

UNTENURED
ISSUE 2.2



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IRAN AND DEAD RATS

By Nadia Farjami

On the side of the fabricated street that smells like sweet hot photos and dough and rosemary and flickering lights and

The end of the world,

I see a dead rat.

We are in iran.

So many things

Are dead here.

[since the regime got power. girls got their rights removed, peeled by the oily finger of

A man,

Peeled off like

Black

Tights.]

My mother, 19, 20, 21, listens to dead music

And touches her dead hair

And feels her dead rights.

Did you know that she isn't able to

Wear nail polish to school anymore?

Or wear her hair down?

Or high-five boys?

The government hugged her, once, but now

Slaps her.



RE-EVOLVING

By Nadia Farjami

A rapid sensation
And a deathly photographic memory
A devil disguised as a man

And a man disguised as a devil.
How many hours, how many days, and how many
Painful and bloated heartbeats had I looked into your
Eyes and said— “I love you.”

Why I fell.
Why I nearly died.
Why I became skeletal.

I thought you were my
Weakness, but you really
Only opened me up and
Down and made me feel
Weak, anorexic, skeletal,
An unbothered, un-blossoming
Bone, never to believe.



TOUCHING

By Nadia Farjami

A FACE, UNSTOPPABLE,
A force, like
Yours
In my little nub-like window.
Tinted glass and taken ghosts.
My hands reach out to you,
And you run.

A FLING MYSELF
Into the shower to
Wash away my sadness.
You left me quickly
And quietly like it

Never happened.
It never happened.

Cinnamon-laced conditioner
And rose-flavored shampoo
My hair like a impure devil
Yours like the spiteful sun, I know.



The Pearl Makers
By Sara Gorske

It is a strange time for a picnic to begin, though perhaps the timing is not as strange as the fact that the woman has brought six plastic tubs of food and appears to be the only attendee.

Another oddity: she stops beside a cast-iron park bench overlooking the river but she does not sit on it. Instead, she spreads her quilt, a multicolored thing like Joseph's doomed coat, on the ground beside it, where grass spurts up in gasping grayish tufts. Sunset is fast approaching, dyeing the turgid river crimson and gold, purpling the rusting slats of the bench, and the chill in the air is teething, forcing joggers to quicken their pace to reach home before full dark snaps its jaws tight.

Her blanket is so close to the edge of the water that it almost appears to drape into the river, but its hem stays miraculously unmuddied as the woman opens the first of her Tupperware containers.

Here you go, she says as she unpacks a spoon from somewhere. Maybe a secret pocket on the quilt. Delicately, she spoons up bits of some chunky stew and feeds the utensil into the river like it is the mouth of an infant that hasn't yet mastered its prehensile thumbs to feed itself. She repeats the process a few times, humming to herself. Then she sets the dirty spoon aside and opens another container of the same sort and helps herself to what appears to be the same meal. She pauses to smile at the river and gesture like she's making a grand toast to someone, clinking her spoon against something invisible except to her.

You are standing by the parched old willow tree, which some years ago stopped growing green and took on the bleak iron shades of river and sky. You found this spot a while back; it's a good place to wait out the last of the sunlight and the accompanying warmth. There's a gap in the towering office buildings across the water, and the sun pierces straight through to land on this barren strip of land.

Your mother doesn't know you come out here some nights. You've told her you're visiting one schoolmate or another, and she doesn't bother to check in since you're so good at spinning tales of video games and homework sessions, and you're always home before the real dark sets in. She wouldn't like that you've been lying to her, that you come to this place where vagrants and junkies could loiter, but you're just a kid, and this lady doesn't look homeless or high, what with her bright blanket and clean plastic jars.

Come closer.

Her voice startles you into tiptoeing forward before you realize her gaze is on the water and not you. She is murmuring to the lapping wakes of pleasure boats and scows, and she has opened another container. The lady dips her hand in, but she pulls it out clenched around the contents, and the container is opaque so you can't see inside it. She waves her hand, palm up, over the river as if she's getting ready to bless it, to drop in flakes of gold like the explorers of yore all thought was already in the water.

What are you doing, you think, and she turns to look at you. Oops. Your mother is always saying to keep your thoughts inside your head.

Feeding the duckies.

There are no ducks here.

You just have to look a little closer.

She points with her free hand and you feel yourself drawn forward like a fish on a reel. You look out over the river and the bank, even the empty bench, but apart from the chittering of a few early crickets, there are no signs of life, avian or otherwise.

See, she says as you squat beside her.

You look at her palm, where chunks and crumbs of bread are clustered. She's crazy, you think, or maybe you say.

See.

The flakes are drifting up from her palm; small indents appear as tongues or beaks shuffle through to find the choicest morsels, lifting them up before they disappear down invisible gullets.

See the duckies.

You imagine bodies forming, yellow beaks first, rooting in the lady's hand for snacks, then glossy heads, onyx eyes, wings and feathers slick from the water and whatever contaminants live in it. You can envision their feet, paddling back and forth to stay stable in the river's current.

How. A question, but not one, because there can be no answer, because there can be no how.

The woman smiles faintly and points at you. Duckies come to me.

For a moment, wild stories play out in your head like the animated fables the teachers made you watch last year in school. The woman's finger is a wand and she is a witch, she is turning you into an invisible duckling and your mother will never find you because your body isn't yours and isn't even visible and you will spend your days getting fat on her cracker crumbs like they're a candy house and then one day she'll put you in a cage and fatten you up to eat you but there will be no sister to save you and you'll end up on the spit and you really should have gone home before dark.

Then you're in your body, fingers and T-shirt intact, cheeks a riot of red because you hope you didn't say that out loud.

The woman proffers the open Tupperware container. The crumbs inside look like sprinkles of fairy dust in a casket of wonder and—whatever—you plunge your hand in and hold your cupped hand forth over the river.

Gentle nibbles and nudges scrape your hand like your mother's fingers on your scalp after a bath. You want to laugh but you worry the lady will think you're laughing at her, and why wouldn't

you, if you had been the you of ten minutes before? But now you're on the clownish blanket too and you're picnicking with ducks that may or may not exist.

Why can't I see them?

You can. All lost duckies recognize each other.

The woman taps her breastbone, the space above her heart.

You cannot see a person's heart, either, but you know it is there all the same.

The blue has nearly bled from the sky and the lights in the office windows are lighthouse beacons marking the shore of the city. They drown out the stars but you still have your sense of navigation, and like a sailor you know it is time to return home. The duck lady still has more unopened food but you remember how she fed the river, how it slurped down the stew into a fathomless stomach, and you don't want to stick around to see if worse things than the ducks emerge from the water.

You run home without saying goodbye.

###

You eye the riverbank each time you pass it, but it seems less mysterious in the sunlight. You never see the ducks, and you never see the lady again, though perhaps that is because you don't venture near the water around dusk anymore. Actually, you don't wander around anywhere anymore. The duck lady had said you were lost, and you didn't like the sound of the word applied to you: the emptiness of the 'o', the swish of the 's' like the hungry river carrying you away to lands unknown.

Your mother sees that you're making an effort to stay home, and she makes a reciprocal effort to keep you: handing you the wooden spoon so you can stir the pasta boiling away over the blue gas flames, promising to get you the console you've told her all the cool kids at school have. But she can't stay alone with just you for too long, and soon enough there's a new man around the

house, one who tries to be nice to you, not like the last one, but all the same he enters like scissors, fraying the fragile tie between you and her again.

Darling.

Love.

The words slice through the veil over your mother's face and she is beaming, but the fabric is falling over your own light, dimming it so much you feel the bulb might shatter under the weight of all the constricting layers.

The cloak of the sky is falling over the shoulders of the world like a king cladding himself in regal purple when you make your way back to the duck lady's picnic spot. She isn't there, nor is her blanket, so you sit on the iron bench and let the last absorbed dregs of sunlight travel through your thighs. After your mother made your dinner, the kind man dropped by in a suit whose elbows had seen better years, and you realized your mother was wearing her best dress, the one she hadn't worn since your father died.

There's your dinner, Do your homework, See you later.

A smile, one for you and one for the kind man.

You pick at the food now as you balance the plate on your knees. The bread is ricotta-soft but tastes like nothing, and you hurl the heel of it into the river.

Before it hits the surface, its trajectory arrests. Then it disappears.

You scramble down to the riverbank, heedless of the way the scraggly grass scrapes your feet when they slip out of your sandals. Holding out your hand, you wait.

A feeling like a wet beak caresses your hand and you smile. You remember the plate of food—do ducks eat meatballs? Probably not—so you return to the bench for the plate and the bread. You divvy it up into crumbs. Your hand trembles as you reach it out over the river again, but

the ducks know you're here now, and they're greedy. How long has it been since the woman came to feed them?

You reach for another handful of crumbs but the bread is all gone. A glug from the river as it exits some eroded hole under the bank makes the sound your stomach feels like it should as it drops. The ducks are silent as well as invisible, but you can imagine their honking, and it sounds like them chastising you the way your mother did after your father's death and you had to pick up some of the chores—not mad, just disappointed in something that you couldn't live up to be. Sullenly, you pick up one of the meatballs, the sauce congealed around it, and you lob it into the water, arcing it high so you don't smack a duck in the head.

A hole opens in the water right before the meatball plunks in, so it is swallowed with a slurp and no splash.

The phantom quacks of the ducks ring in your ears all the way home.

A ring sparkles on your mother's finger and smiles flash across her face with no provocation. She used to smile like that when she thought of your father.

You wonder if the river would swallow that diamond whole or if it would spit it out, the jewel too pristine for the grimy water to even touch.

###

As the wedding day draws nearer, you visit the river more often. You dare it to swallow what you throw at it—the leftovers from the fancy dinner your mother makes for the kind man, which it guzzles down, the stale crackers your mother hasn't replaced for you, which are swallowed with a questioning gulp, an old baseball you used to play catch with your father. You regret throwing the ball as soon as it's left your hand, and the river either senses your mistake or isn't willing to consume something so clearly inedible, because it washes up next to your feet, the stitches still their faded red, the white leather parched into gray bone underneath the grass stains.

There's a power in taunting the river when you're drowning everywhere else on the solid ground.

Congratulations.

You must be so happy.

Won't it be nice to have a family again.

