Complete Creative Writing: Stories

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Lone-handed, George Davidson, a 70-years-old master whaler attacked and killed a humpback whale at Twofold Bay. The veteran whaler worked from a small dinghy and used only a lance...

The Argus 12 November 1936

A dark shape lolls out in the bay. A seal perhaps, catching the last warmth of the winter sun – flippers skyward, head down, looking like an old box washed out to sea.

From his seat in the outhouse up the ridge, the old man can see right across Twofold Bay. On a clear day he can see the white caps break over Mewstone Rock. Random patches of foam cling to the surface for a breath or two before subsiding into blue. Even now he can spot the patches that fracture the surface in close succession, those that linger longer than they should, that surge in troughs rather than peaks, suggesting a source from beneath rather than above. Fish, dolphins, whales, seals, sharks; their signatures written on the water for those who can read them.

The shape rolls into view again. Not a seal: too dark, too large. He watches as it drifts closer, appearing and disappearing in the troughs of the swell.

His trousers slump into ancient boots and he leans forward onto dry, wrinkled knees to look out of the open door of the outhouse. Old man’s knees. Parchment skin stretched across bone and sinew, all its elasticity sucked dry by years at sea. Hairless shins are worn bare by the daily friction of gumboots. Blotched brown hands rest on pale thin thighs. Winter air fans the smell of seaweed around his bare behind, mingling with the dark warmth from the drop. He rips a square of newspaper off the hook beside him.

A wave breaks, black rolls over white. A distinctive triangle slaps limply against the water. It is Tom. The waves cuff the old killer whale’s fin back and forth as if trying to reanimate his lifeless body. His fin smacks the water like a comic re-enactment of the many times he had flop-tailed in the bay, waking the whalers with a mighty crash of his tail, calling them to action. Rush-oooo, they’d all cry, leaping clumsily from their beds, falling over each other into the boats. C’mon, Tom would call with another crash of his tail, get a move on.

He watches a fishing boat trail its wake across the bay, heading back to port. Sometimes he’ll join the fishermen at the hotel, listening to their stories, their bragging and laughter. ‘Old Fearless’ they call him, as he sits with his lemon squash. The fishermen never brave the southern gales in their over-powered trawlers. Only whalers go out in winter, rowing their open gigs, six men to a boat, hunting humpbacks, right whales and ninety-foot blues.

But that was long ago. There are no more whales now. No more whalers. Only Old Fearless, sitting on the ridge, still scanning for the tell-tale slice of white, the hiss and fan of a blow-hole to mark the start of the season.

The body in the bay rolls again, fin slapping the water. C’mon, calls Tom.

The old whaler heads back down the path to the house. His knee doesn’t bend anymore. A whale broke it; a whale could cure it, if there was a whale to be had. But

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there is no more whale oil to soak aching limbs, no more hot, greasy carcasses to slide into. Straight leg first down the hill, he pivots over the steps. Bending is over-rated.

The path leads down to the cottage behind the ridge, overlooking the inlet which meters its tea-stained waters across a ripple of sandbanks into the bay. A dark snake of water marks the narrow channel where the whale-boats once towed their prizes into the sheltered waters and dragged them up onto the beach. The bones of the giants blanch on the beach, where their carcasses were flensed and boiled, rendered and reduced down to a few barrels of precious oil. He can still smell the acrid stench even after all these years.

Past the tryworks, derelict and unused. The huts where the crews lived crumble back into the earth. Once there had been a village here, filled with men, wives and children. They've all gone – upped and left when the whales stopped coming.

The whale-boat lies on its side, exposed ribs gaping at the elements, green paint flaking onto white sand. Too big for one man, it will lie here until it rots away like all the other relics. Gradually doing less, using less, making do with less, until finally there is nothing left but a pile of old bones.

He upends the dinghy, retrieving the oars from underneath and dragging it down to the water. The sturdy little boat bobs under his weight, sliding into the smooth rhythm of the oars as they pass from the sheltered inlet, over the sandbar, onto the choppy waters of the bay.

