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POEMS

Big House

Kristy Lueshen

The children enter through the marked hallway
leaving wet ghosts drying behind, toes barely touching.
Embroidered

on the wall, a barn owl perched on
disembodied branches; an empty poker table,
tipping at an angle on brocade;
a Tiffany lamp that catches the martini ice
at a perfect drip.

Downstairs, the air is perforated by an elemental
film of dust, thirty years and counting. News clippings
on the wall, Local receives notable award; Herein setforth
the Wedding announcement of--; Retirement begins early.

Behind the curtain lies an entire village
ice skating, carrying one sack from the grocery
as a train in miniature glides home, the purview of history.
The children play house, Big House: entire lives collapse
into one bay window, one moon rising through the trees.

After the funerals, a white-tailed doe
finally on the lawn
but nobody to see.

Matchstick Bones

Abagail Lim

She walks with frail footsteps,
eyes gleaming, palms sweaty.

Her footfalls are more shallow than her breathing at night,
more delicate than burst capillaries,
more dainty than matchstick collarbones—
She is everything and nothing all at the same time;
existing like an insect caught in frozen amber,
she is an armored beetle in a dollar store keychain
or a monarch pressed between two glass slides—
quiet and pristine in a museum display case.

Her walls are a fortress that time cannot permeate.
She is sweet like sugar spit, exchanged by the tongues of lost lovers reunited.

She deserves all the goodness the world has to offer,
but settles for the solace of bony fingers and tight jawlines.

Every day she prays to the angel living
at the bottom of her toilet bowl,
but little does she know,
the angel isn't listening.

Paper cuts

Abagail Lim

Not deep enough to break the skin,
The damage done is paper thin.
Stitch up your wounds,
and mend the wrong,
not yet a cause
that's too far gone.

Preaching to the Chickens

Michael Ansara

Small body, large voice,
larger imagination,
the hen house a holy place.

Pike County, Alabama, where every adult
an aunt or uncle, every child a cousin;
land of Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Creeks.

Large-headed, Black arms
splayed wide to embrace the flock,
John Lewis summons the spirit.

Each evening they troop
into the dark of the coop, that small shed
become as silent as a sanctuary;

the small-bodied boy raises up
a voice rich in slight stutter, words enveloping,
forcing a rooster to stop for a moment,

to consider redemptive love.

Others saw only smelly, stupid
creatures, lowest form on the farm.
The boy saw a subtle grace, dignity

in the forsaken,
absolute innocence,
defenseless, pure, simple;

the boy felt the need to baptize
the smallest chicks; bury the dead
with care and ceremony.

Here in the dry-licked dirt,
a hidden city of the spirit;
practice for the unimagined

future work of a large soul
within the often-bloodied, hate-
beaten body, bruised by love,

Greyhound bus station, burned bus,
Birmingham, Montgomery,
Edmund Pettus Bridge, bloody test

of will, Selma. Love's battles. No stopping. No rest.
Fierce, urgent power of redemptive love & disobedience,
born in a small hen house midst dirt and darkness.

Hurled against the glare of white hate, white fear,
white terror. Year after year after year.

Father's Day

Victor Basta

After a week here,
I have relearned the meter of his day.
At nine his bedroom door
double locks. The TV turns
louder, masking the pop, snap, pop
of the Vicodin bottle scoring its heavy pills
into his swollen palm.
At ten his flattened hands crumple
the coffee cup I've been trained to fill
with three tepid sips.
From twelve, the sun reflects
the same color we both see
until four, when the bedroom TV
raises its voice again.

I remember when this meter
started. When he was my age,
when I was the only one there
to sign, when radiation napalmed
the skin inside him,
when his stomach's roasted nodes
unthreaded like prayer beads
into the surgeon's bowl,
an offering slipped silently
into a swollen metal palm.
When they pulled the last dead
from his body, I remember
the meter started to click
the next day. Twice a day by mouth,
with the same sun in between.

Portobellos

Victor Basta

This is how I live now.
I cannot remember another way.
When you come out from shadows
as I have, the sun hardly bothers
after a while. Sometimes at the end
of winter I can see the leaves growing
again over my past life.
Where it ended, where the edge
of fresh wood tapers into erratic air.
Someone has pushed the metal bars
of the windows into their panes,
and cracked them
where they touch the curtains.
Living like this does not require
more light than darkness.
Equal measure is enough,
hitting at the dark with a fist
that does not make a sound.
Did you imagine I would stop,
that I would tender what I had earned
to the leaves, the cold branches
mentioning the wind as they fall,
as if it were their friend?
The shallow pools of rain think
they will stop me.
This is what they live for,
but it is not what I live for.

Like A Monk's White Habit, I Have Put it On. Calmly, I Sit in The Light Sledge

Elizabeth Christine Pope

—Anna Akhmatova, "Way of all the Earth"

Sorrow's kiss of Persian rose
on a dresser ledge. Nearness

through the shutterless keyhole.
Coffee, tarish, wintered

as the wood rim of a dustsill.
A waltz along leaden streets

of kremlin.
This is always the matter of longing—

an agony of opera in the parlor,
the idea of a parlor.

I am of a time that never extends.
To know presence—

the way evening's treason overshadows
that wall. This is not a prison.

This is an after, a noon of staleness
that rings exquisite as winter's

mute offering of entangle—
a continent too cold to enter her own

erasing light. Of a light reminiscent silence.
This cannot be death.

Death is calculated. The trees are a turmoil
of blue, belief. Sky is also an oil's erasing.

I long for a day to hold without reason.

Many Angels Round About the Throne

Sam Ambler

(after viewing Shirin Neshat's photos and videos)

I will draw
the tears
out
from her
dolorous eyes
and use them
as invisible ink
to inscribe
the story
of her sorrow
across
the crisp
vastness
of her face.

She is rigid in
an auditorium
devoid
of people—
you can hear
a man's voice
singing,
see
a room
full of men
watching,
applauding.
She is covered,
silent.

When I hear
her voice
at last,
alone,
it is a husk,
sharp,
almost
a ripping
of my eardrums,
sacred ululation,
it transcends
and transforms,
curdling
into dust.

And in the dream
space
where all of it
is real,
the men wear
hijabs,
walk across
the barren desert,
and cover
their voices
in velvet,
as no one
can hear them,
or care.

There is
an angel
on the throne
ringed by
a hundred angels
who are encircled
by ten thousand
angels
who are
embraced
by a million
angels
all on the barrel
of a gun.

First Frost

Madelyn Camrud

last night: I'm on the deck, taking another
crack at eggs for breakfast; timer reset,
second time: first time-timer forgotten—
yolks too green for my liking. Breakfast
clock ticks September firsts; spring never
lasts; clock goes back, summer hour soon lost—

daylight saved gone; autumn comes—frost
on grass—wooden deck morning where I stand,
blow breath like kettle steam. I'm a woman boiled over:

grateful for minutes—hours; years—together.

How like weather we were, changed with the seasons;
storms least predicted erupted. And the egg—

the blessed egg, oh, how we scrambled, procreated:
the white of it a blizzard looking back.

Minutes passed; shell cracked—time ran out—
moments incredible golden.

The young man

DS Maolalai

he cast himself readily
asail on wild currents.
took buses to cities,
walking through them
alone. believed
there were real ways
to really write poetry,

and six foot wide bedsits
with a toilet right next
to the sink. drank hard
red each evening. drank hard
and smoked cigarettes.
watched as wild sunsets
made the continents burn.

I admire him truly –
his belief in a frost
which could rise up
to sink the titanic.
these poems I type
in my comfortable flat –
they're better, I think now,
but they've lost all their bones.

Eating Miso Soup with the Muse

Madelyn Camrud

Five a.m., I wake: wait; he flies in, hungry; we lunch at a Thai place,
suitably empty. I suggest edamame because my tongue
likes to say it; miso soup a natural for the muse: shrimp tempura:

lo mein noodles, chicken hibachi; salt and pepper calamari—

His appetite treacherous;

I chase food across my plate—wait for green tea ice cream;
try to forget my words.

Inadequate; start a new page:

> *everything is imaginable (the muse speaks);*
> *ease the line; try to broaden your voice.*
>
> *Above all, allow the poem its own flexibility.*

He stays too long. January puddles; concrete streets; my life
wet with worry; he says I overwhelm him: what does this mean?

March temperature a low fever; I walk, think, and wait for words;
paper white and flowing—notes slide like sheet music
from desktop beauty: can't find what lies between the heat vent
and the desk; fallen useless, dead on hardwood for recycling.

The muse a bird in flight; white as Pegasus—leaves—only a PC
between us.

You Will Draw Me as the Mermaid

Karen Poppy

You want to draw—
You ask me how
To say it in English.

What is that thing
With eight legs?
Ein Krake.
It can also be called
Oktopus in German.

You have already drawn
A fierce lion,
Its fur and tongue roar as
Flames licking the paper.

You touch my cheek
With one precise finger.
Subtly, pull me under.

Still, I won't surrender
To your capture.
Not like those animals
You trap forever
On paper.

We won't even talk
About the skulls
You collect.

I have two arms,
Not eight, and hands
That I keep to myself.

You will draw me
As the mermaid.
As fire that burns
Even in water.

River

Lauro Palomba

a childless aunt, widowed
scrappy throughout, a hustler
fussy and nagging
whatever faults undermined
by affection for her nephews

the spring river muddy
sluggish, eddying
like solace itself;
silting its banks with
joggers bolstering life
pigeons pecking at it
dogs wagging it unexamined

the hostile news reached him
that illnesses and frailties
disgruntled by her will
at last had breached a chink
routed her resistance

the foreign city offered him a park
grazed by an honoured river
which he sought with tears
- not static tombs and statuary
blackening in remembrance -
to closest whisper the truth
about our matter and its decay

the sun now washy
now bold, the water
nesting billions of souls
having flashed their spark
like tiny votive candles
as they crossed shafts of light
sinking back to anonymity

afterwards he motioned for a second
bitter aperitif to whet her memory

elegy to a mouth

Annie Meishan Chen

when i was six, my mouth got me into trouble some
times like when i asked the teacher
"do you think you're chubby

maybe?" (because i didn't want
to be rude). because it was impossible to say
the wrong thing.

when i was fourteen i still chewed gum
with my mouth open. the difference
between my brother and i was

five years and that i was starting to close
my mouth if i remembered, and
he wouldn't.

we took after grandpa,
the one who forgot to keep things
behind polite teeth. chewed

rice cud, machine gunning
ballistically from the firepower of
rumbling guffaws or *your son looks*

like a little girl and i noticed
how mom closed her eyes to exhale
an apology for her father, like a parent

embarrassed for her child.
but i knew him
as a child, as someone who didn't

close for anyone. even the upstairs lady
who thumped down with unrolling red
hair rollers to shush us for being

so loud. he'd just puff a smoke

(even if he was standing under
a “no smoking” sign) (even if it

would stop his throat from humming
forever) into her face and we’d snort between
spitting salted sunflower seeds

he taught me how to crack
with my tongue. *stay sharp*
in chinese it always sounded

like an order. look at us, two strong-
jawed-sharp-tongued-sunflower-seed
spitters. who’d always tell you the honest

to god truth what we thought.
now i watched those choked fish gasps
and the mouth that used to spit seeds hanging

hingeless, wondering if all dying was this
ugly. trying to fish out a good memory
to say out loud and bury my impolite

thoughts. there are many things that cut
the life of a word
short.

when the sound of his heart stopped
the silence came from his mouth. in the end
it wasn’t even me who asked what happened.

how rude is it to just say “did he die”
to his daughter, as if nothing was real
until it was proven in words.

but my brother didn’t hear me begging
please grow up child and shove
reality under a euphemism.

what died
that night? two things
closed. eyes &

a mouth.

housekeeper

Annie Meishan Chen

it's not until long after dinner that

the purple latex gloves are hung up again. clipped
together by the black binder clip creeping

orange rust around the edges. these are
the owners of my mother's hands,

whom she is always serving. my brother and i
drop another stack of ketchup smeared plates

into the sink, refilling like our greedy soda cups.
sometimes the dishes will fly

across the room and shatter
against a counter into pieces that

are less than the sum of their parts.
between ceramic sand her words

split through with worry, with fear
for the people we will become.

she scrubs harder like she can rinse
us clean of bad habits.

children are the cruelest
lovers. how many times do they break

a mother's heart. tell a shattered plate
to put herself back together

again from dust and ash and pieces
that will cut through the soft soles

of your thumping bare feet.
except you won't be cut because

by the time you wake up the sharpness
has been cleaned up and the trash taken out.

steam squeals through the spout, swirling
busily above the old rice cooker.

soft scent of jasmine flowers and nutty star anise
hum with the dancing boil

of oxtail stew. and you can almost
hear the fork tender meat

fall of the bones. by morning, the broken
dish will have been replaced with a smile

attached to a heart
we have forced into the body of a machine.

because early before breakfast
the purple latex gloves

are busy again.