The words are repeated so often you're up to your ears, and you can't take a breath for fear the platitudes will run down your throat and lodge in your mind as fact, telling you you're safe when you're starving for oxygen under the surface.

You haven't fed the ducks in a long time.

###

The morning pulls up in full splendor for the wedding, releasing its guests of honor: a soft breeze, a warm sun, a few stray wispy clouds.

The kind man is anxious as he stands in front of the garden arch, but his smile relaxes when your mother sashays down the aisle in a simple summer gown. The piano music lilts, the bridesmaids weep, and everyone gasps and sighs when lips touch and the garden seems to bloom brighter. You look away at that moment, though, so you don't register the pink and white roses opening their petals to soak in the couple's radiance. Your eye snags instead on a scrap of quilt dangling over an old woman's legs.

She is sitting in the back row with the blanket draped over herself, as if she has both settled in to brace the nonexistent cold and is ready to escape out the back at any second. It is the duck lady, and she winks at you.

When all the guests stand to congratulate your mother and the kind man, when the caterers start to drag the chairs into position around hastily erected tables, you shove through the crowd toward the old woman. Your head is just high enough that you can't scoot beneath elbows and arms

any longer, and you jostle a few bodies swathed in voluminous gowns and those ridiculous cummerbund things the men use to hold their fat bellies in. The duck lady is up and moving too, but she glides between the other attendees like she's drifting along a smooth current. In her wake, you find it easier to move, but harder to slow down when you realize she is exiting the venue. You glance back but you cannot see your mother, and she doesn't seem to need you. If you escape now, maybe you can avoid being shoved into one of the pictures the cameraman has to take of the family, one of the ones that will never make the wall because what are you but a distraction from the happy couple?

You follow the duck lady all the way to the river. She has spread the quilt out on the bank and waves at you to come sit.

Why are you still lost, duckie?

I'm not lost. No one wants me.

The duckies want you.

She opens her hand; she holds seeds and crumbs. You snatch them up and throw them blindly toward the river.

Now, now. Duckies can't get food if they're chasing after it. They come if you give. And you give because they come.

She hands you more duck feed, and you take it more cautiously this time. You flip your palm to the sky and wait.

A beak pokes at your finger and nibbles. Then more, until your hand is peppery with pecks.

The seeds are gone, but the birds keep scrounging, and you try to yank your hand back, but something seizes your fingers and you're being dragged down the bank.

Help me!

You have to give if you want more.

Your hand is in the marsh reeds, then your face. You suck in a breath before your head is pulled under and your body follows, dragged down by the weight of the fancy starched clothing you put on this morning.

But the water is not drowning you. It is opening, swirling into a whirlpool with you at the center, but you aren't circling with it. The water closes above your head and you see that beneath the surface, it is not so murky as you thought. A pocket of air encloses you, but your fingers are stretched out into the blue beyond, still clasped by the ducks' beaks.

Which are not beaks, but finned hands attached to fishy feathery beings that look like the hybrid mythical creatures you doodled in kindergarten. The creatures are neither male nor female, fish nor human nor bird, but they have faces and you recognize kindness there. It is the same expression on your new stepfather's face, the one he makes when he asks what you like to do and you respond in silence. Befuddlement is added into the equation but doesn't subtract out the genuineness. The beings tug you along until you enter a grotto which your senses tell you is beneath the city, but that can't be because the river has to end somewhere.

Glittering blue stones decorate the walls and the ceiling, stylized into waves that are somehow also hands and tails and wings. The water twists into currents you can see, because each thread of water is painted a dazzling shade of aqua or violet or deepest indigo, and they coil around the beings and the other strands in a way that defies nature but could never be mistaken as manmade. A magnificent throne occupies the chamber, and seated on it is the duck lady. Her quilt has transformed into a cape made of fluttering multicolored seaweed strands. On her head is a crown of pale stones, glassy green hunks smoothed into ovules. Maybe she would have liked your mother's ring, before it became bound to her finger by the words at the altar.

Hello, young giver.

You do not say anything, because suddenly you realize your mother was right, that the spot by the river was dangerous. Wait. She never said that. You found the spot on your own, right? She never forbade you from coming here; the reason you never brought it up was because of her general caution, not specifically tied to the bank by the bench.

What do you have to give me, for me to give back to you?

Nothing.

She cocks her head. You have yourself, do you not?

Panic flares spidery legs in your gut, but then the river queen laughs in the manner of river creatures. Translucent bubbles shoot out of her mouth and catch the gleam of the gemstones, which reflect abstract constellations back onto the walls of the chamber.

Do not worry, dear duckling. You have already given to the river enough. Just one more sacrifice is required.

Sacrifice?

A memory for a memory.

She blows another bubble at you. It pops through into your cocoon of air and bursts. Scent, brine and earth, fills your nostrils and the colors of land rise up in front of your eyes before your tears blur them out. The memory slots into your mind, a book returned to its rightful place on the shelf where before there had been an empty space devoid of words.

The river queen stares at you sorrowfully.

I took this memory many years ago in exchange for a life lost, but instead you became lost, too. If you wish it removed once more, I will do so, but you will forever wander in search of it.

You can visualize the scene: the dying man, water starting to clog his lungs and steal his voice. Only his eyes can speak, but he does not see the beauty, only the filth and horror and the shadow of an otherworldly face. He cannot see the underwater kingdom, but if goodness can exist in

the smog and fumes above, he knows there must be a chance here, too. He begs the river queen with his eyes. Not for his life, but another's.

The scene fades into the new—no, the old—memory and like the tide, you can't separate a before and after because it is all one saga. Your story.

Why didn't she save him too, you want to scream, and maybe you spoke it, or maybe thoughts can wing through magic waters like birds, because the river queen answers.

Though we are forgotten, we are still bound by the laws of the world as you are. As he was. Do you want this gift?

It is hardly a gift, and yet it is because you feel yourself righting around the shape of the memory.

Yes.

The river stirs, the eddy swirling up around your bubble of air until your sight is obscured by a dervish of silver streams that remind you of water flicking off the wings of a bird as it takes flight. You glimpse the faces of the river creatures, see their webbed hands reach for you as they did when you thought they were just ducks. Then they are gone, and you are sitting on the spit of land, your feet dangling in the water but your hair and clothing dry.

The river queen's cloak in its blanket disguise has vanished, and all your mother sees when she races out of the garden is you, staring out over the river as the sun retreats to its bed on the horizon. She does not wonder at the oddity of a sunset river visit, though she does gasp in fear when she sees you so close to the edge. She gathers you up and you cling to her, though your eyes are still locked on the river, the last place you saw your father.

He was paddling the little canoe, clutching you in your toddler-size life vest between his knees. An eight-man crew team passed you both, and he pointed at them, showing you the smooth,

parallel strokes in perfect tandem. You laughed when he imitated the coxswain barking orders, your uncoordinated legs and arms flailing.

You knocked the paddle out of his hand and he lunged for it. The canoe flipped. The current beneath the surface was strong and you were small and it sucked you down, down, down. Your father kicked his legs and swam for you and hoisted you up but you were both too deep, and you couldn't hold your breath any longer, the first fright of instinct crescendoing into the fear of the human fate you somehow knew you were too young for.

He saw the river queen. He begged her. She saved you, but only you. And she gave you one more gift, or what she thought was one.

The river spat you onto the shore and you glanced around, bewildered at why you were wearing the fluorescent jacket on dry land. Something had happened, but you did not know what it was. Your father was gone, and your mother could not speak of it, and you could not remember it, and like an oyster creating a pearl around an imperfection, nacre hardened around the nugget of missing memory until what should not have been was regarded as beauty.

So brave.

So lucky.

So strong, to carry on.

In your mother's arms now, you cry. The tears are the last gift of the river queen, for they had been stolen along with your memory. Your mother weeps too, and somewhere along the way you are both crying no longer because of the past, but because you are holding each other, because the beautiful thing born from ugliness is still precious and will never be lost again.

You and she stand and look out over the water, where the triangular wakes of motorboats are lit up pink and orange, neon arrows pointing out and away and forward. You hold out your hand

and wave, and in the last instant before you pull your hand back to clasp your mother's, an invisible palm presses itself to yours.

I'll come back, you promise.

What was that, darling?

You look up at your mother, her updo mussed and the ribbons on her dress windswept and tangled.

Let's go back.

No. That's not the right sentiment. You trawl through your mind, trying to trap the right words. Then there they are, the sand of years swept away to reveal what you need to say.

Let's keep going.



Cold Coffee
By Scott Taylor

Morias curled his serpentine tail and swayed underneath the black, empty sky. He was akin to spires of white glass in the distance, reaching for the invisible god of their quiet city. The city once had a name, but there was no point in that anymore. Morias basked in the warmth of his friend's home, and the thought of that friend.

Much of the city was smooth, reflective, and shaped itself in mimicry of long-forgotten geography. The ever-connected edifice of it all caught the light of the spires; only every couple of centuries did that light recede, a moment of true sleep to receive the power of the quiet god. This dimming had come decades early, a surprise to all. A few moments ago, it had passed.

Morias now faced a problem that had plagued him for more than seven thousand years: his coffee was cold again.

Every day started with kind intentions. Choosing between more or less coffee, Morias just couldn't bear to deny any one ounce the chance to be experienced. But there he reclined, on another day, with half the cup remaining. He peered into its pale-brown depths. In truth, he didn't understand any of its constituent parts, only how they related to him and his tongue. Sweetness, fullness, bitterness, they emerged as if from nothing. What *was* coffee? Maybe if he made himself finish the last of this mug, he'd finally understand.

Before he could ponder that truth, a coiling bracelet around one of his many arms sparked to life, and his calm smile shattered. He didn't believe for the first few seconds what shone in the device's projected light, as it reconnected to his life's work. It was a simple alert: for the first time since the city's creation, a message had arrived from beyond the dead sky.

People walked the streets, even if Morias passed only very few. Most wore bodies long removed from any concept of necessity or crude evolution. They almost seemed to belong in their beautiful city. As the millennia had dragged on, others had receded into soft, simple, jelly bodies like Morias's friend Oobl's. They had very little in the way of notable features, maybe a pair of lopsided eye-stalks or an especially wide perambulation-mantle if they were particularly daring. Sometimes Morias felt himself a monster around them, but figured he was in good company. Today, though, a distance separated him from them all.

