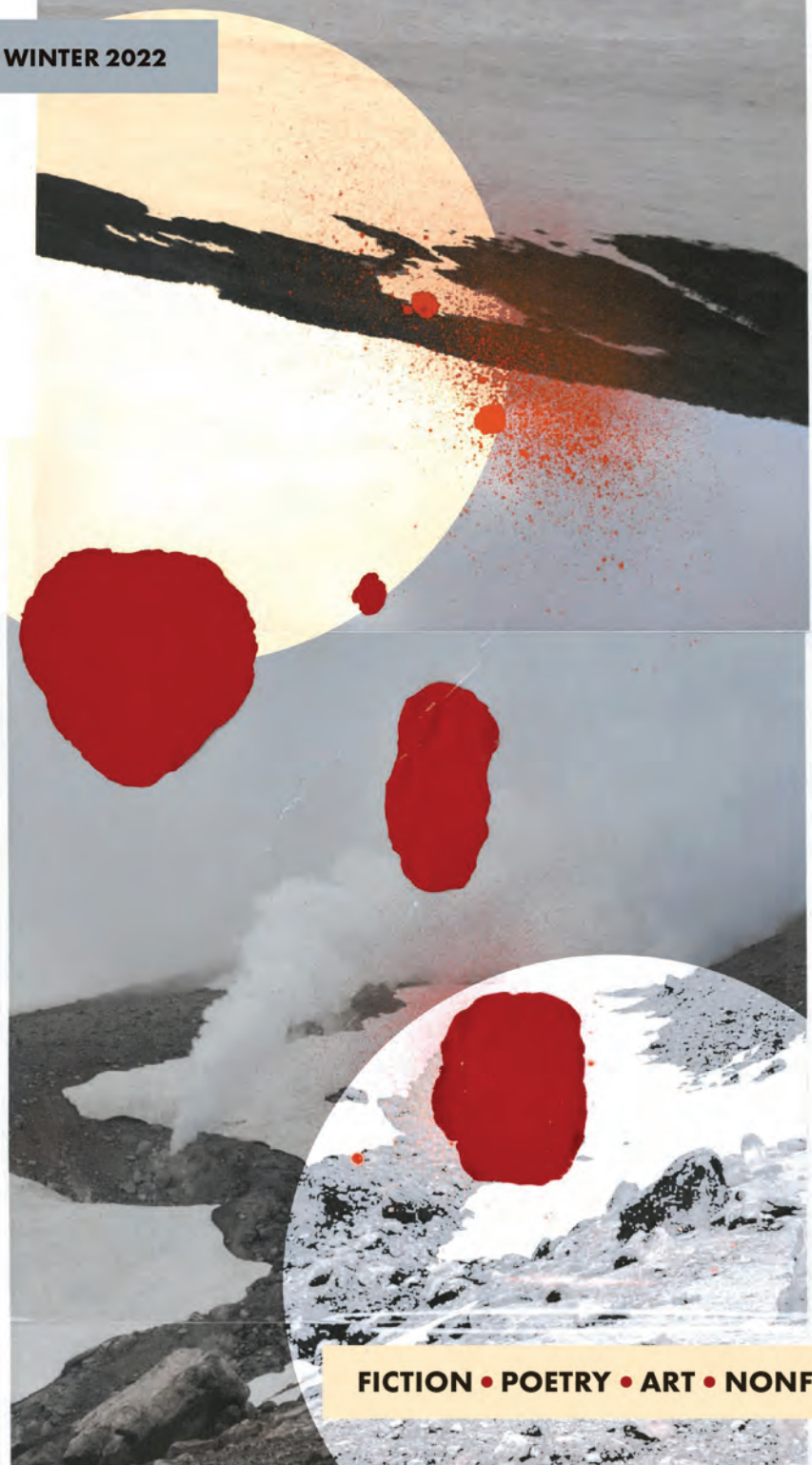


BreakBread Magazine

ISSUE 3 WINTER 2022



FICTION • POETRY • ART • NONFICTION

BreakBread Magazine

Volume 2, Issue 3

Winter 2022

a home for young creatives

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We Would Also Like to Thank:
Abraham Ajani and Archit Kalra

Cover photo by Nathan Cho, "Climbing 2"

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EDITOR'S NOTE

W. David Hall, Editor-in-Chief

For Valentina

A warning: This is difficult to write; it will be difficult to read.

Another name we must say: Valentina Orellana-Peralta. You won't find her name on the masthead. She never submitted a piece of work to BreakBread. For all I know, she never knew we exist. But, spiritually, she was one of us.

Two days before Christmas (one week ago from when I am writing this note), Valentina and her mother were in a Burlington store dressing room in Los Angeles. She was in a dressing room, trying on a new dress for the holidays.

In the store, chaos of the kind that has become commonplace in these United States reigned: according to various news sources, a man had entered the store, allegedly (at the time I write this) assaulted three different women with a bike lock and chain, and officers from the Los Angeles Police Department had been called to the scene. On video, you can see how LAPD tried to corner the man, hear how they demanded he stop running. But he doesn't comply. Shots were fired. Some of those shots entered the man, killing him instantly. But one bullet somehow went through the drywall behind him.

The drywall connected to Valentina's dressing room.

As she was trying on the dress, a bullet burst through the wall, hit her in the chest, and killed her instantly.

She was fourteen years old. She was six months new to the United States, a transplant from Chile, according to various news sources. She wanted to be a citizen.

When I read of the death of a teenager, any death, really, I turn to God through John Donne's Meditation XVII "No Man Is An Island" and the lines:

*Any man's death diminishes me
because I am involved in mankind.*

I also recall the deaths of two students I knew personally. One, a young lady, took her own life. At the funeral, her mother told me that our Poetry class was the singular bright spot in her daughter's otherwise dismal school days. The

other, a young man, had gone missing for days before his body was discovered near some railroad tracks a few states away. I was chaperoning students for a field trip to an art museum for a student poetry program the morning we heard the news of his passing. Administration encouraged me to cancel the trip, but I let the kids make the call: we could stay and mourn with the rest of the school—or we could carry our burden into the art museum and see what poetry came out of our despair.

These students chose poetry. Of course they did.

Now, I'm not suggesting that Poetry—or any art form for that matter—is an elixir that cures despair or resurrects the dead when taken in the prescribed dosage. What I am suggesting is that art—especially that of young creatives—can guide us to wholeness when we are diminished. I see longing and pain when I read these ending lines of Penelope Algeria's "& My Dad Says 'Even You'll Want Kids'":

"i know ill die exactly how I was born, with nothing in my belly and my hands, still baby soft.

And I also feel the poet and father taking a step closer to understanding their relationship. Likewise, the way the eyes of the central figures connect in Karen Peng's beautifully rendered "Parasitical Medusa" shows me the heartbreaking hello/goodbye in every human encounter. To experience everything in this issue is to learn what it means to be involved in mankind on a molecular level, to stare down its passion and its pain, its sensibilities and its suffering, its uncanniness and its uncertainty, and yes, even its death, and still find the strength to create a thing of beauty.

Sayari Debnath writes in the opening of "Lost In Translation":

*we promise to return
to our loves, our homes.*

As we say goodbye to those no longer with us, may we keep the promise to return to the creation of art—our love, our home.

W. David Hall
January 4, 2022



& MY DAD SAYS 'EVEN YOU'LL WANT KIDS'

Penelope Alegria

after Danez Smith

imagine autumn, upon seeing December, decides against wintering and browns its leaves another year. imagine a sob, mouth *ohing* to the grave, shoulders clenched in a forever-heave. your jeans never wear and your shirt doesn't fade. big hands that clasp mine, whose callouses debate my palms: not everything changes with time; i know i'll die exactly how i was born, with nothing in my belly and my hands, still baby soft.

YEONTAN

Lauren Cho

As I walked
Home, to a place
Familiar to me as
Yesterday's clouds,

She stopped me. The gentle grandmother
Gleamed; a malevolent blade, familiar foe,
Bound itself to my throat, choked with
Practiced precision.

Paper cranes,
Blood-red, winter-grey
Took flight. A single feather brushed me. Charcoal
Marred my skin.

Now, when night falls, the world is
Protected from my visceral vices,
But I scrub until my flesh hangs
Red, raw, stained ash gray.

A fever dream, she visits me,
Holding a cup of blue.
With broken bones, you dare
Gleam defiant?

Yeontan (Korean: 연탄, yeontan) is the name for large coal briquettes used in South Korea for cooking and home heating. ... A new yeontan would sometimes be placed atop the current one when it was halfway burned, to continuously maintain the fire.

DON'T YOU EVER RENEGE IN SPADES

Triston Dabney

Black people never actually teach you
how to play spades,
It is something to have
been previously learned, metabolized,
Like your grandmother's cooking,
because you know they don't
use no recipes.
Maybe it was stewn
into the hymns, lined in the pockets
of the ancestors,
Who swallowed it
before breaching shore.

My father was a freedom fighter,
Always triumphing with the power of black,
One time I saw him,
That 5'6 giant,
Slay someone in the spirit
for calling me the n word.
He never made bids he couldn't take.

I'm even ashamed to say
at this age,
The ancestors have never
instructed my hand.
Growing up, I prayed the illusory X in Malcolm
would double the sands of my kneeling beach,
Washing away at identity's uncertain oceans,

I'd ask my father for advice-
The one who used to date my mom-
But he now talks to women from the yellow of his belly,
Plays only with the sclera¹ of the cards
- Jamal

¹The white of the eye

DARK GREEN RELIGION

Zachary Dankert

Forgotten in my boot, a seed
an extinct god crying
for milk. Fed to a lark
in March, it will bloom
in May, but to what semblance of life?