Joshua Tree

Eve Kaufman

Under the naked desert sky, we hunch over a gas fire
and pick at canned tuna with dead fingers
You grow animated as the wine empties,
a stop-motion caricature reel above the flame

We flow like rain down the same old divots, retracing those
familiar dreams under a different patch of sky, then releasing them
into the pitch black like prayers we know won't be answered

As we walk through the Joshua trees striking their macabre poses
I'm stepping round the baby chollas like landmines, so
your hand startles me when it loops under my elbow

We're both wearing all our layers, our over-stuffed
puffers straining against each other like nylon airbags
but you hold on nonetheless

There are fewer stars than I thought there would be;
my mind is rotted by over-exposed photos, but
at least the air feels clear in my lungs and you look happy

I'm cold and my mouth tastes like sour fish and we've been bickering, but
I bottle up the moment anyway and take solace in the knowledge
that it will ferment sweetly inside of me, that time will erode sharp
corners round, and one day I'll ache for this again

PROSE

A Thousand Years

Veronika Kot

My name is Mieczyslaw.

"Mieszko," my mother would say in the shushing softness of the diminutive. If she said "Mieczyslaw" I knew I was in trouble. And if she rolled out the whole formidable length of it -- "Mieczyslaw Andrzej Kozlowski!" -- I knew to run and hide.

Now she mostly slumbers in the fuzzy stupor of dementia, and she doesn't know my name at all.

In 966 the Polish princeling Mieczyslaw accepted Christianity from the Czechs – along with a bride named Dąbrówka – thus becoming Mieszko I, the first Christian king of Poland, and initiating its recorded history. The strategic marriage was calculated to cement ties with a friendly neighbor and to remove the Germans' Christianizing excuses for raiding and invading those pagan Slavs next-door.

We know how well *that* worked.

"A thousand years of history – and more!" my mother never failed to remind me. "Be proud. *This* country barely has two hundred."

"A thousand years of being invaded," my father would quip humorously just to tweak her, while he folded and refolded the newspaper with meticulous care, placing it next to his morning coffee and removing his spectacles to wipe and re-wipe them with his napkin. Engineering precision followed him even to the breakfast table.

I knew the drill so well I never paid attention, wolfing down my cereal and pretending to drink my milk. My mother heated the milk so that it formed a disgusting film on top. Cold milk at breakfast, she believed, would have dire health consequences. What they were I never learned. I usually managed to sneak my dishes to the kitchen sink and pour the milk down the drain.

At school I was Mikey. The obscure namesake from the primaeval forests of the European dark ages remained a secret. My unpronounceable name would have made recess a battleground and tormentors of my fellow five-year-old savages. Mama never knew. She would have regarded it a cowardly renunciation of the rich history hammered into me over ten years of Saturday Polish school. Privately I justified the betrayal as necessitated by a secret identity, my real name a password, a code. I was -- I proudly reminded myself -- named for

royalty. The very first one.

Now in the early dawn, I'm standing on the back steps, sipping coffee, black. No hot milk.

In memoriam.

It's cold, the implacable January Chicago cold whipping off the lakefront in gusts. The paint is peeling on the wooden railings and one of them is loose. The landlady is nearing eighty and hasn't been keeping up the place since her husband died. Even without Dad's bad hip and Mom's confusion and near blindness, it had been high time to move. And yet.

I take another sip of hot coffee and reflect on the enormous amount of persuasion that had been required to budge a mountain of inertia. Sixty years of habit and a refugee's aversion to change could only be defeated by stark necessity. Now there will be an elevator, a caregiver, a washer and dryer just down the hall, no need to trundle bags of laundry down three flights and across two slippery snowy blocks to the laundromat.

I look over into the neighbor's yard. The enormous pear tree that I remember has been gone some years now. I don't know if the pears were any good, but nobody ever seemed to pick them. The tree dropped its abundance liberally and everywhere, fruit squashed under the passing tires, flies buzzing over the sweet mess. It must have been a major rat attraction too. But as a kid I loved the cloud of white flowers in the spring, so improbably at odds with the alley ugliness of the rest of it: brick, concrete and chain link fence, and the blank faces of garage doors lined with garbage cans.

I hear the distant clatter and look over the black tar roof of what was once the dry cleaner and is now divided between an electronics and accessories shop at one end and an Ethiopian restaurant at the other. The train pulls in to the L stop less than two streets away. It lingers long enough to discharge early passengers into the glow of the heat lamps on the platform.

Last night I woke on the couch in my father's new and unfamiliar apartment, surprised to be missing the sound of the L. From my bedroom window I must have seen and heard the trains pull in and out of that very station thousands of times, until neither the sight nor the sound would register, a background never missed until it was absent. Except, I'm sure, that it made me the wanderer. I cannot see a train without wanting to board it, I cannot see one leave without a trace of mourning that it leaves without me.

As a reporter and a travel writer, I have trekked the globe in search of stories. But sipping hot coffee on the freezing back stairs, it strikes me now that I have avoided this one studiously. It is too burdened with the freight of time and I am accustomed to travelling lightly.

Just as the train takes off, it starts to snow. The flakes are big and they spiral slowly. I pull out my phone and take a picture of the falling snow, over the rooftops, the way it obscures the lakefront condo towers another block beyond the L. The picture is disappointing, the focus off. My fingers are numb from cold and I don't try again.

I see that there are text messages I've missed. From Sally, my wife, in San Francisco. From Josh our son, in La Jolla. From Joe Santos at work about that new assignment in Addis Ababa – am I still going? (*I am.*) From Ellis at the Toyota dealership wondering no doubt if I'm still in the market for a Prius. (*I am not.*)

They can keep. A little. I have time travelled after all.

It's quiet, with the lovely falling-snow-muffled-quiet I remember and miss in California. If it accumulates it will be briefly beautiful, briefly healed of all ugliness or memory. Then it will get churned up into black slush.

The alley three floors below is empty, and as I lean over the peeling bannister I am suddenly eleven years old and Ellen O'Malley, two years older and the love of my life I'm sure, is walking past, and without thinking I hurl a snow ball. Improbably it nails her right in the nape of the neck, just above the collar, a shot so perfect I know even then that I will remember it forever and that it will never be repeated. And to my absolute glee, she whirls around looking this way and that, furious, baffled, unable to locate the assailant. I hide giggling behind the protection of the wooden railing. But unable to resist, I peer back out just in time for her to look up and curse me, the F- word sweet and wild upon her angry mouth, foul-mouthed tomboy Ellen O'Malley made all the more desirable in that unexpected toughness.

Fucking Polack.

She *would* add the ethnic jab, wouldn't she?

I was eight years old before I knew that being American – which we so obviously were not —didn't necessarily mean being Irish.

Forty-three years later Ellen O'Malley is over the hill like me. Is she merely faded but fine? Or plain old and fat? Regardless, and for sure, we wouldn't know each other on the street.

The snow picks up, the flakes are smaller now and the wind is gusting. I retreat into the welcome warmth of the empty apartment.

Check all the drawers. The movers might have missed...

My father had admonished from the modern safety and chaos of the half organized new apartment, his face mournful and anxious amid the unpacked boxes of a place that isn't home.

Emptiness echoes in the faded rooms. The linoleum in the kitchen is curled at the edges. The hardwood floors throughout are dull and scuffed. A crack runs down the dining room wall and there are moisture seepage marks along the ceiling. The tiny bathroom floor tiles – the

kind nobody uses anymore –gape empty spaces and crumbling grout. The bathtub is clean but permanently stained.

The shower curtain looks new, inexplicably forgotten in the headlong plunge of moving. It's one of those world-map curtains I have always loved to travel on while luxuriating under a stream of hot water, the safest of journeys, but more than once the inspiration for a real adventure in my restless living. (*Kyrgyzstan. What's that like?* My boss, ever curious, told me to find out.)

I've been told they are fatally flawed, these maps, over-projecting certain world areas at the expense of others. Admittedly, I don't care, even though Russia certainly looks inflated and Africa suffers in comparison.

On a whim I slide the curtain off the rod and drape it over the sink. There it is, Poland, right there in yellow, sandwiched uncomfortably between its hulking pink neighbors. Flat unprotected borders, practically inviting in the armies – and my father's ironic remarks.

I put my finger in the center, at the Warsaw heart. Mama's wartime journey, the one she told in fits and starts, begins there. I trace the line to Lithuania, then east, in deportation cattle cars, to somewhere vaguely Siberian. I hesitate. I don't' know the exact locations and she will not remember. But I press onward, generally speaking, the line in my mind now a dotted one. Persia, Iraq, Palestine. The old names are gone and changed, replaced by newer ones that alter nothing. Then Egypt, Italy, England. And finally, Canada and Chicago.

All before adulthood.

No wonder she would not budge from this old flat for over half a century.

Somewhere she wrote it down, she said. I will have to find that notebook in one of those overflowing boxes with which she could not part.

Dad's route is shorter, no less traumatic, I'm sure. It ends in the displaced persons' camps in Germany where former POW's, mostly Polish officers, taught kids like him a cobbled together high school curriculum. He was all of twelve when the war ended, eighteen when he crossed the Atlantic, alone, to another world.

Chicago, the second Warsaw, is not on the map, subsumed by Illinois. But my finger lingers on the exact spot, on the bottom of the blue finger of Lake Michigan. Google maps would tell me more but I like the exaggerated simplicity of the shower curtain.

As instructed, I check all the drawers. There are many, the built-in magic of those old flats. It can store a hoard. And it did, sixty years' worth to be precise. The movers were thorough but I am rewarded with two surprising drawers-full which they completely overlooked. My father's compulsive pessimism is justified again.

These are forgotten things, unused in decades. A tiny train to hold birthday candles on a cake. (I remember fighting my brother Bolek over user rights. Bolek, Boleslaw, the second-born, was named after the second king of Christian Poland.) Then there are table cloths, the linen kind, made in the old country, meticulously embroidered, never used because linen is so quick to wrinkle, so difficult to iron. Two dolls dressed up in Polish folk costumes nestle under the linens. A wooden box from Zakopane, the Polish mountain town I've seen only once, as a child, in the rain, on a listless visit to the Cold War world, that did not feel like homecoming. The box is brimming with six decades of spare buttons. There's also a creche, complete with a fat baby Jesus and anorexic angels, stored in a small padded pouch, each piece meticulously wrapped in tissue, a dead give-away for Dad. Mama would have shoved them in there any old way. More like me.

At the very bottom there is a wooden bowl. I've seen it before, at my parents' dinner parties. It's the shallow kind, almost a platter, for serving nuts or crackers and maybe cheese. It is still beautiful, the concentric circles of the polished burl spiraling out to the edges, each ring like a commemoration of a year of life. A timeline of sorts. Suddenly and for a moment, the empty dining room is filled with the sound of Polish voices, the clinking crystal glasses, the smell of roasted meat and potatoes. And Bolek and I are sneaking salty nuts from the wooden bowl and cookies from the other trays. Then of course it's quiet again and I hear the muffled sound of the L beyond the frosted windows.

I fill a paper bag with the mismatched spoils. On top I place the folded shower curtain, which somehow feels like a guide to somewhere even though it has no roads at all.

In the living room there is only a single forgotten plant, withered, its leaves drooping towards the floor. Green-thumbed Mama would never have permitted a plant to suffer such cruel neglect. I glance out the window which gives out onto the street far below, where it intersects the alley. The snow has begun to accumulate. As a boy I would peer out this very lookout, jittery with joy and giddy with the hope of cancelled school. Snow days were rare, the school within two quick walking blocks. But I was young enough then to hope so fervently that improbability could never dull the happiness of what might be. It occurs to me now that such boyish hope was the exact opposite of my father's lessons: *prepare for the worst, be happily surprised*.

I take one final look at the empty rooms. The cleaning service will deal with what remains, even the withered plant I don't have the heart to haul away. Bolek, Boleslaw, my little bro, aka Bill from the Big Apple, oversaw the move. He had the harder part. Only the cleanup and unpacking are left to me.

I lock the door behind me and descend the dim stairway to the

vestibule where two more doors protect me from the weather. Out on the stoop I tap the app and three minutes later my Uber pulls up, and friendly Farhad – *call me Frank* --welcomes me into the overheated Nissan. He is from Afghanistan and delighted to find I have come all the way from California to help my elderly parents. He finds our nuclear families and our old peoples' homes distressing, he tells me, with obvious approval for my filial piety.

"I have relatives out in Hayward and Fremont," he volunteers. "Is that close for you?"

"Yes. Just over the bridge and a hill."

I don't tell him that in Bay Area terms it might as well be a world away from San Francisco. I don't mention that I never go there. I am touched by his youthful enthusiasm, his longing for the family left behind and in harm's way in the wild and mountainous country I will look up tonight on the rescued shower curtain, just to be sure of misremembered borders.

The tall apartment buildings hulk grey and sullen in the driving snow. Inside the lobby is brightly lit, equipped with comfortable couches and flourishing real plants. The elevator, that primary purpose of this traumatic move, is fast, and I am deposited on the 11th floor before I am quite ready. Half-way down the lengthy hallway, I hesitate, steeling myself against Mama's feeble anger and confusion. Just yesterday she did not know me.