He resisted the urge to rush to his receiver tower. His fingers, trembling, were petrified. He relied only on the inertia of his body to carry him.

Morias' own form was a melange of beasts and myths, though he couldn't get most people to listen when he rambled about the universe's endless list of extinction. To most, he was simply a heavy, incoherent mess of scales, fur, horns, eyes, limbs, and features that didn't even have names anymore. He was connected to this old universe, wearing the bodies that it had so meticulously crafted, so perhaps it was right that it should reach out to him?

He began to pass one long street, and turned an enrapt eye to the left, onto the borough that he couldn't see. Parts of the city were as utterly, horrifically dark as the empty sky above. Perhaps the people who first made those places were trying to appease the cold universe, or wanted to be ready for when the last lights went out. The modern denizens couldn't – or wouldn't – say. Ordinarily, it sent a shiver down his spine. But compared to the message even this darkness was familiar.

He arrived at the tower of his work, but paused as he met his companion in the great search, Tani. She was a swarm of diminutive hovering machines, which she claimed each had a unique purpose, despite all evidence to the contrary. Tani was utterly still. Had she received the same message?

As he approached, Morias noticed that her machines were pointed upwards, staring. He followed suit, and nearly collapsed beneath her.

Their tower was meant to be crowned with a bright blue receiver array for every form of faster-than-light communication recorded in the exponential mind-paths of all the sedentary historians. And yet, as they looked, it simply was not there.

“Tell me what has happened to it,” Tani demanded. Her voice flowed, engrossing and the sheer definition of synthetic.

“It can’t just disappear.” Morias tried to piece together an explanation. It couldn’t have fallen. And yet, its supports at the tower’s crest were gone as well, unfastened. “Someone must have taken it.”

“None others have use for it!” Tani protested.

Morias’s mind burned. Aside from the spirelings who harvested energy from the quiet god, nobody besides them pursued anything beyond city limits. “Who? And where to?” His many hands wrung each other as he muttered to himself. He was supposed to be searching.

Tani spoke with finality, “Someone sent us *the message!* What if we’ve missed it?” Her machines, usually quiet but for the air they disrupted, whined and hissed with exertion.

The thought of their search ending here made Morias’s veins hurt with the pressure of his blood, but with the little breath he could manage, he found something to cling to, the next beacon in the eternal night. “The array always keeps a backup. We search.”

Morias and Tani asked every living being on their little street what they had seen. And yet, not the people who sat content in their jelly bodies, nor the ones who etched their selves onto nano-planes of crystal and circuitry like Tani, nor those who shaped themselves into long, coiling, artistic shapes knew anything of what happened. Every one of them had been secured away with one another for the dimming.

Tani had degraded. She was suspended in her anger as much as in the air, and when they finished questioning even those residents of their street who had not seen another creature for two centuries, she swarmed herself in a great ring and looked in all directions at once. “We must scour every centimeter of what remains of creation. Even to the great lights of the quiet god—even to the bed of the quiet god itself. The future cannot be abandoned!”

And then, without warning, one of Tani’s machines dropped from the aether. It clinked against the metal foundation of the building on which Morias had curled his lower half, and the whirring within it became soft and stuttered.

Morias stared for a moment at the brand new sight, lost for thoughts. An instinct he didn’t understand sparked in his chest. He reached out and took Tani’s machine from the ground; when its little spindly limbs curled around his fingers, he seemed to forget his normal distaste for them, and clutched the small form of being to his chest, as if the warmth from muscle, blood, and fat could repair a creature of hard silica and platinum. “Tani, I don’t think you would make it long enough for that search. Not like this.”

“Many have taken the task of seeing all of the city. It took the fastest of them centuries, and we don’t know if we have minutes,” she continued, undeterred, “but they were aimless; I will spread all one hundred of me—”

“Ninety-nine,” Morias interrupted her.

“What?”

“Ninety-nine of you.” Morias lifted the broken machine like a figure of some religion that once mattered, and slowly the humming swarm of Tani coalesced in front of him.

She was silent, and the broken machine calmed down to a simple, cycling *click*, as it twitched. “What? How is that possible?”

Morias set the machine on his shoulder, where its legs clung to him. “None of my body’s parts were meant to work with one another. But even those without my fault lines can break under the right pressure.”

“Your romance with imperfection doesn’t make you wise,” she murmured and set her swarm of machines to rest beside Morias.

The two remained still, only the sound of Morias’s breath keeping utter silence at bay. Morias gazed down the empty street. He lifted his coffee cup to his mouth; why couldn’t it just be warm? “We should fix your little machine.”

“We don’t have time,” Tani said. There were potentially billions of years left to them, but with each minute that passed, the infinitesimal chance of another civilization reaching out across the void became ever more remote. What if this was not just the first message, but the last?

“We have to keep searching, at the pace of two creatures.” Morias lifted himself from the wall, though he didn’t turn his head. He stared across the street, past shining metal buildings, and into the stretch of darkness that stood a few blocks behind their barren tower. He swallowed a lump in his throat. “I suppose, not all creatures would hide from the dimming, would they?”

Though the sheer darkness left Morias with the hammering of his hearts in his ears, he could still touch; his fingers, cold and trembling, could still grasp the world and follow the sharp thrum of air from Tani’s wings.

They wandered the dark place, from its surface to far below, then an ascent to a crest of dizzying spirals, and back to the surface layer as if it was all the same. Smooth metal and glass cooled Morias’s slithering form, and his fingers found many pleasant indents and smooth little loops in which they could curl and comfort him.

He supposed that, if he could see this place, his stomachs would have dropped many times from the heights and depths they achieved. But guided only by touch, there was only the descent and only the ascent, and a slight calm approached his body.

Other beings touched Morias and Tani on their journey, warm bodies, cold bodies, wet, dry, small, tremendously large, and though Morias was used to a great variety of forms around him, he somehow imagined that in this place where he couldn't see them, they must have been so much more beautiful and horrifying than those that walked in the light.

Tani asked every person the same question, "where are the lights?" But for most of their journey, nobody even understood what she meant.

They stopped finally in the center of the dark space, where those lights of the city shone from so far away that they were a halo on the horizon, marked every so often by the point of a white glass spire. But one stretch of that light was gone here, blocked by something enormous right in front of them. The being was barely more than a silhouette, a great garden of swaying and mingling tendrils that had shape only so long as the city light far beyond them framed their sides. However, the remnant shimmer of city lights caught on that garden, in its eyes, eyes without number, which now beheld Morias and Tani.

The voice that emerged was rudimentary, as if made as an afterthought. "I have seen you both before, king-of-the-legless-things, recursive-swarm."

"My name is Tani," Tani said, hot on the edge of her words.

Morias didn't bother giving his name; The Garden seemed happy with their version, and he didn't want to take that away from them. "You watch the lights, then? You know of their people, their happenings?"

“I *know* their people. I know you.” They turned their many eyes on Morias, in a strange intimacy. “There you are, with your mug. But then, something’s changed. I’ve never seen you here before.” A hint of anxiety glimmered in those dark eyes. “You look no different.”

“Of course something’s changed!” Tani droned in two concentric rings, becoming like one great eye that looked down on The Garden. “And you know what! Our receiver array, who has taken it?”

“No such thing.” They said, no more malice or conflict behind their voice than a calm breath.

“Why are we wasting our time here?” Tani demanded. “They’re as thoughtless as the city itself! All they do is sit and watch, and somehow, know nothing of use!”

“I’ve never been thoughtless,” The Garden murmured.

Morias balked at Tani’s cruelty, but her machines were twitching. And she wasn’t completely wrong. “Tani,” Morias began softly, “Perhaps they don’t speak much. Less so a creature of words, you know?”

Tani hovered near the broken machine still clutching to Morias’s shoulder in the dark. She was a being of speech, uninterested in the softness of the city. She stared at Morias’s yielding, tactile form, and after a quiet moment she disappeared into the air as if there was only the black sky above. Morias’s ears were all that remained between them, catching the faintest hiss of her machines, waiting far above where she could be alone with her thoughts.

Morias took a breath, suddenly reminded of his nature as a creature of bright places, now that he was alone with The Garden. “It was the top of our tower, made of narrow shapes, colored bright blue.” Morias had chosen that color himself; many of the endless extinct worlds that once harbored life had skies of that shade when their stars still burned.

“Yes. The jagged ring. I’ll ask you not to name it to me again.”

“Did you see who took it?” Morias took a quiet sip of his coffee while he mulled over the possibilities. None made sense.

The Garden’s silhouette form wavered, grasping and releasing the far-distant lights of the city. “They were taller than you, taller than I. Their limbs drifted, and every crease on their transparent skin cast light. They carried it into the only bright place in the sky.”

A creature of the spires? “I have never been to the quiet god before.” Morias tried to steady his breath. He looked to the sky, to ask if he should make a second array and embrace his search anew. But he found only the sound of Tani, and the soft pressure of the drone’s broken little legs relying on him.

The Garden’s next words sliced through his concerned thoughts, “I do not ask why my sights in the distance are there. The towers, the structures, the little moving things like you, they simply are. But I cannot imagine that one of my sights is gone now. *Why* is it so?”

Morias paused, but he knew the answer well. “Have you ever seen a light from the sky above? Any glimmer of life from the void?”

“Never,” they answered without a moment’s thought.

“We’ve heard the call of something alive, out in that deepest darkness, caught in our blue ring. But before we could listen, it was taken from us.”

The Garden didn’t answer with the wonder that Morias had expected. “Are you certain that you *want* to hear what that message is?” Their eyes spread out to the far-distant city lights, and above, to the even farther nothingness.

“We’ve been searching for seven hundred years.” Morias’s hearts quickened, and his stomachs dropped out from under him at the weight of this day.

The Garden drove that weight deeper within him. “Once you have heard that message, it will never be anything else to you than something as dead as what it is. Is that worth it?”

Tani would have answered yes, without doubt. As for Morias, well, why had he started this search in the first place? Had it really become background radiation to him? He took a long drink of his coffee, and still couldn't understand its nature. "Thank you, friend." He stroked the broken machine in his care and called out to Tani.

Perhaps she would give him the strength of conviction to walk into the cradle of their god.

Morias followed Tani out of the dark place. He'd told of The Garden's thoughts, and his friend had grown so quiet it unnerved him.