Cottontail rabbits are born then too,
left in open fields and snatched
by children. This doesn't yet matter.
We are still feeling the kicks
smoothed over by winter's belly,

swollen and polluted, with something
of a corpse in its tired weight.
But the children should know the mother
is always there. This seed
is still screaming and I'm not mother

enough to feed it. I pluck
it out, a sterile womb.
March lies through its teeth,
we'll have casketfulls of snow
before it's done. Spring's out of reach

and stuck in a human jaw
and when all of this thaws
possum pups will stay forgotten in
their cold mother's pouch.
Michigan is cracked, Superior too

through the fractures, peer
at the black liver filled with oil.
How far will you reach inside?
Foxes hollow away soil and logs, storing kits
close to the center, where it's safe.

I hold the seed, I imagine
swallowing it. Passing through
tunnels and burrows and intestines
singing winter's tune until preserved
in the core of my planet.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Sayari Debnath

“Ami aschhi”
“I shall return.”
In Bangla, there’s no goodbye.
Nobody leaves, nobody goes.
We promise to return
to our loves, our homes.

“Ami aschhi,” also the
first Bangla phrase I taught you.
I loved you —wrinkles and warts;
Embroidered in language and love, needless to say,
I never wanted you to leave.

On the day I took sick
(bloated belly, searing headache, burning temperature);
you buzzed around the house in the early hours
in a half-worn shirt and sick frenzy.
Fixing meals, feeding the cat, running the bath
And I lay in our bed, groaning and moaning
(sometimes burping, other times retching)

As the clock chimed 9:00 signaling it was time to leave
(already fifteen minutes too late)
you dashed out of the door, the shirt still half worn and
badly tucked in, a frayed belt, mismatched socks
and a banana in hand.

You must have forgotten your
usual goodbye kiss and a flitting wave,
in the madness of trying to catch the 9:03 bus
You shouted “Ami jacchi” —
(perhaps remembering the missed goodbyes)
already three flights down the stairs.

Of course, you paid no heed to your words.
I think under different circumstances,
I wouldn’t have either
but that day I was a shell of myself
feverish, unmoving, decaying

Cooped up in our balmy bed
I drove myself into a fit
Worrying, Sweating, Crying
What if indeed this was a goodbye
What if my sickness was too much for you to bear
and you had had enough
What if this was it —

After eight hours of ruminations
and preparing myself for the Final Departure,
I heard your keys unlocking the door
You walked in.
Sweat, snot, disheveled hair
and in that moment, you were the most beautiful man
to have ever been.

There was nothing to worry about.
You had returned. You stood in front of me.
Taking off your shoes, plugging in the phone
putting the tetra pak of milk in the fridge —
I read them as signs that you were here to stay.

I had given up dairy and you were a firm believer
that a glass of milk a day, keeps osteoporosis at bay.
You’d stay for at least the next three days
until the last drop of milk had been washed down.
I decided I had seventy-two hours to ask
what you meant when you said, “Am jachhi” instead.

And then I remembered
(the thought hot and embarrassing)
Bangla isn’t your language.
“Aschhi,” “Jachhi,” probably mean the same to you
After all, you are still learning.

DIVISON

Tesa Blue Flores

I was never good at math but I always
understood division.

One number going at it to another,
making it smaller and smaller.

Slips of it falling into even chunks, tucked away somewhere discrete.
And it seems one of us always has a knife and one a shovel.
And I always look like a child and you are horrifically grown.

I with the bruises and little bumps, you slitting and slitting away at me, a machine that slices
straight gashes through the rice bag and the rice goes everywhere, little sounds of rain.

Little smooth white dots all over and the inside comes out and it's
not at all what it's supposed to be.

There isn't even a machine that's supposed to cut rice bags in half.
It doesn't look right, feel right, let you sleep ok at night.

The whole time we were running towards each other, taking pieces.
We grab eggs at the egg hunt and inside there are pieces of our souls, things we ran over with
our survival instinct years ago.

When you go to clock out at the end of the night, they only let you take one half of the egg,
the other half goes to your boss.

Some of the colors your soul had brings out his eyes, so he dyes a new suit with the pigment
you provided
and you limp home.

THIS END

Greta Hardy-Mittell

Visiting you is like an unraveling
a lesson in care
Every day I find less of you lying
in your bed, your strawberry blonde hair
fanned against your pillow like the strings
on my sister's fiddle—you used to remember

the name Mendelssohn; now it's a miracle

she sang Cat Stevens and you
knew the tune. The sky is falling out there but
you are my daily news—whether you could hear
the ocean when we held a shell to your ear,
the number of times you smiled, said
I love you, the joy in your voice

when you finally saw a bird.
I feel my words slipping away
when I try to write you down, Gramma,
is this how it feels
Are you running out of ink?

you are a ball of yarn,
and I don't know which is worse:
the Fates with their scissors
or me, letting go of your string.

JELLYFISH BLOOM

Kathleen Langston

The earth slips off her knee
avulsion in mind, spins down her lap and cycles out
and out on the floor until it plants its bleached feet
right in her line of sight
(there will be no reconciliation).

(Wiping away the ellipses she is paved with)

In the shower she is dark and diaphanous
like a room with the lights out
but the neighboring streetlamp feels its teeth in its mouth and grins;
delirious (Aurelia), her foot slips down the plastic drain
the streetlamp's bent spine like a diver fishes it out.
Her image: two feet miraged
and slivers of her reproduce out into the night.

NOTES FOR COOKING ON THE ROAD

Lagnajita Mukhopadhyay

after Alejandra Pizarnik

Why did I stay?

- a. We need a home where the idea and the image is the same. It is in you, specifically, where the schism of the truth held hands with its betrayal, like fool's gold or high fructose corn syrup in the cup holders and the fields driving by, fixed and immovable.
- b. The friend brings a fragment to the dinner table, fast or slow in between the spaces, eating before speaking. Mob comes from mobility, movement is a myth, borders are not fixed: something about milk, and Rotten, or overindulgence out of habit—
- c. *“subtle links” that could allow for an innocent coexistence, on the same plane, of the subject and the object, as well as erasing the usual borders separating I, you, he, we, us, them. Alliances, metamorphosis.*
- d. No contact, as if dead, as if grieving your pyre, starvation: instructions:
 - i. burial, or root vegetables
 - ii. denial, denial, and dairy cows
 - iii. doom, the wasted, the spoiled
 - iv. grief.

Or did you choose me?

February 13

A silence that drives the conversation, empty due to its failure, pulled over on the highway again; like you are eating something even in your own sleep: the slurp, the hit of your tongue against roof, an unconscious hunger

February 12

consume me devour me
you will always be hungry
sweet in the front, a bit sour on the sides

February 18

sugars and sugar alcohols and your great grandmother's corpse

(what taste buds, bitter in the back of the tongue yet Hänig was wrong: the diagram is too reductive, hospital beds in the fast food joints or vending machines in the hospitals)

February 19

like half of a big red onion, tasteless: the cowboy or the settlement, gas station kids, dirty boys in the neighborhood, crying on the job: Name the thing out of place. One of them is not like the other.

- a. I think I wanted one thing to not think about
- b. You wanted to: be me but ate around the bad spots / swallow the menu instead of ordering the food!
- c. What's the use of golden hour in a dead field?
- d. The sweeper never gets clean feet

May 10, 2020

We went through the drive-through once a day
to get ice for our cooler so our food wouldn't go bad.

February 27, 2021

My mother's brother's breakfast walk: Geetika-r hing-er kochuri, khaastaa laal jilipi-r pore Badurbagan-er mukhe koraa liquor-er chaa. Taarpore Nakur...sorer roll (gurer o saadaa), sorer singara (mohaakaay o natun songjojon), golap sandesh. Shese Nirala cabin-er saamner dokaaner chaa-e somaapoyet.

February 27

I have lost the recipe; I have shared it with your family; I did not eat so you could eat more. Maybe if you had spent your money, maybe if

we had the time, another propane for our two-burner, if we did not meet at the market. Maybe if I saw how you swallowed and did not digest. Tell the truth, you wanted a house so bad that I built furniture in my mouth. Tell me, everything you built broke or everything you have made has led to death or you told the truth about everything but you or what would you like to feel. What would you like to make. Are you still hungry?

4. mix turmeric with coconut milk (a nice yellow color)

I have lost the recipe again; your mother never cooks; we did not eat. Money, time, fire, market. We need a place where the cook is human, who swallows and digests slowly, who builds a table for the supper, who breaks the eggs into the pan, who makes a spaghetti without sugar, who knows themselves and how they feel and what they make. Who I can make less hungry.

NONBINARY CREATION STORY

C.G. Myth

What if I came from Eve's rib
After she from Adam's
A creation, amen

God's followers—
Burn me under moonlight

CANDY WRAPPER

Cloris Shi

I once collected candy wrappers from the playground.
I wiped each clean from soiled tongues, traced faded names like
watermelon, lemon, blue raspberry, gave them new names
like Lisa-why-can't-you-sit-still pineapple wrapper
like boy-bribed-Lisa green apple wrapper
like nursing-home-front-counter-before-we-let-you-know-grandma-died strawberry wrapper,
I placed them in my desk.
One afternoon, my teacher reported there was an ant problem.
Perhaps that is why I now sugarcoat the truth,
scared you take candy, leave packaging; take treasure, leave chest,
Perhaps that is why, even now,
when you taste me, you taste only plastic
why when you throw me away, I fold to paper cranes.

ELEGY TO SUICIDE VICTIM WITH A CHERRY VANILLA COKE

J. Perry

I found you splayed
on the bed, absent-
minded.

At your wake, I whisper
your name into a cherry vanilla
coke, cap and bury it beside
the magnolia we date-stamped
with pocket knives, brothers
etched into a tree that would
outlast you. I pour drinks for you
and drink them.
In this way, I keep you.

Later I add you to the spicebox
of the earth. I buy a dog and meet someone
you would've liked. I'm told this
is supposed to be said but does not make it
any less true. I choose to move past you.