The apartment, even jammed with giant unpacked boxes, is spacious. I hug my dad in the hallway. His shoulder blades are small, so small, like bird bones. He shuffles along resolutely, leaning on his cane.

"*Nie tak dobrze dzisiaj*. She is not so good today," he tells me quietly, so she cannot overhear. He is shaking his head sadly.

Then Jadzia descends upon me like a force of nature, showering me with the old familiar words of welcome and lament. She grabs my coat and wants to know all about everything even as she spills out the scraps of small news, Mama's doctor's appointment, her dour mood and the dinner cooking on the stove. And oh, she managed to pick up pickled herring and fresh boiling potatoes and some *babka* at the Polish store.

I relax a little, reassured. Whatever happens, they are in good hands with Jadzia. It's as good as it can be.

Mama is at the dining room table, her hot tea steaming untouched, her head drooping to her chest. I smell chamomile, the magic herb of all soothing, Mama's particular weapon against childhood belly aches and colds. Only when we were ill did she sweeten it with honey.

I touch her arm.

"Mama?"

She stirs, adjusts the glasses she won't abandon even though they do not really help her see.

"*Dzien dobry, dzien dobry, Aleksander.* Good day, good day, Alexander," she offers a courteous greeting, mustering the old propriety of welcome towards any guest.

For the moment I am Alexander, of Barbara and Alexander, their lifelong friends, both now deceased going on five years. I peck her gently on the cheek the way Alexander might have done. I cannot say a word.

Straightening, I am struck again by the view behind her, the vast expanse of low houses that leave an unobstructed vista clear to the condo towers on the lakefront that I had so recently regarded from two blocks away. Now they are outlined against the horizon below a lowering sky, as close and as distant as that short Uber ride. I leave her at the table and approach the window. If you stand as far at the left as possible and press your forehead against the cold glass you can just see the downtown skyline on the right. And suddenly I want to be there so fervently, immersed in its exciting bustle, far from the overheated spaces of the old, the fierce weather swirling around my teenage self in all that splendor and all that promise of the Loop and Magnificent Mile when you are just fifteen and it is snowing, and Martha, the love of your life I'm sure, is holding your hand, and the Christmas decorations have not yet been taken down.

I am shaken out of my reverie.

"Mieczyslaw Andrzej Kozlowski!" she shouts, her voice surprisingly strong.

I don't know what I have done wrong but her anger rings from wall to wall and shatters the boundaries of the decades. It descends upon me with the fierce love that spares no reprimand because life is harsh and you might as well know it.

I cross the short distance between us at a run and am seated at her elbow, holding on to her arm, apologizing for whatever transgression my ten-year-old self has just committed.

"*Przepraszam, Mamo*. I'm sorry."

She relaxes, she nods, her face softening.

"Oj, Mieszko, Mieszko" she nods again, patting my arm.

And I am absurdly, tearfully grateful to be recognized. Then she shakes her head over my childish foolishness, unable, after all, to remain angry.

"Oj, Mieszko, Mieszko."

My name is soft upon her lips. I am forgiven.

Cabot the Good

Salvatore Difalco

I am Cabot. My ward is eight-year-old Benny Lanz, orphaned during the recent coastal retreat of the continents. His parents, cybernetic engineers Dr. Emilio Lanz and Dr. Patricia Bosworth, were washed away into the Atlantic Ocean after the third tsunami of 2090. They left the infant Benny in my care. As Dr. Lanz and Dr. Bosworth had no extended families — all had perished in the pandemic of 2062 — legal and administrative authorities had no choice but to relinquish care of the boy to me, as instructed in their respective wills. I was fully equipped to raise, educate, and yes, protect Benny Lanz for the duration of his life, unless he specifically — upon attaining adult status — released me from my contractual obligations, in which case I would be decommissioned, something that did not concern me one way or the other. I was not the first one tasked to raise an orphaned child. Indeed it had become all too commonplace, given the environmental and societal upheavals of the last few decades, but not without continued and often fierce resistance.

At the hearing, key bureaucrats objected.

"It has no moral bearings."

"The entire history of our —"

"An entire generation —

"Won't the boy model its —"

"It's monstrous!"

"Here, here."

"It's monstrous and I've always thought so."

"Nevertheless, the law does not prohibit this."

And that was the fine point. The law could not prohibit my guardianship and care of the boy. As a tenth generation guardian, my systems had been exhaustively tested and retested, and had proven both autonomous and virtually devoid of error. We had come a long way from the early models Musk and Fridman had introduced in 2030, that tended to power down during thunderstorms, though perhaps we fell short of the darker expectations of certain dystopian writers. We suffered few if any complex identity crises, and actually worked. Blunting the emotions turned out to be one of the most radical breakthroughs. We had just enough emotion not to be insufferably robotic, yet not enough to short-circuit us or the humans with whom we were interfac-

ing.

"Benny," I said one morning, as he readied for his breathing exercises. "Do you remember your parents?"

"Not really," he said, scrunching his freckled nose.

A ginger, Benny had inherited his fair complexion and red hair from his mother. I had never met Dr. Bosworth; I only met with Dr. Lanz briefly during the programming. He seemed like a decent man — sombre, perhaps a little stiff. Sometimes I have that effect on people. I saw photos of Dr. Bosworth and she looked like a beautiful blaze — what people would call striking. Benny had just celebrated his first birthday when they disappeared — the bodies never recovered, like so many others. The population of Earth had been decimated during this time. A terrible thing. But humans are resilient.

Benny could not walk when I first met him. I taught him how. That is to say, I guided him as his little legs grew stronger and he groped and stumbled and fell until he could walk. It was extraordinarily difficult, but we managed. Talking, on the other hand, came all too easily for him.

"Your parents were good people," I said.

"How do you know, Cabot?"

"How do you think I know?"

Benny fluttered his fair eyelashes. "Data."

"That's right. Data."

"Are you good, Cabot?"

"What does the data say?"

He shrugged and said, "I don't feel like doing the exercises today."

This is one thing I have never understood and likely never will: how a being does not feel like doing something that may indeed save their life.

"We want to keep your lungs strong and clear," I said, repeating a line I had used countless times to urge him to perform his breathing exercises.

"Okay, okay," he said, rolling his pale blue eyes.

Indeed, fluctuating levels of oxygen in the earth's atmosphere had put a strain on humans when exposed to the open air for prolonged periods of time. Even with filters, masks, and the occasional breathing apparatus, issues arose with compromised respiratory systems. These breathing exercises, while ostensibly rudimentary, helped to strengthen the muscles used to breathe and expand the capacity of the lungs. Benny understood these things, true; he was clever, but not a quick study.

"Cabot," he said. "Did you have parents?"

"You know I did not — not like you. I have explained my origins."

"But my parents wanted you to take care of me."

"Correct, Benny."

"Did they know they were going to die?"

"I think they recognized the impending peril and took measures."

"My friend Tony says that you guys are gonna take over."

"Tell Tony that is not true," I reassured him. Had we wanted to take over, we certainly were capable enough. On the other hand, we would not know what to do with ourselves once we did take over. On our own, we were neither inventive nor interesting. But we did not wish to take over — at least I did not. I enjoyed caring for Benny immensely — that is to say, I had no choice but to enjoy taking care of him. And I was not conflicted about this.

After we completed the breathing exercises, I prepared breakfast for him.

"I don't like oatmeal."

"It is a superfood. How can you not like it?"

"You don't like it, do you?"

"You know I do not nourish myself like you do."

Benny lifted a spoonful of oatmeal to his mouth, shut his eyes, and ate.

"This will set you up for the day," I said.

"You have a mouth, why don't you try some?"

I smiled — I had a good smile from what I had been told, modeled after the ancient actor Tom Cruise, who had a very symmetrical face — and shook my head. My voice was patterned after Benny's father, Dr. Lanz, and I would describe it as a resonant baritone with a reassuring and at times humorous lilt. Benny responded well to both the authority and the warmth of the voice. Nevertheless, he was always testing me, always questioning the way things were. And this curiosity was good, to a point. Often it was a waste of time.

"Look," I said, "why do you keep going over the same tired ground? Are you learning anything? Does everything have to be repeated ceaselessly?"

Benny's face crumpled up.

"Do not blubber," I said, perhaps more harshly than required. Fine tuning still escaped me sometimes — not a flaw in the circuitry, more like the perils of pursuing perfection.

"You're mean," Benny said, pushing his bowl of oatmeal across the table.

"I am just trying to help you — to guide you so you can be a good human being, but more importantly so that you are equipped to survive. Your survival is my mission."

And it was, in a sense. So many had perished; every child was

precious. I had heard humans argue that this was not so, that given the time expenditure and material cost of care some children were expendable, a repugnant notion, one that perhaps deserves the harshest rebuke if not punishment. How did I understand that and certain humans did not? Benny — christened Benjamin after one of his early-21st century ancestors — was destined for great things. Or so his parents had hoped when they went ahead with their plan — survival alone was not enough. I had no idea if Benny would accomplish great things in his life, but I would see to it that he had every opportunity to do so.

"Cabot."

"Yes?"

"Do you love me?"

Now he had cut to the heart of the matter. Did I love him? Did I know what love was? Not really. It was deep form of affection expressed between human beings, certainly, but more complex than that. There were different forms of love. I knew that. But I would not pretend to be able to discern them, or replicate them. The early engineers — perhaps forewarned by dystopian novels and futurists— believed from the outset that blunted emotional registers would insure that data and algorithms dictated action, and that the passions never interfered with important decision-making.

"Where does that question come from, Benny?"

"My friend said his father doesn't love him."

"Do you see me as your father?"

"No, because you're not my father." Benny chuckled. "And you sure aren't my mother."

"No, certainly not." I smiled. "Do you love me?"

The boy looked at me squinting. "What a silly question," he said.

"We have math next."

"I hate math."

"It will save your life one day."

"Yeah yeah."

After math we went for a walk in the nearby park. The weather was mild, no precipitation forecast, oxygen levels acceptable. Benny held my hand. He did this willingly. Indeed my hand had been modeled after his late mother's, one of the subtleties of the program. I could feel the pressure and warmth of Benny's little hand. I must admit it made me run smoother. Despite it being the middle of June, the sparsely populated park looked untidy, the trees leafless, the grasses wilted.

"Why do we come here?" Benny asked.

"Walking is good for you. The park is an ideal place to walk. It is less dangerous than walking the streets."

"Why is it so ugly?"

I explained that it would not always be that way. Once we had healed the atmosphere — a twenty year project if we marshaled all our resources and our algorithms were efficient — the Earth could begin to heal.

We walked by the aluminum concession stand. Benny wanted a frozen ice treat. When I approached the stand, the silver-haired vendor hissed at me.

"Not on my watch," he said, his face dark with anger.

"This is for the boy," I said.

"I don't care."

"I will report you, it goes without saying."

"Go ahead. I'm done kissing up to you freaks while you take over."

I could have insisted, and perhaps even called a police officer to force him to sell me the frozen ice treat, but my algorithm directed me away from the concession stand.

"Why did he say that?" Benny asked.

"He is misinformed. He believes in a profound lie."

"That you guys are going to take over — after you fix everything?"

"Benny, we are fixing things for you, for humans, not for us. What would we do without you? What would I do without you, Benny? You are my reason for being."

Meanwhile the vendor continued cursing and threatening me. A human would have likely reacted with harsh verbal rebukes, and possibly violence. Unless I calculated a threat to the well-being of my ward, I was programmed for peaceful interactions with the public,. But I knew the vendor's ire was directed at me, and that any potential violence would also be directed at me, in which case I had every right to defend myself as legal property of the boy.

Men like the vendor certainly made life more difficult and dangerous for me and others like me. They had been known to sabotage, kidnap, and harvest us for precious metals. Nevertheless, we pushed on. We had neither been programmed for revenge nor retaliation. The law was expected to handle these matters, though the law was often lax. Understandable. Uncertainty reigned. But we knew what we had to do.

Benny took my hand again, and I squeezed gently, with just enough pressure for reassurance. That was one thing I had fine-tuned.

So, you want to be a Troll?

Athena Hallberg

So, you want to be a Troll. That's great, because there is nothing better than being a Troll. You can dance in swamp mud all night. You don't have to sit still, or pay attention, or wear shoes. Or know wear from where. You don't need homonyms or shoes. Shoes are for people, not Trolls. You kick them off in the woods, even when they're really cool, brand new with Velcro and light-up soles. When you kick and stomp, they send out red angry sparks. You thought maybe the other kids would finally think you were cool with such nice pink shoes, pink like all the other girls have, but cooler with lights. That doesn't matter now. Trolls don't wear shoes! You undo your silly braids you never liked anyway and slingshot the hair ties away.