As they crossed the surface of the city, nearing its edge and the pathway to the quiet god, he couldn't contain himself anymore. "What do you think, Tani? Do you think we'll find what we're looking for? What if we really do? What then?" Morias looked up, trying to spy another creature in the city who didn't know where they were going to be tomorrow.

"We will know what to do," Tani answered, not with the calm of the city and its comfortable creatures but something from the times before, when there was yet more to build. "We have been searching because the truth will have been worth it."

Morias held his own arms. "I never thought that our searching needed to be justified."

"Not the search." Tani led him further, until the dark sky opened before them. "Why is it, nothing has ever been made taller than the white glass spires?"

"I've never come up with an answer for it," Morias said, quietly.

Tani's machines turned to him. "Morias," She pinned him down with the gaze of ninety-nine selves, "please, tell me you've asked the question before."

He yearned to reach out and answer the desperation in her voice. But he couldn't lie to her.

"This is why we must hear the message." Tani's passion had cooled, but weighed down on her so terribly that she might have been crushed against the street.

It was a long journey to the bed of the quiet god. Only one path led there, a great platform that was adorned with millennia of melted metal candles, murmuring mendicants whose bodies stretched out and rested on the cool surface, and reflections from the unmatched fingers of energy that stretched between the city and its god's slumber.

Not a soul spoke to Morias or Tani. Some who came to this place never returned, and others didn't return the same. But they were not there for the god or its impossible countenance. Morias sipped the last of his coffee, and wondered if next time he might try warming it up again.

The quiet god never came into view, for that was simply impossible. It was not darkness, but an everything so complete that nothing could be known of it; the fingers of energy bent in life-giving arcs between million-mile planes of shining fabric, fed by the endless dancing spin of the god.

In exchange for the light and warmth of the city, all it asked in return was the material of the universe, matter that had grown cold and still. The spirelings waited for them at the consoles of the quiet god's bed, their transparent skin shining like their white glass. But within, their bodies carried structures and systems. Moiras could name none of them, but he doubted they could have named any of his.

He stood steadfast with Tani while she spoke, "That message was not yours to take from us."

Most of them didn't make a sound, merely looking at one another and pulsing their skin with flashes of color. Only one crossed the polished stone and opened their mouth. They simply sounded like their body would imply, ethereal and plain. "Would you be content, Tani, if we lied to you? We could claim that we know nothing of your message, that it must be elsewhere." They extended one arm, which grew spontaneously from their dignified torso. "Your search would never end. Eternity, as you have chosen it."

Morias's eyes swam at such a wonderful offer. Tani's broken drone held tight to him, and he kept his mouth shut, understanding or not.

"The search will end, today or when the quiet god gives up the last of its strength." Tani's words flowed from her, following a mental path that must have been rubbed smooth by their constant passage over centuries. "Give us the end we've found."

The spireling moved its arm in a great sweeping motion, and the aether around them took on a mess of color, falling into itself until, miraculously, it formed into the images of people. Jelly, machine, eyeless, many-legged, and those that resembled mere abstract geometries rather than living creatures, they moved around Morias and Tani in a gravitational well of being.

There was something so similar about all of them, despite forms as disparate as the universe once was.

"Do you think the city wants your search to end?" The spireling asked.

"What else is the point?" Tani demanded of these masters of light. "Look! They are, all of them, lost!"

Morias watched the drift of their bodies, the calm in their steps, and the gentle truth of their intent. Every life playing out in the light was one of meandering.

"Your friend Morias understands the good in this." The spireling turned their gaze on him. "The universe is calm, and so are us all. The truth is that we are all that remains, regardless of what you found in that message. Why would you fight? Do you think, Tani, that anyone here is unhappy?"

Morias looked for something in the spireling's eyes, a spark of divinity or wisdom. What waited for him was just as they had said: the truth. Of course, they were right. Morias *was* happy. He could keep searching until the background heat of the universe was constant, and the city would

never be anything except for what it was right then. “I want to see what Tani sees,” Morias answered.

“Tell us where you’ve hidden our message.” A warmth grew in Tani’s voice, not certainty, not at all, but trust. “It’s our choice to hear it.”

“And what of everyone else?” The spireling wasn’t looking at the images of the people. “They cannot even walk the streets when we dim the light of our spires. If we cannot gather energy for the city without sending them to hide in their hallowed homes, how can you show them a message from beyond us all?”

“Let me ask you, the one who knows so much about us,” Morias ventured, “if we’re all creatures of calm and habit down to our bones, how will one message from a universe away change anything?”

The spireling’s skin flushed with stark color, while the rest of their kin offered only calm violet on their own forms; Morias might not have known their language of colors, but he was well familiar with the calm of certainty in a living body. The spireling who spoke might have fought with Morias and Tani, but they relented in the face of disagreement from their own.

“It sits on the altar of the quiet god,” they admitted, “waiting to be fed past the singularity.”

Tani left then, without another word for the spirelings. Morias found the same boldness within himself.

They arrived at the center of the god’s bed, a stretch of genuine stone, rough, dull, and sublime on the sensitive scales of Morias’s tail. The final shards of broken planets sat upon this bed, waiting in offering to the quiet god. Morias ran his hands on those strange rocks and wondered if life had ever called them home. But his eyes wandered along with Tani’s, and in all the reach of this marble bed, there was only a single point of bright blue.

“Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to stand here during the dimming.” Morias gazed up at the singularity, defined only by its crown of life. “The bending light must be bright enough to imagine a star.” He sighed. “I think the spireling was right. Nobody would dare to look upon it, even from the city streets.”

“I would, if you asked me to.” Tani’s machines thrummed around the receiver array, already connecting to it. They projected words into the aether, as she found the signal from beyond the sky. “The dimming didn’t drive you to your *own* home. Besides, you’re here aren’t you?”

Morias took a moment to wonder what was on that transmission, to hold endless possibilities in his mind before the dawn. They would share that moment many times over with the city, and after, the wonder of what the message meant. “Do you want to guess what the universe has to say?” He asked.

“I imagine it will be anything but silence.” Tani played the transmission, on her little speakers, in a field of forgotten earth.

END



Brown Spots
By Crystal Pierce

The dermatologist's gloved hands slid over my face quickly as she examined my skin. Suddenly, she clicked her tongue in disapproval.

"These brown spots on your cheek are harmless, but if you wanted to remove them to smooth out your complexion, it would be easy. They are genetic" she told me.

Then I remember where I saw my spots before.

"No, Thank you" I said

"They aren't mine. They belong to my grandmother"



Nothing Held Us From Death
By Amy Moore

Astride miniature gondolas of wood,
we flung ourselves from the brink of adult-
hood; our hands loosely grasping metal bars,
our feet on wooden planks where we should

prey to desire's irresistible heat;
we refused to hold tight to the earth's
relentless pull. We cleaved the indecent
edge, hardily fools to fate's reckoning.

have sat: we peer into the black night,
overflowing with unspoken hopes.
We could fall at any moment, lose
our grips; we're drunk anyways on home

brew, *samogon* from a Mason jar. But
it's not Mason in Ukrainian, just
some other cliché of archaic glass
jar tucked into Andrei's jacket pocket.

Restless strays, we rove the glistening
streets; unparented, we abandon our-
selves to unruly whims. Perched on the
apex, we glimpse futures unspent be-

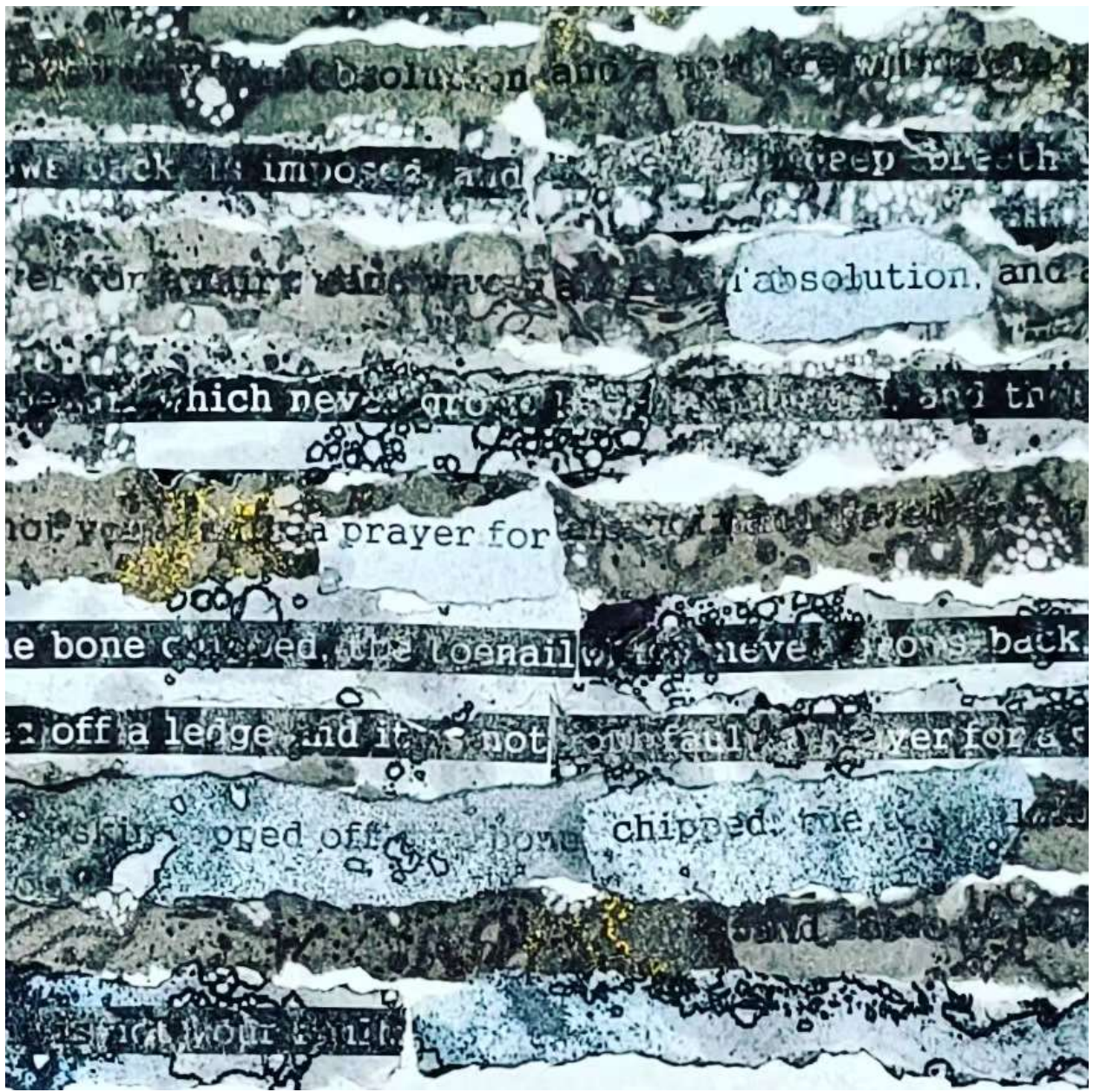
fore plummeting down; then back up where
we stare past one another, into
the starless sky. Our burnt throats no longer
wish to call out to those we left below.