In the red-shifted autumn, after
another morning of shared memory,
I unearth the cherry vanilla bottle
and lift it to my ear. The soft hiss
of your escape hurries past me.

SELFIE OF A GIRL IN THE SUNLIGHT

Angelica Whitehorne

I need to stop writing poems about the sun,
(I know) but how she always finds me,
half curled into the grave, fetal and stupid
for any warmth, any warmth I can grab and
make into a golden powdered blush or a
spotlight (so self-obsessed, I know, I know).
I should stop looking for her in bleed spots
through the windowpanes, across faces,
between trees, or legs; it's a lot of work,
there are days full of only clouds— but they
say you are who you hang with and I want
to be a star, so when she comes, I let her in
and where she asks me to be, I go.

JADED MEDITATION

Erin Ye

Take it day by day.
Breathe in.
Breathe out.

Even when my dad interrupts me
Berates me
Accuses
Shames me
I remember when he loved me, body and soul.

The summer before seventh grade
I told him I wanted to try out for the volleyball team.
Not an athletic kid-
Stubby legs, chubby body, clunky movements all around.
He brought a yellow ball home
And we practiced every night in the backyard after dinner.

I didn't make the team
And when I told him over dinner
He just nodded
Said it was okay and that I tried.
Those nights were not brought up again.

Even when my mom eyes my plate
Comments on my weight
Ignores me
Gets bored of me
I remember that I am her first-born baby girl.

We used to have girls' lunches
In the city by ourselves.
I would look over the menu forever
Deciding between my top three choices.
She would pick the salad and a diet Coke
And sigh over her postpartum body-
But she would let me get whatever I wanted.

She still tells me I'm so pretty
She still kisses my cheeks before bed

But she sighs when I speak
As if I was wiser at six weeks
And more lovable
When I was just her girl
And not my own.

HOT TUB KINGDOM

Jameson Hudalla

On Friday nights, the Fire King hosts shindigs in the backyard. We're seventeen-ish and have nothing better to do than be with each other. The key players are President Dirk, who boxes and smokes Cubans and plans to be the 2033 democratic nominee. The Fire King's older brother, who whittles kayak paddles and has the baffling allure of most *I-don't-give-a-fuck* types. Bean, whose only contribution is controlling the volume of the EDM pumping through the speakers. Alexa, the one with the reservoir of unsavory stories such as puking in Denny's parking lots and doing shrooms with that one guy in town who owns an octopus because *there are some things in life you just have to try*. And of course the Fire King, who stokes the wood and gesticulates wildly when he speaks like an oracle forewarning a global flood.

"*Sharknado*," the Fire King claims one night, "is the best film ever made."

We're in the process of clamoring one by one into the hot tub like a pack of heat-seeking creatures. We are uncoordinated tap dancers on the wintery pavement, waiting our turns, goose pimpled flesh exposed. There is no graceful way to insert ourselves into a hot tub. One calf always lags over the side, every muscle concentrates on not slipping and, all the while, each skin follicle screams in confusion at the switch from arctic temperatures to Satan's groin.

"We are voting you off the island," Alexa slurs at the Fire King. "Leave—geouttahere."

"You can't make me leave."

He's right of course—the hot tub is harder to get out of than it is to get in. Also, his parents own the joint. It's a gray little home in the woods, out past the bar folks drive drunk from and the bridge teenagers jump off of into the river. The leap's long and the water's shallow, and if we didn't have this tub we'd be floundering through the air, one jutting rock away from a hospital visit like the other jumpers. But we're here, safe and inhaling each other's boozy breaths.

Once inside the hot tub, only one thought remains: *When can we get out?* There's a dance that consists of several tactical moves—wiggling slippery thighs against the sand-granuled seats, shifting to the ledge so only a fourth of our bodies are submerged, repositioning so the jet doesn't pound our shoulder blades into bone soup. But we choose to endure this unpleasantness, if only because we have tricked ourselves into believing we like it the way we

like beer and cuddling and other people's kids.

Our white skin pinkens like chicken in a boiling vat and we squirm until we're numb to the spit-bubbling water. Neighbor Boy Dylan, who is not a key player, scoots close to me. When we were five and relegated to the same daycare, he yanked my hair so hard he held a clump of it in his fist like uprooted dandelions. I ignore NBD and focus on President Dirk, who's my philosophical sparring partner at these things—but only when we're water-swallowed and the moon highlights the steam and the air is so thick we can say anything we want. Anything like:

"So, Jamie, how do you reconcile your feminism with treatment of women in the Bible?"

Before I launch my five-point response, Alexa shouts, "Fuck the pink tax!"

She's right, of course—and we chat about boxes of tampons we have to put down payments on and how, in 2033, President Dirk will eradicate sexism. He's a blue drink of water in a town so red it could be a slasher flick. Alexa presses against him and declares she'll be his first in office scandal. The Fire King blocks my view of them as he offers me a cigar his brother rolled. We pass the halo of embers back and forth as if our lungs aren't already scraping against bleach fumes.

Do any of us consider why *so* many chemicals are required to keep hot tubs clean? Maybe because it's a communal pool of cooked skin. Maybe because chlorine wars against the under-nail grime and pit stink we trail with us from our various days spent at supermarkets or bathroom stalls or sports practices. The Fire King's chemicals have a purpose that is no less horrifying but is, in the very least, knowable.

I discover it when I stay until 3:00 a.m., at which point bloodstreams have magicked into rum rivers and everyone contains so much Captain Morgan we should require a *flammable* label. After several weekends of observing the effects of alcohol on the hot tub control group, the Fire King proves it is positively correlated with wooziness. In other words, guts and brains turn to whirlpools that need an outlet, and waterlogged legs aren't quick enough to find a toilet or a tree. The Fire King spends most 6:00 a.m.'s fishing for chunks of vomit, draining the tub and spiking it with sanitizers. He says his parents might kill him. Then next weekend we do it all over again.

Pick a Friday—it doesn't matter which, and watch as one hot-tubber launches a game of Truth or Dare. We're huddled together like raccoons around a trash can, eyes slippery. Are they secrets if we're eager to share them? Are they challenges if the only stakes are a pat on the back or getting called a *pansy*? No matter, the game lures in seekers the way most rituals do.

"I dare you to run to the river and back," says Bean or Alexa—it doesn't matter who.

It's the Fire King's heroism under scrutiny, at the moment. *Will he do it? Will he make it?* The water slithers at the end of a snowcapped hill in the

backyard. It's a balmy two degrees and the Fire King's breath is visible as he squelches awkwardly from the tub's protection. What's not visible: the bottom of the hill through the blackness. We chant like the crowd that crucified God as he sprints barefoot over ice.

It's President Dirk who eventually searches for him. They hobble up the slope, the Fire King's arm slung across President Dirk's shoulders. In the fractured moonlight, we see beads of blood clinging to the Fire King's calves. I wonder if we'll ever be infallible again. But then the Fire King laughs and someone tosses him a towel to hide the blood and we do it all again next Friday.

We don't know how to talk when we're not in the tub, when we have to stare at our reflections in each other's pupils, unobscured by fog and loudness. I'm driving the Fire King to pick up pizza for the shindig. He never bothered with a license—operating the wheel makes him anxious after too many car rides with his inebriated father. His dad is sober now, though, and has to be if he wants to keep his firefighter position. He isn't around most weekends, usually whisked away to extinguish the latest disaster, too busy saving other people's kids to smell the smoke wafting from his own.

"I'll be President Dirk's secretary of state one day," the Fire King says from the passenger seat. "Or ambassador to the UN."

He predicts Brexit before Brexit is knitting together in the womb, knows more about geography than a map, but skips class and flouts homework. I turn down the rock station, blinker into his driveway and wait for him to say more. He doesn't, and neither do I. We arrive at the party armed with flimsy pepperoni and slick cheese and we are the loves of everyone's lives. Later, in the hot tub, the grease from our fingertips is washed away. *Wash* being a relative term, depending on what is filthier: us or what holds us.

The Fire King's arms wrap around me when everyone leaves. I want to be President Dirk's First Lady but I'm halfway dating the Fire King. I don't know how we end up in this situation, the two of us. We go together like Ranch and chocolate, but he puts Ranch on *everything*, and with that level of passivism, these things happen. At this point in our high school existences, on the cusp of tipping into adulthood's oblivion, we want nothing more than to think less. We watch *Sharknado* and argue over which one of us would survive the longest if the sky rained hammerheads. The Fire King loses, since his fears are as follows:

1. Heights
2. Chickens
3. Sharks
4. Zombies

In the hot tub, fear doesn't exist. It's the warm blanket that puts us to sleep—our hearts slogging to the beat of the jets, our brains pruned like our fingers and toes, pruned in a will-less way, in an ironic way, in a Fear #4

way. The Fire King's brother always sits on the edge, never fully with us, and tonight he weaves us flower crowns from the hillside's weeds. It's summer this time so we don't stay in the tub for long, but we end up crouched around the campfire pit anyways—fanatics of some strange heat not even August can offer.

The Fire King has just tossed us another controversial bone to chew on, and as the aimless fight escalates he raises his hand above us as if to calm the masses. He dons a halo of crumpled purple petals. For a moment I cannot stop staring at the hand, creased from absorbing the tub's water. Its wrinkles are all wrong against the backdrop of energetic pop songs and cut-offs made from school sports T-shirts. I want to leave the party before the party leaves us—before I admit that hot tubs have always given me headaches and the Fire King's eyes are the same aluminum-blue as his father's. I want to take the Fire King's hand and lead him away from the pit, but he's said it before: *You can't make me leave*. These things are harder to get out of than they are to get in—but I know, with youthful certainty, that we will eventually scatter from the gray house like ants away from some cosmic shoe. We'll go to universities and watch films without CGI sharks and trade solo cups for dishwasher-safe glasses. We'll return one day, praying the giant foot in the sky spared the Fire King, praying he'll be gone, the embers dead.