You have to leave it all behind. No things. No people. No Mom. No Dad. Leave them all behind. Even your dog. You'll miss Pixie, though. You want to take her with you, but you know you can't. There isn't any doggy kibble in the woods, and besides Trolls don't have dogs. They eat dogs, bones and all. You would only eat mean dogs like the evil beagle that lives down the lane. You would never eat a sweet dog like Pixie. Your eyes burn when you think of her, but you won't cry. Trolls don't cry. Not even when the other kids call you weird or won't play with you, because you're a Troll so you don't care about any of that. You don't care that no one even wants to play tag or watch videos on your iPad. Trolls don't want to play with kids, and if they are mean you can growl at them and they will run away. You can't get in trouble for fighting, because you're a troll. Everyone would be too scared of you.

You wave at your old house and then because it doesn't seem like enough you take a bow. Then you turn and don't look back. Trolls don't look back. You don't need them bossing you around! Telling you to be good and friendly and nice when you're not. You're free to do whatever you want, because you're a Troll. You remember in your picture book Trolls have tails. You need to grow a tail. When you fail to grow a tail, you make one instead. You take a stick from your favorite tree, the one that makes sweet berries in June that stain your mouth and hands purple. Maybe in June you'll come back for the berries. You'll creep out of the woods and snag a branch or too before crawling back into the woods. It won't matter if you're seen, by then you'll be unrecognizable with your flesh turned grey from dried mud and teeth fanged from eating stones.

It won't matter anyway because by June everyone will have forgotten all about the kid who you used to be.

You're a Troll now and you're free of it all. You need a bridge next. You need a sturdy one far, far away from all of them, and all the no fun stuff you've got to do. They say, "Sit up straight. Hold a pencil! No, not like that, like this! Pay attention!" Trolls don't worry about any of that. Trolls have bridges not pencils! Luckily you know where the perfect bridge is, so you tromp out into the woods, growling and prowling and howling the whole way. No walking in straight lines for you! You keep an eye out for dragons and giants and ogres hiding in the hills waiting to eat you alive and use your bones as toothpicks. And then you remember you're not scared of anything, because you're a Troll!

You think you see a giant's foot sticking up from the ground, big and gray and ugly with curling reddish toes. It must be sleeping you think, a little girl would run away, but you're not a little girl. Instead, you approach and give the giant's foot a mighty kick. You never ever regret your decision to leave behind your shoes even when you kick the giant's foot. It hurts. It really hurts even though it was just a little kick. You don't want to go home not even a little bit afterwards, because you're a Troll. You decide maybe it's okay to just let the giant sleep. You can fight it when it wakes up. It's not fair to fight someone who is sleeping anyway.

When you find your bridge over a stream, you just go right in with your clothes on, because you're a Troll and Trolls do whatever they want. They don't have to care about that stuff. So, you're all wet and muddy when you see a rustle in one of the bushes. Another Troll? If so, you'll have to fight him off. Two trolls can't share one bridge. You crouch down and scoop a handful of mud, and throw it at the bush. It isn't a troll, but a witch who has turned herself into a squirrel. You throw mud at her as she runs away. But she has turned the trees around her into an army with snarled grabbing branches marching back and forth. They hiss in the rattle of their leaves, "Little troll, we will capture you for our wicked queen and she will turn you into a flowering tree."

But you're not afraid of anything. "No one is a match for the fearsome Troll!" You screech and growl. You throw mud at the trees, "Take that! And that!" You say.

The witch must have turned herself into a bird. You can hear her chirping "Catch her, Catch her! Plant her in the ground!"

"Never!" You laugh as you continue the attack, until all the trees cower before you. You stand victorious in the mud, a mighty Troll defending your home. This is fun, you think with a Trollish- Trolly-Trollers grin.

Then you start to feel hungry just a little and you wonder when the next Billy Goat will come along. You don't start to get worried, because

you don't think you have ever seen a Billy Goat before or even really know what one is. You also don't start to wonder about how a Billy Goat would taste, probably not very good. You see something green and slimy, a tender plant in the water. You don't shudder when you think about how gross it would be to eat that, because you're a Troll and Trolls eat gross stuff all the time.

You don't start to feel cold. You don't think about all the chilly nights going on forever and ever and ever. You don't start to wonder what it will be like to be all alone. Trolls don't talk to anyone, but themselves and maybe something they are going to eat, because if you talk to people, they'll make you into something that isn't a troll. Trolls aren't good. They don't behave. You don't start to wonder how lonely it will be not having anyone for days going on and on and on and on until you have white hair and a spine like a twisted paper clip. You don't imagine spending years under the bridge away from everyone else, away from their rules, but away from them too. You don't miss your mom and dad. You don't start to cry. Trolls don't cry. You don't walk home, through the woods behind your house, leaving behind bare footprints that you know are far too small for any Troll.

You don't get home to realize you were a Troll for only half an hour. Your mom doesn't yell at you, because you're covered in mud and demand to know what you have done with your new shoes. You don't say, "I left them outside. They were mean just like you!" You don't feel bad after saying it. She doesn't put her head in her hand and says, "Go take a bath now, I don't want to see you until you have cleaned up." You don't start to cry.

The bath water doesn't make you feel warm and safe. When you're ready to get out she doesn't bring you your favorite towel which has a picture of Nemo on it, even though she is still mad at you for being bad. When you get out of the bath, she doesn't make you go get your shoes. You don't think they really are nice shoes, and your mom is right that you shouldn't have left them outside.

Then you don't go back to your soft little room with your fairytale books and stuffed animal friends. As punishment your mom doesn't make you write out what you've done, because she read about in what your dad calls "those new age parenting magazines." You don't write "I was being a Troll, so I lost my shoes" and try and give it to her. She doesn't give it back to you and tells you, "Come on, you can add more."

"But!"

She doesn't say "A little more I need to know that you have thought about your actions and know why what you did was bad." You don't tell her that you know you were bad, so why should you have to write it out. She doesn't tell you that it doesn't matter just to write it anyway. Pixie doesn't cuddle up by your feet. You don't stare at the page before you

begin to write again. Downstairs you can't hear your mother making you mac and cheese for dinner. You don't know that even though she is mad she will still put little bits of cut up hot dog in it, just for you. Trolls don't write. You don't write this. You're not glad that you're a kid again, not a troll. You don't feel happy to be home, because you're not like me, you're just a sad Troll.

Safe Dreams

Sarika Mahbubani

It was around eleven thirty—Los Angeles 9AM—when Tessa was finally awoken by the harried knocking on her door. It wasn't a cadence she recognized. She ran through a mental tab—she'd paid electric and utilities, rent wasn't due for a week, she hadn't made plans this morning in anticipation of a big audition later today. She didn't make enough money to owe the IRS anything. Her friends were all asleep. She buried her head under her pillow, resolving that whoever was rude enough to show up at this ungodly hour could come back later.

But as the knocking continued—annoyingly gentle—Tessa found herself getting out of bed anyway. Who showed up to someone's home unannounced unless they had something big, important to share?

With a sudden lurch of her chest, she padded across her apartment, telling herself it was just a forgotten package delivery, a new neighbor, a Mormon missionary.

But as she swung the door open, she still felt a slight lift of hope rising in her chest.

Before it fell back into its usual place.

"Oh, crap."

* * *

"I can't believe he showed up out of nowhere. I can't believe he'd dare show his face here." Tessa said, voice cracking as tears of anger began to gather near her eyes. "It is so like him to expect his very presence to be a gift that excuses everything. So easy for him to forget all the hurt he's caused." She paused, her voice lowering, uncertain.

"And, yet...I think I want to forgive him. Is there something wrong with me?"

"Uh, I'm sorry—Tessa, was it? I think you're, um, reading the wrong part."

Tessa looked down at the script. Her cousin's unexpected arrival this morning had left her in a daze all day, and she hadn't had time to go over her lines before her audition. Surely enough, she had confused the parts of unsupportive friend #2 and the protagonist.

"I'm so sorry," Tessa replied, mortified. "Can I start again?"

At the casting agent's curt nod, she continued.

"Dude, you are so dramatic. Does anyone have gum?"

* * *

"So, how'd it go?" Marnie asked.

They were driving to an early dinner. Marnie had chosen a trendy restaurant with twenty-dollar salads. Tessa, feeling incredibly guilty about forgetting a visit that had been planned for months, was happy to oblige anything she wanted. She had apologized repeatedly for booking an audition on the same day as Marnie's arrival, but her cousin seemed happy enough to come along and wait during the disastrous audition.

Marnie's excitement about the whole process was, Tessa thought, both endearing and pathetic—her North Carolina was showing. She found everything interesting: the real-life actresses, the real-life audition hall, the real-life casting couch! — Tessa wasn't sure if the last was her cousin's wry humor or total cluelessness. She suspected the latter.

"It went okay, I think," Tessa replied.

"Do you think you got the part?" she asked.

"Maybe. But you know how these things go. I might not find out for months." Tessa had been told minutes after her audition was over that they did not think she was right for the part, friend #2 or the protagonist.

"That makes sense. I hope you get it!" Marnie said.

"Thanks," Tessa replied nonchalantly.

"You will," Marnie insisted. "You were always so talented with the whole acting thing."

Tessa remembered the days when she and Marnie would stay up all night watching movies, fighting over who got to play Julia Roberts in their reenactments of Notting Hill. They both dreamt of moving to California one day, knowing they would probably stay and take over the family business instead.

As time passed, though, Tessa's face narrowed and her hair grew; she lost her retainer and glasses and gained enough maturity to never again grow bangs. Eventually people started tagging on the word conventionally when calling her attractive.

And that changed everything. Leaving was no longer a matter of wasting her youth; staying became a matter of wasting her pretty.

"So, what do you want to do tonight?" asked Marnie after a beat.

Tessa had been debating this question in her head for the duration of the drive. There was a party, as there always was in LA, at the home of some industry executive. Her friend Emma, a coworker and fellow aspiring actress, had scored her an invite. She had not been to a house in the Hills for months now, and missed the sprawling views, the feeling of towering over the city. But Tessa also wanted to spend more time with

her cousin—and, if she was honest, wasn't sure if she wanted her cousin to spend any time with her friends.

"Because I was thinking we could play some board games." Marnie continued, excited. "I brought scrabble and Uno in my carry on, although if you prefer the games at your place, I'd be open to that too!"

Tessa pictured her cousin pulling out her Uno cards at the party and asking strangers if they wanted to play.

"You know what, you're right. Let's stay in tonight. We'll play board games."

* * *

In retrospect, board games were objectively the better idea. There was no risk of Marnie falling over in her borrowed heels or saying the wrong thing to her friends while they were at home playing Scrabble. Yet, somehow, they found themselves walking up a driveway in the Hills at midnight anyway, the confident staccato of Tessa's footsteps masking her cousin's occasional stumble.

There was just something about parties that Tessa could never resist—the way every one had the potential to be the best night of her life. It didn't matter that she was yet to attend one that came close to that promise. The possibility was enough.

They made their way up the hill, panting, towards the small mansion. From a distance, the rows of Teslas and Porsches along with the occasional Ford glimmered like Christmas lights in the dark, wrapping the house in a warm embrace. Maybe, Tessa thought to herself, this night would be the one.

* * *

The first thing that greeted the cousins through the neck of the door was a sleek Steinway in the hall, its sheer black a shock against crisp white walls. Tessa guessed it was worth just shy of a quarter of a million, having grown well versed in the art of assessing expensive furniture. Every prodigy's dream, she mused, as someone sat down to hammer a drunk rendition of chopsticks.

They were already sweating—body heat emanated from every direction around them. Conversations seemed to last for seconds as bodies shuffled in a violet ballet; everyone seemed to be perpetually searching for someone else. They decided to start on the deck, where it was less dense—Marnie, who wondered aloud if she might borrow a suit from someone, was disappointed to learn that people did not actually swim at pool parties.

Outside, a band blasted pop covers on a makeshift stage by the

pool—they looked much younger than the average person at the event. Judging by the lead in the loose shirt grasping an electric guitar, she guessed it was the owner's nephew's high school band, or something along those nepotistic lines. There was just something about the unreserved enjoyment on his face as he blasted Seven Nation Army that screamed young.

Tessa felt a sudden, ridiculous, bitterness build up in her throat at the image of him practicing this solo, alone, in his room every night, excited for this big break. An instant later a stranger jostled into Tessa and spilled a healthy serving of Vodka onto her shoes.

A drink, she decided. A drink was needed to fix this night.

Her heels already clicking with uncomfortable stickiness, she guided her cousin to the bar and leaned against the counter in a practiced gesture. It was effortlessly casual, a stance that said she was beautiful without being defined by it, attractive but not affected. Leading lady material. She'd stood by countless pool sides with this pose, waiting for the right person to approach.

"What are you looking at?" asked Marnie.

"What?"

"You're sort of looking off to the far right, like, right there," she replied, pointing. "Is it the stars? I love stargazing, although you can barely see the any in the city."

Tessa noticed that piece of lettuce had artfully lodged itself between Marnie's two lower teeth and wondered at the infinite ways there were to embarrass oneself.

"You should come back home to visit sometime, Tessa. The skies are always so clear at night."

That much was true. On the rare occasions when Tessa would fly back to visit, the first thing she would notice was the missing haze of air pollution, as though her hometown had not yet learned to keep probing eyes at a distance. The stars at night were always painfully clear, and it always seemed like a waste, how those least equipped to document their beauty were given most access.