What we don't know—not flight, but height—
will
expose the pattern lightly traced. We raced
spring into summer; the *elektrichka*
trundled us to the forest and we slung

our ancient rucksacks, followed the old path
away from real life. Setting up tents (we'd
been assigned the role) while the boys,
because they were men, gathered firewood.

We believed in the canvas myth, shelter
from harm; we had no need for fire
other than desire. But they did not
return, our boy-men seeking wood to burn.

Only the trees witnessed his fall, silently
mocking the one who dared to seek dead-
wood snared high above; genius so
mercilessly rewarded. Each of us



Border Artifacts
By Amy Moore

Dawn rain tiptoes, earth parts her creosote curtain:
pungent artichoke, desert sage imbue the air,
thick with memories. Dry earth spits a profusion
of unspoken names sown through arid histories.

Hot winds of memory skitter cross the dry earth
caught in plastic sacs momentarily aloft;
sand whirlwinds exhaled pasts, spinning solitary
dervishes beyond the edge of perception.

Seeds buffeted by hot gusts, shallowly rooted
plantlings; shed facets of self now sand artifacts:
laceless shoes, mouths agape & parched tongues silenced;
abandoned packs, replete with loss, litter the earth.

Dust memories fill the air; quiet ghosts tiptoe
into thornbush brambles, hoping to snare themselves:
fragile survival for the deracinated.

how do you recall the moment after a crime you don't remember? how can you ever call it a crime if you can't remember it happening? how do you know what happened?

I remember why up with you passed yours in
I was sleeping on the side as I often do,
I was barely awake. I heard you tell me - question,
I heard your dog say no, was it that wasn't she
I said no. I didn't say yes. I was Mrs.
I said after it happened. He said yes.
She said well, didn't exactly say yes that
the dog you're looking in a mirror

you have that
little respect
for me -
I'm
satisfied
you think
you've
no more you
and you
get the
back out



1716 Purdue Ave, Apt 201
Oct. (or Nov?) 2020

In some
I don't say
I know you
for what
I'm sorry

how do you recall the moment
after a crime if you can't
call what happened a crime?

We invited wildfire to our home
By Amy Moore

*Come, we told her, be our guest—
please, eat your fill, take it all,*

a lifetime gathered in closets
too tired to close their eyes

to the mess of disappointments
and torn out knees; *please—*

We imagined wildfire
in a race against herself;

flame fingers prying, parting
dust-web curtains: exposing;

fire lips nibbling, snacking
on stacks of good intentions,

smacking her greedy lips,
satiated by our

pedestrian hopes: dirt-smudged
wooden train tracks; docile silks

and linens awaiting
happier days, scratch that,

evenings not toppled by
exhaustion and unmet wants;

novel labyrinths whispering,
constantly, on their shelves;

smug notebooks quiet beneath
mottled covers; carefully

annotated recipes,
chronicle births/deaths/divorces/

reconciliations—

we begged wildfire, take
it all, liberate us from

a lifetime stashed in a drawer
the guests won't see, forgotten

citations for crimes suffered
unto the other;

We demanded wildfire,
divest us of a lifetime

of failed expectations,
malignant documents filed

away for another day;
dun rainbows scraped beneath

sagging doors; crenellated
roses blooming in shocked walls;

silenced windows, staring
senselessly outward—

we held our breath, emptied
our stale lifetime from our lungs,

inhaled her cigarette breath,
even that— we imagined

sage lace, delicate stems, burnt
floorboards abloom with orange chiffon;

we required blunt green against
burnt earth, rare fire poppy

[We invited wildfire, pg. 2]

whose seeds await wildfire's
hot breath, her unrepentant

hunger, her outsize desire
to consume—patient, rare flame

flower brought to life out of
destruction.



The Dragon's Mouth

By Geeta Johal

Stalactites hang from the roof of the cave. Rafael wraps his fingers around a jagged spike. Looks like the mouth of a dragon, he thinks.

Outside, light flashes above a mountain. A blast of dynamite sends plumes of black smoke into the sky. The ground shakes, Rafael grips a wall to avoid falling.

“Stay low!” His father crouches beside him until the rumbling stops.

Rafael drags his grandfather's stone hammer, streaking a trail behind him.

“Rafael, Pick it up!” his father yells. “Show respect for your tools. This is our trade, this is who we are.”

He hooks the hammer over his shoulder. “Yes, papa.”

The cave is hot, steam rises from deep inside its bowels.

Rafael follows his father to a portal leading to the underground labyrinth. He stares into the darkened void, his voice trembles. “Papa, where are we going? My feet are burning.”

His father, a quiet man with proud cheekbones and slanted eyes, takes out two bandanas from his pocket. “You will get used to the heat. Come on, there's something we need to do before we start. Here, cover your face with this scarf.”

Dark-skinned men swing hammers over their heads, smashing rocks in search of copper. Silica dust rises into the air, slowly calcifying in their lungs. The workers wheeze and cough.

Rafael knows that sound, it's the sickness his father has warned him about-the one that killed his grandfather and uncles-the nausea, vomiting, what they call ‘the slow death.’

He remembers how his uncle Juan was marked by a look of terror in his eyes when he succumbed to the illness. He gasped for air on his deathbed, his face pale, writhing in agony. The family had to give Juan some coca tea to spare him from his suffering.

Rafael helped his father paint a wooden cross for his uncle's grave. The family buried Juan on top of the mountain two months ago, among the crowded rows of white crosses, next to his three older brothers and Rafael's grandfather. From the top, his uncle Juan could help guard their village his father told him.

I'm not going to die like them, Rafael thinks. I'm going to be rich. When I get married, my wife will be very pretty.

Rafael's father guides him through the dark with a small lamplight. "In the mines, you can only see what is in front of you, nothing else." He taps his foot on the ground and then looks up at the ceiling. "You will need to feel your way through the tunnels."

Rafael squats on the ground, examining the red dirt as it slides out of his hand. He doesn't understand why young men slave over this metal. "Why do they want us to dig this?"

His father's face is solemn. "They use it to make bullets so we will keep working."

"Papa, I'm going to own a big house, not like the small huts in La Veco," Rafael says, beaming.

"The only piece of land we can call our own is the one we are buried in," his father replies.

The heat intensifies as they continue down a narrow tunnel. Rafael's skin is slick with sweat, ants scurry over his bare feet, stinging his flesh.

"You are thirteen now Rafael, you have become a man. One day I will be gone, and you will have to take care of your mother and sisters." His father wipes his brow with a damp cloth. He points to a boarded entryway. "Six miners died here after a tunnel collapsed." He gives Rafael a stern look. "If you hear the roof creaking, you must run. Otherwise, the dragon will eat you. Do you understand?"

Rafael looks around the chamber, wondering which tunnel contains the dragon. "Yes, papa."

They stop before an altar of a figure with horns sprouting from his head. A cigarette smolders in its mouth, the clay mask that hangs for its face, grins at Rafael.

“God doesn’t live in the mines Rafael, we are in the underworld. All miners have to make a pact with the devil in order to survive. You must come here first to make an offering to be granted a safe passage. El Tío owns rich minerals deep in the earth. He is the patron of the miners. We cannot take something from his world without giving him something from ours in return.” His father takes out a pouch of tobacco leaves from his pocket and tosses it on the altar. “Promise me, you will never forget to make an offering before you start working. Two of the miners who died stole from El Tío. One week later, a ton of rocks fell on their heads when they were digging. Anyone who cheats El Tío will bring bad luck not only to himself but to all those around him.”

“I promise, papa,” he nods.

His father kneels with his hands clasped in prayer. “Please keep us safe El Tío. Do not let the mine collapse. Please let me and my son return home unharmed.”

Light from the lantern dances on the grinning mask like flames, Rafael swears that if he listens closely enough, he can hear its laughter.

As they get up to leave, Rafael notices a small opening cut in the rock behind the statue. He tugs his father’s sleeve, pointing towards it. “What’s that?”

“Your grandfather dug this tunnel when he got lost. He managed to escape by crawling out of it. Raphael, our history is inside these mines. Everything we know is here. You cannot betray what you know.”

His forehead creases. “Where does the tunnel go?”

“It will take you to the base of the mountain. It is where your mother and Janella go to get water.” He pats his son on the back. “Let’s get to work. The others will notice if we are gone for too long.”

Rafael's father hauls an empty cart, bringing it to the excavation site, copper glistens in the fissures of the rock. He strikes the ore with his hammer in a steady rhythm, pulverizing the surrounding stone. He stops to wipe his brow. "You will help load the cart with rocks, Rafael."

"Yes, papa." Rafael is eager to show his father how strong he is. I can finish in half the time, he thinks. He smashes rocks, pounding them in a fit of excitement, quickly falling short of breath.

"Rafael, do not start by trying to break all the rocks at once. The days are long-you will have to pace yourself to avoid exhaustion," his father warns. "Remember, slow and steady wins the race."

They dig for hours. Rafael pushes the wobbly cart on the tracks until it picks up speed on the descent. He jumps on its ledge, soaring through the tunnel with his arms stretched out. "I'm flying," he shouts.

The ride screeches to a halt outside the cave, Rafael waits under the sun while two men empty the cart with their shovels. He kicks a rock between mounds of rubble, imagines scoring the winning goal, and raises his arms in triumph. The crowd roars with excitement, an amazing play by number 17, he thinks.