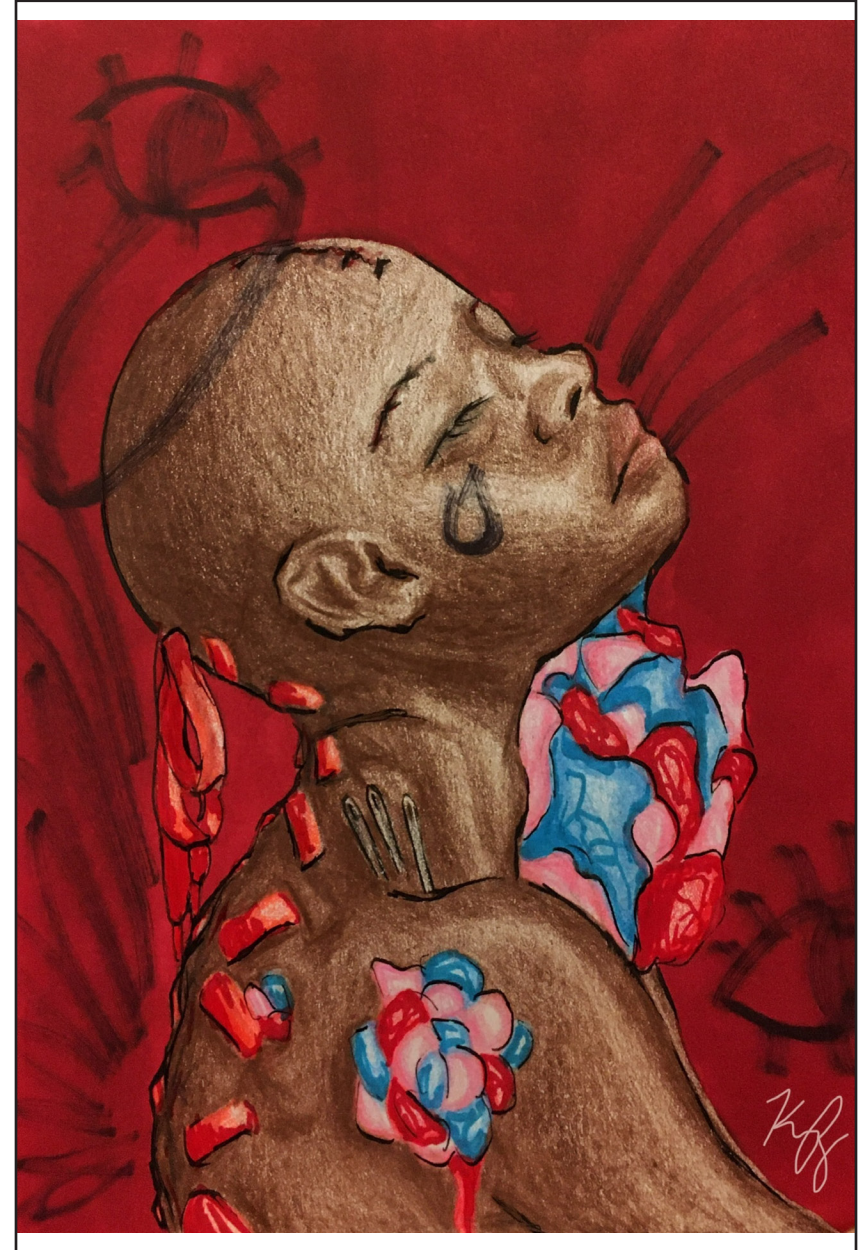
SELF PORTRAIT IN BLUE

Bjorn Bengtsson



RED STITCHES

Karen Peng



PARASITICAL MEDUSA

Karen Peng



SOMEWHERE BETWEEN EARTH & SPACE

Camila Silva



NO BETTER WAYS TO RECOLLECT

Orji Victor Ebubechukwu

“No Better Ways to Recollect” previously appeared in *Afritondo*, an online magazine for African politics and arts, including fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and essay. We are grateful to the Editors at *Afritondo* and to Orji Victor Ebubechukwu for permitting us to reprint this story in *BreakBread Magazine*, and bring it to our readers.

The first thing that is known of Okorie is that he was a nineteen-year-old soldier Uka had taken to loving so much. He was, in fact, Uka’s first and only true love. It was as if Okorie was a key specially designed to lock Uka, and that no one else could fit into her but him. The second is that he, Okorie, died while fighting for the nation that never lived. The third is that Okorie was just too young to understand what he was getting into: both the love and the war and the gestures only him and Uka could interpret, and the tons of sex he had with Uka, who also, was full of youthful flare. Love and lust burned in both lovers, and they realized a way to mix them, finding gratification in what this *thing* they were doing produced.

To be mentioned, the year was 1967. The year, like several other years that would come, had so much heat and coldness at the same time. The heat came from massacres of innocent people, and the coldness, both from the massacres and from a different entity entirely. An entity of the nature of *new* love. It was a time with the generation of teenagers seriously *falling* and helplessly *hiding*. Not like the children of nowadays who flaunt opportunities their parents would have been too shameful to flaunt in their own times. If you were a teenager then, and you happened to fall in love with someone, it was best to keep such a relationship on the low, away from the sniffing noses of the public, lest you earned names that meant disrespect for yourself and your family. You would be labelled the strayed child. The uncouth child. A shame to the family.

So, though their parents always saw them both together, always saw how they ambled to the Community Comprehensive Secondary School or the St. Martin’s Cathedral together, fetched water from the public manual water pump together, how the boy that was Uka’s lover always eagerly accompanied

her to the Dosu market, even returned to assist her in her mother’s kitchen, they just believed that they were just so close because they were children and because they were very close friends of very close families.

But then the war came, and they rapidly became adults, people who could make their own decisions. In their bones, zeal burned for the impact that was going to make them free at last: free from a nation that wasn’t there in the first place, free from the bonds of adolescence. Free to explore into their individual lives, to cuddle themselves before a window of a seaside house, letting the soft rays of the morning sun and the breeze from the ocean fill them to saturation.

They felt the freedom a couple of times together before this same zeal led Okorie to be recruited in the army, the same zeal that took him forever. Away from Uka. Faraway. The first was when Uka had gone to his family house to deliver some *uneh* his mother had asked hers for. Nobody was home but him. His mother had gone to the market, his father was away in Ibadan doing some trade there, and Nne, his father’s mother—who would have been in her hut chasing flies with a broom stick had she been—already died last year. She was shy when Okorie praised her, when he called her, “Achalugo nwanyi, omalicha m.”

She blushed.

Her cheeks felt cold. She could feel it in her mouth.

“I have never known beauty in this form,” he said, and she chuckled, a little more flabbergasted. Then she fine-tuned her voice to tell him, “I’ve always told you you’d make a good poet.”

“I am only your poet if I’ll ever be a poet. I will only write my poems for you, not for any other person.”

His smile was enough to sprinkle sugar over her brain, but it was the words and the way he spoke every bit of them that did it. She was flirting, and she knew it. And she loved what flirting was—with this boy.

He said some more words that stocked ice in her belly. His words chilled her, and that was why when he began to bring his hands sluggishly to her chest (the region her mother had always warned her against letting any boy touch), she didn’t resist. He saw she wasn’t resisting, so he furthered tenderly. They lured themselves into his father’s obi, and on the mattress, Okorie’s dreams of pressing her breasts and putting his mouth over her nipples finally came through. Here they were, on his father’s mattress, fondling themselves.

The second time was in the bush behind St. Martin’s Cathedral. It was early morning, during which time they could hear the Fada’s voice through the megaphone blare his morning Mass homilies. There, in the bush, they

fondled again—quick, sensual and inaudibly, as the first time had been.

The third time was the first time they went all the way. Uka's moans were intense. She couldn't understand how this thing that caused her pain still pleased her. With time, they lost count. Everything was perfect except the sad realization that they couldn't just be like normal adults, settled, doing this sort of thing without having to hide from their families.

#

So, they swore to be together. It was under an *ube* tree. And together, they were, until the war that would teach them what life meant—nothing, just nothing—came. At first, like every other person caught in the war, they were singing, "Biafra will win the war!" But when hopes bashed, poverty and lack enthroning themselves before people who used to swim in the ocean of plentiful, losing their houses to bomb explosions and raids, their songs changed, in fact, they didn't have strength to sing war songs any more. The only thing their mouth—because somehow their heart still wanted that nation, Biafra—could lament was for the war to end, for Ojukwu to surrender to the Nigerian government, to be reunited with the Nigerians, because unlike the Nigerians, they had nothing for the war: no weapons, no food, no drugs, no much foreign aid like the Nigerians had, no nothing! And how do you fight a war without all these? Especially when your enemies had them all?

It was a day before Umuahia was captured that Okorie died. His lover didn't know he'd died because he was somewhere in the warfront, and she was running through bushes for safety with her protruded tummy which was almost dropping. She was guided by her mother, who was readying to be a grandmother in wartime. Uka did feel pangs of melancholia though; intuition, perhaps, was telling her something had happened to her lover. And even if she was too weak to pay any attention to the feeling, but she did.