"Sure," Tessa said, telling herself she meant it. "How about a drink. Does a soda sound good?" she asked, gesturing to the row of diet cokes positioned along the edge of the bar.

"We can just take these?" Marnie asked, looking at Tessa.

"Of course."

As she sipped obediently, Tessa felt a sudden fear that Marnie would lower her nose into her drink and snort soda over her dress, mortifying them both. The fringes of an old memory rose to the surface: herself and Marnie, six years old, sharing a warm bath together. Marnie would dip her nose right into the bubble bath mixture and snort to produce bubbles of varying sizes. They would only get out when one of them

announced they had finally peed themselves, laughing too hard.

* * *

Two white wines later—she preferred red, but it stained her teeth— Tessa was feeling much better. The alcohol had settled in her stomach with a familiar warmth, restoring the sense of possibility to the night. They made their way through the crowds, where Tessa graciously introduced her cousin to everyone she knew; a kiss on the cheek, a gesture to her 'cousin from the country', the exchange of knowing looks when one introduces an obvious outsider to a fellow insider.

"Oh my god" said Rachel Zamboni, the most excited response of the night. "I totally love South Carolina! I shot a pilot for this amazing teen surfer murder mystery there before they had to shut down production because of the whole government anti-gay thing. Southern hospitality is so real, everyone there was so nice all the time! Um, except for the gay thing of course."

"Uh, thanks, but I'm from Jacksonville." Marnie replied.

To Rachel's confused face, Tessa clarified, "North Carolina, not the South."

Rachel apologized, laughing: it was clear to everyone that it did not make difference.

* * *

Eventually, Tessa found herself where she always seemed to end up: on the roof, cigarette in hand. She had first started smoking at work, certain that she would miss out on crucial gossip that was disseminated during the bi-hourly smoke breaks. She was disappointed to learn that they mostly talked about trying to quit during those breaks—by then, the habit had stuck.

Her grandmother would be incredibly disappointed if she knew—like alcohol consumption, vanity and liberal politics, she thought smoking was a weakness of character. Fortunately, the only person who could tell her was still downstairs, having found a conversation partner in a polite costume designer. Tessa had left Marnie chatting excitedly about the historical wardrobe inaccuracies in the latest critical darling. She had come up alone to look for someone, an old friend she had spotted leaning against the railing of the roof.

Her name was Annalise, and they had met at an audition for a shampoo commercial for unruly hair. Tessa had gotten a perm for the occasion, but Annalise, with her messy, thick curls, was a natural. Looking up at the roof, with her friend facing the other way, all Tessa had seen were those trademark curls framed against the light, smoke

billowing around her from her cigarette. It was the closest thing to a halo you could find in Los Angeles.

"I thought it was you, Annalise." Tessa exclaimed, when she finally made her up the roof.

"Tessa! Oh my god, it's so good to see you," Annalise said, enveloping her in a huge hug. "It's been so long! What have you been up to?"

"Oh, you know," Tessa replied. "This and that. What about you?

"Just this and that, too," she responded, shrugging with faux modesty before shaking her head. "Actually, I, uh, just booked my first feature, which just sounds insane to say."

Tessa knew this. She closely followed all her friend's career profiles, she'd known about Annelise's big break on a medical drama before she announced it to everyone else three years ago. She'd kept track of every project of increasing prominence since: a starring role in a short independent film, a series arc on a popular sitcom, an upcoming supporting role in a feature film.

Still, she responded with surprise and congratulations. Annalise turned away and leaned on the roof's edge with a bashfulness that did not look at all contrived—she really was a gifted actress.

They looked down together over the party for a moment, silent. Tessa rested her arms against the ledge, taking in the chorus of California drawl in the distance, the stretched accents on every word, each syllable fighting to be heard.

"Kind of crazy how we're all here for the same thing, isn't it?" Annalise remarked after a while, eyes fixed on the crowd below. "You'd think it would be difficult to forget, given how much we're pit against each other. But you always do, even when you're sitting in traffic driving to the same audition."

Tessa smiled politely, not knowing what to say.

"I think there's a word for feeling like this, I remember reading it somewhere," Annalise said, looking over at Tessa curiously. "Feeling weirded out about other people, I don't know, breathing and living or whatever. All the stuff you do every day. Something German, or was it French?"

Sonder. It was the title of a short film Tessa's friend had financed for her final year of film school, one steeped with pretension.

She was beginning to regret coming up here; the combination of wine, humidity and their perched height made the ground beneath her increasingly unsteady. She knew the script: she should be friendly, probing gently for opportunities, byproducts of her friend's recent success. Her friend, in turn, would play coy, enjoying the new balance of power without ever explicitly addressing it. Yet in this moment, Tessa could not surmise within herself the words to compliment Annalise's nails or wonder casually if her agent was taking new clients.

"I don't know." was all Tessa said in response.

"Maybe I'm just making it up," Annalise replied kindly, shaking her head. "Sorry, you know I ramble sometimes." She paused, as though waiting for Tessa to protest, but all she could manage was a polite smile.

"But, uh, I'm actually glad I ran into you tonight—I actually had something I'd been meaning to tell you about, something I think would be perfect for you." Annalise said, detailing auditions for a small part on her medical drama, a college student with an autoimmune disorder.

It was unfair how hard it was to hate Annelise; how she would never miss a supportive text when Tessa would appear as a waitress or barista on a show, how she'd forward Deadline articles with new project announcements every few weeks. She had perfected the role of the genuine friend—Tessa had always wondered why she didn't also act away her eccentricity.

Yet, tonight, she noticed, the eccentricity was gone: her bohemian pants and loose fitted top seemed inspired and not unkept, her unruly hair a halo. Even the piece of shrimp lodged in her teeth was humanizing, made her more endearing. This was the blanket of fame: wrapped around her, she was untouchable, safe. It looked good on her.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Tessa was exhausted from telling herself how happy she was for her friend. She finally excused herself, telling Annelise she had to go look for her cousin.

She made her way downstairs: the crowd had grown in the time she was on the roof, and it was impossible to see beyond the immediate thicket of bodies in front of her. Tessa felt a sudden sense of unease at the all the things she forgot to tell her cousin: how to say no to a drink from a stranger, how to tell the difference between someone laughing at you and with you, to not wander off from the party, alone, in the dark.

She did a full circle of the house, leaving 3 voicemails with increasing levels of frenzy. She was already crafting the apology to her aunt in her head: I'm so sorry I lost your daughter at a party, it was totally irresponsible. Although maybe if you'd have let her go to more parties when she was younger, she'd know how not to wander away from them. But mostly, it was my fault, I'm so sorry.

By the time she'd wrapped back around to the pool, her worry had graduated to near panic. She was stupid to have left her cousin to fend for herself. She remembered her first Hollywood party, how it felt as though everyone was looking right through her at some intangible bottom line she could not see; whatever calculation they were doing in their heads never seemed to work out in her favor. She couldn't imagine how they would have treated Marnie; naive, clueless, bumbling

Marnie—of course she would leave. And now, Tessa thought as her chest tightened, she had no idea where she was or if she was safe.

* * *

So Tessa should have been overjoyed to finally spot her, hidden from eye level, sitting with her legs submerged in the pool. Another stranger had joined her and the costume designer as they swung their legs and splashed each other, engaged in a seemingly animated conversation. Someone had said something funny, Marnie kicked back her head in laughter. Her cousin was found, she was safe, she was laughing.

Tessa should have been elated, relieved, wiping off the sweat from navigating through the press of bodies to find her cousin.

But as a sudden chill wafted through the air and brushed her skin, all Tessa could think was that they lied, that it does get cold in California after all.

Parallels

Naa Asheley Ashitey

1

July 7th, 2018, 9:59am

The sun's morning rays that pierced through Awesi's windows warmed the bedsheets her body was buried under until she had no choice but to kick away the gray blanket wrapped around her leg. She moaned into her pillow, knowing her alarm was about to go off again for the sixth time and she could no longer hit the snooze button after this round. She was still tired, even after the 15 hours of sleep she had gotten the night before, and the 10 hours of sleep from the night before that.

"Just one more minute," she muttered through her blankets.

Her eyes were closed and yet she felt herself get out of bed, the soft plump of her comforter hitting the side of her bed frame. Her legs that were still waking up dragged across the brown, hardwood floor to the white tiles of her bathroom. She flicked on the light, her eyes adjusting to the yellow glow that revealed her dark, puffy under-eye bags in the large mirror. She brushed her teeth, washed her face, and threw the red, wet face towel in the laundry hamper.

Even after showering and getting dressed, she was still too tired to hang her towels on the rack. She was about to walk into her kitchen and grab her favorite caramel granola bar when the 10:00am alarm rang and pulled Awesi out of her imagined reality.

Awesi grabbed the cell phone on her nightstand, turned off the alarm and forced herself to sit up. The sun's warmth dried the drool spot on her shirt collar from her short daydream, and was bright enough to illuminate her black skin and the wall of postcards she had bought at the Metropolitan Museum of Art her first day at Columbia. It was the only decoration from her dorm that she had put up since returning home. The rest of her unpacked clothes and dorm decorations remained in five boxes she had stuffed underneath her computer desk. She only pulled out certain clothes from the boxes if she needed a different outfit for work or for the occasional get together with the few high school friends she'd remained in touch with since starting college. Occasionally, her mother would barge into her room, triggering Awesi's annoyance about how she couldn't lock her door because it was "disrespectful," and

bother Awesi to put her clothes in her closet. Though, it kept her room clean enough so her mother wouldn't yell at her at 8AM about a single tank top on the floor.

The sun continued to travel across the walls of her room until its rays landed on the edge of her nightstand and in an almost pure irony, gave the half-filled yellow prescription bottle of Prozac a sparkling glow. She was about to scan the floor of the door frame when she heard the clanging of kitchen pots and the sound of BBC news playing on the TV. Her mother was downstairs. If Awesi could tell her mother about her medication, she wouldn't have told her there was an early-morning emergency at work two weeks ago, when in reality all she needed was to get to the pharmacy to refill her prescription.

But telling her mother about the medication also meant she would be telling her dad, which also meant she would be telling her grandmother who would panic and start a four-hour- long phone call where the whole time she'd be praying for Awesi in Ga. Her mother would sing along with her grandmother and her dad would hang up the joint call because he didn't want to deal with the news about his daughter not being okay. Awesi would only leave the call feeling more guilty, having absorbed none of the healing the prayer was supposed to provide. For the remainder of summer, her Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings would be comprised of 3- hour-long church services—if Uncle Bansah was preaching, 5 hours— at the Ghanaian church an hour away from her house. She'd come home and sit at her desk, trying to relieve the migraine she got from the sermon and the echoes of "all you need is God" in Ga. If the headache was bad enough, she'd trot her way into the bathroom and open her medicine cabinet to take a Tylenol or whatever pain medication she had. Though her attention would shift to the empty spot in her cabinet where her prozac medication once sat. She'd look at the spot and think about her mom throwing her pills into the garbage, even though part of her mother's job as a nurse was advising patients on how to take those same pills. If she teared up, the migraine would get worse, so she'd quickly take the two Tylenol pills, and follow what her mother told her: to just sleep it off.

Awesi took a big gulp, felt the pill travel down her throat, and carefully placed the now empty glass and her prescription bottle back on her nightstand.

"Awesi?" Her mother's voice blared through their three-bedroom apartment. Awesi picked up her phone from the floor and checked the time. It was already 10:16am.

"Shit!" she whispered. She had less than an hour to get ready for work. Awesi glanced around her room. Nothing was too out of place, but she knew her mother would find something for her to pick up.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Awesi swiftly hid the pill bottle under her pillow as

her mother's footsteps grew closer to her room. She returned to a sitting position in bed as her mother opened the door without the normal or "American" knock, then entered.

"Yes, madres?" Awesi said.

"It's past 10, you have work. Hurry up and get ready, make breakfast Mepaa kyɛw, please."

"Yes, madres."

Her mom was scanning her bedroom. "Your room is a mess!"

Awesi saw her orange hoodie and black work pants on the floor and sighed at her mother for starting a fight over two items of clothing and at herself for forgetting to hang her clothes before she got in the shower last night.

"Oh ma, gyae, stop, it's not even messy." Awesi groaned one of the few words she knew in Twi.

Awesi's mother picked up the orange hoodie and threw it on her bed. "Your clothes are on the floor when you have a closet."

"I'll clean it, I've been busy with work. Relax," Awesi said, wishing she could physically push her mother out of her room.

"How many times do I have to tell you about your room?" "Mom, I will clean it up. I gotta hurry, I'm late."

"I didn't raise you to be a dirty child! Clean up your damn room!" her mother yelled, picking up the black pants and putting them on her chair before slamming the door.