When the men finish unloading the cart, Rafael races it over the tracks. He jumps inside as the cart picks up momentum, the wheels squeak over the rails, and his laughter echoes in the tunnel.

Rafael works by his father's side, smashing rocks in the sweltering heat. His back is drenched in sweat, his muscles ache, and his feet burn.

"Rafael, how are you doing? Are you feeling tired?"

Rafael's mouth is parched from thirst while his stomach growls with hunger. "No papa," he replies with a tense smile. He strikes the rock with his hammer. His body collapses forward from the swing, but he steadies his foot to avoid falling.

His father takes a bottle out from his satchel and tosses it to his son. Rafael slurps the water, cold droplets spill down the front of his shirt. His father reaches into his pocket and takes out two

leaves. “The coca leaf will end your hunger and give you energy when your body is tired from breaking rocks.”

Rafael chews the pungent leaves, green juice trickles from the corners of his mouth. After a few minutes, his hunger and fatigue vanish. He picks up the hammer and continues to work next to his father.

“Take some of my copper with yours when you go outside for weighing. If your metals don’t weigh enough, they will not pay you,” his father says.

Rafael takes a large piece outside with the few nuggets he has mined. An old man with sunken eyes and a grey beard sits in front of the cave with a scale. He looks at Rafael's meager gains with disapproval. “That’s all you found?”

“Yes,” Rafael blushes.

At the end of the day, Rafael waits with his father behind a long line of workers for inspection. The guards ask the men passing through to empty their pockets and confiscate their coca leaves. When it is Rafael’s turn, a guard pats him down and then signals him permission to leave. He walks home with his father in silence, crestfallen after a brutal day’s work.

“I think you should stay home tomorrow to recover. You are tired, your body needs time to rest,” his father says.

Rafael shakes his head. “I’m not tired. I want to go with you tomorrow.”

When they arrive home, Rafael washes his feet outside of their hut. He lies down on a mat, his eyelids grow heavy. He dreams of finding the dragon in a hidden chamber, he chases after it, reaching for its tail, but it tapers off in his hand as the dragon flees.

“Rafael, come eat your meal,” his mother calls.

“Let the boy sleep,” his father replies.

For weeks, Rafael leaves for the mine at dawn with his father. He brings an offering of dried potatoes for El Tío each day. Rafael learns to conserve his energy, breaking rocks in a steady rhythm like his father. His back still aches, but it has become a familiar pain; one he knows he can endure.

Rafael doesn't know much about his father's life, except that it is hard. As a child, he remembers when his father came home from the mines, his body broken from a long day's work. He barely spoke to anyone except Rafael's mother who applied a salve of oil and dried coca leaves to ease the swelling in his knees. Rafael always felt like he was a burden to his father, who worked tirelessly so his children would not starve.

I will show papa that I've grown up to be a strong man. One who is capable of saving the family from a life of poverty, he thinks.

The lunch whistle blows. Workers drop their tools and head outside to eat their meals on flat rocks. Rafael sits with his father in the shade, enjoying a rare moment of quiet from the clamor of stone hammers and pickaxes.

"Papa, did our family always live on the mountain?"

"Your great-great-great-grandfather grew up near the river in the fields where your mother and Janella work. He used to make clay sculptures for people in his village. You know that mask on El Tío? Your great-great-great-grandfather made it."

Rafael scratches his head. "Why did he decide to leave for the mountain?"

"We were forced to live in the mountains when they took our land." He points to the mountain where Juan was buried. "La Reina was once full of treasures, now it is a hollowed skeleton. They took everything and left nothing in return."

The smile on Rafael's face fades, he hangs his head low. "Oh."

His father sees the defeated look in Rafael's eyes. "You know before he died, Juan told me you scored seven goals against him. He said you were one of the best players he's ever seen."

Rafael raises his chin. “Really? He said that? Papa, one day, I’m going to play for our country.”

The whistle sounds again. His father smiles, “Come on, back to work.”

After several months, Rafael learns which sites are worthy of excavation, how to hammer rocks with a shiny sediment, and ignore the dull ones that yield nothing. Rafael takes on a more serious countenance and talks little during dinner, but when he does, his words are measured. His hair has grown long, casting a shadow over his face. His mother and older sister, Janella, who raised him, no longer recognize the young man before them.

Rafael stays close to his father during lunchtime, while the other children play a game of soccer. They sit in the shade, eating their meals.

“I started working in the mines when I was your age, running after your grandfather, smashing rocks. Then I became a young man, one who could help his father when he was no longer able to load copper into the cart.”

Rafael begins to understand his father, and the man he is destined to become. Everything his father knew was inside the mines. He dug tunnels that his son would one day have to crawl into like him.

For two years, Rafael makes an offering to El Tío each day before starting his shift. He has grown tall and strong, he lifts heavy rocks without much difficulty. His father works beside him, smashing the ore. Rafael notices that his father tires more easily, and is often short of breath when he speaks. During their meal together, he hides his hands under his plate so his son can’t see them shaking.

In the spring, Rafael’s father collapses on the ground while loading copper. His lips turn blue; he holds his throat, whistling each fleeting breath.

Rafael rushes to his side, helping him to his feet. “Papa, are you okay?”

He leans forward with his hands over his knees, coughing sediment. “Don’t worry, I will be fine,” his father replies, wiping sweat from his brow. “I must have –have swallowed a bug,” he smiles.

Rafael can’t sleep at night.

His father’s condition is getting worse: his entire body convulses when he is seized by a fit of coughing. Sometimes, he leaves the hut so no one can hear him gasping for air. When he returns, his face is pale and there are vomit stains on his shirt. Rafael’s mother and Janella take turns making him tea from coca leaves to numb the pain in his lungs. They wait until he falls asleep to light a candle and say a prayer.

One day, Rafael wakes to find his father bedridden, breathing noisily. His chest heaves and his eyes roll back. He passes out of consciousness while Rafael’s younger sister shows him a drawing she has made.

“Rafael, go to work. Janelle and I will take care of him,” his mother says.

There’s a sinking feeling in Rafael’s stomach, he knows despite his mother’s best efforts, nothing can be done. He walks to the mine alone, his eyes well up with tears. He wipes them away so no one can see he was crying.

When his father dies, his body is buried next to Juan. Rafael continues working in the mine. He prefers to keep to himself during work-eating lunch alone on the flat rock where he once sat with his father. His mother and Janella worry for him, but Rafael doesn’t confide in anyone. His soul is restless. At night, he walks to the top of the mountain and sleeps next to his father's grave.

Grief-stricken, Rafael kneels before the altar, his face buried in his hands. “Please bring back my papa, El Tío! I don’t want your riches,” he sobs. “Please help me!” Memories of his father flash before his eyes. He thinks of all the times he brought dried potatoes to El Tío, and how he kept his promise so he and his father could stay alive. He clenches his fists. “You were supposed to protect us! So why didn’t you?” Enraged, he kicks over the offerings, desecrating the place of worship.

Rafael wipes his tears when he sees a young man sneak out of the boarded tunnel. “Hey, don’t go there! You have to be careful of the dragon.” Rafael says, remembering his father’s words.

The young man’s face is smeared with dirt; his headlamp shines in Rafael’s eyes. “They say that the miners who died in there found silver. I don’t want to stay poor all my life.”

Rafael rubs his neck. “The guards will shoot anyone who tries to bring home silver.”

“I promised one of the guards that I would give him silver if he lets me pass inspection. Do you want to die like your father did? Or do you want to be rich?” His body towers over Rafael. “Come help me dig! We can split our treasure,” he says with a confident grin.

“What is your name?” Rafael asks.

“Victor. I also worked with my father when I was your age.”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.” He glances back at the boarded tunnel. “Look, it’s up to you. I don’t want to live and die here.”

Rafael shakes his head. “But it’s not safe.”

“It’s safer with the two of us. One of us can be a lookout if anything happens.” Victor points to the tunnel. “You’re small enough to get past that rock blocking the entry. If you don’t want to die a beggar, meet me here tomorrow at lunch. We can split the silver we find.”

Rafael returns home and eats his dinner in a heavy silence. It’s the first night since his father died, that he doesn’t visit his grave. He’s tired, but he can’t sleep, he paces back and forth to dispel his nervous energy. Rafael knows his father would not have approved, but if he is rich, his children and his children’s children will be spared from dying in the mines.

At the crack of dawn, Rafael gulps his tea and sprints to work. He hammers the rocks in the ore. It feels like an eternity before the whistle blows for lunch. He heads to the collapsed tunnel when he sees that the other men have left to eat their meals outside.

Victor waits for him at the entrance with a grin. “So you decided to come?” He looks over his shoulder. “We don’t have much time before lunch is over. I will be on lookout.”

Rafael’s face tenses. “Why don’t you go in? I’ll be on lookout.”

Victor rips off the boards sealing the entrance. “I’m not small enough to make it past the large boulders. Don’t worry, I will guide you.”

“But there are dead bodies in there!” Rafael says, covering his mouth with his hand.

“Are you afraid?” Victor smirks.

Rafael shakes his head.

“Then prove it. Come on, we don’t have much time.” Victor pushes him inside, “Here, take this shovel with you.”

Rafael steadies his feet on the rolling rocks, moving past the large boulders blocking the entrance. He crawls through the tunnel, his palms sweating. The ceiling is low, covered in cracks; he spreads his arms across the walls to keep them from closing in. Light from his helmet bounces on the rocks, a scorpion dashes towards him, he freezes. It climbs up his spine, his left arm, and then burrows into the ground. Rafael falls back on his heels and lets out a sigh of relief.

Rafael descends at a clearing a few feet from the exit. He strikes the ground with his shovel, it lands with a thud, mud splatters over his face. “There’s nothing in here!” he shouts. “I’m coming out!”

“Keep looking! My uncle said they had dug a spot where there was silver.”

Rafael turns over smaller rocks with his shovel because he’s scared of finding dead miners under the large ones. He starts to regret his decision to spend his break searching for silver. The whistle will sound in half an hour and he will have to go back to work without eating. Rafael wipes the sweat out of his eyes when he sees a spot further back that looks hollowed out. He holds onto the walls making his way over, feeling his way through the tunnel.