Waves slap steadily against the hull as the boat pushes through them. He watches the water change from pale green over shallow sand, past dark smudges of rock, into deep weedy blue. Here, it was exactly here – unmarked and unforgotten – that his son’s body was found thirteen years ago. He holds his breath as he passes, oars dripping, and lets himself drift for a moment.

It had been a fine day. They’d crossed that bar a thousand times. But the tide was on the turn, making the crossing more treacherous than usual. The wind had picked up a chop and the current must have caught the dinghy as it crossed the bar, just enough to tip in a breaking wave. The wind blew the cries of the children across the water, the shouting of men as they rushed to the shore, dragging bodies from the surf. All but one – his dark head bobbed in the waves, trying to right the boat, holding a child afloat. And then he was gone.

It was Tom who found the body the next day. He had seen Tom circling insistently, guiding the boats back, nudging at pale limbs in dark weeds. He followed the black bulk of the killer whale, diving in to untangle his son. He floated in-between, in a green world where his boy stared back at him. He wanted to drift with him out to sea, unbreathing, unseeing. He didn’t want to surface. He didn’t want to suck in that painful grieving breath. It was Tom who forced them both up, pushing them back to the surface, pushing him back to the air.

Tom had always been there to save him. Tom had dragged him up by the seat of his pants when he’d gone over tangled in a line. Tom stood between the men and the sharks whenever a boat capsized. It wasn’t anything special. They were family, that’s all. When a whaler dies, the blackfellas said, his spirit goes into a killer whale. But no young killer whale ever came to replace his son.
Less than a breath and the moment passes. The oars resume their steady rhythm, the water slapping once more against the hull.

The swell has brought Tom’s body closer to him. He digs his oar in deep, spinning the dinghy to come alongside. He strokes the black skin, still gleaming smooth and glossy. Tom’s mouth hangs ajar, the ivory spikes that once slashed ninety-foot monsters worn to yellowed stubs of decay in raw gums.

Tom was the only one who stayed. Who knows where the others went: Stranger, Hooky, Humpy and the rest of the pod? Maybe the pickings were better up the coast. They’d worked together for over fifty years, and with his father and grandfather before that. But then the killers left. Only Tom came back, every year a bit older and a bit slower. Now he’s come home to die.

The old man tosses a rope around the great tail, lashing it to the stern cleat. He digs his oars in short and sharp, feeling them bite against the heavy weight. Slowly he picks up speed, eddies slipping around the streamlined body behind him, even in death aligning itself to the flow and sliding effortlessly through the water.

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Next morning, he sits on his customary seat, looking out over the bay. Voices drift across the calm water as if they were just downhill instead of five miles away. Right whale weather. Right whales were the best whales, slow, placid and easy to kill. Not like finbacks, angry things that thrashed and fought like the very devil. Right whales, fin whales, blues and humpbacks – he’d hunted them all.

He thinks of Tom, the times he mucked about and teased the whalers, towing them out to sea, splashing them in their boats. The times he annoyed them, leaving them wet and shouting. He thinks of the whales Tom has caught him, the whales Tom has lost him. No more whales for Tom.

He wonders what to do with the body. He could drag it out to sea, weigh it down, watch it sink into the depths. It’s how he’d like to go when his own time comes. No fuss, no funeral, no speeches. His daughter doesn’t agree. Funerals are for the living, Dad, not the dead, she says. She’s right. He won’t care when he’s dead, anymore than Old Tom. There is no one left to mourn old Tom, no one to remember him.

He picks a bit of bacon from between the gap in his teeth. There had been nothing in Tom’s stomach when he’d slid the flensing knife through his flesh.

A plume of spray catches his eye, far out into the bay. His eyes lock onto the shifting water, tracking an invisible path left and right. There it is again; the round wide plume of a humpback. A long white flipper extends out of the water. He stands tense, watching. Who could crew? His mind flicks over the fishermen, his children off in the city. There’s no-one left. Just Old Fearless.

He races down the hill, three steps at a time.

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His breath comes short and sharp as the little dinghy surges across the bay towards the whale. He doesn’t want to lose it. The miles trickle past beneath the boat. Good thing it’s calm. A mile off and he finally eases the pace.

