

FICTION | ESSAYS | POETRY | INTERVIEWS | BOOK REVIEWS

The Book Smuggler's Den

May 2020

*Writing
Prompts*

that prompt excellent
writing!

Fiction
that is out
of this
world



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Letter from the Editor

Writing is like a 'lust,' or like 'scratching when you itch.' Writing comes as a result of a very strong impulse, and when it does come, I, for one, must get it out. - C. S. Lewis

Hello readers and writers!

What a crazy couple of months it has been? Unfortunately, these crazy times had an effect on our publication and we missed the deadline for our April (coming soon, we promise!). The show must go on they say and we made an executive decision to move forward and publish the May edition of the Book Smuggler's Den.

I'm not a big fan of watching the news and I have heard plenty of people tell me why that is a bad idea. "You need to be informed," they'll say to me. But I counter with, "Why?" End. Of. Story. This is why I love turning to reading and writing! As a writer myself, I've been paying attention to prompts posted on social media. I feel that in times like these, writing about something totally unrelated is healthy! This is why we loved the pieces submitted to us this month! Pieces far removed from what the news reports, and I am so grateful we received so many enjoy short stories and book recommendations.

The Book Smuggler's Den does everything it can to promote authors, but we are a small publication. We are so grateful for all of those who submitted this month and can't thank you enough for your interest in the magazine.

Without further ado (and drama) let's get to some reading!

Best,

Dani & The Book Smuggler's Den Community

Dani Watkins

Dani Watkins

Editor-In-Chief, Book Smuggler's Den Literary Magazine

Stars and Sky

By Ian Campbell

All the stars are closer tonight than they were last night. Than they were a few minutes ago. Some are bright enough that I can't look directly at them. It's not a trick of the light. Or some atmospheric phenomenon. The stars are closer. Close enough to touch, but I don't reach out. It's not the time for that.

There's no one else outside when this happens, just empty lawns along the block in all directions. No one ever sees them get closer. They only see the stars as they are meant to be, distant and cold and untouchable.

I stand in the yard. Watch the stars get brighter until I need to cover my eyes with my hand. There is the sense of growing heat on my skin, as though I were standing in the midday sun—but that might be my imagination, so I ignore it. I can see light around my fingers, and I wonder what I must look like. Me standing there, covering my face, head towards the sky. Someone staring from their living room window and shaking their head as if in confirmation that I am, in fact, as weird as they thought. Maybe more than they thought.

The light is gone and there is only dark at the edges of my hand. The drone of streetlights warming up. Suburban wildlife moving in the shadows of SUVs and uniformly shaped hedges. In the air, dinner smells mingle like the open-air market we visited in some country when I was a boy. A rare trip where we felt a family, having only each other in a place of the exotic and the unknown.

When I uncover my eyes, the stars are where they are supposed to be in the sky. I don't know enough about astronomy to know for sure if they are. I take it on faith that they are and turn back towards the house. The house sits on a corner lot. It's not as nice as some of the others on the block, but the lawn spreads out like a field, bigger than the others around it. Room enough to run for a catch. Not that I've ever done that. The lawn is the only thing that distinguishes the house from all the others on the block. Most are bigger and nicer, but that doesn't bug me.

I lay on the grass. Summer days that pink my skin. The sun arching across the sky, the stars dim behind it. Always are there stars if you know where to look. Deeper in the blackness of space than the star at the center of our own galaxy. When I lay there, the grass pokes at my skin through my clothes. The urge to itch is intense, makes me squirm, but I stop myself from scratching. Let the feeling overwhelm until I can barely breathe or think. Where the sensation is everything. To the point I can no longer hold off and then I lose control. My nails drag across my skin until it's red, close to bleeding, until it hurts, and the feeling disappears.

It's greener in front of my house. The others around us are forever under siege by concrete. This is the only home I've ever known. One that I've explored countless times. Until I could close my eyes and tell you of every corner, crack, and creak of the whole.

I was lost once. Lost to my mother and father, though I heard them call for me, heard the panic in their voices as my name carried out over the yard and into the street, mixed with the voices of neighbors who came out to see what was wrong. Then I heard my name in a half-dozen voices. A chorus calling out to me. And still I did not come.

A boy from down the street—he moved away years ago—saw my feet sticking out from behind a bush and called out. I remember the anger on my father’s face and how it seemed to spread onto the faces of the others as they looked at me. As though his anger gave them license to feel the same. He carried me into the house, away from everyone except my mother, who followed along behind him, saying nothing. Her eyes on the ground, though I stared at her, hoping she would feel me. My mind willing her to look at me, but her head stayed down until she moved away from us to do something in the kitchen. The sounds of pots being moved around as my father carried me upstairs, his muscles tense. Where it hurt but was as close to a hug as I would ever get, both love and punishment. So that his hands would sting less later, only the words he yelled causing any real pain. The tone sharper than any hit that night.

It bugs my father, the faults of our home, though I have never asked him about it. But I’ve seen the way he looks at it. The way he stares at it when he gets home, before he goes inside. As though he might stay in the car and drive away. Letting the disappointment fade in the rearview as he fumbles through the radio stations, whistling a song that isn’t playing. Instead he pulls the keys out of the ignition and comes inside, his eyes flicking to the sides with each step as though an escape might present itself. It never does, and I always hear the door open, the weight of him taking hold of the house like a second gravity.

Like our house, I disappoint my father all the time. Our dog, sweet and innocent and old, disappoints him, too. We often share in the disappointment together, standing side-by-side as my father rattles on and on about the two of us. My mother standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Sometimes she nods, but I don’t think she agrees with him. She usually finds me later to place her hand on my shoulder and to tell me that I’m not a disappointment. Always in a whisper and her eyes flit about as though she expects him to jump out from behind a corner, face full of rage. The look of someone betrayed come to seek revenge. Even when we can hear him laugh at something on the television elsewhere in the house, she whispers. When she’s done, she always says, “Don’t tell him.” Her voice trailing off.

She never finishes the thought. What I shouldn’t tell him. I know how it ends and she knows that I know so it’s enough to keep her from saying the whole of the thing. That she doesn’t ever want me to tell him that she talks to me after. As if saying it aloud would make it hurt less for me. My mother can’t shield me from the pain of knowing that she would rather I feel like a disappointment in front of my father than to let him know that she secretly talks to me afterwards to tell me I am not.

Tonight, I stand outside the house and want the bright lights to come back. The stars to get closer. Maybe I can reach out and finally take hold of them. Maybe it’s time. Half of me imagines the things from beyond that await me if I did touch the stars. The other half of me doesn’t care if the answer is simply that I burn up in the burst of radiation. Even that would be

better than to walk back into the house. To turn my back on the stars. But I do walk inside. The air stuffy and thick around me. My father sits at a chair in the kitchen. There are papers spread out on the table, a cigarette burning on a plate next to him. By the sink, my mother is drying the dishes with a yellow towel, frayed at the edges but still the color of the sun.

She's wearing an apron to keep the water from splashing onto her dress, which blossoms with different flowers in an endless loop around her waist and legs. I remember, years ago, when she laid the pattern down on the table and I moved my fingers over the black spaces between the flowers, the material soft on the tips of my skin. I tried to go from one side to the other without touching any of them. The type of game that comes easy when you're a child. I would return my finger to the beginning of the print if I touched a flower, sometimes even if I wasn't sure I had touched one. It felt wrong to complete the journey if I wasn't sure. It felt like cheating. Eventually, she brushed my hand away and told me to go play somewhere else. She spent the next several evenings making the dress. A smile on her face the whole time.

My father was different on those nights. He was nicer, even to the dog. He would look up from the tv and ask me how it was looking, and I would go and look and then give him a detailed report. As I spoke, he listened and nodded and sometimes closed his eyes as if trying to imagine it. Sometimes he would stop and ask me a question about it, as if gain more clarity of the picture in his mind. He would always end the exchange by telling us that he loved "this" and would spread his arms wide, sweeping them over us. Even over the dog on the floor, his eyes watching the movements from between his paws. My father would wink at me and then go back to the television. When she finished the dress, I had the urge to rip it in half. To have her start again. To keep going those moments when things seemed different. When things were happier and there lived in the house a hope. The look on her face as she held it up, the flowers cast in alternating hues of light and shadow from the bright bulb of the lamp by the sewing machine, stopped me. Tonight wasn't the first night the stars got closer. They've come closer before. Many times before. Five years ago, I was eleven and looking out of my bedroom window, the town lights like their own constellations, and saw the stars blink off. They were there one moment, but then they were gone the next. Only deep darkness remained. Almost black, except for the flare coming from the lights of the town below. And then they were back, in the space of a few heartbeats. But they were closer, much closer. The surprise of this caused me to step back and I tripped on my feet.

My head missed the dresser, but my back hit the floor with all my weight, and I felt the wind squeezed out of me. I cried out when I got my breath back, my voice high and choked. By the time my father opened the door, light spilling in from behind him bright enough to hurt my eyes, the stars were back to where they always were. After he saw that I was okay, aside from the tears, he stared at me, his face in shadow. He didn't say I was a disappointment then. He didn't have to. His silence was enough, and then he walked away without a word. I listened to his steps down the hall. Watched his shadow move in front of the light until it was gone. My mother, a small voice that felt a universe way, asked him if I was okay. There was no reply and then television noise drifted over the house. I moved over to the window, but the stars remained where they were, and I went to bed with the sound of my father's laughter trailing in through the cracked door.

Sometime, in the middle of the night, I felt a weight at the foot of my bed. Half of my brain was still dreaming. Still thinking of the stars. My mother's voice in the dark. She loved me. Her hand resting on my foot, which was covered by the thick blanket. The touch felt removed from me. The sensation lessened by more than just the material between us. It didn't comfort me the way I knew it should and I pretended to be asleep until she finally stood up and left. I looked out the window when I was sure she was gone, the stars high in the night sky, billions of miles away. Out of reach. No longer close.

That was the first time I noticed the stars, but there were more nights. Many more. Times when they would blink off, as on that first night, but the effect became less jarring each time. Sometimes they would appear as if they were further away. There were fewer stars in the sky in those moments. This would happen, and I would have time to think the world had shrunk. When I looked up at the moon, though, it was the same size as it had always been, so I would discard the idea. Later, when I wasn't thinking about it, I would find something was smaller than it was before. A sock that I had to throw away because it barely came to my arch. The table, by the front door, that began to tilt when you put your keys on it. One of its four legs now slightly smaller than the others. There was the time I felt a sting on my arm as I let it rest on the desk in my room. Upon inspecting the spot of pain, I saw a tiny, pink eraser sticking out of my skin. The number two etched on the side of the pencil, now the size of a penny, when I pulled it out. Small drops of blood I had to wipe away. I was convinced the dog was slightly smaller, but I couldn't ask, and he couldn't tell me anyway. Something in his eyes, when we would stare at each other, him at the foot of my bed resting his face between his front paws, me sitting against the headboard. We carried that secret together. Holding it with someone else made me feel better. I felt less alone. The secret findings an array of scattered stars but still able to make something whole. A constellation. An understanding that the universe was doing something I didn't understand.

I wondered if others saw it. I carried that small sock and its pair to school, not wanting to leave it at home to be found among my things. The questions that might come. Misunderstandings that would have to be dealt with. Pain I didn't want. I walked through the halls of the school with the sock in my backpack like I was hiding contraband. Eyes on me as I moved past the other kids, ones that hardly talked to me, looks that lingered as though they knew.

In the middle of class, I asked to use the restroom and walked out, the teacher barely bothering to write the slip before I moved into the empty hallway. White like some alien landscape incapable of sustaining life upon its surface. Classrooms like distant worlds seen through shatter-proof glass windows. I felt the pull of gravity as I passed each one, almost drawn into their orbit. Occasionally, someone looked up and our eyes met before they flicked away, and I glanced off and towards the next class and then the next. My steps carrying me zigzag until I reached the bathroom.