Paying attention to the feeling built fear in her. The fear that still lives with her until today. The fear that would make her wish she could erase every bit of Okorie from her memory, the fear that still made her to not be able to erase any bit of the memories at all. The fear that always told her, *Your case is different. Your brain is not a computer hard disk.*

Though she didn't see him again, even after the war would end in January of 1970, she knew that the war had taken him—just as it'd taken her father, her only brother and sibling learning a trade in Sabon Gari. It was Okeoma—one of their kinsmen trading in the same district where her father's shop was situated, where her brother was learning his trade—who came home to inform Uka and her mother that "ndi Awusa" had butchered her father and

brother like they were chickens. "Ka fa-abu okukor," he'd said. Uka didn't seem to mind that Okeoma had pronounced Hausa as Awusa. There was nothing she could mind, in fact, but the images of her father and her brother lying stone cold in the brown hot sand of the North that kept clouding her thoughts and mind. In her mind also, she pictured her father in the hands of an angry black youth, begging for his life, and the youth paying no heed to his pleas. She imagined that the angry youth had slid his dagger across her father's neck, and had done the same to her brother. *Mbaaaaaaaa! Noooooo!*

The day Okeoma came in November to narrate his tales of woe was especially sunny. The sun kissed the earth so severely it left trademarks on it, the ground cracked, thin hollow lines appeared like veins, making the earth resemble an overbaked clay, a clay baked near ruin. Okeoma had gone ahead to tell them that he himself was lucky he had a good Hausa friend. During the time of the riot, Okeoma said, Alhaji Mustafa, the Hausa man who was friend with him, had taken him into his house, hidden him, and had warned his three wives, each with a dozen skinny children, to deny seeing any person that wasn't a member of the family in the compound. And when the boys with stony faces had come to Alhaji Mustafa's compound to search for anyone who was Igbo, their enemies, all his children, even the very senseless ones had assembled, and had one after the other denied that anyone who was not one of them came into the compound. With that, the boys left, saying to Alhaji Mustafa, "Na gode, Alhaji," with a bow.

"When the heat died down after two days," Okeoma was saying, "I came out and found them"—by them he meant Uka's father and brother—"lying lifeless, like they were skin bags stuffed with foam, no breath."

He didn't tell them that Uka's brother wasn't just killed, that he was killed with his head decapitated and thrown to one side of the road, far apart from the body. That the head had eyes widely opened, the lip had formed an "O" shape that displayed yellowish looking teeth. That giant flies perched the bodies, buzzing irritatingly. That he almost threw up, but had to respect himself and return to Alhaji's compound lest he be discovered. He wasn't going to let them know all that. Those were not stories to tell a grieving family. He just told them that some days after, Alhaji Mustafa had made arrangements for him to be brought back to the East ("Oh, what a good man Alhaji was," he'd said sorely, like a part of his heart ached), to this their village in Ihite Azia. Uka resented him a bit though, why would he run to safety without his brothers? Why would he let people he called "umu nwannem" die that taciturnly while he ran to safety? But what Uka didn't know was he was

trying to save his own self, that there was no way he could return to call them to safety without himself being killed.

#

The fears that overpowered Uka made her believe Okeoma's stories with her whole heart. Maybe because it seemed like the truth. Maybe because it seemed better to even know that they were killed, and not to sit down every day, hoping that they returned one day.

And to be said, this was unlike her. Unlike Uka. Uka the *questionnaire*. *The Pocket Lawyer*. The girl had always questioned every damn thing, had always taken time before believing things, and without evidence, she may just not believe at all. But then, how come was she believing this one without an evidence? So quickly? So undisputedly? Without having to behave like the *pocket lawyer* she was sometimes called?

She would have appreciated it had the fear only made her believe he, Okorie, had gone forever and let her be, let the memory leave her completely, but “mba,” the fears seemed to be saying in bold voice.

The day the news came over the radio device Uka's mother always took around, in the fallen voice of Philip Effiong that, “..we accept the existing administrative and political structure of the Federation of Nigeria. ...That the Republic of Biafra hereby ceases to exist,” Uka felt so bitter. They were finally giving up when they'd lost all they'd ever held dear already. What was the essence of giving up? Or what was the essence of starting up the war in the first place if they would just give up like that? Or was Ojukwu really serious to have toiled with the lives of people in an attempt to better it?

And it worried her that her mother was one of the women who ran along the streets, flying the green-white-green flag, shouting, “O bi go, it has ended!” How cold her mother was, she couldn't feel the real impact of the war! That the war took her only son and husband, that for the war, they'd had to eat lizards and all manner of rodents, that the war had for a few times turned them to thieves; people who went at night to harvest other people's premature cassavas and yams. Memories, which were just still very young as at the time, invaded her like a Trojan horse. She couldn't be happy that the war finally was ended, and somehow also, she couldn't be sad either. But she could weep.

So she wept (just as she continues up until today to), more because she was just so young—eighteen—as at the time of her lover's disappearance, and she had her daughter in her arms (of which knowledge the boy lacked; that she was even pregnant), who looked just like the boy she used to love, and nothing else. Just herself and the baby. Nothing else.

PARK STREET

Rida Jaleel

The rickety table in the middle of the hall was laden down with delicacies, some of which Azi didn't even know June knew how to make. Azi paused for a second. June always cooked a storm, especially when she could foresee one coming. She scanned her schedule. Nope. She hadn't planned a row that day. Not that she wouldn't have liked that. For the past week, Azi had been pinning the reasons to quarrel with her boyfriend Tari on a corkboard in her head, like the long needle upon which pending bills are slammed down after every order in the old Naga place around the corner. She swung her neck through the strap of her brown tote, and smiled an unsure, flickering smile at her flatmate and first friend.

“Is he coming?” Azi tipped the chipped yellow plate onto the table. A tiny rivulet of water dripped onto the faded tablecloth. June extended her plate to Azi. When June cooked, Azi served. When Azi cooked, June. It was a pointless charade extended only to save Azi an endless barrage of flustered apologies for her abysmal cooking and worse schedule. Azi couldn't cook to save her life. And June knew this much. Simple mercies; unexpected gifts brought along by a friendship that saw both of them from tottering in diapers to brutally thick lines of kohl shimmering beneath their fluttering eyes. Azi was suddenly reminded of their old colony, even her memories acquiring the vignette of a rusty old photograph. It was strange—why couldn't she remember in colour?

“I don't know.” June mumbled—an unexpected harbinger to a sudden flurry of movement at the door. “There he is.” She smiled, slightly cocking her eyebrows.

“Well, what a lucky little thing am I...” Azi muttered amidst a mouthful of rice and braised chicken. She made a show of not gracing the visitor with much attention, reaching for another spoon of lemon curd. From the corner of her eye, she could sense the restlessness of yet another night.

Even tangled in the fresh aroma wafting from the table, Azi sensed the lingering scent of Fogg cologne, made musty by mingling with Tari's sweat. It was one of the first things that drew her to him; the way he smelled. Through

every bike ride in the rain, through all those sweltering mornings in the cramped apartment they'd shared before this, through every argument. Not much has ever clicked between them; ideologies and equations teetering on their edges, shivering in the air, giving a fleeting impression of faux-stability and then toppling over, like they always do. But their pheromones had always matched, like two worn-out puzzle pieces slipping like velvet into each other. He's said it before her, how much he liked how she smelt. And she'd nodded along, smiling that simpering smile she'd learnt to smile in the initial periods of being a "girlfriend", her holding that plaque for the world to see, looking at it every now and then, brushing away the dirt every now and then and then hoping that it'd stick. That it'd stop feeling like a nickname given too late, flinching and unsteady. That plaque was at the end of some rubbish heap now. Heck, Azi wasn't even sure that she'd taken it with her to the new apartment they'd shared with June and her singer boyfriend. Didn't know if she'd even need it for much longer. Azi had let go of more than one argument distracted by that increasingly appealing odour, had wondered if the way Tari smelt was making her any less of a feminist before shelving the idea for another day.

"June, you are everything." Tari sat, in another flurry of movement, blowing a chef's kiss into the air, winking smilingly at June. He reached for a plate, waiting. Azi focused extra hard on her chicken. He had another thing coming if he thought she was going to play the hostess to him in his apartment.

She caught him fixing his black t-shirt and smirked. Tari was ejected out of his mother's womb in black. Even Azi had never seen him wear anything other than his prototypical variations of black. Once, on a birthday, after two hours of going back and forth, Azi had bought him a gorgeous mustard yellow linen shirt. But when she saw his face fall behind an unflinching smile of gratefulness, Azi had sighed and told him that she'd get it returned. He had protested and worn it a couple times before ironing it precariously and hanging it in the farthest end of his closet.

Azi had loved the colour on him. In mustard, Tari didn't seem like a brooding cinematographer. In mustard, Tari could've been a Professor walking down the worn-out red floors of an institute that had a legacy of at least a hundred years. In mustard, Tari could've been a painter, peeking at her from behind his easel with a faint smile, wedged in a studio they would never have been able to afford on their measly monthly income. In mustard, Tari could've walked into her house, kissed the side of her head and marched up to the living room and talked to her parents. In mustard, Tari could've swept her parents off their feet, swept her off her feet. Azi never bugged him

for abandoning her painstaking birthday present, because deep inside, she felt guilty.

She knew that the only reason she chose mustard yellow was because it was something Tari would never have chosen. A perverse pleasure, a kindling hope, a trope, to force him, at least for a day, to be something he wasn't. To force Tari outside of the black-lined world he'd known forever and be pushed into something scarier. Azi had wanted Tari to be scared, embarrassed, unsure. Even for a second. Even if he looked like the sun itself while he was at it. Azi hated that this was what she called love.

"Azi," he begun nonchalantly, like he'd just noticed her there. Azi knew what was coming. "I can't come for the protest today."

There was a shaky pause at the end, like he wasn't exactly planning on ending the sentence, like he was gauging her reaction to string in the rest of the words.

"Cool." Azi muttered, still not making eye-contact. "Are you, June?"

She looked up at her friend and suddenly realised the implicit reason behind the spread. This was the reason for the banquet. June had sensed a fight coming and had done the only thing she knew to stave it off, press down on its intensity. Azi and Tari never fought over a table of good food. It was a rule they never broke. Nonetheless, the reasons for a row were piling up like a stack of dusty books against the brick walls of her mind. But she didn't care. She had places to be.

"I've to urgently edit this thing Radhika had asked me to. Today's the deadline, Azi. Or I would've been there. I'm sorry."

