaps confounding the expectations of the two men on the Vespa, turned down Calle delle Erbe, a narrow alleyway.

Actions as fixed as a liturgy, the two drove off to meet Freddie on the other side.

At 7 a.m., Swann left the *pensione*. A cold wind blew from the north. It was as if he had jet lag. Venice was a temporality—a space-time where

he seemed to have misplaced his equilibrium. Everything had already happened. He walked along the Corte Grandi. Hopefully, his *Zeitlichkeit* would be rediscovered later, in another country.

The wind picked up. Flakes of snow began to fall haphazardly.

In a tiny park, on a bench next to a swing-set, a man lay on his back. The crook of his elbow was thrown over his eyes. Swann moved closer. The man's pants were pulled to his knees exposing white silk boxer shorts. His blazer, torn at the shoulder like a wound, revealed the pale interface-fabric beneath. Snow accumulated on him. Like a film montage, dread penciling in the details, the man's identity began to take shape before Swann's eyes: the large skull, the big body, the jet hair. It was Freddie. Swann could see that the knuckles of his left hand were bloodied and swollen...

And then, Freddie was sitting up, and struggling with his pants.

Coughing, he pointed at his throat: "I think...one of those...little *sche...*" He fell back onto the bench.

\*

It was the beginning of winter, yet insects swarmed through the apartment: ants crawled in the cupboards, roaches and millipedes lay dying along the wooden floor, fat flies flew slowly from room to room.

The light was fading, she was alone.

She wore one of his old cardigans. Three of his suits hung in a closet, his razor sat on a shelf in the bathroom. His belongings could fit into a grocery bag.

The valence of her loneliness had been altered by his presence. Even when he was lost somewhere in the heavy winter fog she was not really alone. It would be unbearable not to be able to send him away.

*Ne me quitte pas.*

Her Freddie was handcuffed like an outlaw to a bed in the Ospedale SS Giovanni e Paolo. In the water ambulance the Venezia Emergenza had found drugs in his pockets. They'd typed his name into a computer and it came to light that he'd overstayed his visa by two years and there was an outstanding warrant for his arrest in North Carolina.

She'd hired a lawyer from Milan to represent him in his extradition case. Yet, she could not bring herself to visit him in the Ospedale, laying there manacled to a bed, a policeman standing guard outside the room.

She opened the door to the closet and reached into the jacket of Freddie's blue gabardine suit. With her thumb and index finger she carefully pulled a little .32 out of the breast pocket.

She thought: I have the destructive potential of a terrorist, not Freddie. She would have made a great criminal, instead she sublimated, she wrote. Perhaps it was not too late.

She sat down on the bed with a bottle, a glass and a carton of cigarettes.

In a city of *ripristino*, of fakes, Freddie had been real.

\*

Swann opened his eyes. He thought of the buildings falling into the sea at the edge of the city. The broken columns, the streets that led nowhere, the shipwrecks lying at the bottom of the Adriatic filled with crushed amphorae and soft bones. As he dressed and smoked the first cigarette of the day, a shadow followed him around the room. It was as if all the friends he'd ever betrayed were keeping vigil outside the locked door.

The clerk at the front desk handed him a pile of messages. All from Gérard: *Call by Noon*.

He returned to his room. Winter gusts banged against the windowpanes and sirens signaled another *acqua alta*.

He was packing when she knocked at his door.

Standing in front of him, cigarette holder gripped between her teeth, she reached into the bag slung over her shoulder and pulled out a manilla envelope.

"The script?"

She nodded. "I'm always good at my word."

"Gérard will be thrilled. Would you like to come in?"

She reached again into the bag and removed the .32. Swann took a step backward, looking around for something to pick up, for somewhere to hide. He'd expected one kind of bad news but, here, he was confronted with another.

"Suffering doesn't confer infallibility on a person, but it makes clear again and again that there's just one rule to life... "

"Wait a goddamned minute."

"...everyone dies in terrible pain and complete isolation."

He heard the sound of branches breaking. Once, twice, three times. Then she went limping away, exhausted, somewhat hunched, melting into the shadows along the Calle S. Domenico.

—Bill Whitten, 47, St. Louis MO



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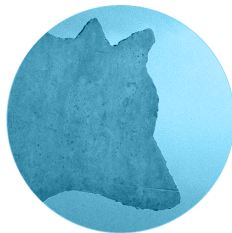
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