I pulled the socks out and held them up to the light coming from the frosted glass blocking off the world outside. Something in seeing them in contrast, their different sizes, helped me to feel not alone and not crazy. A question I asked myself always after the stars left. When I was by myself, once again. Just another speck of dust traveling the length of galaxies before eventually

being annihilated by the heat of some immense star whose gravity is impossible to escape. Its pull enough to direct the flow of planets. Of the universe itself. Where oblivion is the only thing that matters. The only thing that's inevitable in the cosmic dance. The socks, proof of what only I could see, held firm within my hands so that I no longer wanted to throw them away.

A boy entered, as I held them up to the light, and looked at me. Someone from class. A boy who called me weird when I walked by him. His anger like the heat of radiation, though I had never spoken a word to him. He followed me. The bathroom too far away for that not to be the case. He glanced at the socks and asked if I was about to fuck them. His hit came fast, and I almost threw up, right on him, but only spittle came, and it splatted on the ground as I worked for air. He came at me again as I felt close to passing out and I held the socks towards him as though that would stop him. Instead he grabbed them and shoved them into my mouth, and I wished the stars were there, but it was just he and I and then he was gone, and then it was just me. The taste of salt and iron in my mouth as I pulled the socks out and wiped the tears from my eyes. And then I threw them away and washed my face off in the sink. I lifted my shirt, the bruise already forming. It matched the ones already there.

Even the stars aren't always there when I need them.

I am standing in front of my house now. All the lights inside are off. I don't know how I got here. The stars were closer again, I remember that. It hadn't happened for a long while. A part of me thought it would never happen again. Like an old friend I worried had forgotten about me. Seeing them filled me with excitement. Then there were papers on the table, dishes drying on the rack. I was excited, anxious, couldn't stay still. I never told them about the stars before. I was always just a disappointment, so I thought it wasn't worth sharing. Not until tonight. The stars were close again and I needed my parents to know. But they didn't get excited when I told them about the stars. They just looked at me, neither speaking a word until my father stood up. He towered over me, though I was sure I was already taller than him. He took my arm, the first time he had touched me in some time, and his grip was strong, as though it would never let go. It hurt, and the pain grew as his hand turned white, his nails starting to dig into my skin, but only just so. Only enough to hurt, but not enough to leave anything in such a visible spot. That was always the trick. As he held my arm, I thought to hug him but then the look on his face told me what it always told me, and I knew they needed to see the stars for themselves. That I wasn't enough for them. That my truth, could never be their truth. Not until they saw the stars with their own eyes. And then the stars were there with me. With us. In the house. No longer in the sky, in space, where they belonged. My parents saw them get closer and brighter and we burned together as a family. I didn't see disappointment in his eyes anymore. And my mother grew taller and bigger as she took me in her arms. Showed my father that she did not think I was a disappointment. And the dog loped around, sniffing the air, and wagging its tail, moving as if he were young again. Now, I'm on the grass. Alone. The stars back in the sky. I want to stay here, on the lawn, the moisture clinging to my pants. To wait for the stars to get closer in the sky. Maybe when they come again, I can go with them. So that I don't have to go back inside to the darkened house.

The pair on the kitchen floor, their arms outspread.

I touched her cooling face, placed my hand upon it as I laid down next to her. I couldn't look into her eyes, unblinking and greying. They were no longer her eyes. No longer her skin I touched. She was gone, like the stars. Maybe with the stars. I stood up and my father was below me. He never seemed so small as when I stood over him. The tiles of the floor underneath his body faded and worn. Making him even smaller. I felt scared at this change. At how quickly he switched from something I feared to something so inconsequential. Space dust. In his lighter hair, I saw the years that had passed. That time reflected even in the wrinkles of my own hands as I held them out above him—splashes of red I washed off after—as though readying a prayer. But I spoke no words and I turned and walked towards the door, taking care to step over the old dog, no longer tired and in pain. At rest upon the deep, frayed carpet. I left the door open as I moved outside, my eyes already on the stars, ready to touch them.

I lay upon the grass with the world pressing upwards against me. As if offering me to the sky. Night air, cold on my face, as gravity lets go of me and I float towards the upper reaches of the atmosphere and into space. Where the stars wait for me.

Dawn in Dusttown

By McKinnon

It ate part of the town yesterday, and when Mom and Dad caught me listening to them whisper about it late at night, Dad sat me down and told me that, “I was not— under any circumstances— going to go back there, do you understand, young lady? Because it’s big and dangerous and scary and even the adults don’t know what it is.”

Dad said I would get it “so bad” if I ever went back there, but of course I had to go. The first time I went was with Susan Cassidy, and this is what we saw:

The prairie was all dusted dry, that’s the only way I can explain it: Ray’s old gas station was gone and so was Ray I guess, but then, so was the grocery store and the thrift shop and the sidewalk and even the road, and if that wasn’t weird enough, the only thing that was left of that part of town were the grasses, only, way too clean, shiny like I’d never seen them before, glowing, as if the buildings we’d built over them had never been there at all. I thought that was the weirdest thing I’d ever seen, but things got even weirder after that.

There are no hills here.

You’d know that if you lived where I live, but down the street from Susie’s (if you know where to go) there’s an old dusty path that runs out from behind the dollar store, and eventually, it leads up to this thing we call a hill. It’s kind of a little rise that looks over the part of town where the thing landed the first time, and that’s where it landed again, I guess, the morning after Susie and I sat on the hill and looked over the polished no-space where a good stretch of our town used to be: now with no gas station, no thrift store, no road, no nothin’.

We were only there for a minute or two because Susie got scared and kept saying: “I dunno, Kathy. I don’t like this, I don’t like it one bit. What if our parents find out? What if it comes back and it storms again? What if— This is weird, Kathy. weird, weird, weird what if—” And eventually, I had to leave just shut Susie up, and I was too loud sneaking back home and Dad caught me and grounded me for a week right there in the living room. After that, he called up Susie’s mom and grounded her too, and I went straight upstairs with no dinner to “think about what I’d done.”

Upstairs, all I got to thinking about was that without Susie Cassidy, I would’ve stayed looking at that strip of vanished town forever, that snipped-off bit of normal, with the polished golden grasses growing tall and even on a perfect line where the street ended, as clean as if someone had sliced off the edge of town with a razor.

Upstairs, I got to thinking that I *wanted* to see the monster come back. Call me crazy, but I had to know how it did it, and in school I’d heard the boys talking and found out that the only one who’s maybe seen it for real is Robbie Rickshaw. Robbie scares me more than the monster, first

cause he's a boy and next cause he's Robbie Rickshaw, but if Dad hadn't grounded me right after

I went up the hill with Susie, I'd have gone to see him sooner.

If any of the stories about Robbie are true, he's the only person in this town crazy enough to go chasing after monsters. It's something in his blood I guess, and maybe when the world gets crazy, it's safer to be with crazy people than normal ones.

That, and Robbie's been talking about this monster for years. So after I was sure that Mom and Dad were asleep, I put on my adventure jacket and my warmest socks and I climbed out the window and down the tree and onto the road, already trusting without ever having met, our town's notorious wildboy, Robert B. Rickshaw.

I stood there for a small forever throwing stones at his window before he snuck up behind me, and when I spun around I was so scared, more scared than I'd been of that people-less, houseless-less, town-less stretch of clean field that I'd seen on the hill with Susie. More scared than I was scared of the monster that had eaten part of our town.

Susie says that Robbie's weird, weird and mean and strange and different. She says he's no good, and that when he came to town, familyless and friendless and alone, everyone started out curious and came away scared, because Robbie's a weird boy and because he's a different color and because for a long time he couldn't stop talking about monsters and crazy, horrible things. From what I know about him from school, Robbie's bad reputation raised him up pretty quick, and he started to act out more as an outcast, and whenever you heard about a kid spray painting walls or shooting out road signs or hitting mailboxes with baseball bats that kid was always Robbie even if it wasn't, and all of that must've made him worse. But when I met Robbie Rickshaw outside of the orphanage, he didn't look particularly mean or aggressive or strange. He looked more confused than anything. He looked like he was already dressed for adventure, with the right clothes and the right supplies and everything, and that was weird because I'd just been throwing pebbles at what I thought was his window, trying to wake him up.

I guess it was as strange for Robbie to have a girl visiting him in the middle of the night as it was for me to be there, and it must have been even stranger that that girl was me: little, loopy, bookish Kathy Mathers, who doesn't talk much to boys in general, let alone boys like Robbie Rickshaw.

So, Robbie, standing there in the cold in his dirty jacket and his shredded shoes, who'd probably been watching me try to get his attention for ten minutes, could say nothing except:

“What do *you* want?”

And me, suddenly conscious of my nicer jacket and nicer shoes and general girlishness, could say nothing except:

“Susi... people say that you've seen it.”

He didn't like that.

Robbie turned around and probably would've walked down the street if I hadn't grabbed his coat and kind of pulled him around and said: "wait, wait. Robbie, please. Don't go."

Something in the way I said that stopped him.

Maybe I did something that only boys can understand, because Robbie didn't walk away and I don't know why. He just stood there looking at me with this strange mix of curiosity and interest and maybe even fear, and it got to the point when I felt like I needed to say something, so I said: "Look— they say that you've seen it and that you know where it lives, and maybe no one believes you but I believe you, and I want to go there and I want to go now." Robbie Rickshaw spat on the ground.

"And why should I take *you*, Kooky Kathy Bookworm? What's in it for me?" he asked, using the nickname that used to make me cry in the school bathroom before I got too big to care about bullies.

In the street I didn't cry. I looked him right in his dusty face.

"Nothing. I've got no food and no lunch money or nothin', but I'll be your friend. Mom says that boys like you don't have any friends and I think that's sad. So, I'll be your friend, Robbie Rickshaw, and I'll tell Susie Cassidy not to say nasty things about you. And how's that?"

I felt stupid as soon as I said it, and I thought he was gonna spit on my shoes or hit me right there on the sidewalk on the wrong side of town. But to my surprise, tough and dirty Robbie Rickshaw didn't spit or laugh or scoff or even sneer. He only said:

"You'll regret it, bein' my friend," and he stared into the sidewalk cracks.

"Prove it," I said, with my hands on my hips and my feet set like Mom, and the two of us looked into each other's eyes until he turned and walked down the yellow line on the road.

I knew then that it was alright if I followed him, and I did, and maybe Robbie was right and I was better off not being his friend, better off staying home and vanishing with Mom and Dad and our world, but that's not what happened.

What happened is I went out with Robbie Rickshaw and we saw things no one should see, and afterward, we lived to tell the tale.

He led me out of town on paths I'd never seen before and beyond, to places that were strange but still familiar, still populated with the same thick, tall, waving gold grasses of home, except less touched by the soot of the city.

Those grasses grew straight and high overhead, and with each step through the wilderness, I trusted Robbie Rickshaw not to do something awful to me like the things men did to girls in tales.

Though, already, he didn't seem like that type of boy.

Robbie hardly talked, didn't smile, and walked with a quiet but reserved roguishness that didn't fit the wildboy stories I'd heard about him, and around the time we saw the mountain, I began to wonder if any of the things I'd heard about Robbie Rickshaw were actually true.

He pointed to the bluish mass of skyline in the distance, barely visible at night and easily taller than anything I'd ever seen or imagined.

"We have to go up there," he said.

"Has that mountain always been there?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but you can't see it from town, and your people never go outside of town because they're either too scared or too dumb."

"Mom and Dad aren't dumb," I said, and he replied, real slow:

"Yeah. They are," and I dropped it, with both of us walking through what must have been miles of grassland until we stepped on something I'd never walked on before.

It was hard: shiny and smooth and dustless, what I guess people mean when they talk about stone, or maybe it was something else, but it had this smell: a smell so strong and unreal that it made my eyes water and my nose burn.

It was acrid, too-clean, something near-citric and toxic and it hurt.