Azi had to look up. She was surprised at the apology—at the genuineness of it. She wasn't prepared for this. But the apology had invited only her surprise, not understanding.

"That's okay." Azi slowly chewed the last of her food. Tari nodded, a little surprised himself, and looked down at his plate. She continued, "To come for things like these, you'd have to have your head out of your ass for at least long enough to give a shit about something other than yourself. It's cool."

June winced. Tari's jaw stopped chewing, his smile filtering out like loose sand from a clenched fist after her prizewinning shot.

The words had just come out in a train of unthinking ruthlessness. Azi was surprised to see the colour drain out of his cheeks. His eyes kept flitting back and forth like a wound-pendulum: first at Azi, then at June. The bullet had acquired the mark, no doubt about that. So why did Azi feel so goddamn bad about it?

“You think I don’t care about anything other than myself?” Tari pushed his plate away, lightly tapping his fingers on the old tablecloth.

“No.” In her defense, Azi wished she hadn’t said it. His deadlines were just as important as hers was. His time had just as much value as hers. She kept trying to think about anything other than the look on his face.

“Is that what you really think?”

“Yes.” It was too late to backtrack now.

“What about you? You don’t think I care about you?” Tari bent his head, trying to catch at least a sliver of Azi’s pointed glance.

“No.” Azi did not want to say it. But to say, “Yes, Tari. I think you care about and love me more than you care about and love yourself.” would be too goddamn hilarious. It would’ve made Azi crack a smile, or it would’ve made her erupt into an inundation of dinner-table tears.

Tari nodded. Clinically. Like he’d heard from the doctor that his child was dying. Like he’d heard the door thud close on the way out of an apartment he’d never return to. Like he’d just had his girlfriend of five years slam him against a wall and knock the wind out of his system.

He stood up and walked gingerly, reminding Azi of a wounded gazelle. When had he acquired this microscopic limp? When had she stopped noticing him? Azi’s insides sank. She was expecting indignance, anger, slammed doors and scattered grains of rice. But Azi and Tari never fought over a table of good food. This was a rule they never broke.

She looked at June but June refused to return the glance. Azi wanted to crack an apology into half, like a crumbly piece of Cadbury dark chocolate and hand it to the both of them. But when has she ever been good at saying things? When was the last time she had said something she didn’t want to immediately kick herself for? It’s been nearly a decade. When are they going to understand?

Later, in the kitchen, Azi gently nudged June away from the sink. When June cooked, Azi did the dishes. Yet another unspoken rule crafted solely for Azi to save face. To not feel like a massive failure within the confines of her home.

“You shouldn’t have said that.” June mumbled.

“I know. I shouldn’t have. But what else was there to say?”

“If you have nothing nice to say, then maybe shut up.”

Azi looked up at her oldest friend, suddenly surprised by the sharpness of the words. June was never one for reprimanding. Or clean-edged words meant only to cleave. Azi would know. She was head of the department.

Isn’t today the day you both met?” June asked, softer than ever. Silently

compensating for the words she’d shot at Azi a second before.

“Our anniversary? *Is it?*” Azi was too engrossed in trying to remember to flip the fact around that she didn’t know or remember.

“Tari was planning on a little something. A small party, maybe a cake, a few friends, Joe’s mocktails, karaoke with Aman and the gang. He wanted to set it all up for when you returned from the protest. That was what that was about.”

Azi wanted to die. “June.” She swept a hand over her forehead and held it there, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Why’d you think I spent all morning on this?” June said, motioning at the dishes piling the sink. “I thought you’d just let it slide...” June mumbled, letting her head drop weightlessly. “For the food, if not for anything else.”

“You should’ve told me, J. Motioned at me, stamped my foot, anythi—”

“He wanted you to be in the dark about it.” June said, suddenly annoyed at Azi trying to pin the onus on her. “Surprise.”

#

Azi sat down. Suddenly the walk to the protest seemed long and undoable. The meal she’d gorged on just minutes before sat squarely in her stomach and she felt a headache creeping in. She gently slid her head into her hands and allowed a couple stray tears make their way out of her eyes and melt into the nest that was her hair, tracing lines on her temples. She didn’t know this then, but a year from now when Azi thought about Tari, this would be the first frame in the movie; her slouched on that trusty brown couch.

She hated herself for what she said. Hated that she’d forced Tari into five years of skirting her preferences and piecing together new excuses for everything she’d loved and valued and everything he’d wanted to run far away from. Hated that some days she’d wait, her glance following him around the apartment, waiting for him to drop and break some ceramic, to stumble over the trailing ends of a dupatta draped over a chair, to fuck up. So she could finally unveil a torrential rain of all the reasons she hated him. She hated herself for shrugging when he asked how she liked the salwar suit his mother had stitched her, irritated that he knew how much she hated black but had conveniently forgotten to mention that fact to his Ammi. Hated that she’d made Tari feel like he would never understand the strange concoction of lore and home inside of her that constituted her Muslim-ness, had never let him in. Azi hated herself for every time she made him feel selfish for not expressing interest in the things that got her fire burning, for not staying up with him the night he learned that his Uppa had had a stroke. Tari had forgotten how to use his own limbs, had spent an entire night standing by the

dresser, his face carved out of stone, tears a stubborn visitor that refused to leave. Azi had tried to get him to sit, tried to get him to sleep, to drink, to eat, to scream. Anything. But he hadn't budged. She'd finally nodded off, waking up at dawn to a shadow of a man, still standing, still stony, his legs shaking like papery residue, mapped entirely by the green slish-slash of his veins.

But she also thought of all the times she had expectantly told him about all the protests she organised, her activities in the Party, hoping to elicit even half the enthusiasm she'd emitted when she saw his first short film. It wasn't a competition. It never was. But if it was, Tari would lose. This was one among a million instances. This anniversary party was an exception, an unlucky coincidence.

She thought of all the times she'd asked him to come, wordlessly begged him to, all the times she'd stood on tiptoes, slogans thundering in her year, trying to catch a glimpse of black in the rippling sea of men and women, all the times she'd come home to him passed out over his laptop, all the times he'd not even cared enough to come up with an intelligent excuse. She thought of the way he'd shrug and squirm every time she'd excitedly give him some constructive criticism, of all the times he told her that he made her feel small, in a plethora of ways. She thought of the mustard yellow shirt nestled deep within his closet until the colour danced beneath her eyelids. She thought of the time she'd woken up early to pack him lunch for a trip he'd had. And of the incredulity in his eyes—a look she wouldn't forget for a very long time, at the fact that she'd remembered, that she'd cared enough. Like Azi was a human being incapable of caring. Like loving was a foreign concept to her. Like her sticking around for five years was an empty, unmeaning testimony to what she felt for him.

The only reason she didn't let Tari in was because he never stood outside her doors, he never waited. He never even asked. One word and Azi would've melted. One word and Azi would've forgiven everything. But Tari had walked back, to older familiar doors. To doors he knew were open and would stay open. The only reason Azi made Tari feel selfish was for the simple, innocuous reason that he *was*. More selfish than any man Azi had ever known.

She walked to the apartment's little look-over balcony. The view wasn't particularly picturesque. But it opened up a pocket of the city that Azi hadn't been privy to until then. A street filled to the brim with bustling vegetable vendors and old, happy couples sitting on brightly coloured Vespas, a cluster of pony-tailed schoolchildren walking to and from the streets and into their houses, a homeless woman who sat on a worn-out piece of sack, cursing in Tamil to every passerby motioning to her sack for alms. One of these days,

somebody ought to tell her that it was an awful strategy. That maybe she should replace her curses with a bhajan, or a parrot spewing prophecies for the future. But Azi didn't know if that would gain any traction. If Thankamma started delivering predictions about her life five years from now, Azi would probably run for the hills. One of the reasons why she could fall back on her faith was that it offered no such chink in the window of what lay ahead. And Azi would much rather not know.

Tari was peering down too. He didn't seem upset anymore. His eyebrows were knit together, in an expression of concentration Azi had only ever seen him employ while editing videos on his old Macbook. He was looking down at the street too. Azi was reminded of their first time at the apartment together. He was the one who christened the cursing Tamil woman Thankamma and the sweet old Hallmark couple Rosie and Georgekutty, for the sole, simple reason that they looked like a Thankamma, Rosie and Georgekutty. Azi had burst out laughing. She had wanted to ask him what name *she* looked like, what he'd christen her as, had he the chance. But she was too scared of the answer. They'd looked down and simultaneously agreed that a busy street road was better to look at than a scenic tea hill with nothing to laugh or gawk at. That was the first time Azi realised that Tari, like her, depended on his sheer ability to plod his way through life to compensate for any sense of doubt or instability. Beauty was fleeting. But movement never was. Movement kept you occupied and unpredictable in a way magnificence couldn't.

Now, when he sensed her behind him, he stiffened.

"On your shoot tomorrow, include people. I know it's a location shoot, but I don't know, human faces make everything a lot more grounded. People never sympathise with old cars or forest valleys, but the minute other people are involved, things change." She drew in a breath. "You're incredible at what you do and this is just the opinion of someone who doesn't know the first thing about any of this. I know you hate it when I give you advice about your wor—"

"It's good advice. I'll keep that in mind." Tari barely blinked. He shifted his downward gaze back onto the perennially awake street. The vegetable vendor brought in a fresh new case of coconuts. Azi saw one roll onto the road evading the scattered vision of the vendor. The sun was perched upon their heads.

Azi saw a droplet of sweat mark its path down Tari's temples, the hair at his crown glistening. In one glance, Tari was an average-looking man. He had dark eyes nestling beneath two thick paint streaks of eyebrows and a long,

stream-lined nose. Even his smile was small, unassuming. But the first time Azi had met him, he was wearing a long black kurta, a guitar swung around his angular shoulders. When Azi had asked him to play a little something, he had laughed—a broad throaty laugh—and whispered in her ear about how didn't have the first clue. How the guitar was a prop, a college-boy tactic to "get all the ladies."