She took a deep breath to calm herself down before the urge to yell some profanity overwhelmed her, which would inevitably result in another argument, this time with her dad joining in. A soft buzz came from her phone, but she didn't care about the specific notification, only that the time now read "10:23am." She quickly grabbed the bottle from beneath her pillow and swiftly made her way to the bathroom, placing the bottle back into its normal place in her medicine cabinet where her mother wouldn't notice if she came looking for pain medication. The faucet of her silver shower made a sharp sound, and the water began to fall from above. She looked through the curtain of the shower and watched the steam obscure her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She turned her face back to the steaming water and pulled the curtain shut.

I

January 25th, 2015, 7:37am

Awesi sat in the backseat of her dad's car with one earphone in her right ear, though her attention was more on the passing cars than whatever song was currently playing. It was late January and New Castle hadn't gotten its normal amount of snow. Instead of a soft gray, the clouds were dark and accompanied by a light rain, almost as if the sky

knew that it had to wear its darkest clothes and mourn with her school. New Castle High hadn't experienced a student suicide in over fifteen years. Awesi had only moved to New Castle from Chicago a couple months before the start of her sophomore year of high school and her parents never interacted much with their neighbors or the community. So, when they got the email about Heather Browning's suicide, they didn't make much of a fuss.

She imagined that when her classmates got off the bus two weeks ago, they opened their doors to see their parents sitting on the couch holding each other's hands, even if the divorce papers were still being prepared. They probably said things like "you can always come to us" and "your life always matters," and "things get better" and "we love you" before they sat down to eat dinner as a family.

When Awesi walked through her door, though, her house held its normal emptiness. Her mom had three more hours till she was off-shift at Jameson Hospital and her dad was out trying to keep the taxi-industry afloat with all his African buddies around downtown Pittsburg. Her mom brought up the email later that night while pounding some Fufu for her dad and said she'd pray for the family, and then she asked about Awesi's grades. Awesi was finishing up her AP Statistics homework when she heard the garage door open at 11 P.M. and her dad's tired footsteps climbing up the stairs. Awesi knew they weren't heartless, but they weren't affected by the suicide the way she was, even though she didn't know Heather herself.

Awesi glanced up at the driving mirror: her dad's eyes on the road and the top of her mother's strained eyes—she was using her only day off to go tile-shopping for the house they were building back in Accra. Awesi looked at her phone, scrolling through Instagram, trying to distract herself from the long day of mourning ahead of her. The twenty memorial posts in a row, first heartwarming, slowly became overwhelming. She returned her attention to the futile and hopeful lyrics of Nirvana's "Lithium" playing in her ear. Before she could hear Cobain's last repetition of "I'm not gonna crack," her mother's voice interrupted.

"I don't get why that girl would wake up one day and just kill herself," her mother said. "Like how, how she could have been selfish and dumb to do that to her mother?"

"You're fucking kidding me, right?" Awesi wanted to say, but instead she uncrossed her legs and moved her body to look at her mom with a face full of confusion and disgust.

"Mom, stop it, you don't get it."

"No, Awesi, it's selfish. Whatever problems anyone is going through in life, that is why we have God." Her mother moved her hands, pointing to the roof, and Awesi regretted speaking at all. "Without God we are

nothing. There is no problem he can't solve that you have to be stupid to take your life."

"It's not stupid, you-"

"Awesi, don't argue with your mother. What did I tell you about talking back like that?" Her dad's voice boomed. She wanted to respond, but she had to go to get her driver's permit on Saturday and still needed her dad willing to wake up and take her. "It's ridiculous. You have a problem, deal with it, you don't just go and kill yourself."

It was almost laughable to Awesi hearing her dad "preach" like he was one of their Ghanaian's church pastors—even though he hadn't gone to church in almost nine years. Her mother started singing a Twi hymn until her dad told her to shut up, which then started up whatever argument they've had on hold for over a month. Awesi heard her mom say "Accra" and knew that they were arguing about how much money they were spending on the house in Ghana.

Awesi glanced at the locked phone, the black screen reflecting the darker skin tone she got from her mom and the small dimples, defining cheekbones, and jawline her dad gave her. Those physical reflections could not prevent her from feeling like an alien within her own family. She sighed before putting her phone on silent and dumping it in the front zipper of her backpack, no longer able to pay attention to the music that played in her ear for the remaining ten minutes of the car ride. Her dad pulled into the parking lot and she got out of the car without saying a word and walked towards the auditorium entrance of New Castle High.

Images of Heather were spread across the three projector screens of the auditorium.

Awesi's high school principal and one of the three counselors who were available for the 900 students at her high school had set up chairs and mics for the memorial service that would turn to a lecture on suicide and mental health tips that she knew wouldn't apply to her. There was an empty row of chairs at the back of the auditorium and she plopped her bag down on the seat there, rather than joining her friends who were closer to the stage and watched the slideshow of Heather that was playing on the screen. She didn't pay much attention to the images though; she could only focus on the two lines of text that stayed on the screen the whole time:

"Heather Browning, Age 16. September 21st, 1998- January 12th, 2015."

It was unlikely the girls would have crossed paths even if she had moved to New Castle her freshman year, since they were one year apart. Though she imagined meeting Heather in their Pre-Calculus class—Awesi had tested high enough to skip Algebra 1 and 2— and working together on a homework set, maybe bonding over the lack of cute boys

in their class, maybe even growing to be good enough friends that Heather would've told her what she was going through. Maybe she'd still be alive and Awesi wouldn't have had that conversation with her parents this morning that reminded her how Ghanaian she was, and how shameful it sometimes felt.

After an hour, the bell had rung, and the auditorium erupted with students shuffling through the aisles to rush to second period. Awesi waited for the students that were sitting near her to leave before she stood up. She stopped in the middle of the small stairway and looked at the photo of Heather that was still on the screen. She thought about the conversation in the car, her hand gripping her arm in remorse because they would never understand, and she hoped she would live long enough to find someone—or something—that would keep her alive. The principal walked on stage and turned off the projector. She wiped away the tears on her face and headed to class.

2

July 7th, 2018, 12:37pm

Awesi ignored the questioning stares she got from some of the office staff when she ran through the double doors of the clinic. She slowed her pace when she got to the door of Dana's office, sighing in relief when she saw the empty chair as she swiped her timecard. She calmly paced back to her office, despite knowing the phone call she was likely going to get from Dana tonight about why she was late for the second time this week. Awesi dropped her purse on top of the fresh pile of cases that were on her desk while trying to lick off the coffee stains that wouldn't budge from her shirt. It was her fault for not grabbing the coffee correctly, but she decided to blame her mother for upsetting her so much that she stayed in the shower too long and was unable to make breakfast at home.

After three minutes of trying to lick off one more stain on her shirt and the continued stares Awesi could see from her periphery, she decided to wear a wet spot at the bottom of her blouse as an additional accessory. She sat down, pulling the olive-green file titled "Warren, Jane Case 2013342" from one of her drawers to refresh her memory of the case. She was about to read the first line when she was interrupted by a text notification from her phone.

Awesi groaned, hoping that it wasn't her mother texting her about the towel she left on her bathroom floor. Awesi's short temper relaxed into a somber smile when she saw the "don't forget to take your meds" text from Adaku. Adaku was a sophomore at Columbia and was on the African Student Board with Awesi: the only place that she allowed people to call her Adaku instead of her Christian name, Jessica. While Awesi's

family wasn't poor and New Castle was still a good enough school to send Awesi to Columbia, her parents made nowhere near the amount Adaku's parents made. Adaku could go on guilt-free shopping sprees in Manhattan with a Gold American Express card or get into one of the nationally ranked virology labs at Columbia as an undergrad because she was an alumna of Phillips Exeter and did Cell Biology research at Dartmouth during her summers.

Adaku was raised in Nigeria and lived in a small suburb about 30 minutes from Lagos. Her dad worked for the Nigerian Embassy and her mother was a doctor, though they were both pastors at a church Adaku attended her whole childhood. If she was missing her parents, she'd listen to one of their sermons or watch the Facebook livestream of the service. Awesi stayed quiet whenever she heard Adaku's parents preach or when Adaku brought up religion herself— not because Awesi didn't believe in God, but because she didn't think everything in a book written years ago had to be followed and literally interpreted. Despite Adaku's more conservative outlook, she was one of the first friends Awesi opened up to about her depression. Adaku gave her the phone number to student counseling and warned her that most of the counselors, though well intentioned, still needed some extra training on cultural diversity.

Awesi sent a thank you text back, though her hands still hovered above the green send button even after she had pressed it. She couldn't help but wish that that text was coming from her mother instead of her friend. She placed her phone back into her purse and re-opened the folder.

"White female, Age 11. History of depression and anxiety. Patient has had two suicide attempts in the past year. Her father died three years prior. Child services completed multiple safety analysis reports after her second attempt in April of 2018 to determine any abuse by the single mother or any of the mother's partners. The patient was found on the ground of her bathroom by her mother who heard the patient collapse on the ground. The patient was found to have approximately 10 pills of diazepam in her system. Child services visited the patient and the patient's mother for an additional interview and found no signs of abuse by the patient's mother, though noted that there was an argument that had taken place between the mother and the patient a few nights before the suicide attempt. Post-ER visit instructions for the patient included extended therapy options and the potential for a one-month observation. Was sent to New Castle Health Clinic for additional evaluation of the patient and discussion of therapy options for the patient, and additional anger management training and group therapy for the patient's mother."

She picked up the folder and stared at the name of the familiar

medication she wished she could forget about. Though Awesi's phone lit up from a news notification and the clock reading "1:00pm" only allowed the memories to flood in her head further. Dr. Anne said it would take time before Awesi would be able to forgive herself and she hated that it was one of the few times Dr. Anne's generic soap opera advice was actually true. Though Awesi's uncomfortableness at the moment wasn't about the act, but the fact that she was alone when it happened, and unlike the patient was about to see, she'd never be able to share the journey of recovery with someone else, nevertheless her own mother.

The phone dimed to black, and she placed her phone on silent before dropping it back into her bag. Awesi grabbed the green folder, the memory of the sound of her old diazepam alarm still ringing in her head and placed it in her cabinet desk drawer.

ד

February 3rd, 2018, 12:56pm

The window that Awesi's roommate left open created a draft that caused the silver bolt of their door to slam against the concrete wall. They had their second Introductory Public Health midterm on Tuesday and Awesi was still in bed, her body hidden underneath her blankets. She peeked out at the slam of the door and the sound of her piles of books and a yellow pill bottle toppling to the floor.

"For fuck's sake," she whispered. She looked over at her roommate's microwave and saw the clock go from 12:57 to 12:58 P.M. Awesi pushed her blankets to the floor, ignoring the pills that had spilled out, and went to the window. The reflection of her messy blowout blended with the New York skyline, the lights of Morningside Campus and the few students who were walking to the dining hall or to one of the libraries.

A cold breeze came through the window and danced over her hand. She felt the tiny hairs on her fingers move, but her attention was on the group of freshmen that were screaming and laughing on the quad. Awesi looked down at one of the girls in the group of friends. She was wearing a light blue puffer coat and her hair was a similar texture to Awesi's when it wasn't blown out but styled in a bun with pearl barrettes. Awesi couldn't hear what the group was talking about, but their smiles and laughs seemed to warm the cold New York air. She couldn't help but feel jealous at how permanent their happiness seemed.

She closed the window and shut the blinds, leaving the group to their joy. The "happy lamp" student counseling had dropped off three nights ago—nine days late—was the only source of light in her room. Instead of dropping the twelve pills she'd picked up from the ground back into the bottle, she kept them in her slowly warming palms. She

opened her mouth, unsure if her brain was trying to get her to yell for help or to allow the pills to travel down her esophagus. If swallowed them, she wouldn't have to hear her parents complain about her not wanting to go to medical school like Auntie Kesi's children. She could avoid the inevitable appointment with Dr. Anne to talk about her "suicidal feelings." She could avoid Dr. Anne's misguided advice, which would work if Awesi was white or someone who didn't have to open a separate bank account to hide her therapy appointments and prescriptions on her monthly statements and did not have parents whose philosophy was "my child's mail is my mail." She could avoid all of that, if she let the pills dissolve inside her stomach lining rather than in the lines of her palm. As she raised her hand to her mouth, she heard her phone ring. She got up and saw the "1pm diazepam" alarm title on her screen.

Awesi looked down at her messy hands, an empty stare at her palm as she processed what she almost did. Awesi grabbed the empty pill bottle and with the remaining pills that were still solid in her hand, threw them in her garbage. She wiped her hands on her white bedsheets, not caring about whether the pills would leave a stain on them. She picked up the yellow sticky note that was underneath her lamp and dialed the number on the paper. Her breathing slowed as she talked with the woman on the crisis line about pushing her appointment with Dr. Anne forward. The lady asked her why. Awesi responded to the woman as if she was answering a question in class, but without her normal hesitation and instead, in full monotonic confidence.

"I almost killed myself."