"Why do we have to go *here*?" I asked, doing my best to cover my crying eyes with my sleeve. "Because you asked me to take you and because these stinking flats are the only place it doesn't go. I hate it here too, but this place is flat and weird and grassless until the... mountain and it won't go there. It only feeds on the towns in the prairie."

I thought about that while we trudged along, then: "So... so you do think it'll come back?"

"I think worse," he said, "I think it'll come back in the morning after dawn. I think it'll do what it does, and I think that this time there'll be nothing left: no town, no people, no nothin."

"Then why don't you do something?" I snapped, "why don't you tell the police or the principal or the people in the orphanage?"

"Because they beat me," he said, "and because I hate it here. I hate this stupid town and I hate these stupid people and I hope it does come back. I hope it comes back just like I always said it would, and I hope it wipes this stupid place off the face of the earth."

“You don’t mean that,” I said, but Robbie didn’t reply, and I didn’t ask him any more questions, because I knew he was serious about those awful things that he said, and neither of us spoke another word until we came to the foot of the mountain.

While blue at a distance it was black up close, sheer, slick, and easily the tallest thing I’d ever seen. From atop the first ridge we could see a vast stretch of the flat-flat grassland that I used to think was the whole world, and as we clambered and scrambled up that mountain, huffing and puffing, I couldn’t help but look over it all and see how big the world actually was and how small we were in comparison.

We didn’t talk until we’d been climbing for what must have been hours, and then I asked Robbie the question that had been nagging me most of the night. It was:

“Why me? If you hate everyone and everything then why take me with you? Why not run away by yourself and never come back?”

“I tried,” he said.

“What?”

“I tried,” he shrugged. “I tried to run away and save myself, but when I packed up and started off you were there throwing rocks at my window. I sat and watched you in the cold by the dumpsters, and after awhile I figured that I didn’t hate you as much as the others.”

I couldn’t help laughing just a little. “I don’t hate you either,” I said, and we looked at each other and then looked away, over the cold grassland cast under purple night light.

“So, will we be able to see the monster when the sun comes up?” I asked.

“Sure,” said Robbie. “We’re standing on it.”

And, seeing the look on my face, Robbie Rickshaw smiled a smile that would melt the heart of a snake.

Dawn came all at once, like always: first there was no light and then it was all there, illuminating the whole world from somewhere far above.

I could see the grassland, see the hard, shining, stinking flats around it. I could even see up and up the face of the silent, sleeping beast, all the way up to where it faded into places that my eyes weren’t meant to see. We couldn’t climb any higher. There weren’t any more ledges. I plucked up the courage to whisper:

“How do you know it won’t eat us? How do you know it won’t move?”

Robbie shook his head.

“It can’t move by itself. That’s all I know. If it’s anything like last time, it won’t move until the second monster gets here.”

I gulped.

“S-second... monster?”

“I don’t know what to call it,” Robbie said, “call it God if you want to, but don’t ask me what it is, ‘cause I can’t tell you.”

“And that’s what you saw last time?”

“Yeah,” he said, and for the first time since we started off to the mountain Robbie Rickshaw looked truly sad, trailing off to a choked whisper: “last time.”

And that was when I finally put it all together: how Robbie came to town familyless, how he couldn’t stop talking about monsters.

“It... where you came from. It— it ate your town didn’t it? Ate your family?”

He nodded, head down, one tear cutting through the grime on his cheeks:

“Nothin’... nothin’ left. All of them.”

I reached out and held his hand for a long time. It was warm, and while I held it I couldn’t help thinking about my own family, couldn’t help imagining that just now Mom and Dad must be waking up in town and wondering where I was: knocking on my door, checking my bed, calling the neighbors, yelling my name, crying and staring their day in a frenzy, knowing exactly where I’d gone without being able to follow, and here I was overlooking it all, with nothing left to do but hold Wild Robbie Rickshaw’s hand because I needed to know.

I needed to see it happen.

And I did.

In about an hour the monster woke up, and Robbie and I watched it gobble up the whole town. The second thing arrived with seven thunderous earthquake-footsteps that shook the world and almost split my head in half. Looking up, I couldn’t see all of what it was. It stretched up and up and up into heaven, the monster that only Robbie had seen, and before I shielded my eyes from it

I knew he was right.

It was God, and God was vengeful.

High up in the clouds, he throttled the top of our mountain with a hand as big as a planet, and with us still perched on the ledge far below, he slid the mountainous mass of monster over the stinking flats until it was well on the way to our town.

There was a tumultuous, atomic rumbling noise, an ear-splitting, head-crunching, deafening roar, and in a second, the monster slid across the miles of grassland that had taken us all night to cross with impossible, sickening ease.

Under us, it began to storm.

Such a storm I'd never seen. It was the godly, horrible, thunderous tumult of the rapture. Riding on the flat outcrop of the mountain, we moved too fast to see it all. One second we weren't there and the next second we were, sliding over our town as if we rode on a cloud. It all happened so fast that I don't think I could see everything even if I wanted to.

I remember looking down and watching a hundred terrible tornadoes obliterate everything I'd ever known: public library shredded to pieces, the roads blown to dust, cars gone, hospital sucked to heaven, Susie's parents house torn to splinters and eradicated, and under all of it, nothing left but pure and uniform golden grasses.

Over the roar of His thunderous anger, I couldn't even hear their screams. I couldn't hear anything until it was over and the storms subsided. There was a sickening lurch in my stomach as the monster retreated back to the edge of creation, and I couldn't move until Robbie grabbed me and yelled "JUMP!"

I didn't have time to argue.

He grabbed my hand and we jumped, fell floating down to earth while God and his monster left us holding each other on the floor of a world made clean.

I'm not sure how long we laid there, but I remember waking up to a pure and golden world with not even a speck of dust to be found.

It was heaven: not even the memory of our people remained. We were speechless for a while, your father and I, but eventually life moved on, and pretty soon we got to building the town you see around you today, complete with road signs and supermarkets and the home where we raised you.

Robbie says that God will bring his monster around again, and he's lived through it twice, so I thought I'd tell you both this story as soon as you were old enough to understand what it means. Your father thinks that when the monster comes back we'll all run away together, but he knows as well as I do that we can't do that.

Robbie and I are too old now.

We'll stay with the home we built and vanish like my family did, but you Adam, and you Eve, well— you're both about as old as I was when I ran away with your father, and maybe it's your destiny to start it all over again.

But who knows?

Between the four of us, I think we're smart enough to get you out of here next time the rapture comes. As someone who's seen Him, I can tell you that God ain't built in our image, kids: he's got hands big as planets and continents for feet, a squishy body that goes up and up and up. As dust, we can't claim to understand His will. But know this: someday, God'll want his grassland heavenly clean again, and when he does, we'll wait for him and his monster with our heads held high and our eyes unguarded, 'cause God must know as well as I do that dust settles in every corner of creation, and try as he might, he can't vacuum us all.

The One Who Leaves

By Melissa Mark

The discontent of my parents' house is palpable, yet everyone stays.

My dreams of getting an out-of-state scholarship were thwarted by my teenage rebellion, so I moved to Tucson to attend U of A with my best friend. Both of us worked to pay the rent on a crappy off-campus apartment, a sagging and faded building in front of an alley littered with stray cats. We fed them and wondered why they swarmed our front porch.

The discontent followed me. I moved back in with my parents after a year, the loneliness and homesickness a humiliating betrayal to my resolve to show them all how I could escape. Defeated, I commuted back and forth to ASU, dodging the hawking eye of my mother when I dared to eat a late-night snack in the kitchen. My hunger was insatiable, something that carrots and celery could not satisfy, no matter how hard I tried. "Yes, Mom, I know that tortilla chips are poison." She nestled closely with my thin sister to live vicariously in her popular high school clique. My brother suffered panic attacks and pretended to attend his community college classes. My dad mellowed with age, fading into the background with ESPN on. Miserable, my finances dictated that I live there for another year until I could graduate and get a real job.

While finishing my degree, I worked part-time at a nearby gym. My manager wanted to date me, and although I felt nothing more than friendship toward him, I needed a friend. Topped off by the notion that someone older and world-wise wanted to be with me, I took the leap. He lived in rundown house on the other side of town with peeling paint and dying shrubbery, but I welcomed the escape.

My mother's disapproval was vehement: "he's too old for you; he's such a loser", and this only strengthened my determination. My brother and dad wrapped up in their world of sports, my sister and mom in their sugary high school bubble...there was no room for me. I packed my clothes, my journals, and asked my mom if I could take my old, white dresser, the one that stood in the corner of my bedroom since I was four.

"No. We need it here."

Two years slugged on, peppered with my college graduation and my first 'real' job in behavioral health. I was busy applying a shiny coat of indifference to my appearance, trying on different looks that seemed adult-like. I tried on being in love with my boyfriend. I wore the delusion that he would one day suddenly grow the motivation to help me clean or take care of the yard. Go back to school and settle into a career. Deep down, I knew I was fooling myself, but where else would I go? Who else wanted to be with me? I was resigned to my life, the depression washing over me in waves, but it was what I knew. Why did I deserve to be happy? I'm not special. Everyone I know hates their job, their life.

An invitation to my friend's wedding in Texas shifted my path into what I later believed to be divine intervention. A whisper of impending change fluttered within me as I packed my suitcase. Suddenly, I felt sentimental and reluctant to leave. I hugged my boyfriend and left with three of my girlfriends to be bridesmaids, to partake in the festivities of young love. Once I crossed the state lines, I discovered that I'd forgotten to pack my phone charger.

I met him in a bar. I was drinking rum and diet coke out of a phallic straw at the bachelorette party table. His dark eyes and confidence drew me in, his persistence and humor kept me there. My youth came tumbling out of my carefully crafted pseudo-adult shell. I couldn't believe that he chose me, liked me, wanted to get to know me. Me, still carrying 8 of the extra fifteen pounds in my eyes (and my mother's) even after my latest crash diet. He called me later and I giggled, agreeing to meet him at my hotel after my friends were asleep. We talked all night at the pool, dipping our toes into the coolness, his syrupy voice lulling me in and surprising me with humor so sharp and safe all at once. His interest was intoxicating.

All the while, my phone somehow stayed charged enough to talk several times a day and plan our meetups. His call, his draw, a lure that led me to leave the wedding early to be with him. Uncharacteristic of me...but it felt so good to not be like me.

"When can I see you again?" The urgency pulled at my heart as we made plans that promised a future. We told each other it was a connection that geographical distance could not touch.

Divinely orchestrated. Magical. A miracle.

Whatever it was, I bowed in gratitude. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, simply living off the energetic pulse of our chemistry. For first time, I felt alive, electric, in love, as though I was living in someone else's body. Was this what happiness felt like?

Guilt sickened my stomach once the plane landed. The hot dry air of my desert home redirected me back to reality, to what I had to do. Move out. Break up. Leave. I tasted freedom and life on the other side, and I longed to dance in it again, to live in it.

I confided my dalliance to my mother and sister as we walked to the drugstore to develop the wedding film. Their eyes lit up and approval shone through as they excitedly lapped up the details. My mother oohed and ahed over my "tiny little waist" and "beautiful cheekbones", a byproduct of my new long-distance love diet. Her attention and love came with strings, but to be blanketed in such warmth after her perpetual freeze out was irresistible to me.

"Now you can come back home," my mother told me. "I'll buy you a plane ticket to visit him." He couldn't watch me leave, he said, so he went out, presumably to a bar. My dad and brother loaded up my desk, my clothes, the few pictures I'd bought in a half-hearted attempt to brighten the walls. I purposely left the photographs behind, the few photo albums I'd made of the two of us. A bit of sadness came later, the knowledge that I'd hurt him, but I never missed him.

My heart belonged in Texas.

My anger was layered and hidden, lurking deep in my psyche where the light didn't touch. I never knew it was inside me, most likely because bulimia helped me to drown it and spew it out efficiently. It works until it doesn't.