Azi had laughed too then and wagged her finger. "How do you expect it to work if you let out the secret in the first five minutes?" He had laughed again, and that was all the reply she wanted.

Several years later, the guitar would creep back into another one of their arguments. A furious fist in old plaster, Azi's unforgiving jab about how everything worth knowing about him was fake. A lie. Azi shook her head, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. Five years of giving each other a world of reasons to hate each other. And yet here they were, side by side, looking down at the street, like that first day.

When June first told Azi that Tari was just an alright-looking dude, Azi had been befuddled. She'd thought back to that throaty laughter, the eyes crinkling beneath those bushy eyebrows when he smiled, his tendency to pluck his right earlobe when he was heavy in thought, an unthinking, unconscious gesture that made Azi want to kiss him.

She thought back to the stray lock of hair that flopped onto his forehead that time when he told her that he loved that she cared about things other than herself. How everyone including himself had forgotten how to. She'd thought back to the nape of his neck, his long pianist fingers that he invariably tangled in hers in the fleeting minutes before he slept, of his tendency to gently rest his head on her back when she sat on that red backless stool they'd bought on their first trip together to Ikea.

After all, Tari had chosen her. Without a shadow of a doubt, unthinkingly, with an almost childish guilelessness he had chosen her. Azi thought back to the five years they'd spent in the constant, rotating company of each other and couldn't remember the last time she'd complimented him, the last time she'd told him that she liked how he looked, or what he did. Azi had translated the last five years into a language only she knew the letters to. And for the first time reached the realisation that maybe Tari hadn't known all the kaleidoscopic slivers of glass bangles reflected off of mirrors he'd never seen himself in. Because she had never told him. He had gone his entire life trying to escape the mediocrity he believed he was steeped in, the person he believed himself to be, of feeling small in her presence. And yet he'd chosen her. Despite everything. Azi wanted to cry. Azi wanted to ask herself if she'd

returned the favour. But she already knew the answer.

"Tari, I'm sorry." She swallowed. "June just told me about the part—"

"Why do you keep following me everywhere I go? What do you get out of hurting me so constantly like this? Why don't you just leave?"

Azi shot her glance up, a jolt running through her body.

It was a plaintive query. And Azi could make out the beginnings of a long-surviving sorrow slowly make its way into his voice. The sorrow that sprinkled over every one of his actions and his movements, that rained lightly without anyone ever truly noticing over his smiles and words. The sorrow that dusted over everything Muhammad Tariq ever did, like powdered sugar over a stack of soufflé pancakes was now starting to come out of its hiding. He didn't say it to be malicious. It wasn't even meant to stop Azi in her tracks and do a double take. And that was what stunned her. The fact that the words had tumbled out of his lips, in a motley unpredictable mixture, surprising him just as much as her. The fact that he hadn't sat up several nights trying to decide the exact proportion of poison to inject her with, as she did, him.

Azi didn't say anything. Her large, black eyes acquired a thin film of moisture. She slid closer to Tari, palms sliding over the polished railing like a strand of hair in softening butter and listed her head gently towards his shoulder. He didn't move, still reeling from the venom he had ejected into the air, casually, almost matter-of-factly in the space between them.

#

When she leant in and placed a kiss on the side of his shoulder, a little above the tiny milky map that the polio vaccine had left behind in his skin from a couple decades ago, the act wrecked Tari. For a second, he couldn't breathe. He thought of the impending party that day that had gone to hell. He thought of her the first time he'd seen her in Park Street, shoulder-length black hair swept to one side, a long blue kurta and a line of kohl that forever, inexplicably reminded him of crescent moons. He should have gone to those protests. He should have told her how he felt after Uppa had had his stroke, should have let her in when he had the chance. He wanted to kiss her head as it lay on his shoulder. Five years worth of apologies and not a word would make its way onto his tongue. He swallowed. Surely, there was something he could do to make things right. Surely, there was some track back to the future, before he sat down at June's lunch.

But Azi walked out of the balcony, picked up her posters and markers, slung her tote over her shoulder and left for the protest.

#

Tari went out for a drink. Okay fine, a series of drinks. He had gone to

get drunk. When he returned, long after the sun had set, the apartment was in darkness. After fumbling for his keys, he allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness, squinting a little before he allowed his fingers to run their way across the wall and flip the light switch on.

The dining room table was meticulous, not a single grain of rice visible from their eventful meal. One of these days, they really had to properly sit down and thank June. He went into their room and cocked his head for a second. Something had changed, but he couldn't immediately guess what. He wasn't that drunk. Pleasantly tipsy is all. At first he couldn't pinpoint on why the room looked different. Then, he realized that the orange beanbag was gone. A few books from the V-shaped Ikea bookshelf were also missing. One of their wardrobe doors was ajar. He swung it open. The black remained, everything else had disappeared.

He sensed movement outside. June emerged from her room.

He tilted his head, his confusion translating perfectly into a single glance. June nodded, her eyes red and puffy, sniffing. That was all the answer he needed.

He was suddenly transported to Park Street from five years ago, to the mayhem and the madness of humanity shutting shop and going back home for the night. He thought about the clang of the old tea stall, and the honks that emanated from the adjacent road, from the screaming Director and the kids slapping paint-drenched fingers onto the graffiti wall of the café near the Street. Thought of the bustle of the balcony backstreet that never seemed to cease. He had met her in the midst of a sunset cacophony, in the middle of an Indian summer. And now the silence enveloping the apartment, the room, was threatening to choke him. A silent ending to a million noisy beginnings.

Everything about Azi was poetic. Why would this be any different?

#

The air was crisp and the sun was just beginning to thaw the icy mist in the air. Park Street was more crowded than usual. The two new cafés that opened up were thrumming with business and if Azi strained her ear just enough she could hear the chaiwala clanging his spoon against the steel of his glasses, stirring thick strands of gooey honey in two cups of lemon tea. Azi stood outside, an extended palm in the sun, with the exact change. June was with her, posters tucked beneath her arms, one palm sweatily clasping her phone and the other rummaging through her bag for something. The sun was beginning its dance atop their heads.

"Where's my phone?" June muttered, swiping a hand to shuck away her loose bangs from her clammy forehead.

"What's in your other hand, J?" Azi asked, a half-smile contorting to sip her simmering tea. June looked absent-mindedly and smiled. The air held enough noise for three generations. So Azi was quiet, sipping her tea and looking expectantly at the joining throngs of commotion.

The protest was quickly gaining momentum and in less than half an hour, Park Street had a pulse of its own, throbbing with the erratic movement of the people that had joined. Azi stood on tiptoes to admire the swell of the Street and let the slogans sink into the heat of the air. This was the largest demonstration yet and she felt a rush of pride and purpose turn her ears pink. People were starting to see. They were realising that The CAA- NRC Act was going to lead to categorised bloodshed. The Act was only going to make India's communal rift grow larger and let blood fill the cracks in between.

And not the blood of just anybody. No. The blood of people like her. People with names like hers, dressed like her Ammi, donned in skullcaps and kurtas and exclamations that involved the name of the Lord that her gran prayed to every night, dressed in an immaculate white prayer clothes, a speck of brown on her forehead signifying a lifetime of silent yearnings and clandestine worship, of worn prayer mats and Jumu'ah on Friday.

Azi felt selfish asking people to join for this protest, like she was trying to gain a crowd for her own funeral. But she realised that if not like this, then how? If having a Muslim friend who lived and ate and breathed like them didn't make them look past the disgusting, sordid news that flipped through the corner of her eye every night at 8, then what would? That's why June's here. Azi didn't want to politicize friendships. But she also didn't see how she could escape it. Every moment of Azi's presence in a crowd was as political as could be. So she embraced it, slipped into the system. Again, she'd felt selfish. But she realised that to live apolitically would end in a funeral procession that touched down on her little house in Kerala. And say what you may about that, Azi didn't want to die. Not for the State, not to propel the revolting agenda of a people who didn't know what she was or stood for. So she went on.

The crowd came to a halt. The road ahead was clogged with incoming vehicles. They were waiting for a space to slip through and cross the road. They were teetering on the edge of the footpath, posters in hand and throats already half-sore with all the screaming. That was when she saw Tari standing on the other side. He was dressed in a loose black shirt, ironed and sleeves rolled up. His hair looked longer and curlier than she remembered and his standard black backpack was replaced by a smart black laptop carrier case. It took her a second to realise that he was carrying a protest poster too, a

different one. She couldn't help smiling.

The cars seemed to move in slow-motion. A bright green bus honked impatiently, and Azi caught sight of an elderly woman, who Tari would have called a Rosie fanning herself with her crumpled handkerchief through the window. In the span of a minute, Azi's mind went through several images:

...A much younger Azi and Tari leaning on the gelato counter. He had ordered his standard peanut-butter-and-chocolate cone but she wasn't done deciding. "Don't come crying to me if your experimenting goes wrong." Tari laughed, licking his cone and paying at the counter. Azi stuck her tongue out in response. "How's the Balsamic Fig?" Tari had asked, as they sidled into their seats at the old movie theatre opposite Park Street. Azi scrunched up her face. It tasted like someone had said 'Fig' in the next room. Tari had wordlessly extended his peanut-butter-and-chocolate to her, motioning for her to trade with him. She'd smiled, and sifted her fingers into his. Mohanlal sprang out to a thundering first sequence on the screen but neither of them remembered the first quarter of the movie.

... Azi crying at her mother's place. She folds herself onto the floor, leaning against the orange beanbag, a stack of books and two old suitcases.

...Azi on a bus, suddenly catching a flash of black. She looks up from her seat, not wanting to. But does anyway. It was somebody else.

#

Across the street, Tari remembered setting out two cups in the wee hours of the morning, pouring steaming lemon tea into the cups before realising. He picks up his cup, takes a deep swig and pours the other one down the sink.