Easy does it, easy now, he murmurs. He lets the dinghy drift in closer, easing the oars back, barely rippling the surface. As he waits, he coils the rope in the tube amidships, attaches the harpoon and checks the lance.

The sun is high overhead now; even in winter it warms him through his shirt.

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If only he had rowers and a harpooner, with himself as headsman. Should have brought the boat-gun or a whale bomb, but the force would probably capsize the dinghy. Other whalers worked with five or six boats. He had only ever had two. Two boats and the killers. He wishes Tom was here, and the other killers, heading the whale off, keeping its head up, clamping onto its flippers and lips. But today there is only one old man in a dinghy.

The whale surfaces to starboard, heading east out of the bay. Quickly he rows ahead, judging the time the whale will stay underwater, where it will resurface. Eight minutes, six minutes, four, two. The oars racket back in the rowlocks. He twists around, feet braced apart to keep the dinghy stable, hefting the barbed harpoon in his right hand over his shoulder and balancing the long smooth shaft with his left. One minute. Pale eyes focus on the point where the whale will return, his pupils shrink against the glare. He searches beneath the oily reflections, motionless as a heron, sifting through the light and shade for darkness beneath.

A shadow expands below the surface. The whale breaches, expelling steamy breaths as if through pursed lips. The pungent smell of decomposing flotsam hangs in the air between them. He hurls the harpoon into the humpback’s neck, just behind the blowhole. Rope rattles from the tub, arcing its trajectory across the sky, the metal barb burying itself deep into the whale’s flesh.

With a groan, the whale rolls away, sinking deep underwater. Its tail erupts into the air, smashing down inches from the dinghy. He drops to a squat, grabbing the sides. The Hand of God, they call the whale’s tail, smashing boats from on high. But God does not want him yet.

He can hear the whale’s cry through the water, through the boat, echoing first on one side, then up and under the other. A long wailing sigh that you feel in your bones. There is nothing so sad in all the world as the cry of a dying humpback. He watches the flicking rope uncoil in front of him, careful to avoid any loops as it snakes into the water. He has a hundred fathoms of rope. The whale will take all that and more if he lets it.

He sits up and begins to row again, chasing the trailing rope. The whale is heading out of the bay. It has dived, but not too deep. It will have to come up for air soon.

Up ahead the whale surfaces, firing quick short breaths into the air, red and steamy with blood. Chimney on fire – it’s fatally wounded. Even so it could take days to die, slashed and harried by sharks to the end. He’s not close enough to strike the final blow though – the headsman’s shot – the lance that will put it out of its misery. He rows on with renewed strength, hoping to outpace it, hoping its wound will slow it down. The sun is falling; he’ll lose her in the dark.

Adrenalin drives him faster than he expects, or perhaps the whale has slowed. It rises beneath the boat. He senses it coming and throws himself to starboard, hoping to tip the dinghy enough to one side to avoid capsize. The water lifts the boat above the rising mass. As the whale breaches, he slides downhill off its back, the stern gouging into the water before bouncing back to the surface. An oar jars free from its rowlock, sliding away from the boat. Cursing, he checks the lance is still in the bow, the blubber spade and spare harpoons still where he tucked them under the thwarts.

Waves surge out from the whale’s descent, tipping and pitching the boat and pushing the oar further away. Waiting until the water settles, he paddles his remaining
oar to retrieve its pair. He’ll have to row fast now to catch up.

His breath shortens as he pushes through the wheeze at the bottom of his lungs. Water sloshes heavily in the bilge. The ache in his leg has returned. What was it his daughter called him? Old fool? A man would have to be a fool to be a whaler. It is what he is – a whale killer, like the killer whales. He’d seen Old Tom out chasing a grampus a few days before his death. Whale killer to the last. And now he was the last of the Twofold Bay whale killers. Old Fearless, out hunting one last whale, on his own.

He sees the rope drifting to the stern and pulls it in, flaking it into the tub. The whale must be milling below. He picks up the lance, a long straight blade. The whale barely makes a ripple as it rises to the surface exhausted, its breath erratic now. He scans from blowhole to fin – a good forty foot. His eye fixes on the fatal point between its ribs, three feet from the knucklebone of the flipper. Here lies the heart, a beating mass too large for one man to lift, arteries so big a dog could crawl inside. He knows just how much blood pumps through those veins. It has stained the water black for a mile behind them.