My sister was always the angry one, I was the "nice" one, my internal dialogue self-loathing and depressed. Two sides of the same coin, not unlike anorexia and bulimia. I beat myself up for not being able to be more on the anorexic side of things, as it seemed cleaner, more regimented and respectable. Bulimia was messy and represented a loss of control and an insatiable appetite that I hid in shame. I was only able to restrict for long periods of time without bingeing when I was taking my Metabolife diet pills.

Never a smoker unless I paired cigarettes with alcohol, my social smoking status shifted when I was high on my diet pills. The glorious feeling of not being hungry, not being even remotely interested in food, so powerful and pure in my pursuit. Control was restored, there was not one extra ounce of fat on my body. My compulsivity manifested in my drive to constantly exercise and smoke, work out and then indulge in the feeling of a calorie-free release. I began smoking in my car on the way to work, even though I previously deemed my sister and friends gross for smoking cigarettes in the morning.

Dizzy on legal amphetamine, I was as close to carefree as I'd ever been, high with the knowledge that I hadn't eaten in days. My diet of cigarettes, Kellan, and wine at night kept me fed just fine, thank you very much. Today I brought half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to work on my mother's insistence, which made me laugh since she had basically tried to eliminate all fat and calories from my diet since I was six years old.

The freeway in the morning took on a sunlit glow, filling my Honda with sparkly, golden light that enhanced my floaty feeling to the point of euphoria. I'd never felt this good. Meeting Kellan in Texas last month had emphasized how depressed I had been living with Bryan. It scared me that I would settle for that existence, that I thought I was living a normal life.

The gratitude and sexual attraction I felt for Kellan bordered on obsession. Maybe he was my new obsession.

Who cares? This is living, this is what I've been missing out on. I was so hot for Kellan that my entire body took on a juicy feeling when we spoke on the phone. This was love.

Where am I?

My route to work, the one I'd been driving for close to two years now, seemed completely new. I must've driven right past my exit. Uncharacteristically, it didn't really bother me. I didn't care about being late. In fact, I didn't care about anything at all except for Kellan. What an amazing feeling.

Come at me, Ruthanne Drexler. I don't care anymore.

After backpedaling and looping and finally finding my way back to familiar streets, I arrived at the West Phoenix Behavioral Health office at almost 9am. Jeannie and I were the only ones who were supposed to be there at 8 every day. With Jeannie's receptionist job, it made sense, but I was the only clinical employee who wasn't allowed to come in at our opening time of 8:30 "in case Jeannie needs backup", Ruthanne told me, a condescending grimace on her face. Jeannie didn't need backup.

Ruthanne took pleasure in making my life miserable for the two years I'd been working under her management. As apple-shaped up top as her legs were skinny, her face resembled a frog's, complete with buggy eyes and a double-chin. Her voice sounded consistently crackled and hoarse from years of smoking. I deduced she was probably in her early to mid-forties even though her wrinkled neck and baggy eyes looked much older.

Yes, Ruthanne's cigarette-ravaged appearance concerned me, but I figured I would quit smoking as soon as I arrived at my goal weight.

The office was empty except for Jeannie and Nancy, one of the founding therapists who came in early just because that's who she was. They were going over the psychiatrist's schedule together at Jeannie's desk as I moseyed in the door. Jeannie looked up at the jangle of the bells. "Nicole!" she mock admonished. "You are late!"

Nancy, a trim, no-nonsense grandmother in her early sixties peered at me from over her glasses. "You're also getting way too thin."

Since Ruthanne was nowhere in sight, I went outside to smoke, reveling in Nancy's weight comment and marveling that my hipbones jutted out in the coveted way my sister's did in her low-slung jeans. My hands shook in a pleasant adrenaline rush as I lit my cigarette and called Kellan. My upcoming trip to visit him in Texas was helping to keep my appetite at bay as well. My heart raced with an intensity that hopefully burned as many calories as my daily run.

"Hey, sweet thing," Kellan answered on the second ring. He'd specifically told me to call him at 9am my time, which meant he'd be on his lunch break in TX.

"Hey, how are you?" I never knew what to call him. Pet names didn't roll off my tongue like they seemed to on his. He called me baby, babe, sweet thing, gorgeous, beautiful girl – so many lovely names with ease. I felt stupid for even trying. I could barely utter his name without fear of coming across to him as too familiar or assuming.

I still could not believe he was with me. I didn't want to say 'mine', but he called me 'his', and that felt so right. My mom had photocopied the picture he'd given me when I left, the one with his stupid stick-thin ex-girlfriend on his back. Mom cut out a fitting sized picture of my face from another photo, then superimposed it on the photo so that it looked like it was me riding piggyback. After I laughed and told her she needed to find more to do at work. It now occupied a

supreme spot in my over-the-hill dorm room, as my brother called my room at my parents' house. It was framed and sitting on my dad's computer desk. I'm sure he appreciated it while he logged into his email.

"So, five more days!" I continued brightly, trying not to inhale into the phone.

"I still can't believe you're finally coming," Kellan murmured, his sexy tone causing me to drag deeply on my cigarette, forgetting not to. His sexiness was insane. My attraction to him was insane.

My sanity never did me any favors in the past, so I would happily ride this crazy train until it crashed and burned.

"I don't know if you'll like me when you see me, though," he said warningly. "I've been eating like a truck driver. You're gonna see me all chunky and turn around and fly back to your house."

"No way," I laughed. "You're crazy." If he only knew how obsessed I was with him. Didn't he know?

"Seriously, though." His voice went even deeper. "I told you how I was depressed awhile back, right?"

"Yeah, you did."

We'd both shared so many deeply personal details that they ran together intertwined in my mind, proof of how solid and binding our connection was. He'd confided that he was on medication for his depression, how awful his parents' divorce had been, how he was the emotional support for his sisters, how his mom was more a friend than a mom and how he never felt like he lived up to his dad's expectations.

He paused. "Shit, they messed up my sandwich again." In a low voice he continued, "The sandwich girl dropped my lettuce on the counter and then just scooped it back up and put it into my sandwich like it never happened. This is going on my list of places to never eat at again." I snorted. "Be careful so that they don't do anything worse next time." I shifted my weight to balance on my other foot. I felt compelled to balance like a stork on one foot whenever I smoked in the parking lot. I had to be burning more calories that way.

"You know you're the only person I'm ever nice to, right?"

I delighted in this, knowing he was tough to please. It occurred to me that if I could pass his test, I must mean something.

To be fair, it was my fault. I started the whole thing by wearing black lacy thong underwear under my white cuffed jeans. In my excitement, I hadn't packed very carefully, and I was out of underwear by my last full day in Texas. I almost wore my teal sundress, but it was wrinkled, and Kellan didn't own an iron.

Thinking my black cotton tank top covered enough of my tight white pants, I wore it out to the bar where Kellan and I were meeting his buddies. Apparently, I was wrong because Kellan almost punched one of his friends when I was ordering drinks at the bar. Hearing raised voices, I turned around in alarm to see him heatedly threatening Marco that he'd better "stop looking at her ass!"

The trip wasn't going as I'd pictured. The romantic, smooth-talking Kellan who lavished me with romance on the phone all those weeks was now consistently cloaked in anger and jealousy. Even so, there was a twisted part of me that always thought I wanted to be with someone who was jealous. Someone who loved me so much and found me so attractive, he couldn't stand seeing other men look at me. However, the fantasy I'd concocted in my head was much more flattering and pleasant than reality. I was constantly stressed out and walking on eggshells as to not upset him.

The night before, he grew furious at me for talking to one of his roommates for too long. I had no idea I'd done anything wrong until I looked over and he was sitting in a lawn chair, smoking a cigarette and staring straight ahead. Trying to be playful, I walked over with my beer and sat on the edge of the armrest. I smiled down at him. He looked straight ahead.

Cold pooled inside my stomach. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Silence.

Now having confirmation that I had indeed upset him somehow, I self-consciously looked behind me to see if anyone was watching, but his friends all scattered, most likely sensing the storm that was about to hit.

"Kellan," I tried again, twisting off the armrest and kneeling in front of him. "What's the matter?"

He blinked slowly and made eye contact. Cold. "Oh, now you remember who you're here with? I think you and Jesse were getting along pretty well. "

"Kellan, I wasn't ignoring you. I'm just trying to get to know your friends, too, since I'm here and we're all hanging out and ..." Notes of desperation crept into my voice, unsteady and crackled.

"You'd think I wasn't even here."

“I’m so sorry.” I pleaded with the blankness of his stare, trying to salvage the night. “We were just talking, and I asked him how long you guys had been friends and he was telling me stories about when you guys were younger. I swear. I’m so sorry if you felt like I was ignoring you.” My eyes filled with tears despite my best efforts.

Kellan met my eyes and seemed to soften at the sight of my tears. “Baby,” he whispered. He reached out to stroke my hair. My entire body began to relax. “I just can’t stand to see you flirt with another guy. Even if he is my buddy.” He enveloped me in his arms and pulled me into his lap.

I was so relieved that I forgot to worry about how much of my weight was pressing into him.

Dad was sitting in the kitchen at the small round table when I came downstairs at 6am. His hands steepled over his temples, his eyes closed, his breathing deep. I rolled my eyes as I poured the coffee he’d made earlier into my silver travel mug. Where had this calm, meditative dad been when we were little? The one who pounded the washing machine with his fists to create an intimidating boom when we were too loud for his liking?

“When I come home, all I want is some goddamned peace and quiet!!”

I snapped on my coffee lid and slid a thin slice of bread into the toaster. Dad rubbed his eyes and looked up at me. “Hey, kid. Do you have an early meeting?”

“No, I just need to finish some paperwork.” Anxiety gurgled in my stomach as I hurriedly spread my fake peanut butter on my diet whole wheat bread, both marked with purple Sharpie to let my brother know he wasn’t allowed to eat them. “Not PB” the label said. I didn’t care what it was as long as it was half of the fat and calories. I’d eaten more in the week returning home from Texas than I had in the past six months, feeding my fear of what would become of my long-distance relationship.

Dad snorted as he picked up the newspaper, shaking it open with a snap. “You want to hear about stress?” He set the paper down flat and rose to get his coffee cup from the cupboard. “World’s Best Dad” stood out in white enameled lettering against the pale blue ceramic mug, a Father’s Day gift from years back.

Dad launched into a description of his latest trials and tribulations at work, I bit into my toast and tried not to gobble it down in two bites. I wiped a dab of “Not PB” from the corner of my mouth and felt a tenderness right under the skin. It felt like a deep pimple was sprouting right in the corner of my mouth. Just what I needed.

I flashed back to shoving tortilla chips into my mouth at lightning speed in the walk-in pantry last night while looking over my shoulder to make sure no one in my family would come downstairs and discover me. The three glasses of wine I’d consumed lubricated my willpower to the point of nothing and I gave into my deep hunger. Tortilla chips, stale Ritz crackers, fig

newtons from who-knows-when, fingerfuls of real peanut butter...my stomach turned now as I thought of all the unappetizing and probably expired food that I'd binged on in a panic. It didn't even taste good.

This morning, I'd carefully applied my concealer to try to disguise the broken blood vessels that scattered underneath my eyes from the purge last night, but I knew I still looked puffy and haggard. I tried to drown out the voices telling me how disgusting and worthless I was with sips of the strong black coffee.

A tornado of suppressed screams inside me demand to know why this still affects me, still haunts me, still influences how my days begin and end. After all these years, this shit still controls me. My mood depends on what I ate, how much I ate, if I threw it up, how much of that I think I got up, and how bloated and puffy my face and belly are reflected in the mirror.

I'm a smart girl. Why can't I stop eating?

Some people like to begin their day with a cup of coffee. I like to rehash everything I ate the previous day, tally up the calories and set a cap on the amount of calories I can ingest today to make up for any slip-ups yesterday. Then I pinch my stomach, feel my ribs, and make sure I am still thin, because there's no way I'm ever going back to what I was.