...stopping by the café walls, the paint beneath had dried and a fresh new batch of posters adorned the wall. Tari caught sight of one that had Azi written all over it; a call for donation and protest gathering for the stranded in Kashmir. The spring-haired girl who had her arms looped in his smirked audibly. "Delusional, no? Who in their right mind thinks this'll work?" Tari looked at her, felt something bury inside him. *Free at last!* He thought *No more guilt trips every week. God, free at last!* Their romance lasted until the end of that week.

...Editing his location shoot at two in the morning in his bang-up Macbook that she'd gifted him. His eyes half drooping, he senses a movement on the floor next to him. Azi sitting cross-legged on the floor, eyes scrunched up in concentration, designing a poster for a colloquium the next day. A volley of things all at once; a faded maroon kurti, chipped nail polish on toenails, a swab of red paint on her nose and locks of wispy hair escaping the

two-day bun she'd haphazardly pulled together. But only for a second, before he realised that it didn't exist any longer. A trick played by the light from the table-lamp. He shut his Macbook. He needed sleep.

...Azi sitting on the ledge of their old apartment terrace. Her hair shimmying, touching her collarbones one second, and evading them the next. An unruly line of kohl lining both her eyes, smudged slightly at the slender curves her eyeliner made. The sky was a marvellous shade of pink, the sun a resigned orb many years past its prime sinking behind a skyscraper in the distance. Tari walk up, two cups in his hand. He inches towards her, stealthily, an untroubled, carefree smile clinging onto his features. But Azi had looked back before he had a chance to yell, "Boo!" She smiled, beckoning him to come faster and reaches for her cup. He walks up to her, cloaks her in the softness of his black cotton t-shirt. She nestles closer to him, sinking into the warmth of his skin, of the thread-worn comfort of his old t-shirt. He comes in impossibly closer and rests his chin atop her head. She stretches up and plants a kiss on his stubbly cheek. A faint smell of lemon clings to her breath. And jasmine — residue from that morning's perfume. The kohl reminds him of crescent moons more than ever now.

Back on the street, Tari tries to catch her eye. He opens his mouth to say something. But he doesn't. His breath catches in his chest. After years of seeing Azi like a child peering into an antique store after hours, hands cupped, breath fogging up the glass, trying to make out shapes in the dark, after years of being an outsider, he felt like he was seeing her for the first time. From up close. From within. As a reflection of himself. Because in that second sliced into a million, they were the same person. He wanted to say something, but he didn't. No compliment would do her justice. She was glorious. She was breath-taking. She was everything. And words at that moment would flit across the surface like a skipping stone on water. Words would dispel into the air like curled breath in the winter. So he stood there, allowing her to melt into him, watching her smile, not daring to breathe, not daring to take his eyes off her. He wanted that moment to stretch on endlessly like sea-water taffy and be enough. He wanted it to suffice and make up for everything else that stumbles short on the way. He knew it was a dream, he knew that it was a split-second out of all their numbered days together. But for that moment, just for that moment, Tariq, the biggest pessimist the world had ever known, allowed himself to think of nothing outside of that moment, on that window ledge, under burnished pink skies.

#

They would never know this, but standing on either side of that crowded

road, the images of this last memory played in their heads at nearly the exact same moment, triggered by something even they didn't quite remember. For Azi, that was the last time she'd think about that evening out on the balcony. In the years to come, the details of those few transitory moments would slip away like petals of a withered lily from her memory until she'd forget that there was even a flower in the first place.

Tari smiled at her, a smile that was genuine. He cocked his eyebrows at his poster and laughed noiselessly. Azi returned the smile. He looked happy, at peace. She noticed that his eyes no longer scurried restlessly, scanning things and people too quickly anymore, like he'd left a piece of himself behind in the place he last visited, or searching for some place he had yet to go to. The bags under his eyes had lifted and the slow sorrow that had seeped into everything he did in the penultimate years of Azi knowing him had lighted away. The tiny limp in his right leg had vanished. Tari was flourishing and Azi was happy to have made this observation.

The cars slowed down. The slogans rose from the crowd again. They walked towards each other, towards the other side. To occupy the side of the road on which the other had stood only a moment ago. But they wouldn't ever be on the same side of the road again.

Azi thought of that last day by him again, side by side, holding back tears and looking over another street like this, like moody capricious Gods, naming people and prophesying actions. She thought of rolling coconuts on the road, wondered if Thankamma was still on her sack, bartering curses for a square meal, about Rosie and Georgekutty on their yellow Vespa. As they moved, Tari was overcome by the urge to look into her eyes, draw her kohl-lined eyes with his own one last time, to think of crescent moons in the middle of an Indian summer afternoon. But Azi was looking to June, the remnants of an old joke dancing on her lips. She gave him one last smile and then the contact snapped.

They'd reached their respective sides. He looked back, hoping that she would both look and hoping that she would forget to. But she didn't. Two years had passed. His crescent moons had set. She was on the other side now. And he smiled again, watching her lopsided locks shimmy past her neck, kissing her protruding collar bones. She was wearing black. She held up her poster. He held up his. And they walked.

SUMMER'S MANGOES

Josephine Redd

I lay on the bed on my stomach with my arms and legs outstretched, as if I were a ray fish surveying the sea bottom. The room was bright with sunlight, thanks to the half dozen windows which guarded the west and south faces of this three-decade-old bungalow. Alone in a corner sat the tiny figure of my sister, younger than me by a decade, meekly leaning on the desk scribbling gibberish on her palm-sized notebook. I listened to the melody of her pencil singing as it sent shivers down those poorly made sheets until the noise was drowned out by the two-decade-old ceiling fan whose diligence kept the room cool despite the summer heat. My grandparent's home, the place where I was resting, is somewhere my family spends every summer vacation. A house in the countryside with the only notable thing being the four mango trees in its garden. Unlike the previous years, these mango trees have been relentlessly fruiting for the past two months, a vitality I admire and genuinely envy. I have devoured them every day since then to the point of exhaustion. Feeding myself a touch of melancholy, I slowly began drifting to the world of sleep. When dreams seemed to fall in place quite perfectly, a sudden thud of the door sprung me back to my feet.

In an attempt to collect all my worldly thoughts I motioned my hands as if I was pulling back cassette tapes which had unwound themselves. Staring at my ludicrously complicated actions, my mother hastily said, "Come to the garden. Mangoes!"

Visibly confused, I stared back at my mother demanding a sensible explanation. As rapid as wildfire, her tone changed to rage; which I recognized as the terror of a wild beast I ought not to trigger.

Mother's voice was eerily calm when she said, "Your aunt is here. Let's go pluck some mangoes." I nodded at her in acceptance. "Before she takes them all with her."

There is almost always some sizzling drama brewing in this household, and the current stealth mission is just another one of its by-products.

Before I could reply, Mother vanished from the room. My sister's eyebrows furrowed into a perfect V, amazed with childish curiosity about this adult

business. Noticing this, I couldn't help but drag her along to this rendezvous.

I had to circle the house in search of my sandals, and finally found them below the steel-roofed veranda, drenched with yesterday's rain. I hesitatingly slipped my foot into it. I couldn't bear that slippery and slimy sensation, but Mother was waiting, so I dragged my feet in displeasure.

The garden is a space at least thrice as big as the house, yet not many plants adorn its surface. Fruit-bearing trees like the guava and gooseberry occupy the area near the walls along with the mango trees. Between the trees and the house lie small shrubs and irregular patches of weeds. It is a monochrome of green if not for the occasional butterflies and peacocks which visit the garden.

"Come here, here," whispered my mother.

In the middle of the yard, my little sister and I stood bewildered. Under the mid-noon sun, I held my sister's arm in one hand and slowly walked towards the faint sound of mother's voice. There were four mango trees in that corner of the garden but Mother was nowhere to be seen. We took one step for each time we were called.

Gradually Mother's "Here" transformed to "Dumbass, come here." I straightened myself and walked steadily towards the tree farthest from the house where I found my mother standing on one of its branches plucking ripe mangoes. She had stealthily merged with the surrounding to such an extent that the mango tree quite skilfully absorbed her into its space, almost making them one and the same.

I stood there intently watching my mother move cautiously along the branches. Every time she moved, the saggy branches prostrated even more, like a man with a bad back bowing down to show his gratitude. The tree was big enough to embrace and shelter us from the wrath of the sun. I wondered whether I too had been absorbed into the tree's graceful stillness.

As I was spiralling my way around it, with mother urging me to pick quickly, I noticed many dangling stems from where the mangoes were plucked off.

With the keen eyes of a detective, I examined the stalks. The tip- still fresh but with a hint of dryness. I concluded that it had been at least 18-24 hours since harvesting. I named this victim Mr. Stalk No.1. I found a dozen more victims, confirming Mother's suspicion that my grandmother was sending mangoes to the families of her other children except us. Grandmother always liked to show her displeasure in mother's marriage in every form other than a straightforward conversation.

My little sister was now standing under the sun studying the grass, the

heat, the migrating birds, the cracks in the house, never looking at me or Mother or the tree. My legs were numb with tiredness and my feet were sticky in my sandals, so I watched my step as I collected the ripe mangoes Mother handed down and stacked them in a basket. Balancing herself as she stood on the branches, mother clutched another ripe mango and pulled it by its stalk.

"Mr Sixteen..." I counted silently.

The moment the dark green mangoes left its home, the leaves and branches merrily danced and creaked in the air, waving a send-off to their grown-up offspring. I took each mango in my hands and gently placed them in the basket. Mother still moved about the tree as if this were a crime scene and she was a burglar; but as I followed my mother's movements from one tree to the next, all I saw were lush green leaves and the tinier fruits waiting to mature. The sight of the unripened fruit made me recall Mother's words, "before she takes them all with her."

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BreakBread Magazine

**VOLUME 2, ISSUE 3
WINTER 2022**

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