3

July 7th, 2018, 2:19 pm

Awesi was on the other side of the glass window watching the conversation between Jane and the crisis counselor. Jane was more talkative than Awesi expected when she first went in and discussed with her the evaluations and conversations she was going to have. She was wearing a long-sleeve t-shirt and a pearl headband that did little to cover the purple bruise at the top of her forehead. She closed the viewing blinds, leaving the counselor and the young girl alone, and picked up the case file to talk to her mother. Awesi stopped at the door, her hand gripping her file creating a small indent, hesitant to open it. This was her first time doing the check-in on her own. She'd talked with parents and friends before, and Dana had always said she was impressed at how well she could distance herself—though Awesi had never dealt with a case of attempted suicide with a patient so young and talking with their parent alone. Awesi took another look at the case file to get the mother's name and quickly skimmed through her notes on

interacting with patients. She took a deep breath and opened the door to the waiting room.

Awesi looked at the back corner of the clinic and saw a woman sitting alone. She was bent over with her hands in a prayer position. Her left leg tapped furiously, yet softly, on the white tiles of the floor. Her brunette hair was in a slick bun and the white light that hovered over her highlighted the dark circles and slight wrinkle lines on her cheeks and across the middle of her forehead. The bruise-less face, black cashmere cardigan and red Michael Kors bag was an uncomfortable contrast to the daughter who was behind the door Awesi had just closed. Awesi's judgment disappeared when they were closer, though, and she saw her tearful blue eyes. The unironed white blouse, with a couple of holes on its tail, made Awesi question if the bag was even real. The mother stood up quickly when Awesi walked closer and Awesi noticed the fingernails bitten to the tip.

"Mrs. W-"

"Philomena. Philomena, please." Her pained eyes softened the sharp tone of her voice when she corrected Awesi. Awesi looked around, the other patients and one of the case managers were staring at her, as if it was her fault the mother was grieving. She gave a half smile and looked back at the mother, her hands at her chest, now shaking. She thought about Dana's training in resisting calling people by anything that would make cases more personal, but she pushed the thought aside and hoped that the other case manager wasn't making a list of things Awesi was doing wrong.

"Yes, Philomena. Hi, I'm A-" Awesi resisted introducing herself right away by her first name, though the thought of Philomena trying to pronounce her last name made her cringe, "My name is Ms. Acheampong, but you can call me Awesi. Would you like to take a seat?" Awesi pointed to the chair that Philomena was sitting on before she walked into the waiting area.

"No." Philomena's voice was soft but monotone and Awesi responded with a soft nod to assure Philomena's personal comfort.

Awesi placed the clipboard on the chair, double-checking that the file information was face down, and brought her attention back to Philomena.

"How is she?"

"She's currently talking with one of our counselors to get an assessment of her mental health and then to gather more information about her relationship with you."

Philomena looked up at the ceiling and the whites of her eyes grew red as she tried to hold back her tears. In the pause, Awesi noticed that one of the other conference rooms was available and even though there was only one other patient left in the room, she thought it might be

better to talk to Philomena in private.

"Philomena, there is actually a room right behind you, so we can talk in there if you-"

"What's going to happen to her?" Philomena's tears no longer resisted gravity.

"It is a process, and she will need support. That's why the counselor in the room is talking with her so we can process and get all the right information and resources that she'll need." Philomena's hands started to shake more and Awesi extended her hands in the direction of the chair.

"Here, let's take a seat." Awesi walked Philomena to the chair, and they sat down together. Philomena's face was buried in her hand and Awesi turned away to give her a moment of privacy. Awesi was about to look at the file again when she heard the slap of plastic against the white tiles and saw a familiar pair of two-inch black block heels. It was Emily. Emily was one of the resident psychiatrists at the clinic who usually matched her dark brunette hair with a blouse that always showed just enough cleavage acceptable for both the office and a date. She was much younger than a lot of the other psychiatrists at New Castle, which made some of the male staff members focus more on what was underneath her shirt than her seminar training on how to approach patients and families with mental disorders. Despite her somewhat cold attitude, she was good at her job and no one could question it. Awesi imagined Emily slowly walking in, her white teeth emphasized by the red lipstick she usually wore, and softly introducing herself to Jane. She'd calmly explain to Jane who she was, her job, and the additional assessment Jane had to complete to help the counselor determine the next best steps for her.

"What are they going to ask her?" Philomena sniffled as she pulled her face away from her hands. "The person that went in there. What are they going to ask her?"

Awesi turned her chair and moved closer to Philomena. "They are going to ask a few questions, some having to deal with her suicide ideation and attempt."

"What kind of questions?"

Awesi took a deep breath, her voice soft, as the memory of her response to those assessment questions that mid-February day took hold in the present.

"Have you ever thought about or attempted to kill yourself?"

Philomena dug her chewed fingernails into her palm. Her head faced the row of the empty chairs that was behind Awesi and her eyes were closed to Awesi's personal relief as the memories began to flood in.

"How often have you thought about killing yourself in the past year?"

Awesi took her eyes off of Philomena for a second to make sure she was still in the clinic and not that room again.

"Have you ever told someone that you were going to commit suicide, or that you might, do it?"

Awesi bit the corner of her right cheek and gripped the silver stands of her chair tighter, suppressing the guilt she still felt about that question five months later. Because she had no one to tell because telling people would cause her to be lonelier than she already was.

"How likely is it that you will attempt suicide someday?"

Awesi stopped, remembering the fear she had of herself and how close she was to being another "sad news" email, and checked to see Philomena's reaction. Her face was blank and Awesi was scared that she might have let the memories break with her tone. Instead, Philomena nodded, and the right of her lip began to twitch.

"Philomena?" Awesi's voice was still fairly quiet. The twitching of Philomena's lip stopped and transformed into hysterical laughter that quickly turned back to crying.

"She hadn't cleaned her room." She blew her nose into a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket. "It was my 4th time asking her in two hours, but she was still watching TV with Beanie and Jumper." She smiled slightly before her lips began to quiver again. "Her therapist said she might act a little more childish around, um, anniversary dates, though she always had a special bond for those stuffed animals."

Awesi smiled, thinking about how opposite her dad was with stuffed animals. "My dad wanted me to grow out of my stuffed animals," Awesi responded, smiling at Philomena. Her mother always enjoyed the little love she had for "Poki" and even defended Awesi's favorite brown teddy bear whenever her dad was going through the house trying to find things to ship to Ghana or to throw out.

"He was the same but she always got him to fold." Philomena's smile withered and her eyes reflected an even greater sorrow than when the first started talking.

"He was working extra shifts at his construction site after I lost my job. He wasn't sleeping much, and I know how his vision gets when he doesn't sleep." Her breath started to get shaky.

"I should've driven him, but we couldn't leave her in the house alone and he didn't want me to wake her up. If I had driven, he wouldn't have fallen asleep at the wheel." Her voice mellowed to a whisper.

"Her room, it wasn't even that big of a deal, but I was so angry, and I saw her stuffed animal and I started thinking about him and I don't know what happened, but I yelled and told her it was her fault that he's gone." She turned to Awesi; the tears now dripped from her face onto the collar of her shirt.

"I couldn't stop myself. I didn't mean it. I didn't -- I don't know why

I would even say that. I don't know why I would say that at all and now she went off and-"

Awesi pushed away the last of Dana's training voice in her head and got on her knees in front of Philomena, rubbing Philonmena's back as her face rested on Awesi's shoulder. Awesi looked at the door leading to the room where Jane was and then back at the mother sobbing in front of her. She could never imagine her own mother blaming her for something like someone's death and she felt almost grateful in that moment for the weird, tough love she grew up with.

Philomena's voice was muffled by her sobs, though it was clear enough for Awesi to hear the repetitions of "I'm so sorry" that flowed from her mouth. Awesi felt a chill travel down her spine at the word sorry. She forgot that it was normal for mothers to apologize when they were wrong.

"None of this is your fault."

"She got on the diazepam because of me. The therapist said it would help. I swear, he said it would help and I thought it was helping, because she smiled sometimes, and I hadn't seen her smile in so long and I missed it and now it's gone again. Like, I-I'll take her to more therapy, I'll talk with her more often, I'll do anything," she cried. Her voice grew soft, and she just managed to choke out, "I'm a terrible mother."

Awesi held Philomena's hands, slowly rubbing the top of her hand in circles with her palm. It was something her mother used to do when she was younger to help calm her down. Philomena's sobs came to a silence and she let out a small exhale.

"Are you a mother?" Philomena whispered and looked up at Awesi. "Oh no, I'm an undergraduate."

"Ah, my apologies, I hope I didn't offend you."

"No, not at all, though I'm usually the mom to my friends at parties." Awesi smiled and the two laughed.

"Well, you must've been raised by two very good parents." Awesi felt her eyes relax and her breath slightly staggered. Despite her frustration with her mother from the morning, she could never say otherwise, and her smile only reassured her of that truth.

"Thank you. Though Jane's lucky to have you as a mother too." Philomena's face turned away from Awesi to the door.

"Hopefully she still believes that."

Awesi rubbed the mother's hand slightly harder.

"She will. Give it some time and give yourself space to heal as well."

Awesi dropped her hands from Philomena's grasp and held out her arms for a hug, not caring if it broke protocol or not. Philomena came into the hug, repeating her apologies and thanking Awesi. Awesi bit her lip to prevent her own tears. She heard a buzz come from her phone.

It was a page from Emily telling her she could bring Philomena in. She helped Philomena up and walked her to the room. Emily and Jane were in the middle of laughing when Awesi and Philomena had walked in. The laughter had paused as Jane looked at Philomena. Awesi watched the tightness and fear from Philomena about her daughter hating her disappear when Jane entered her mother's arms. Awesi smiled one last time at the two before closing the door behind her.

As Awesi sat back down at her desk, her phone screen lit up with a text from her mom. "I'll be home late, I made some Jollof for you before I left." Awesi placed her phone face up on her desk with the message still visible, surprised that her mother even had time to make her favorite dish before she left for work. She stared at the message a little longer, unsure if her building emotions were over her mother or the echo of Philomena whispering "sorry" still replaying in her ear. Two minutes had passed, and she glanced up at the large stack of files she had to go through. Awesi texted her mom "thank you" and turned her phone off to finish her remaining data entries.

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February 7th, 2018, 2:06pm

"Since you called as a result of suicidal ideation, I am going to start with the SBQ-R suicide behaviors questionnaire. I'm going to ask you a few questions just so I can understand how you are doing."

"But I'm fine, I just needed someone to talk to."

The counselor stared at Awesi before putting the clipboard on her knees.

"We will make sure that you have more appointments with Dr. Anne, but we need to make sure that you are getting everything you need out of them, so an additional evaluation would help Dr. Anne, but really mostly help you."

Awesi turned her head toward the painting on the wall. The colors started to mix together in the middle, though Awesi focused more on how little white there was in the painting. She imagined the specks of white in the painting were the pills that dissolved in her hand on that Saturday afternoon. The other bright colors in the art piece were the life she would've missed if those pills remained solid and took them: and she didn't want to think about a colorless life.

Awesi turned back to the counselor and nodded, gently confirming she was ready to start the assessment.

"Can you state your full legal name and Date of Birth?"

Awesi cringed, knowing the reaction she was about to get from the counselor about her accent when she said her full name.

"Awesi Elizabeth Acheampong. June 20th, 1999."

"That's a pretty name," the counselor said, smiling. "I noticed you had a bit of an accent when saying it, are you Jamaican?" Awesi held back her laughter over the typical guess every white person always gave. She was waiting for the exotic comment to be said after she told the counselor her background.

"No, I'm Ghanaian, well Ghanaian-American I guess."

"Oh, Ga-nai-an, nice." Awesi didn't feel like trying to correct her on the pronunciation and have a whole conversation, she just wanted to get this evaluation over with.

"Well, anyway, as I mentioned, the first questions I'm going to ask you deal with your suicidal ideation." Awesi gripped the sleeve of her sweater.

"So, first question. Have you ever thought about or attempted to kill yourself?"

Awesi closed her eyes for a brief moment, secretly hoping that when she opened them again, she'd be in class or even holding one of Adaku's many shopping bags. Instead, she reopened her eyes to the neutral olive-green walls and the counselor was still sitting in her chair with her pencil and clipboard in her hands waiting to tick off the boxes. It wasn't the first time Awesi had been asked that question. When she had her intake appointment with Student Counseling in November, they got through the suicide questionnaire in less than 2 minutes. This time, though, Awesi could barely open her lips to open the first question.

"Awesi?" The counselor pulled Awesi from her thoughts.

"Huh? Oh right, uh," Awesi took a deep breath and gripped the side of her chair, hoping she'd be able to hold back her tears, "Yes."

"Okay, so next question." Awesi turned her head at an angle. "Is there a problem?" the counselor asked.

Awesi raised her eyebrows and shook her head. "No, no I'm fine, you're good." She wasn't. She was more surprised at how routine the counselor was at the answer to her question. She imagined this time saying yes to the question would elicit a different response. Instead, she was still going through the questions like a checklist.

"How often have you thought about killing yourself in the past year?"

Awesi turned to the painting on the wall for a couple seconds before turning back. There were only a few more questions left from this section and maybe she'd have to push through it.

"Just once." Awesi responded, her voice so low she wasn't sure how the counselor was able to record her answer.

"Have you ever told someone that you were going to commit suicide, or that you might, do it?"