QGBANJE

by Kasimma Okanji

You did not expect the turn of events after the copycat deaths of your children. Your first child went to bed a healthy child nine days after her birth. By morning, she was as stiff and strong as frozen meat. Your second child copied her. But after you buried your third child, your father sent for you. Your wife was still snoring like a locomotive that morning when you left with the teenager who brought your father's message. You got there and found your parents seated on white plastic chairs, arms folded, lips turned downwards, eyes distanced. You sensed that there was Fire on the mountain. On the ground beside your father's outstretched legs was a gourd of palm wine. The mouth of the gourd was stuffed with *omu nkwu* leaves. Your father's walking stick was between his legs. His raffia palm hand fan lay on his lap. Three tumblers and a green thick-glass plate with two kola nuts in it lay on the stool before your mother. You sighed in relief.

"Ah ah, this one your faces are like rain-battered faeces. *Ogini?*"

"Sit down, my son," your father said.

You dusted the spare chair and sat. "So why are you two looking moody?" Your father proceeded with the kola nut ritual. He was in no hurry to thank his gods and ancestors for a new day and everything. You could not take your eyes off your chain wristwatch. You declined the kola nut and palm wine.

"Agunna, *kedu?*" your father said.

"I am fine, Nnam," you responded.

"You will have to stop looking at that clock of yours. A man whose house is on fire does not pursue rats."

You rubbed your beardless jaw. "Nnam, you know that I am the only doctor in the hospital. I have to be there on time."

Your father bit his kola nut. "I have called you this morning for two reasons. First," he raised his forefinger, "you must get interested in this family's *arobinagu* and learn the yearly ritual in its honour. I am an old man with limited time in this space. Our *arobinagu* have faithfully provided us with riches from which you have benefited. Do not let the spirits scrape your mouth on the ground before you start sacrificing to them."

"Nnam, at the risk of repeating myself, I am a Christian and cannot participate in anything fetish."

Your father turned to your mother.

“It is our tradition,” she said, “what is fetish about offering the oracle a white fowl and three kola nuts yearly? It does not stop you from going to church.”

You shook your head and looked at your watch. You had been through that argument several times and had no patience that morning for it. The loud sound of your father’s gulps made you turn in his direction. For a brief moment, you felt pity. Your father used to be a huge agile man. Now he was all skin and bone. Your mother who was once a feared teacher was not spared from the fearless aging process.

“Secondly, *Agu*,” he raised two fingers, “it is about your childlessness. This issue chases sleep away from my eyes. How can I join my ancestors knowing that my only child is childless? *Agu, agwo no n’akirika.*”

“There is no snake anywhere, *Nnam*. We have had all these discussions before. My wife and I are just going through...”

“Through what?” your mother snapped. “We have had this discussion before,” she mimicked you. “Have you not seen that whatever is eating your children is above western medicine?” You sighed. At a distance, a cock crowed and the sun rose at a snail’s pace. Your father’s unkempt black toes became slightly visible.

“It is not above western medicine, *Nnem*. My first son died of pneumonia. My first daughter died of diarrhea. My second daughter...”

“Died of gonorrhea or is it syphilis...”

“*Nnem*, my children did not die of gonorrhea and...”

“I guess that their gonorrhea and syphilis killed them on their ninth nights on earth.”

You snorted in disgust, falling back on your seat and breathing heavily. Your mother clanked her tongue to deride you. You ignored her. It had become bright. The bleating of hungry goats and sheep and sounds of sweeping replaced the howling of dogs. Human voices gradually rose to full-blown sounds of praying, singing and even quarreling. You heard a feminine voice scream at a child to go get ready for school. You looked at your watch and gasped.

“*Nnam*...”

“I have told you to stop looking at that clock.”

You sighed in resignation. “*Nnam*, don’t worry. I will have a child. My wife will give birth to the one that will stay. We are taking adequate medical precautions now.”

Your father smiled lopsidedly. Old age did not hide his dimples.

“It is beyond the white man medicine, *nwam*,” he shook his crossed legs. “A man pressed with watery feces does not walk. I have taken the pains to go and consult a diviner. He confirmed my fears,” he cleared his throat and spat out the thick yellow sputum. “Agu, you are having *ogbanje* children.”

You jumped up. “Dear Jesus! God forbid!”

You circled your hand around your head and snapped your fingers. Your mother shifted her legs as if to dodge the ill you snapped away.

You sat again. “Nnam, please, I am a Christian. I do not believe in all these things. What business have I got with *ogbanje* children, for goodness sake?”

“Those wicked and mysterious spirits choose whomever they want.”

“But I have had a boy and two girls...”

“...who all died under the same circumstances, and, I am certain, at the same hour. You do not even need a diviner to tell you that you are dealing with *ogbanje* spirits here.”

Your mother hissed. “When we warned you not to marry that thing, you refused. It must have come from her.”

Two deep lines appeared on her forehead. But you were not prepared to go down that road with her. No, not today!

“My son, a man who removes a woman’s clothes does not just stand and stare. You must join me to go and see the *abiankata*. He can put an end to this.”

“Me!” you struck your chest, “in a shrine? Are you joking?”

Your mother drew her ears. “Use your tongue to count your teeth, *gị bu nwa!*”

“Nnam,” you ignored your mother, “please I have to go. Thank you for your concern, but I cannot do as you have asked. This is the year 1994, not 1915. I am an England trained medical doctor, and I am telling you that my children’s problems are purely medical. Our next child will stay. Watch and see.”

*

You knew everybody in the village watched and listened as soon as your wife’s pregnancy became news. You took every medical precaution. Your wife, Amalachi, did not miss a day of her routine pregnancy drugs. She ate fruits and fed well. You insisted on that. Even your pastor did not bat an eye when you told him you were going to his rival church to seek a miracle. The rival pastor prayed over a white handkerchief and gave it to you. His instructions were clear. At

midnight, spread the handkerchief on Amalachi's stomach and read Psalms 91 and 23. The handkerchief would become the spiritual ultrasound machine. Place your lips very close to Amalachi's belly and speak life to the child. After this, drop the handkerchief in a white basin—he emphasized on the white colour—and pour hot water on it. Then hold hands with your wife and pray until the water is warm enough to drink. Drink it. You did this until the baby was born.

You also visited a priest who gave you a rosary after making the sign of the cross above it. He asked you to recite it every day, and by 3 a.m., you should say the chaplet of the divine mercy. You had to buy Catholic books to teach you how to say all these prayers. You even went the extra mile to place the rosary on Amalachi's stomach while she slept.

You were always falling asleep in the office. Your body moved from chubby to gaunt. Though your wife gained weight, the strain was not lost in her eyes.

The baby arrived. Her skin was as smooth as ice cream. She was so fat that she tore Amalachi's vagina to make more room for herself to pass. Her eyes were the brightest brown eyes you've ever seen. She had your full nose and heart-shaped lips. She looked nothing like your wife.

You were as sure as yam is yam that this child will stay. She sucked breasts more than her predecessors. She laughed often, gave no troubles, and grew fatter each day. These were good signs but you did not let your guard down. You prayed and recited your rosary every morning and night.

While Amalachi slept on the ninth night of the baby's birth, you kept watch. You had to eat kola nut, something you find very bitter, just to stay awake. A part of you was afraid that your father was right. The second part of you continued to wallow in denial. You never took your eyes off that baby for even one second. You prayed your chaplet of divine mercy with your eyes on your daughter. Not too long after that prayer, everywhere became cold. You refused to rush to your room and get a cover. Even when an eddy of cold air swirled through the windows making the curtains wave, *wooh-wooh* sang the wind, you did not blink. The only time you felt slightly scared was when you sensed a chill on your skin that made all your body hair stand up. The truth is, there was a presence in that room. The spirit stood close to you, looking at you as if trying to divert your attention from the baby. It had a neck as long as a giraffe. Its body, covered with white hair, was as muscular as a chimpanzee. Its legs were as pink and as soft as a tongue, and its hands weaved together as a batwing. Then, it started shrinking, turning to a human form. His spider-face turned to that of a very handsome "person" with bright red eyes and black pupils. Its hair looked like long strands of algae. It had strong muscles and torso as a man but it had no private part. It walked away from you and stood close to the bed. It carried your daughter's spirit, and rocked it tenderly, back and forth. Then it jumped out of the window with the baby and turned into a bat. When you could no longer hear the baby's soft snores, you placed your index finger under her nose: no breath. You raised her hand but it surrendered to the force of gravity. You pulled down her lower eyelid. Her fixated brown pupils stared right back. You stumbled back to your chair. Your head spun like a sewing machine's wheel. When you got a hold of yourself, you looked at the time, 4:00 a.m., about the time your other baby died. Everywhere

became still. The curtains stopped waving, the wind stopped howling, and the chill vanished. You stared at your baby's corpse, squeezing the handle of the chair as if to crush it. Taking it in your stride as a man should, one deep breath at a time, you returned to your room. You lay on your bed and put your pillow on your head but sleep eluded you. Even when your wife started screaming at dawn, you stayed the same.

*

Five months later, you came back from work one night to find your wife crying in the sitting room. You went to the kitchen to look for food, but you met the pots so sparkling, they almost blinded your eyes. You settled for bread and groundnuts.

"Nonye, what is it?" you asked your wife, sitting across from her.

You are the only one who refused to call her by her nickname, Amalachi. A name she got due to her love for the food, *amala*.

"Your mother came here today."

You sighed. You knew what next.

"It was worse than her former visits. She called me *Mamiwater*. She said I came to use you to produce children for my spirit husband. She cursed me. She said I will die during my next childbirth."

"What!" you accidentally knocked down the plate of groundnuts. They were happy to roll far-far away from you. "My mother said that to you?"

Amalachi blew her nose. "Nobody sells to me in the market any longer. Nobody speaks to me. They squeeze their faces and hide their children's faces when I pass by. They call me names, spit on me, and even remind me that I am ugly."

You went to her and hugged her. She buried her face in your chest and bawled. Tears dropped from your eyes.

"You are not ugly. Don't mind them."

But you know you were lying. She's ugly. Let's not go into her orange complexion. Not chocolate, not fair, not bleached, orange! Her ugliness is as bitter as a mixture of chloroquine and bitter leaf juice. Imagine someone drinking this mixture? What would the person do to their face? Squeeze the hell out of it, is that not so? And even spit? Good. Now, do you understand why sometimes when she walked past, people spat?

"I cannot continue like this, Agu."

“Don’t worry. The next baby will stay.”

She raised her head from her chest, shaking her head. “Go and see *abiankata*.”

“What!” you pushed her away. “Have you joined them? Have you forgotten that I am an assistant pastor?”

“There are many ways of serving God,” she cleaned her face with the flat of her hands.

“Christianity is not the only religion. Look at me,” she jumped up. “I am a skeleton. Look at my breasts,” she raised her shirt and dangled both breasts to your face. Each breast looked like half a slice of bread and dangled like a hanged man. “They are flat but no child to show for it. I almost died during the last labour. You know how much blood I lost...”

“Don’t be melodramatic. I will never turn my back on God.” You dismissed her with the wave of the hand.

Deep lines appeared on her forehead. Her orangeness shone. “Melodrama, isn’t it? Melo... Okay. You have three options. If you will not consult *abiankata*, you either take me back to my parents or I will kill myself.” She stormed out.

You took it as a flippant statement. But when a bottle of rat poison surfaced in your rat-free house, two weeks later, you affirmed to her that you will consult the *abiankata*.

Before dawn, the next day, you went to see your father and narrated your ordeal.

Your father smiled. “I have been trying to tell you this long ago, Agụ. A child dances to the sweet melody of *Surugede* without knowing that *Surugede* is the dance of the spirits. I named you Tiger, not Rat. You are ready to be my son.”

That same morning, your father and you strolled to the house of Dikeogu, the *abiankata*. Your father must have fanned himself a thousand times before you two arrived in the modest bungalow of the diviner. The sandy compound was decorated with marks from a traditional broom. A teenage girl carrying a pail of water on her head curtsied as she greeted you two.