With one swift stab, the lance plunges in. The whale shudders, a great spasm that breaks the surrounding water into quivering tessellations. He feels it through his arms, through the water and the boat. It envelops him, filling him with a shadowy presence, before dispersing like a handful of sand in the water. All is still. The silence seems much bigger than it should. Like something has vanished so suddenly you can’t even remember what it was.

He hastily secures the whale before it sinks. It is too big to tow home. He’ll have to ask Logan to come out in the launch and bring it in later. He watches as the body drifts down, ropes taking up the slack out of the darkness, the glass buoys bobbing as they take the weight. So little air to hold such a heavy load.

The row home takes forever. His hands blister between callouses. How quickly they get soft. A dark stain soaks his trousers. He rolls them up revealing mottled bruising and grazed skin. Thin skin, thin blood. He knots a rag around his leg and keeps rowing. Steady does it, keep the rhythm and your body forgets the time and the tiredness.

Without thought, he crosses the bay – across the bar, around the point and up to the beach. The route he’s taken every day of his life. Darkness is nothing, absence of form as familiar as its presence. He drags the boat up next to Tom’s body. Sand gives way beneath his feet. Time, tiredness sweep over him. The ages all rush back. He falls back onto the sand, lying full stretch beside the whale. He feels his heart fluttering in his chest, small enough to hold in one hand. How much blood pumps through these veins?

The sand crushes warm beneath him, holding memories of past sunlight. He rests one hand on the killer whale, stroking the smoothness of its dark dead skin. The last whale. No more. Their days of whale-killing are done now. In the morning he’ll strip back Old Tom, give his bones to a museum. Lest they forget. He rests his hand on the killer whale’s side and waits for dawn.
I got up early and went for a walk. The weather was cold, though the sun had risen, and the sky was blue grey. The crickets were still singing. I walked through the paddy fields as the chilled air hit my arms and face and passed between my fingers.

Although I had put on my shoes when I left the house, my feet were becoming wet, and there were bits and pieces of grass on my ankles.

I tried not to lose my balance as I walked. The paths were narrow, and it would have been easy for me to fall and hurt myself.

Many little grey frogs were jumping out of my way, leaping into the paddies. I had been walking for maybe half an hour, and my legs were itching. There was no one around as far as I could see, and I had looked around and around. There was the mountain in the distance and the trees and a few small rustic houses.

I don’t know how far I had walked, but I started to hear water running … a stream. After I followed it, I noticed a foreign girl with a bucket, washing at the mouth of a river. She was startled, but she didn’t cover herself.

We stared at each other. I never saw a person like her in real life, only in pictures.

Her skin was like rice paper that was used to carry strawberries, and her face and nose were narrow, and she had such large eyes. Yet her pupils and hair were as dark as mine.

She called out something that I didn’t understand.

She said it again.

I started to hear raindrops hitting the ground around us, and I looked up. The foreign girl was gone when I looked down again.

The rain was falling harder. I ran and found a tree, and I waited under it until the shower finished.

When I returned home, sunlight was streaking through the shadows in the house. Father’s pen and papers were on the floor, lying next to the kerosene lamp.

The time was twenty past six, and I put some coals in the samovar, the one the Soviet Army officer gave our family for father’s translation service after liberation. It was one of the few things of ours that survived the American invasion, when mother died.

We had moved here from our city a month ago on party assignment after the war ended.

Father woke up and went through his routine, urinating behind the house, doing his morning warm-up exercises, cleaning his teeth, and washing himself with the cloth and the rainwater we collected.

I was preparing rice porridge, radish, and some bean paste from our rations, and I was thinking about the foreign girl.

Father and I didn’t talk much in the morning, which was normal for us, and we ate our food.

‘Bring my papers,’ father said shortly.
Father had been up late, preparing a lecture to enlighten the poor peasants in the village. Many of them were very backward, the men and the women, and it was not easy to teach them our party’s ideas.