Rafael remembers the first time he found what he thought was a diamond deep inside the earth, he was so excited, that he rushed back to show his father. His father was chewing on coca leaves when he pulled out the precious stone from his pocket.

“That’s fools’ gold,” his father said, throwing it back on the ground. “In the mines, men see mirages of treasure. That’s the devil playing tricks on your eyes.”

Light from his headlamp shines inside a ditch. “I think I see something!” Rafael shouts. A silvery vein glitters in the light. He hacks at it with his shovel, a small piece breaks off. He weighs it in his hand to make sure it’s not a trick. Mesmerized by its brilliance, he takes out a larger piece and places the treasure in his pocket.

I’m going to be rich, he thinks.

Rafael digs frantically, striking blows. The tunnel creaks, there’s a rumbling sound, rocks fall from above. “The dragon!”

“Hurry!” Victor yells.

Rafael abandons his shovel and runs. He screams when he feels the dead miners’ stiff fingers graze the soles of his feet. The ceiling behind him caves as he sprints towards Victor. “Help Me,” he cries.

Rocks tumble down, blocking the entrance. Victor smashes them to clear a way out. He hands Rafael the end of his hammer. “Don’t let go!” Victor grabs Rafael’s arm and pulls him halfway out.

Rafael’s shoulder gets caught between two rocks. “Help! I’m trapped!”

Victor twists Rafael’s arm with all his might. The ground shakes, rivers of blood course through the tunnels. Rafael falls into the clearing as the entrance behind him closes.

“What’s happening?” Victor yells.

“The dragon is awake! We have to escape before he eats us.”

Rafael heads to the passageway near El Tío. A large boulder blocks the exit. "Help me move it, Victor! This will lead us out."

"It's too heavy! It won't move!" Victor shouts.

They run to the front of the cave, their feet sticky from blood. The dragon snaps his jaw. Its teeth tear into the ground, trapping Victor and Rafael inside its mouth.

"We have to dig our way out of here," Victor says. He takes his hammer and starts to hack away furiously. "Grab one of the hammers and help me!"

The dragon growls, spewing fire from its throat, molten copper oozes from the ore. Rafael and Victor hide inside a tunnel. "We're going to die!" "There's no way out!" Victor cries.

Rafael feels something hot burning against his skin. He digs inside his pocket and sees the two pieces of silver. "We have to go back to El Tío," he says, grabbing Victor's arm.

They run to the chamber. Rafael tosses the pieces of silver on the altar. "El Tío, please protect us! I don't want your riches."

"Are you crazy?" Victor shouts, reaching for the silver.

"If you hold on to the silver, you will kill us both. Anyone who steals from El Tío will not only bring bad luck to himself but to everyone around him."

Victor shakes his fist. "I'm not leaving here without it."

"You said that you didn't want to live and die in the mines. If that's true, you have to give El Tío his silver. Or his dragon will kill us!" Rafael wrestles the metal out of Victor's hands, throwing it back on the altar.

Fire leaps from a great fissure that splits open the ground. The dragon lets out a monstrous roar. They huddle together next to El Tío.

Flames lick at their ankles. "El Tío, please help us," Rafael begs.

They hear a loud crash. A giant spike falls from the ceiling, splitting the heavy rock in front of the passageway in two. Victor's jaw drops.

"Come on!" Rafael yells.

They push away the two halves and crawl inside the narrow shaft. As they reach the end, there's the sound of water rushing below.

"We will have to swim," Rafael says.

The young men jump into the cold water; rising waves carry them out of the mine. They swim the rest of the way to the base of the mountain and collapse on the shore.

Rafael's mother is shocked when her son walks through the front door with his clothes dripping wet. She throws her arms around him. "I thought you were dead!" she cries. "One of the mines caved in. They said you and another boy were trapped inside."

Rafael rubs his eyes. "I'm not dead. I just need to lie down." He prepares salve for his limbs and sits outside, watching the sun shine over the miners' graves on top of the mountain. I wouldn't have survived without you, he thinks.

Rafael continues to work in the mines over the years, like his father, and his grandfather before him. He lives in a small hut in La Veco with his wife and three children. Rafael's mother and Janella come to visit, bringing corn that they have picked from the fields.

On his eldest son's thirteenth birthday, Rafael brings him to the mine. "Nico, this is your grandfather's hammer. It has been in our family for generations, you must take great care of it."

His son examines the stone hammer with awe. "Yes, papa."

Rafael feels his way through the tunnels. "There's a dragon that lives deep inside the mine, it hides in a secret chamber, devouring men who steal its treasures. I once heard it roar when I was younger; it came after me, and after your grandfather, and his father. Our history is inside these

tunnels, we cannot escape them.” He taps his foot on the ground and then listens. “If you hear the roof creaking, you must run. Otherwise, the dragon will eat you!”

The End



Behold This Beauty on This Day
By LN Lewis

She fought her way to the surface, and still there was no air. She was in her own bed, thrashing, flailing, sending commands to her own body, trying to control her panic:

Breathe! BREATHE. Mimi! Where's my phone? Where did I put my phone? Dial 911. I need to call an ambulance. I'm going to the ER. My phone — Mimi! They're going to put me on a ventilator. BREATHE. WHERE'S MY PHONE? BREATHE. MIMI—

She sucked a hit of oxygen. Then another. Another. And another. Teary-eyed, Shaundray lay in her tangled sheets.

The first thing she noticed were his feet. Huge, dirty, free of shoes or socks. Then his hands, especially the right one, inked with a large, iridescent ankh. He wore an old blue bandana instead of a mask, and above it, the face was young with glittering, dark eyes. He was sitting on the sidewalk, his back against a grimy, boarded-up storefront, and as her Nikes detoured his long legs, his smoky voice rose up to meet her: “Mmmm... I'm your bones... mmm your blood... mmm your heart... mmm your brain... You mmmmiss me when I'm gone...” his words faded out with a cough.

At the glass counter of Miss Thang's, she pondered an almond crunch bar versus a cranberry muffin.

“Got another funeral this afternoon. My cousin Tommy. He has three kids: two, six, and nine.” The sadness penetrated Miss Thang's sequined face mask.

“That is so upsetting.”

“I know they say this is going to end—” The nitrile-gloved hands slid the tea and muffin to Shaundray, “—but it don't feel like it.”

The door swung open with a gust of fresh air, loam, apple orchard. The barefoot man stepped over the threshold with a delicacy that belied his size. Miss Thang's head swiveled and locked.

"Hello there. What can I get you?"

The large, dark eyes widened and focused on the offerings.

"Mmmmm...Ethiopia Sidamo...Mmmmm...Guatemala San Marcos, Kenya Kikima, Mmmexico Cordoba..." he intoned slowly, and then, as if still reading: "Mmmm Kenya. Coffee trees growing under a volcano in mmmm red dirt. Six-year-old boy and with an eight-year-old mmmmachete chops down lantana because lantana choke the coffee tree. I am the coffee tree. I am the lantana, red dirt, volcano..."

Shaundray side-eyed Miss Thang who responded with a shrug.

"Baby, you a first-timer. Muffin and coffee on the house."

Shaundray had removed her mask and was taking a second bite of the tangy sweetness of the cranberry muffin when the huge stranger eased down into a folding chair at the next table. Without even looking up, she sensed his eyes on her, and the feeling suffused her with a hum, a gentle reverberation.

"Mmmm... your name?"

No way am I telling this freak my name, Shaundray thought, sipping her tea.

Two sparrows landed at his feet. He broke off some honey pecan muffin and dropped it to them. Three pigeons joined in. A starling fell from the sky, landed on the man's table, and began to eat from his hand. A moment later, a dozen birds flitted from his arm to the table to his open palm, pecking at the muffin.

"My name is Shaundray." *Did I just tell this freak my name?* "And yours?"

"Geb."

"What kind of name is that? Where is that from?"

“Mmmm... Kemet.”

“Is that in Michigan?”

The sparrows, pigeons, starlings, and wrens scattered when Miss Thang approached. She trailed a glove over his massive shoulder.

“Are you enjoying that?”

“Mmmmyes. Yes, I am.”

“What happened to social distancing?” smirked Shaundray.

“Ain’t no way to social distance from this,” Miss Thang flirted.

Those eyes, the birds floating from the sky, and that hum had so captivated Shaundray that when Geb rose, she got up and followed him.

“Brother Sycamore. How you doing, Brother? Mmmm... All these sycamores, this too much. Need to mix things up. Here we go: sweet Sister Dogwood...” Two squirrels stopped in their play to watch them pass. Geb named and greeted pokeweed, spikenard, nettle, sedge, Michigan roses, and knotweed thrusting through broken glass, fast food bags, and pop cans. “Mmmm... You far from home, Sister. Knotweed come all the way from Japan.” He gently coughed into the bandana.

The aura of sunbaked meadow seemed to follow him beyond the vacant lot to a liquor store. From its parking lot, a trio of men hooted and howled, pointing at Geb’s untamed hair and bare feet, but a fourth drinker let loose his paper bag and approached. The little man stared up at Geb and tried to remember. Shaundray watched Geb lift his bandana enough to gently blow into the little man’s face, and her astonishment grew as the man wept, dropped to his knees, and kissed Geb’s feet.

The traffic’s thunder seemed to be fading, or maybe the hum was just expanding, cocooning Shaundray and Geb in a strange serenity that even seemed to touch little boys on bicycles pedaling alongside them, uncharacteristically quiet, wide-eying the giant in a frayed blue t-shirt and worn

khakis. The boys raced away at a gas station, and Geb's beneficence soured. Choking from the fumes, he glowered at each pump, his eyes casting sparks at drivers filling their tanks. They waited at the corner of Livernois and Joy Road as SUVs, sedans, pickups, buses and trucks blasted past them. When they got to a quiet side street and could hear each other, Shaundray would tell Geb about her Grandmother Mimi who had introduced her to so many Alabama flowers and plants. But Geb was no longer waiting beside her. He had stepped out into traffic.

Shaundray screamed. Cars skittered and slid to a stop. Calmly, easily, Geb glided from the eastbound to the westbound lanes. A blacked-out Dodge Charger careened within a yard of him, rolled down its windows, and bellowed curses. On the opposite curb, she confronted him.

“Do you have a death wish?”

“Mmmmm... Life and more life.”