“Thank you, my daughter,” your father responded, smiling from molar to molar. “*Nwa aga alu alu!* Please tell your father that I am here with my son.”

You felt embarrassed for the little girl when your father called her “marriageable.”

Your father pulled you closer. “That is the girl you will take for a second wife if this option does not work.”

“God forbid, Nnam,” you whispered back. “I am not a pedophile.”

Your father hissed.

“Nweze!” a very deep voice rang out from inside the house. “Welcome. The door is open.”

Your father raised his raffia hand fan. “Dikeoḡu! *Ekenem gị.*”

You gave your father a hand as he climbed the steep steps. You parted the old curtain for him and waited for him to enter first.

The deep voice rang again. “Welcome. There is seat o!”

You looked around you. There was a wooden altar lighted by a tiny bulb. It shocked and well as relaxed you to see the crucifix between the portraits of Jesus and Mary. A huge rosary hung on a nail at the left of the altar.

You nudged your father, your mouth almost entering his ears. “Had you told me that this man is a prophet, I should have come with you the last time.”

Your father chuckled and whispered back. “He is Christian in front and a native diviner behind.” You did not believe him. You looked at the brown sofas and wooden center table. The floor was covered in a sparkling blue carpet. Nothing suggested that this man was a local diviner. Three curtains at different parts of the house suggested that there were three rooms. Along came a woman with a big stomach, whom you assume was his wife, carrying a tray. She was all smiles as she asked after your mother and your wife. She dropped her tray bearing a saucer of garden eggs and groundnut and two cans of soft drinks and left. A tall man, who should not be more than forty-four, dressed in a neat police uniform emerged from one of the curtains. He wore eyeglasses and maintained a neat moustache. Even when you heard his deep voice, you still did not affirm to yourself that he was Dikeoḡu. He shook your hand firmly as your father introduced you to each other.

“Ah, ah, you have not touched your kola?” Dikeoḡu said.

“Kola is in the hand of the king,” your father said.

The man laughed. “Go ahead. It belongs to you.”

You were still quiet. Both of them discussed as if you were absent. You heard him tell your father that he had had kola already and... your mind faced its business. You did not understand what was happening. Are you yet to go to the diviner’s place or what? You heard them laughing about something you must have missed.

“Why is your daughter at home?”

“That one,” Dikeoḡu waved his hand, “she got suspended for fighting in school.”

“Ewoo.”

“And let me warn you, my daughter will go to the university and become a doctor like your son. She is not to get married yet.”

Hot urine pushed down your bladder but you held your fort. You were very certain that your father whispered to you when you were outside. How then did this man repeat what you two discussed?

Your father laughed. “Of what use is a woman if not marriage?”

“Anyway,” he hit the back of his palms on his thighs, “my own daughter will be the best woman she can be.”

Your “independent” head nodded in agreement.

“So let us get into what brought you people here. I am about to go to work.”

“Work?” you blurted out.

He laughed, pointing at himself. “Can you not see that I am a police officer?”

You could no longer hold back your questions. “You are not the *dibia*, are you?”

He shook his head. “I am not the *dibia*.”

You held your chest and sighed in relief. A dog barked some distance away.

“I am Abiankata,” he said.

Your eyes flung open. “Are they not the same thing?”

Dikeogu laughed. “They are not the same thing. The *agwudibia* is a physician. I am a diviner. So if you are sick, this is not the best place to be. Go to Okafor’s house. Though,” he raised his hands in surrender, “let me clear your doubts. Both *agwudibia* and *abiankata* get our gifts from the goddess, *Nneagwu*.”

You pointed at the altar. “You are a Christian, are you not?”

He shrugged. “I cannot boldly go by that title, but my wife and children are Christians. It is the same God but different methods of worship. I go to church occasionally though.”

As if he could still read the confused look on your face, he added, “stop by another day and I shall clear all your doubts. For now,” he glanced at his watch, “let us get to business. I am running late.”

You rubbed your beardless jaw and shrugged. Your father relaxed on the sofa, shaking his legs and chewing his teeth noiselessly.

Dikeoḡu drew closer to the edge of his chair. “Aḡu, I have consulted the goddess on your behalf. They told me that you are having *oḡbanje* children.”

You shuddered. Your body felt cold. You looked at your father who tilted his head slightly as if to say he told you so. You began to think that you were watching a drama unfold. Had your father secretly convinced this educated man to pretend to be a diviner and convince you of the “*oḡbanje*” thing?

“Your wife is pregnant, is she not?”

The urine pushed harder. You clasped your legs shut. You only found out yesterday after you tested her urine yourself. No one except both of you knew. How then did this man know?

“She will give birth to that baby, a girl. However, I’m afraid, she will die like the rest of your children.”

You covered your mouth with one hand, the second still between your clasped legs as if to push the urine back. Dikeoḡu looked at his watch again. Your father lowered his head and rubbed his forehead.

“It is too late to save this one. We will use her to set an example. After her death, I will give you a charm to bury around your house and give your wife a concoction to drink. But, and listen very carefully,” he drew his ears, “when the baby dies, neither you nor your wife should touch the corpse until I come.”

You could no longer hold back the urine. You rushed outside, went close to the bush, and relieved yourself.

*

When you watched the fifth child die, just like the others, you covered your sleeping wife’s mouth. She jerked out of sleep.

“She’s dead. Don’t shout and don’t touch her.”

She still tried to shout but you pressed your palm to her mouth and clenched your fist. “I said don’t shout. Do you want me to knock off your teeth?”

Her burning tears splashed on your palms. You left her mouth alone and staggered to your chair. Your wife cried until a few minutes later when the Dikeoḡu’s voice and bell-staff tolled in your compound. You unlocked the door and went outside. It was no longer the educated policeman

that approached your house. The voice, however, was unmistakably Dikeoḡu's. He walked gracefully and noiselessly as a tiger. He was wearing a white, cotton, ankle-length skirt and white, sleeveless, baggy shirt. His big goat-skin bag slung on his shoulder and he did not wear eyeglasses. A living turtle crawled in position on his neck, held fastened by a black neck rope. He neither greeted nor responded to your greeting. He entered the house walking backward and straight to the room where the baby lay as if he had been there before. Still reciting his incantations, he scooped the corpse of the baby and walked outside. You held your sobbing wife in your bosom as both of you walked behind him. The harmattan wind threatened to push down the trees; its howling sounds made the aura eerier. Amalachi hugged herself.

Dikeoḡu dropped the corpse on the sand and sat about ten feet away. "Undress her."

You left Amalachi standing alone and carried Dikeoḡu's order even if you felt as though you were exposing your "dead" baby to the cold. Her body was still as soft as cotton.

Dikeoḡu brought out a dagger from his bag and pointed it at you.

"Knife her."

Your legs felt stiff and heavy. You wondered how you could stab your baby even though she is dead. Your wife clutched to your feet, pleading with you to allow the child to die well at least. You kicked your legs free, mistakenly hitting her in the jaw, and collected the dagger from Dikeoḡu. Consumed in the helpless rage from watching your children die, you dug the knife into her chest and dragged it down. Blood splattered out, splashing on your wife and you. You knifed all parts of the baby's body except her face. You could not bear touching her cute face. Her organs were visible from her mutilated body. Tears streamed down your eyes. You could not even bear looking at your wife who kneeled beside your baby, wailing.

"It can hear. Speak," said Dikeoḡu.

You looked around as if trying to figure out where the malign spirit stood. "You malign spirit. You better not come back here! When you go back, tell them that I, Agū, the tiger, said that if I catch you here again, I will bury you part by part. I will gouge out your eyes and chew them raw. I will use your brains for *ngwo-ngwo*."

Dikeoḡu laughed. He produced three bundled *omu* leaves from his bag which he gave to you.

"Cover her."

You spread the leaves all over the bloodied corpse.

"Set her on fire."

You dashed inside, got a box of matches and a cup of kerosene. As you doused her in kerosene, you saw Amalachi holding her chest as though she was preventing it from falling apart. You flung the cup, struck a match and threw it on the corpse. It caught fire. The smell of burnt hair

filled the air. You hugged the wailing Amalachi. Suddenly, you heard Dikeogu laughing, his oily face made visible by the fire, and pointing at nothing you could see.

“See them running away. Can you not see them over there?”

Hot vicious urine pushed down your bladder, but you had to stand like a man. Amalachi held you tighter as if she should enter your body, making you more determined to feign strength.

*

One year later, after obediently adhering to Dikeogu’s instructions, Amalachi gave birth to a son. As soon as Amalachi pushed her baby out from her vagina, the nurse screamed and almost dropped the baby. She rushed to the dressing table and dropped the baby as if he were a plate crawling with maggots.

You went called in. You looked at your baby. You recognized the long scars all over the baby’s body and even on his scrotum. The longest and deepest scar ran from his chest to his stomach. He had pink patches all over his body, hands, and legs like someone with vitiligo. You did not understand any of it. He wailed, kicking his legs, and reaching out to you. You carried him.

Star of the East

By Edward Sheehy

Cheryl's kid fusses nonstop the whole way down to Roanoke. I yell at Justin to shut-up, but then Cheryl starts in on me for screaming at her kid. You're not his father, she scolds. Lucky for Justin. I'm so angry that I got right on the bumper of a slow-moving car in the left-hand lane and let him have my brights until he moved over. People like that have no business on the highway. Anyway, I blame my short temper on the fact that I'm tired. We'd got a late start on the drive from Middleburg. I live rent-free in a converted loft in a horse barn in exchange for doing odd jobs around the farm. I'd met Cheryl at the Supercuts hair salon and we hit it off immediately. Since then, she'd been handing Justin to a babysitter two or three times a week while we roll in the hay at my place. She'd asked me to drive her to Roanoke to visit her mother and sibs over Christmas as her hand slid over my belt buckle. I couldn't say no.

It was after midnight when we finally arrive at her mom's house. Unfortunately, Cheryl's brothers and sisters had already staked claim to the spare bedrooms and sofas. Luckily, I find us a room at a Motel 8. I grumble about laying out sixty bucks for a room when I thought we were staying gratis at the house. Cheryl calls me cheap and gives me the silent treatment on the drive to her mom's. When we arrive, I say that I needed to go out for cigarettes and will be right back. That's when I detour to Mill Mountain to see the Roanoke Star during the daytime. I saw it last night from twenty miles distant as we rolled into town. On Christmas Eve night, the white star burned bright as a beacon for all wise men, pilgrims, and truckers. The radio blared good tidings to all:

*Hark! The Herald Angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King;*

Surprisingly, the parking lot at the summit is full. I'd hoped for a little peace and quiet on Christmas day, so I can figure a few things out. Like my next move. Middleburg is horse and hunt country for the super-rich, but job prospects for a handyman with a high school degree are scarce, unless working at The Gap for ten dollars an hour sounds good to you. It didn't to me. I need a ton of cash money, now. My father keeps pushing me to enroll in that HVAC school that guarantees a job when you graduate. But I'm thinking of moving to Las Vegas. Someone at a bar said blackjack dealers make a 100 thou with tips. Then again, I've got a million other options. Actually, too many options. What if I choose wrong? I'm sick of being broke and starting over again, one shit job after another. As Cheryl constantly reminds me: I'm going nowhere fast.

On the plus side, it's a spectacular Christmas day. The temperature hovers at 70 degrees. Cumulus clouds float and fold into fantastic shapes. A light breeze morphs a man with a beard into a walrus with wings.

Turkey buzzards ride the thermals, hovering in place, then wheel in great looping arcs. There must be something dead in the valley. Road kill, no doubt. The horizon is broken by the knobs and humps of the Blue Ridge mountains that rise and fall like swells in a gray winter ocean.

The Roanoke Star is a huge metal beast. The neon-tubed contraption rises 88 feet high and perched atop Mill Mountain at over 1,000 feet is visible from 60 miles away. A plaque at the base proclaims it as the largest, free-standing, man-made, illuminated star in the world. Really? Are other cities competing to see who can build the largest piece of neon crap? As I stand there craning my neck, I think about building the largest middle finger to a world that has fucked me over since high school.