‘What will you lecture about today, father?’ I asked.
‘Our united front policy and the gender equality law,’ he said. ‘Have you prepared the songs for the children?’

The Democratic Youth League had distributed children’s songbooks about General Kim Ilsong, as well as great leader Stalin, uncle Lenin, and grandfather Marx.

We walked to the village and found some peasants and their daughter arguing bitterly with the cadres. Father went to the lecture building, and I went to the primary school next door. On the wall was our people’s flag and a portrait of our leader and two others of Gorky and Pushkin, my favorite Russian writers.

‘Why were the peasants fighting?’ I inquired to father later that afternoon.
‘There was a misunderstanding, but the cadres will fix it.’
‘What happened? Is it about the arrests over the taxation policy?’
‘No, not this time. It was about the Czechoslovaks who are helping us build the machine tool factory. There was some miscommunication.’
‘Czechoslovaks?’
‘Yes. Haven’t you noticed? There is a compound not far from where we live. There are some engineers and technicians and their families, too.’

Our country was a pile of ruins, and we were still recovering. I knew about the stationing of the Chinese Volunteers and that the fraternal countries were sending aid and helping us rebuild our industries. But I didn’t know about the compound nearby.

I didn’t tell father about the foreign girl I saw, but I went back to the river several times over the next few days. She wasn’t there.

One weekend morning, though, as I was walking through the paddy fields again, I saw the back of someone sitting not too far off and looking at the mountain. I could tell it was a young woman, and I decided to meet her.

‘Good morning,’ I said to her.
She turned around and, indeed, it was the same foreign girl I saw bathing at the river.
She gazed at me recollectively and stood up.
‘Where are you from?’ I asked.
She raised her hand to her mouth, shook her head, and uttered something I didn’t understand again.
I looked at her.
‘Do you speak the international language?’ she suddenly said.
My face lit up as I heard the Russian words.
Dalenka’s father was an engineer and had been working in state industry in Prague, where he made friends with one of our People’s Army officers who was studying engineering in his country.
That is how Dalenka came here, with her engineer father and draftsman mother. They were sent to assist with the machine tool factory, which was projected to begin lathe production in the next nine months.
I found that we were both seventeen, but Dalenka had more time for herself than I did. ‘I envy you,’ I sometimes told her.
I was always busy with the Democratic Youth League and teaching the children at the primary school, but she didn’t have to do that. She studied at her compound school, helped her mother, and would write to her cousins, aunts, and uncles back home.

But Dalenka confided in me that she was not really happy.

She said it was because her father was a Magyar and that this caused discrimination against her family in her home country. It is something I had no experience with, except perhaps when I was a little girl during Japanese colonial rule.

I remember that I was not allowed to speak our language at school, and those of us who did would get a beating from the teachers.

I didn’t tell father that I was meeting Dalenka, nor did she tell her parents about me.

I got out of bed at twenty-four past four and needed to go out to relieve myself. I took the kerosene lamp, which kept some of the mosquitoes away.

I wasn’t able to go back to sleep, and I had an ache in my right temple. My hands and feet were hot, too.

Since I could not sleep again, I decided to go through some of father’s papers. They were mostly party documents, lecture notes, and some speeches by General Kim Ilsong. There were also our two volumes of great leader Stalin’s Selected Works, which we studied carefully.

Father didn’t have time for novels or short stories, especially after mother died from the bombs the Americans used to destroy our city with. Now, he was quiet and immersed in his work among the peasantry.

Mother loved fiction very much, and we would often go to the city library to read our favorite Russian writers. That was before the Soviet Army liberated the northern half of our country.

But I don’t remember the first nine years of my life as being too difficult, at least not like the life of the poor peasants. We lived on the east coast, where the Japanese had set up major factories.

Father had studied foreign languages in Japan a long time ago and worked for a Japanese shipping company in our city for many years. That is where he met mother, who was a secretary. He was twenty-seven, and she was nineteen. They married a year later and had me.

Our family was not rich, but we were also not poor. We lived in a small apartment, and mother stayed at home after I was born. I remember music on the radio and broadcasts about the Japanese emperor and the war in China and Manchuria and that mother told me these were all bad things, even though father worked for the company.