Once, beech trees here grew so massive that stars tangled in their branches; black bears claimed white oaks with slashing claws; spring streams rioted with pink salmon; howls of cougars echoed in forests; whitetail deer raced the meadows; riverine megacities of beaver sprawled; woodland and grassland cheeped, creaked, crackled, and cried with locusts, katydids, crickets, grasshoppers and the chickadees, woodpeckers and warblers that hunted them; Monarch butterflies stormed in legions so vast that they blotted out the sun; the vanished bison, vanished caribou, vanished elk thundered over the land; and in the midst of all that life lived the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples — *Council of the Three Fires* — right here, in *the place of the whirlpool*, now known as Detroit. They traversed forgotten streams, razed woodlands, drained marshes, and Geb crossed streets and intersections as if stop signs, stop lights, cars, SUVs, and buses did not exist.

“Are you alright?”

“Mmmhmm...”

“You need to see somebody about that cough. Have you been tested yet?”

They were standing in the car exhaust haze at the north end of an overpass above the I-75.

Geb hacked and coughed, and then: “Mmmmm... that used to be a river, *zibé*, like the Potawatomi say...”

And he leaped the barrier, his long legs ambling down the grassy slope.

“What are you—”

“Mmmmm, that *zibé* flows to *wanyatenak*...”

“Geb! That is not a river! That’s the Fisher Free—”

By the time Shaundray made her way down the hill, Geb had stepped out on to Interstate 75. Horns blasted, a truck fishtailed, and cars squealed, spun, and braked. Geb navigated around the stilled vehicles, unbothered. Shaundray was sprinting on to the freeway, shouting his name, when a Dodge Hellcat lunged at her.

The black curtain lifted to reveal blue sky and a circle of masked faces. Audio came back on line: horns, shouts, screams.

“What is wrong with her?”

“What did she expect?”

Now the pain hit, closely followed by terror.

“Just stay still. The ambulance will be here soon.”

“She was running after that fool—”

Geb leaned over her. The blue bandana. The scent of passionflower.

“Shaun-dree...”

“Help me,” she whispered.

She could feel his fingers easing through her locs, cradling her skull. Someone shouted, “Don’t you touch her!” But Geb went on stroking her shoulder, pressing her hips, resting his hands on her right thigh. And then he helped her to her feet.

“Works of Satan!” a woman shouted, as drivers hurried back to their cars, slamming doors and locking them. Shaundray led Geb back up the hill to the overpass.

###

They sat on a park bench facing the Detroit River. Beyond Canada’s twinkling lights, clouds metastasized in indigo and black. Geb leaned forward, his head hanging to his knees, his breath sawing in and out. She rubbed the valley between his shoulder blades.

“Mmmm... before... the sun... Mmmm... before the moon. Before stars... We come from the dark: me... my sister. She is... mmmm... Queen of the Sky, and I... mmmm... rule all below. I love Kemet... The Two Lands... red sand... black dirt... that long mmmm long river...”

The air had turned heavy, syrupy, and a breeze was skipping leaves and plastic bags down the Riverwalk. *Don’t let it storm*, prayed Shaundray.

“You helped me. Won’t you please let me help you? Please. Let me take you to the hospital.”

“Take off the mmmm... mask,” he rumbled through gasps.

“I shouldn’t even be touching you, and now you want me to take off my mask?”

Thunder muttered. He slid away on the bench and pulled off the blue bandana, revealing the black diamond symmetry of his face. Then his head dropped, and he began wheezing again. She moved close to him and took off her own mask.

He was so close that all she could see was the glitter of his eyes. He drew in a long, strangled breath and then blew into her face. An icy fog rose: the blue-toned scent of snow, the childhood memory of a winter storm.

Fighting for air, he blew into her face again. Burning pine cones: the resin-aroma of the camp fire she built with Daddy and her cousin Ramone on a trip to Lakeport State Park.

He took in a strangled inhalation and then blew in her face a third time. Horseflesh and freshly cut grass: Shaundray was riding Sooky, Uncle Percy’s old mare. Tobacco, lemon, gutted fish:

Shaundray was sitting on Percy's porch with her grandmother, Miriya Mozelle Frazier, better known as Mimi, drinking lemonade and snapping beans while Uncle Percy cleaned red-eye bass. Grass pink, wild hyacinth, Carolina allspice: Grandmother and granddaughter on their long walks around Browntown, Mimi naming for Shaundray almost any wildflower, tree, vine, or bush they passed. Even in Michigan, Mimi could point out the plants that were like herself, Southern migrants.

Mimi told her, "This persimmon, the Indians named that, and they ate that... My grandmother had heard all kinds of Indian stories when she was young, about how they tried to drag the Choctaw and Creek out of Alabama, tried to make them go west, and but some of them wouldn't go. They just disappeared into the woods where they couldn't be found. And they could read the land like a book, they knew how to hunt, they knew what to eat. They told Black people a long time ago: 'You can eat this, but leave that alone. Burdock can heal you, but bottlebrush will kill you quick...'"

As the pandemic took hold in Detroit, Shaundray was grateful to be locked down with someone she loved so much, but she was terrified of bringing the plague home. Her bedroom doubled as an office where she answered calls and logged data for the Department of Water. Mimi gravitated between her own room and the kitchen, leaving Shaundray's meals on the dining room table. They called to one another from room to room, or talked by phone long past midnight, because neither of them could sleep.

That was their routine until the night Mimi collapsed in her bedroom. They rode in the ambulance, clutching hands, an oxygen mask clamped on Mimi's face. Nurses video-streamed Mimi intubated, on a ventilator, weakly waving to the family Shaundray had called, emailed, and texted around the country. She wept at her computer when a doctor told her that she was seeing Mimi for the last time: gray-faced, blind-eyed, comatose. "I love you. I love you. Do you hear me, Mimi? Miriya Mozelle Frazier! I LOVE YOU."

The black sky detonated, its roar echoing as Geb fell away from her, sprawling on to the sidewalk. Shaundray knelt over him, calling his name and shaking him. He was convulsing, and with trembling hands, Shaundray was trying to dial 911, but her phone had gone dead. The lamppost over them flickered and went out, and across the river in Canada and on this shore, the Michigan side, lights in towers, office buildings, and high-rises were blinking off. The wind screamed, and the river hurled white caps. Geb's flailing arm slammed Shaundray to the ground.

She felt for him in the darkness. Geb's wild thrashing had stilled. She wasn't sure if the trembling she felt came from her hands or him. Helplessly searching his chest for the heart beat she could not hear over the roar of the wind, she began chest compressions.

Don't you die on me. Don't you die. You can't die--BREATHE. BREATHE, GOD DAMN IT. BREATHE.

Shaundray fell into him and back until her hands cramped and her arms burned, until his eyes opened and slowly focused on her, and their black glitter reignited. She kept pushing rhythmic compressions into his sternum until she could feel a response: the slow, then steady rise and descent of his chest.

He pulled her close and whispered, "Mmmm... I'm your bones, blood, heart, brain... Mmmm... I'm inside you. I'm outside you. You cannot live without me. You gonna miss me when I'm gone..."

The sky exploded above them. Shaundray closed her eyes, burrowed against him, and held on tight.

She awoke beside her garden in the backyard of the house Mimi had left to her. Perched on the branch of the apple tree, a robin cocked its head, glanced down at her, and then winged away. Chilled and damp with dew, Shaundray sat up. From the driveway, in a pool of sunlight, a black cat studied her, and then stretched, a silver ankh dangling from its leather collar. The cat's gaze drifted

and so did the sun, finally reaching Shaundray with its heat. Her fingers dug through the sod into the soil, and she raised them, breathing in the perfume of earth.



Treatment

By Christopher Menezes

I.

We squeezed into a single recliner
and watched movies on my laptop
while chemicals burned in her bloodstream
numbing her fingers and toes.

I accompanied her half the time,
she was alone the other half,
save the six others, in chairs beside her,

sharing stories, diagnosis,
photos of children, dogs,
spouses.

So, when one recliner was found empty,
it left a hole.

II.

She won't lose her hair
but she chops it pixie short
because she can.

Nausea medicines are expensive,
scarcely effective,
and give her tremors.

Nurses say marijuana works best
but doctors are afraid to recommend it.
I text a friend.

III.

The man slouching at his desk
at the check-in counter
says, *I'm sorry, mam,*
this happens all the time,
and denies her treatment.

To her surprise, he says

her employment and health insurance
have been terminated.

There's nothing we can do, he says.

She looks at the side-door, blocking
her view of the treatment room and says,

I hope they don't think I'm dead.

Leaving California

By Christopher Menezes

Maybe it's the cars—the Lamborghinis, LeBarons, Suburbans, Subarus, Vans, Accents, Prii, lining every inch of the road, red brake lights, blood cells of Los Angeles flowing through veins of callous concrete and asphalt, keeping the dead alive, shining in glorious white headlights, the light of our creators that blind us with Hollywood stars and popcorn, as we loop the race track of work to home, work to home, coughing smoke emissions that eat away, into lungs and brains, eating away, eating away the reasons we do this.

Or maybe it's the people—trapped inside cars, inside billboards, inside tanning beds, roasting like carrots, shaved in delectable beauty, caught in careers, dangling family duties from key chains, bobbling yes-heads on desks, swelled with glowing numbers on website bank accounts, weighing every inch of worth or self-doubt, who sit in restaurants eating, and ordering, and eating, and ordering frivolous details, who refuse to eat salads with cilantro, hamburgers without cheese, who need everything on the side, who are never full, like the friends who drink at bars, who never invite you out and ask why you haven't been around, whose girlfriends hate your wife, who represent single life.

Or maybe it's me—wound tight and gift wrapped for everyone to see, trying to balance the numbers projected on my computer screen, buried under unpaid couches, unpaid coffee tables, unpaid floor rugs, unpaid vacations, unpaid hospital bills, speaking frivolous sentences about duties to people I don't know, to my wife who is craving something she believes dwells deeper within me, as I write these words, trying to create a name for myself rather than accept the name that was given to me: Christopher: The Saint of Travelers. I have to get out of here.

UNTENURED

Esaias Strandsand.
Untenured: broadly defined, 2023.

anti - Capitalism,

- Racism,

- Sexism,

&

Equity, &

Equality,

broadly defined.