I drive back to Cheryl's mom's house—a split-level rambler in a development of identical ramblers as if the house was reflected in an infinity mirror. Cheryl's brothers and sisters and spouses huddle on the deck, knocking back Wild Turkey shooters, getting a jump on the festivities to come.

I duck into one of the bedrooms and change into my running shorts and shoes. I ran cross country in high school and find it to be great stress reliever. And boy do I have major stress right now. Cheryl meets me in the doorway, gripping a red plastic cup. Right away, I smell the whiskey on her breath. From her sour expression, I can tell that she is still pissed that I yelled at Justin or something else that I did or did not do or forgot to do or should have done. I tell her I'm going running to blow off some steam. She turns without a word and heads back to the deck.

It's a ten-minute drive to Victory stadium in downtown Roanoke. A sign says that the stadium's name was intended as a rallying cry for Allied victory in World War II. In its heyday, Victory Stadium hosted the annual Thanksgiving Day game between Virginia Tech and Virginia Military Institute as well as hundreds of high school football championships. But today, the stadium is a sad hulk of its former self. Ghostly shouts of glories past echo and fade in the trash strewn concourse.

The cinder track at Victory stadium circles a neglected football field. After my sixth lap, I notice a pack of kids on the inside lanes of the track up ahead. A man stands to the side with a stopwatch. On a signal from the man, the pack takes off at a leisurely jog.

The pack consists of six teenagers in various shapes and sizes. A tall kid with a buzz cut leads the runners. Buzz is my height, maybe sixteen years old, but skinny as a rail, all arms and legs. I run alongside him and taunt him to pick up the pace. Come on, can't you beat an old man! Come on, wimp! Can't you run any faster. Wimp!

Buzz ignores me, so I break off, and leave him in my dust. The next lap around, the pack and the man with the stopwatch have vanished. As I walk toward the parking lot, I notice a door underneath the bleachers spray painted with the name Victory Gym. Seems odd that a gym would be open on Christmas, but what the heck, I wouldn't mind pumping some iron now that I got my heart rate up.

Inside the door is a blackboard on which someone has chalked: *Fear is not an option*. It's a dim, low-ceiling room with folding chairs facing a boxing ring. The cramped gym smells of sweat and leather. Two small kids, wearing protective headgear and groin protectors, spar in the ring. The man I saw on the track with the stopwatch referees the match.

I grab a seat and watch the bout. The kids punch wildly, but mostly hit air. After a minute or so, the ref stops the bout. The kids touch gloves in the center of the ring and climb down through the ropes.

Next up in the ring is a tall skinny kid wearing the protective gear. It's the kid I teased on the track— Buzz!

The ref leans over the ropes and says to me, hey pal, wanna help out? I don't have a sparring partner for this tall fella. Just one round. Whaddaya say? Just for fun.

I look closer at Buzz. My first impression of all skin and bone now looks more like lean muscle. He rolls his shoulders and bounces on the balls of his feet. Why should I waste time getting in a ring with this punk? I start to beg off, when Buzz says, come on old man! What are you...a wimp?

I turn my head and the blackboard sign comes into view again: *Fear is not an option.*

Ok punk, you asked for it.

I climb in the ring. The coach helps me don the protective gear. The 16-ounce training gloves are well padded, like I'm wearing air bags strapped to my hands. So nobody gets hurt, the ref says. Just spar a little, you know, nothing serious. Have fun.

There's that word fun again.

I've never boxed before in my life. I think of the boxing movies I've seen, and how the boxers danced and held their gloves. How hard can it be? The coach brings us together in the center of the ring to touch gloves, then says Go!

In a heartbeat, Buzz is all over me. Punching my headgear, and landing blows against my arms and chest. I outweigh him, so I push him back, but he springs forward with a flurry of one-two combinations. As Buzz advances with jabs and hooks, I raise my gloves in front of my face. I backpedal, but my legs are like dead weights from running laps. I gasp for breath, barely able to hold up my arms.

I counterpunch, but Buzz flicks it off. The blood rush to my ears deadens the sound of leather smacks against my headgear. Sweat stings my eyes. I can barely see the barrage of blows. I clinch to staunch the onslaught but Buzz rocks me with an uppercut. He taunts me: come on, wimp! I roar with frustration, my arms flailing like a pinwheel, but Buzz dances out of reach, then connects with a hard cross that snaps my head back.

How long is a damn round? Two, three minutes? It seems like an eternity. Finally, the ref calls time, and I let down my guard, and that's when Buzz lands a solid right to the side of my headgear, staggering me against the ropes. My rubbery legs buckle. The kids in the front row squeal with glee: KO! KO! KO!

Bastard! A cheap shot to embarrass me in front of his friends. In a blind rage, I charge forward but the ref pushes me back. It's over, go back to your corner. The ref admonishes Buzz for the late hit and tells him to apologize. Buzz mumbles 'sorry' but the smirk on his face tells me otherwise. My eyes follow Buzz until he disappears into a locker room.

Seething with anger, I strip off the gear, wobble out to the car, and head back to the house. The party is going full blast. Cars and motorcycles are parked on the lawn. Raucous laughter and ZZ Top reverberate off the walls. A haze of home-grown Kush hangs in the air. I elbow my way through the crowded living room and into the kitchen when I find a half gallon jug of Wild Turkey. I pour a generous slug in a plastic cup and throw it back to numb the pounding I took from Buzz. White lights snake across the deck. A keg is balanced on a picnic table and I fill my cup with the foamy brew.

Long hairs in denim jackets and motorcycle boots jam the deck. Bodies sway to the Texas boogie while the deck timbers creak and groan. Tomorrow's headline flashes before my eyes: *Deck Collapse Kills 20. Christmas Party Turns Deadly.*

The sun drops behind the foothills and the air turns cool. I feel a chill and decidedly out of place in my thin nylon shorts and tank top. Through a momentary break in the wall of people, I glimpse Cheryl on a guy's lap in a serious lip lock.

My sparring match with Buzz infused me with a confidence in boxing skills I never knew I had. Or maybe it's the Wild Turkey. Either way, I fantasize about punching the guy in the mouth. Except this dude is bigger than that scrawny kid in the gym. Convinced I could take this guy if I really wanted to, but figure why cause a scene and ruin a party. Disgusted, I push my way through the throng and peel out in the Mustang.

I haven't eaten in a while, so I pull into a Git 'n Go and grab a six-pack and a slice of heat lamp pizza. The thought of Cheryl making out with that dude gnaws at me. I should go back and punch his lights out. Boy, would Cheryl be surprised, even impressed that her jealous boyfriend stood up for himself for once in his pathetic life. I'm going back! I swear to god! I'm gonna do it!

As I'm standing in line, imagining my knock-out punch, a little unsteady from Wild Turkey and beer on an empty stomach, I notice a tall skinny teen-ager buying chips and a liter of cola. It's the punk who sucker punched me in the Victory gym. Buzz!

Thoughts of avenging my honor with Cheryl evaporate as I focus now on Buzz. Fear is not an option, eh? Well, I'll put the fear of god in *him*. In the parking lot, Buzz straddles a red scooter. The engine kicks over with an electric purr. As soon as he is on the highway, I ditch the slice and trail the scooter at a discrete distance. I pop a can and guzzle it with one hand on the wheel, then another. I inch the Mustang close to the scooter's rear wheel, blast the horn, and let Buzz feel my turbo breathing down his neck. Now who's the wimp?

Buzz speeds up. What a joke. Does he really think a scooter can outrun the 350 horses under my hood? A straightaway on a two-lane stretch gives me an opening to pull into the passing lane and draw even with the scooter. I power down the passenger window and when Buzz looks over, I hold his gaze. I know he recognizes me as I flip him the bird. A glint of metal catches my eye. An oncoming car—closing fast. Buzz on my right, a wall of trees on my left. No escape. My bowels loosen. I'm about to have a head on collision. Just then, Buzz slows the scooter enough to allow me to slide over, narrowly avoiding two tons of steel blurring past my line of vision.

I glance in the rearview. The scooter fishtails. Buzz somersaults over the handlebars and faceplants onto the pavement. Horrified, I pull onto the shoulder and suck deep breaths to calm myself. It was an accident. I never touched him. Not my fault Buzz lost control. The Mustang pushes ninety as I slam the pedal to the metal.

* * *

Another late start and we're headed back to Middleburg, at last. The trip has been a disaster, to say the least. Justin fidgets in the back seat with an electronic toy while Cheryl stares absently out the window, hardly saying a word. I've avoided confronting Cheryl about making-out with the dude on the deck. A sense of foreboding nags me but I can't put my finger on it, like the warning aura some people get before a migraine attack.

Then out of the blue, Justin starts up, mommy, mommy, look at the star, why is the star red mommy? In the rearview, I see that the star on Mill Mountain is lit up in red neon. Cheryl turns in her seat and patiently explains they light up the star in red anytime someone dies in a traffic accident and as soon as the words leave her mouth I reimagine Buzz splattered on the asphalt. Cheryl continues to comfort Justin. We'll say a prayer for whoever it was when we get home tonight, sweetie.

An hour passes, and Justin finally conks out. Cheryl slumps in the passenger seat, her head nestled in a pillow. In the rearview, I can still see the red star on Mill Mountain—which is impossible since we're over a hundred miles from Roanoke! Must be one of those afterimages that burn into the eyeballs even though the object is no longer in view.

The Mustang cruises steady at 70 in light traffic, but the red star hasn't moved from my mirror. Then a single headlight comes up on my tail, and flicks on a high beam, bathing the interior in a ghastly white brilliance. I disengage cruise and press the accelerator. The speedometer creeps up to 80, 90, 95. The headlight stays right on my bumper. And then I get another afterimage. This time, it's all battered limbs and a buzz cut in mad pursuit.

My attention is glued to the headlight riding my tail, so when I glance up, it is just in time to see a giant red star emblazoned on the back end of a tractor trailer. I jam the brakes. Tires squeal and the car skids to a halt inches from the rear end of the trailer. Although strapped in, we are thrust forward by the braking force, then jerked backward as the car lurches to a stop. Jolted awake, Cheryl screams at me: what the hell are you doing?

My hands tremble. I don't know, I think someone, uh, was chasing me. Then the truck in front of me suddenly braked. Cheryl's face contorts into a mask of hysteria. Are you trying to kill us? What truck? There's not another goddamn car on the road. Did you fall asleep?

I don't know, I don't know, I stammer between sobs, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Get out Cheryl huffs, I'm driving. We switch seats and Cheryl adjusts the bucket seat and we're off again. Desperate for a cigarette I pat myself for the pack. Cheryl sideeyes me and snarls don't smoke in the car. After a few minutes, she fiddles with the FM. A church choir comes on and Cheryl lets it play out:

*Star of the East, thou hope of the soul
Oh star that leads to God above
Who's rays are peace and joy and love
Watch o'er us still till life hath ceased
Beam on, bright star, sweet Bethlehem star*

I glance at the passenger side mirror. And there it is again, the Roanoke star, glowing like a red hot branding iron, my soul forever seared with remorse and shame.

The Art of Mahfouz by Naguib Mahfouz

Reviewed by Nadia Benjelloun

Bombs, beards, and belly-dancing. Rather than just a fun alliteration to say, this phrase would summarize what would come to mind upon hearing the word Arab. This is the epitome of orientalism. It's all due to narrative, but just as there are misconstrued Arab and Muslim representations from sources that range from the social sciences to the creative arts, the undoing of such images can also be provided for by the same means. An exemplary scholar who does well with enacting such scrutiny is Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, who uses storytelling as a method of critique.