It was only after liberation that father and mother said they were connected to the national independence movement through mother’s cousins, and this is why father helped the Soviet Army and joined our party.

I was thinking of all this and noticed that it was now eighteen past five. I hadn’t realised an hour had gone by. The night outside was turning blue.

I was wondering what Dalenka was doing since I could not always meet her. I had to teach the children again, and my slogan for the day was ‘Ignorance means ruin!’
Some of the peasant children did not have the zeal to learn and would ask mockingly what ‘foreign grandfather’ Marx and ‘foreign uncle’ Lenin could teach them about using the ox and plow. It was an idea from their parents, who had not gone to school and many of whom were still illiterate and ignorant.

‘Mastery of these subjects is key to the success of our revolution and decisive for the success of our nation!’ I made the children recite loudly three times after I wrote it on the chalk board.

Father was lecturing. He would sometimes tell me how difficult propaganda work was and that it was frustrating to see the children’s parents fall back on bad habits as soon as they left his lectures.

‘Obsolete ideology still persists in their minds,’ he remarked. ‘A few are committed, but others want shortcuts, and some even have hostile ideology. But it is not an irresolvable problem. Marxism-Leninism teaches us that the development of our people’s consciousness lags behind economic conditions. Their minds will catch up.’

I told this to Dalenka when I saw her again. She said it was the same in her country.

Dalenka was full of unusual ideas when we would walk through the paddy fields and along the river, holding hands. One time, she said something about a world where there were no nations, no countries, no classes, just an associated world society where everyone was free and where love was free.

‘This is Marx’s and Lenin’s real view,’ she seemed to insist. ‘But nobody says it like this. Instead, we get all this heavy talk about building socialism and communism in each country separately. How can you do this? Capitalism makes it impossible. Socialism is communism, and it must be everywhere all at once after the workers of all countries have …’

‘But, Dalenka,’ I interrupted, ‘socialism and communism are distinct phases. We must build them in our country. That is what Marx and Lenin teach us. Great leader Stalin and our leader General Kim Ilsong have told us so. We Koreans will have Korea even when the whole world goes communist. It is our right to self-determination.’

Dalenka asked if she could see my house. I would have gladly invited her, but I didn’t want to upset father. We were supposed to get permission before meeting our friends from outside.

After I told her that, she caught a frog that was about to leap into a paddy, and he urinated on her hand.

There was another argument with the same peasant family and cadres in the village again. This time I heard what it was about. The daughter had been seeing a boy at the foreign compound, and now, she was having the baby. I don’t know what the cadres did, but the boy and his parents were going to leave our country.

‘Ah … Tibor,’ Dalenka mused. ‘Everyone at the compound knows about this. He just fell in love with that girl’s small eyes and golden skin. I don’t know how they became friendly because he can’t speak your language, and she can’t speak ours or Russian!’

‘How old is he?’ I asked.

‘He is our age. I hear the girl is at least twenty-six! What a catch!’
Dalenka took the whole thing in such good stride that it made me uncomfortable.

‘So he is a non-working youth like you, you mean? How irresponsible!’ I was quite upset.

‘Nothing of the sort!’ Dalenka shot back. ‘His whole family comes from the nomenclature. Very important. Don’t you know what they have arranged?’

‘What?’

‘They are giving your peasant girl a scholarship to study in Prague! It saves everyone a lot of embarrassment. And look at what she has gained … a foreign education and a baby!’

The way Dalenka said it sounded so unreal, but it was true. Within a month, the girl was shipped out with the child, and there was a lot of wailing from her parents and extended family. But I suppose it was a good thing for everyone.

‘So what do you think of the machine tool factory our engineers helped you build?’

‘Machine tool factory?’

‘Yes. It’s been in commission since yesterday.’

Oh, of course, for lathe production. I forgot.’

‘Well don’t forget. My father tells me that your country will be producing all sorts of things with it – not just lathes, but milling machines, gear cutting machines, shapers, and radial drilling machines.’

I knew nothing about industrial technology, and I couldn’t picture what any of these things looked like.