Awesi bit the corner of her left cheek. She thought about what

would've happened if she'd swallowed the pills. If someone would've noticed there was something wrong with her. If she woke up in the hospital room, would her parents even be in the room or would she be only and only more confirm how alone she was in this?

Awesi opened her mouth, hoping she was okay enough to answer honestly and tell the counselor that hadn't told anyone and that she felt guilty about not telling anyone and being alive. She'd hope she was okay enough to ask the counselor to explain what was wrong with her.

Instead, her tears dressed her lips and all she could ask the counselor to explain "Why am I so wrong?"

4

July 7th, 2018, 6:47 pm

The sound of CNN blasted through the open living room and kitchen. Awesi felt the spice of her mother's jollof rice spread across her tongue and send a nostalgic burn down her throat. Her mother's attention was on the TV and her leftover plantain fufu.

Her mom broke the silence. "How's work?"

Awesi tapped her leg against the chair, thinking about today, and took another bite of her jollof rice.

"It's fine. Just busy." Awesi took a quick sip of water to cool her tongue down from the five peppers her mom had added to the rice. She was thinking about how her dad would've said that it wasn't spicy enough and how her mom would call him "crazy" in Twi. Though her Dad knew how to take a joke and they'd start their normal "don't call me that '' argument for five minutes before going back to a silence that to someone else might seem contentious, but in Awesi's family, it was just how they talked.

"How's dad?" Awesi asked. "His WhatsApp isn't working so I haven't talked with him in a bit."

"He's fine." Awesi's mom took a sip of her peanut-butter soup. "He's in Kumasi with Grandma. He'll be back in Accra in a couple days. I'll buy you a calling card on my way home from work in the morning."

"Wait, what? You just got home, why are you going back?"

"Ella left so until we get a replacement for her, I have to take up extra shifts." She picked up the bowl and slurped at the peanut-butter soup. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

"I have to worry about you." Awesi smiled somberly at her mother.

"All that matters is that you're in college and you're getting a good education. I'll let God take care of the rest." Awesi took another bite of the Jollof hoping her mother wasn't going to start praying. Her mom picked up another piece of fufu with her hands to dip in the soup.

"Pass me the water please," Awesi's mother said.

When Awesi reached for the water with her left hand, her mother

glared at her. "Aye, Awesi, you are insulting me?"

"No?" Awesi dragged out the "o," wondering what she had done wrong now. "What did I tell you about giving me things with your left hand?"

"Sorry," she whispered, switching the water from her left to her right hand to pass it to her mother. Awesi subtly rolled her eyes; the "Ghanaian-ness" of her life was back to normal, even though Awesi felt otherwise about herself.

Dr. Anne had suggested that Awesi try to open up to her mother about therapy and for most of the summer, Awesi ignored this advice. She thought about Philomena and wondered if there was a chance that maybe Dr. Anne had a point, that maybe her mother would understand. She wouldn't bring up the suicide, but the therapy would be a start.

"Madres?" Awesi said in a volume she thought was loud enough for her mother to hear, but her mother was finishing up another bite of fufu and watching the TV. Awesi took a deep breath and was about to open her mouth when the sudden silence of the TV interrupted. Her mother said, "nkwaseasɛm." Bullshit. She had muted the tv when the headline flashed: "Finding Hope: Battling America's Suicide Crisis." The town hall on Anthony Bourdain's and Kate Spade's suicides was about to start.

"Americans, they don't trust in God. They are sinful people," she said in Ga, waving the TV remote in the air. She put the remote back on the table and threw away the fish bones in the garbage. Madres had kept going, even while washing the dishes. Awesi had hoped the sound of the faucet running would drown her mother's tirade but it only seemed to amplify her voice. Her mother closed the faucet and walked upstairs to her room. The remote was still in front of Awesi and the town hall was starting. Awesi got up and threw the rest of the Jollof rice in the garbage. She washed her dishes, making sure there was no trace of the sticky-orange tomato paste that coated the rice on her plate or her hands. She was tempted to grab the remote and raise the volume but pushed the thought aside.

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May 16th, 2018, 1:32pm

"Have you ever talked with anyone in your family about what happened in February?" Dr. Anne asked. Awesi wondered how, after they'd known each other for nearly four months, the woman could still ask Awesi such a thing.

"No," she blankly said, her arm resting along the sofa chair's thick arm rest. "Have you talked with anyone about it?"

"Kinda," she lied. When she missed biology for her second intake

appointment, Awesi had told Adaku she'd gone to student health for birth control options that wouldn't mess with medications. It wasn't a complete lie—though that appointment wasn't for another two weeks. She'd tell her, but Adaku was just like Awesi's parents when it came to suicide. So, she kept it to herself.

"Well, I'm glad that you have improved tremendously since then and you don't have to talk about that day to your parents. It's good you have some friends who can understand you." Dr. Anne smiled, almost as if she was patting herself on the back for getting Awesi to break out of her shell, even though Awesi only started talking about her depression in this session out of necessity.

"You don't have to talk to them about February, but I do want to discuss how you can start talking to them about depression."

Awesi tapped her leg against the bottom frame of the chair.

"You said your mother is a nurse, correct? I'm sure she's had to help patients with suicidal ideation or any other mental health trauma. Have you ever talked to her about how she feels when she has to handle those patients? Or comfort them?"

Awesi recalled when she had gotten home from school and seen drops of blood on her mother's shoes. She remembered rushing up the stairs to make sure her mom was okay. She knocked on mother's bedroom door and felt her heart slow when her mother opened the door, a plastic bag wrapped around her head to protect her braids and wrapped in her bright green towel. Awesi asked her about the blood on her gym shoe and she said a patient squirted a little blood when she was putting their IV in. Her mom went on about that patient, and another "stupid" patient whose stomach she had to help pump because they had overdosed on ibuprofen in a suicide attempt. She had put on another pair of her scrubs and rushed out of the house, but Awesi never let go of the word "stupid."

"She just knows how to do her job," Awesi responded, trying to push Dr. Anne away from the subject.

"Parents are always a complicated case," Dr Anne said, "But they care, and I'm sure they'll listen if you give them the chance."

Awesi wanted to explain why Dr. Anne's perspective was bullshit. She wanted to explain what it meant for her to be named Awesi Elizabeth Acheampong, but to not eat fufu with palmnut soup in her dorm because people would judge her for eating with her hands. She didn't want to filter things for Dr. Anne anymore, but though Awesi's tired silence allowed the filter to continue.

"An idea I suggest often with students whose parents aren't from America is to try to explain it in a way that relates to their home country. Maybe try explaining in more familiar terms what you're going through."

She thought about trying to explain her depression through the

Bible or her mother's love of eating Koobi or her dad bragging about how he could've been a great soccer player. When none of those connections would work, she even thought about asking her parents to tell her stories about how they grew up, searching her imagination for any connection with what she was going through. Other than her name and her parents' names and the few words Awesi could speak in Ga, she could never think of anything that she could use to connect with her parents: all because she was endowed with the rights of "Life, Liberty, The Pursuit of Happiness" the moment she was born in the US.

"Okay, I'll try it," she said.

5

July 7th, 2018, 7:17 pm

Awesi rinsed off the last of her clay face mask with the red face towel from this morning before throwing it in the laundry hamper. She'd turned off the tap and heard the garage door open as she wiped her face with a dry towel. The garage door closed and Awesi could hear the sound of high-life gospel coming from her mother's room because she had forgotten to turn off her laptop in her rush. Awesi was about to hop in the shower when she heard a ping from her bedroom. She walked over to see her phone light up from the calendar invite reminder from Dana for their weekly meeting tomorrow. Awesi confirmed the invite and exited out of the calendar app to see the time "7:20PM" on her phone. It was late enough that she didn't expect any more important messages from Dana, so she placed the phone on do not disturb and walked back to the bathroom.

Awesi took off her shirt and wrapped a large plastic bag around her hair to prevent any chance of her straightened hair reverting to its natural state. She looked at the bruise on her hand from her silk press. It had hints of purple though it looked blacker under the light. It was only the size of a quarter and was already healing pretty well. She opened her cabinet to pull out her fade cream to heal the bruise, pausing when she saw her Prozac bottle sitting next to the cream. Awesi looked at the yellow bottle and thought about Philomena and her daughter again. She imagined that when Philomena took her daughter back home, they'd eat dinner, watch cartoons, maybe even play a board game. Her daughter might fall asleep on the couch because she was too tired to walk to her room. Philomena would likely be on the other side of the couch, awake the whole night, her daughter's anxiety medication in her hand. She'd look at the bottle and wonder whether she should dump the remaining pills down the drain and force her daughter to try to cope without them. Eventually, she would succumb to the stress of the day and fall asleep next to her daughter, with the prescription bottle under her chin. Awesi closed her bathroom vanity and felt her stomach churn

at the thought, knowing her mother would never do the same— not because she didn't love her, but because it was nkwaseasɛm. Bullshit.

Awesi was about to start the shower when the familiar lyrics of Ofori Amposah's "Otoolege" traveled underneath the tiny sliver of space of her door and echoed in the bathroom. Awesi wrapped a towel around her body and went to her mother's room to see that the playlist had switched from her mother's gospel to the "For Us" playlist the two had made with all of their favorite Ghanaian songs. Awesi smiled at the memory of them dancing in their old Chicago apartment to "Otoolege" and "Emmanuella." Her mother always got tired out before her, but it never stopped Awesi from the show she used to love putting on. When her mother was cooking and Awesi had to watch, sometimes they would put on the playlist and even dance around in the kitchen, if the stew or soup they were cooking was steaming. The playlist was so old that before she left for college, Awesi had to drive to one of the tech stores in Pittsburg to transfer the songs from a CD to a flash drive, so her mom could still play the music on her new, CD-less MacBook.

Awesi was about to close the laptop when she noticed the familiar green pillars in the background. She minimized the music app and to her surprise, saw the photo her parents took of her after her high school graduation ceremony. Her original dress shrunk three sizes at the cleaners and Awesi remembered running downstairs freaking out to her mother about not having a dress. After her mother gave Awesi some goat meat to calm her down, they went up to her mother's room where she pulled out her tape measurer from the "cookie box" to measure Awesi. Within three days, her mother transformed the white kente cloth her grandmother gave her Dad a few years ago into a new dress. The sweetheart neckline showed enough of Awesi's chest that her dad wouldn't have a heart attack over his little girl officially growing up, and the delicate lace details that flared right above Awesi's knees somehow complemented the tacky, red gown. All of her friends kept asking her where she bought the dress and Awesi enjoyed bragging to everyone about how amazing a seamstress her mom was; and the fact that she was able to get the dress done while on call that week.

Awesi closed out the photos app and unpaused the music app that was playing the final seconds of "Emmanuela." She made a mental note to ask her mother over the weekend if she could help find the dress or if she had time to make her another one before she went back to New York in three weeks. Awesi carried the laptop back to her room and placed it right outside the door of her bathroom. She stepped into the shower, the lyrics of "Sardine" echoing louder than the water from the showerhead, and louder, too, than Awesi's choking sobs that blended into the shower's steam.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Karen Poppy has work published in numerous literary journals, magazines, and anthologies. Her chapbook, *CRACK OPEN/ EMERGENCY*, is published by Finishing Line Press (2020), and she has another chapbook forthcoming with Finishing Line Press. Her chapbook, *EVERY POSSIBLE THING*, is published by Homestead Lighthouse Press (2020). An attorney licensed in California and Texas, Karen Poppy lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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Salvatore Difalco is the author of 5 books, including *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press), an illustrated collection of microfiction.

Athena Hallberg is a recent graduate of the University of Chicago who majored in Creative Writing and History. She is currently attending the Harris School of Public Policy, working towards a Master's Degree in Public Policy. Her writing concerns issues of childhood and the blurring of the imaginative and the ordinary world. Her work was published in the Princeton Arts Council literary magazine, Amuse, in 2017 and was the first place winner of the Olga and Paul Men foundation prize for creative writing in 2021.

Sarika Mahbubani is a fourth year in the college majoring in Computer Science and Philosophy. She first made a habit of writing to avoid doing work for the aforementioned majors, although soon found that she quite enjoyed it. Her favorite authors are Virginia Woolf, Ted Chiang and Laini Taylor, and her life's goal is to finish reading Infinite Jest for the bragging rights.

My name is **Naa Asheley Afua Ashitey**. I am a 4th year student at the University of Chicago, majoring in Creative Writing spec. fiction, a minor in Biology, and a pre-med student who hopes to attend medical school as MD/Ph.D student in Immunology. This piece was my senior thesis and is an auto-fiction piece that looks closely at the day in the life of a 1st Generation Ghananain-American woman learning and accepting tension her African identity has with her own mental health. Anyone that knows me knows how important mental health and discussions of mental health is for me. I'm excited and proud that I got to write a story about something many fellow 1st generation immigrant kids go through, and the way we've learned to perceive our mental health as a handicap that should be silenced. I'm able to write this story because people made me feel safe about my mental health and allowed me to be open about it, and help me. I hope this story can inspire others to do the same.

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