Mahfouz was born in Cairo, Egypt in 1911. He wrote 34 novels and over 300 short stories. He studied philosophy at Cairo University and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988. While he is notably known for *The Cairo Trilogy*, another book he wrote that is no less a work of art, is *Adrift on the Nile*. The title alone holds huge significance. First to summarize the plot, the short story is about Anis Zaki and his group of friends who meet every or most nights on a boathouse and have philosophical discussions that range from love to politics. Other than that, they take pleasure in each other's company by getting high, drinking, and having sex. Since the setting takes place on a boathouse on the Nile throughout most of the story, they are literally adrift on the Nile. But because the point of view from which the story is being told shifts constantly, and the protagonist is high through it all, his consciousness periodically drifts away and comes back, giving readers a less than tangible grasp of the characters' realities and surroundings. In this sense, both readers and characters are adrift on the Nile. Another aspect to it is that all the characters presented engage in escapism through some way, shape or form. As their lives feel so unstable and adrift, they are once again, adrift on the Nile.

The characters are many and diverse. Primarily, Anis Zaki is a civil servant that spends a good deal of time using drugs and smoking. His friends include Ragab an actor and womanizer, Saniya a university student, Layla a translator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed a director of accounts at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Mustafa a lawyer, Ali an art critic, and Khalid a writer and playboy. Later they are joined by Samara, a journalist, who is supposedly the serious one of the group. The friends mildly debate differing philosophies and exchange a few romantic misunderstandings, though their cynicism is shared. Samara spices things up when she refuses to smoke the pipe at first and succumb to their merrymaking. This poses a challenge to the group, as they see it as reluctance to let go of the burdens of life.

At one point during the novel, Anis finds her notebook which she accidentally left behind at the houseboat. In it, were her notes for a play, the characters of whom were all based on the friends from the houseboat. She detailed the traits and flaws of each one, outlining the notes as under the theme of "the Serious versus the Absurd", and describing the friends' predicament as "the collapse of belief—belief in anything." (Mahfouz, 1996). This chapter of the book was a critical moment because it sums up the overarching theme of the novel itself. (The use of Samara and the scenario of her notebook was like reaching out to fill the shoes of the reader and breaking the

fourth dimension.) To reinforce this idea, one has to consider the state of affairs of Egypt at the time, a background for the novel.

After the 1952 revolution, there was a massive drive for nationalism. Inequalities in socioeconomic classes had become more apparent and left a lot of Egyptians confused and frustrated. The search for meaning and purpose became lost on them. As a result, many were driven to feel socially alienated. For the characters of the novel then, it wasn't that they were searching for meaning, but felt that the search itself was pointless. Civically speaking, there was turmoil and unrest, which to the characters translated to turmoil and unrest of the soul, mind, and body. Thus, the "collapse of belief—belief in anything."

The novel ends when the group decides to take the car for a drive late at night. Drunk and high, they end up running over someone, and they make a run for it. The following morning it was announced in the papers that a dead person was found by the side of the road, and it belonged to an old peasant man. The friends argue over whether or not to take responsibility, eventually coming to a consensus that they should dismiss the whole crisis because it was "just a peasant" and their reputations and jobs would be at stake. The novel comes to close with them continuing their lifestyles, keeping the accident a secret amongst themselves, and Anis having a troubled monologue contemplating it all. This is Mahfouz's way of exhibiting the agitations of their society while remaining unpreaching.

This outstanding novel was also adapted into a movie. The movie, however, did not do the book justice. It portrayed the characters as more materialistic and lunacy-driven. They were exaggerated for comedic effect, though they were more profound in the novel because of their deep conversations. The accident also took place during the daytime in an open space and made the victim a young, pregnant, peasant girl. The aftermath of the accident did not sink in with the movie characters as much as it did for the characters in the novel, which was a basis for an intense fight and them almost breaking-up. In the movie, they almost immediately went back to partying, and the watchman released the ropes of the houseboat, abandoning them, which did not happen in the book. It seems the aim of the movie was to be more dramatic and lofty, whereas the book was meant to be analytical. The release of the houseboat at the end of the movie, however, was quite symbolic, as it relates more to the English title, *Adrift on the Nile*. The movie seemed to suggest that the characters' lives will forever, both figuratively and literally, be adrift on the Nile.

The novel and Mahfouz's work is relevant to today because he gives credibility to Arab literature. The societal structures and the alienation of his characters represented in his works are not exclusive to Egypt. His fiction reflects real issues, and real perspectives. Moreover, the diversity by which the issues unfold, and varying characters that can be picked up on throughout his novels, humanize both unique and universal values and struggles. This helps break the barrier between the traditional view of the West versus the East. No more just bombs, beards, and belly-dancing!

Writing Prompts via Reedsy

As mentioned in my note, writing prompts have been one of the best ways to get my mind off of the news and to a planet far, far, away. These are some of my favorite writing prompts. We hope to see submissions that use them for June's edition, that we will publish on time! And for more prompts like these and submit to a writing contest, check out what Reedsy is all about!

Comedy

- The dog ate my homework.
- A sudden BANG! and puff of smoke emerged from a garage in a quiet suburban neighbourhood.
- In the midst of writer's block, an author goes to sit at a bus station looking for inspiration. They get more than they bargained for.
- It was the highest stakes game of rock-paper-scissors ever played.
- It was the kind of Friday that gave new meaning to the phrase TGIF.
- Make the absurd absolutely and completely normal.
- That night, the action backstage was even more dramatic than the story unfolding onstage.

Creative Nonfiction

- Write about someone (or something) you loved that you shouldn't have.
- Write about a date that was so terrible you'll never forget it.
- Write about your most unique experience at, or in, a wedding.
- Write about a time when a broken heart led to something you'd never have expected.
- Write about a secret that you've never told to the person you love.

Drama

- Had I known I was going to have guests at 4am, I would've tidied up.
- I'd like to buy a plane ticket to your furthest destination today, you told the airline employee.
- A double agent is assigned by both of the countries they work for to capture their alias.
- A group of travelers are exploring a deep, dark, remote cave when they find a computer and a lunchbox.
- A winter night in the city.
- A writer is fighting with writer's block. They reminisce about the last time in their life they felt inspired.
- As they rode away from their old life, they knew they'd never look back.

Fantasy and Science Fiction

- I remember the last spring. It was 18 years ago.

- I wish I could skip next week, you think as you get into bed that night. In the morning, you wake up 100 years in the future
- They found out about us. They're coming. They were the words the kingdom had feared hearing for thousands of years.
- You're early, said the Grim Reaper, with a hint of surprise.
- I suddenly realized my survival depended on...
- A child has befriended the monster that lives under her bed.
- A day in the life of a ghost.

For Kids

- Write about your favorite birthday present. Why is it your favorite?
- Imagine you owned a pet monkey for a day. What would you do with it?
- If you could have any superpower, what would it be and why?
- Imagine you and your best friend hanging out ten years from now. What has changed? What hasn't changed?
- Write a story about a person who is only one inch tall.
- You're packing your bags to climb the tallest mountain in the world. What do you pack?
- Imagine you became in charge of your school for one full week. What would you do?

Fiction

- A character experiences déjà vu so strong they almost fall over.
- Describe each day of the week as if it were a person. Give each one personality traits, a job, and a goal. Write a story about them.
- This was the weekend you'd been waiting for for the past three years.
- Write a short story that ONLY uses dialogue.
- Write a story about a 100th birthday party.
- Write a story about a misunderstanding.
- Write a story about a plane crash. Your main character is the sole survivor. What happens next?

Historical Fiction

- You had one job, he said to the young squire who had been tasked with delivering a scroll — and failed spectacularly.
- 1930. The travelling circus is in town. The first performance night would be rife with scandal.
- A bard falls in love with the monarch who employs them.
- A duo of time-travelling detectives.
- A family sit around their brand new radio for the first time after dinner.
- A famous historical person packs for a trip.
- A love story between the boy who delivered milk bottles to the neighborhood and the girl who delivered newspapers.

Mystery

- As you're paying for your groceries, you mention to the clerk, There's a mess in aisle 16. They give you a puzzled look and reply, There is no aisle 16.
- Write a story about a character waking up to something completely absurd.
- Write a story about a character waking up to the best news of their life.
- The detective didn't realize they were being foiled by a competing detective.
- The first day you opened your own office as a private investigator, you didn't expect it to be busy. You were wrong.
- You're shaking hands with a stranger at a networking event when you ask for their name. I have no name, they reply.
- A genius serial killer has been killing successfully for a decade. His only weakness is that he can never, ever lie. He finally gets caught and is facing trial for all murders in court. Yet, he walks, acquitted of all charges.

Romance

- A fortuneteller falls in love with their client who has their palm read every month.
- It wasn't love at first sight. But now you were starting to see them in a new light...
- Someone with anxiety falls in love with someone extremely adventurous.
- The lives of two people are changed forever when they coincidentally meet and engage in a weekend-long affair.
- They lived in a world where PDA is forbidden. One day, they slipped up and held hands on the street.
- Two characters who are perfect for one another are foiled by bad timing.
- Two mortal enemies fall in love when they're trapped in an elevator together and begin to see the other person's perspective.

Thriller and Suspense

- Guard this with your life.
- A loved one confides in you, but the secret could damage someone else you care about. What do you do?
- As you're browsing through a rack of sweaters, someone approaches you and says, I need you to listen to me very carefully.
- She has been walking for hours. Her feet are starting to bleed. But she can't stop moving... she can't let him find her again.
- The morning after a blizzard you make your way outside and slowly start to realize everyone has disappeared.
- You find a hand-written note on your windshield that says Drive west for 100 miles.
- You wake up in a jail cell, crusted blood covering your hands. You have no idea how you got there. The cell door clangs open, and an officer walks you to an interrogation room where two detectives wait to question you.

Contributors

Nadia Benjelloun is a poet, novelist, and freelance writer from Tangier, Morocco. She is also an associate editor for Typehouse Literary Magazine. Her works have appeared in Eskimo Pie, The Literary Yard, In Parenthesis Journal, The Scarlet Leaf Review, and forthcoming in DM du Jour. She's also been a feature in Publisher's Weekly Magazine. You can find her previously published titles [here](#).

McKinnon lives in the mountains. He spends his days exploring the rivers, lakes, and trails Southwest of Asheville and his nights writing stories to read to friends. He's thrilled that you've read his work, and earnestly hopes that you have a generally agreeable existence on our little blue spaceship.

Melissa Mark struggled to choose between majoring in creative writing and psychology in college. As a practicing therapist for almost twenty years, she is now exploring her love of writing and hopes it's not a midlife crisis. Melissa has been published by Scary Mommy and is a contributor to City Mom Collective. She lives in Flagstaff, AZ with her husband and two young boys, and is currently working on a novel that has nothing to do with motherhood or raising kids.

Ian Campbell is a writer and has a BA in English, with a Creative Writing emphasis, from Cal State East Bay. Currently, he is reviewing MFA programs. Ian is a Case Manager and works with adults with developmental disabilities. Sometimes his sense of humor is so dry that he has to go back and explain things to those that have actually believed something he has just said in jest. This reflects more upon himself than it does upon them, he assures you.

Kasimma Okani was born and raised in Nigeria. She schooled, worked, married, and is raising her family in Nigeria. She self-published her first set of books—three novellas—at the age of sixteen. Since then, fifteen years later, she has been trying to be an excellent writer. Her dream is to write very strong unforgettable stories that stay with the readers long after the book's been closed. That is why she has made efforts to be a better writer, participating in Chimamanda Adichie's Creative Writing Workshop, 2019; International Writing Workshop, 2019; SSDA flow workshop, 2019. Kasimma has also been a writer-in-resident at Faber, Spain; Wole Soyinka Foundation, Nigeria; Thread, Senegal; and elsewhere.

Edward Sheehy is a writer living in Minneapolis. His short stories have appeared in The Write Launch, an online literary magazine (2019) and in an anthology, Lake Street Stories, published by Flexible Press (2018). Dog Ear Publishing released his novel, Cade's Rebellion, also in 2018. Forthcoming in 2020, a short story in Frontier Tales (online) and two poems in Jerry Jazz Magazine (online). Read more at: www.edwardsheehy.com.