‘The factory is a great symbol of the friendship between our people,’ I said.

‘Yes, yes,’ Dalenka repeated. ‘The factory and that peasant girl’s baby!’

The factory was in operation for a year. A month before the anniversary, father received a letter to attend an important party conference in Pyongyang and was gone for a week. When he returned, he said there had been a lot of debate among the factions and that a central committee report was calling for exerted efforts in socialist construction, political education of party members, and eliminating the carryovers of capitalist and Japanese bureaucracy in the party and state organs.

Since father was a propagandist and agitator, he was also notified, in the winter, of serious ideological errors being committed by the factions that wanted to adopt Soviet and Chinese methods.

Great leader Stalin was falling out of favor in the Soviet Union, too, father explained, and General Kim Ilsong was very concerned about this and the problem of imitating foreign ways in our revolution.

The weather was frigid now. It felt like knives cutting my skin, whether I was inside or outside. The grass was grey under the snow.

I finally invited Dalenka to my house one weekend when father was away. I made sure the coals in the pit under the flooring were hot so that her feet would be warm. I wished I was in my apartment with mother again.

Dalenka and I were having some hot tea I made from burnt rice. She didn’t like it much, but she was nice.

‘What do you dream about, Cholok?’ she suddenly asked.
‘My dreams? When I sleep?’
‘That’s right.’
‘I’m not sure,’ I said.
‘There must be something you remember.’
‘I … I don’t know. I have difficulty remembering them. I can’t usually remember them.’
‘Surely, there is something,’ Dalenka continued.
‘Well, I …’
She was listening with her left hand on her cheek.
‘Sometimes I see you.’
‘Me? What’s so special?’
‘I don’t know. I just started to see your face after I was told to take down the portraits of Gorky and Pushkin at the primary school.’
‘Why were you told to take them down?’
‘The league said they do not instill national pride in our school children,’ I explained, ‘so we put up pictures of our writers Han Solya and Lee Kiyong.’
‘I see.’ Dalenka drank a bit of the tea.
‘What do you dream about?’ I asked her. She didn’t hesitate to answer.
‘Bratislava. It is where I was born.’
‘So you dream about going to your hometown. I think you are homesick.’
‘I never lived there. I was just born there,’ she said matter-of-factly.
‘What could it mean then?’ I wondered aloud.
As we sat, crows began cawing in the distance outside the house, their voices echoing loudly in the winter air.
We listened to the sounds for a while. It was as if the crows were talking about something, arguing a bit, stopping and then returning to their conversation here and there until they flew away somewhere.
‘We have an expression in our language,’ I mentioned.
Dalenka was nodding her head.
‘We say “I ate a crow”; however, it means “I forgot”. I think your dream is about something you forgot.’
She tensed her forehead and smiled.

Father told me that the political situation was getting more serious with the party factions. Some of his high-ranking friends had also informed him about a special report in the Soviet Union that said the most immoral things about great leader Stalin.

The Democratic Youth League organised a meeting for our forty-three members.

There was great enthusiasm among us.

I was the only one in our branch who finished middle school, but we had all received political education, and that was the most important thing. Five of us were women.

Minjoo was the highest ranking and oldest among us, almost twenty-eight, and some of the members were fond of calling her ‘comrade auntie.’ She had joined the league nine years ago and used to be involved in the peasant movement. After liberation, she became a leader in one of the people’s committees that had formed throughout the country. She also fought in the war to defend our country. All of this
gave her a lot of valuable experience we could learn from.

Unlike the majority of the other members, Minjoo was not just a poor peasant. She descended from the very low people, and that, I think, is something that drove her. Our people’s democracy was favorable to her background.

She gave a speech.

Dear Comrade Members of the Democratic Youth League,

We are calling this meeting in session in view of urgent demands placed upon us in the course of our revolution.

Our happiness grows day by day under the guidance of the party and General Kim Ilsong, who are leading the revolution in our united front as we build socialism in our country.

We have been freed from the shackles of feudal landlordism and the rapacious claws of Japanese imperialism for over a decade now, thanks to our liberator the great Soviet Army, and our people are the masters of the land and the country.

But while we have been emancipated, our brothers and sisters in the south are under the colonial enslavement of U.S. imperialism and the tyrannical rule of the landlords, comprador capitalists, and pro-Japanese and pro-U.S. national traitors.

The working people and progressive youth in the south are subject to daily harassments, arbitrary arrests, and tortures. Their conditions are grave and wretched. They have no freedom; they are forbidden to organise; and they are starving. This is something we in the north cannot tolerate.

We have been ruled by foreign aggressors and invaded by foreign aggressors, and we do not want to be slaves again!

We must maintain the heroic fighting spirit that allowed us to defeat U.S. imperialism three years ago in the Patriotic War of Liberation.

We must consolidate our youthful efforts in helping our party and working masses build the northern half of our country as a base of democracy and socialism that will inspire the workers, peasants, working intellectuals, youth, and students in the south so that we can achieve peaceful national unification.

This is what we must do as we also address the problem of overcoming political and ideological backwardness in the struggle.

Our branch of the Democratic Youth League must consistently educate the peasants in working-class ideology and socialist patriotism and recruit many more activists from the peasantry.

We will purge all incorrect thoughts through our education and propaganda work, for political and ideological indoctrination is the most essential mission of our league and its cadres.

This year, we will be committing more efforts to the weekly study sessions in the village, at the primary school, and at the new machine tool factory to fully effect the great change in our people’s consciousness.

We will also further education in the tax collection policy and assist our security forces and public security personnel to expose the reactionaries, counterrevolutionaries, spies, and pro-Japanese and pro-U.S. elements plotting against us.

We must also improve education in our league in the creative application of Marxism-Leninism to our Korean reality. As the party teaches us, the subject of our ideological work is our Korean revolution.
We must work out our own way and not blindly follow foreign fashions. Some of our league members did not give enough emphasis to studying our own things, our own national traditions, and our own history last year, but we resolved this error quickly.

This is proof that there is no difficulty we cannot overcome. The destiny of our country and people depends upon our efforts to uphold the political and ideological stand of the party and faithfully carry out party policy through our social organization as we follow the party and General Kim Ilsong.

In conclusion, I express my conviction that you will continue to march forward and fulfill the urgent tasks of our Democratic Youth League.

Everyone stood up and started clapping. Some older party members were watching. Father was there, too.

A few days after the meeting, I met Dalenka again. She complained that there was pressure at the compound because of the international situation. I imagined this had something to do with the factions and special report, but I didn’t say anything.

Sometimes when Dalenka would talk, I wouldn’t always hear what she would say. I would just be looking at her and remembering how I first saw her.

We went for a walk in the evening, through the paddy fields.

The moon was full and bright, and everything looked pretty under the fresh snow cover. We had dressed more warmly than usual and wore our big, shaggy hats since we decided to walk to the mountain this time.

We passed by the stream and river, which were frozen over, and through a field and some rugged pathways. Sometimes we would trip over rocks hidden under the snow. There was a small steep hill that we walked down from.

Dalenka reached the bottom before me and stretched out her hand so that I wouldn’t lose my balance. She was like a big sister I never had. We stopped for a short rest and continued.

When we climbed a high hill near the foot of the mountain, we saw that the peasants had started a bonfire. There was music and dancing, and adults and children were holding hands and running in circles.

Dalenka was charmed by the sight, and we joined the peasants for a short while. Although she had been here for two years and six months now, Dalenka had not had a chance to enjoy the harvest festival our people celebrated under the first full moon of our new year.

After we danced a bit, we found a place to sit, and we felt much warmer.

We had become quite hungry from the walk and the dance. I brought out some bits of dried fish from my coat pocket, and Dalenka brought out what I first thought were two rice cakes. She said they were made from flour, and we shared our food.

‘Dalenka,’ I said.
‘Yes, Cholok.’
‘We had a league meeting some days ago.’
‘Don’t you have them regularly?’
‘We do, but it was different this time.’
Dalenka nodded as she was eating her dumpling.
‘Our chairwoman was very passionate,’ I continued.
‘Why shouldn’t she be? Wasn’t she in your anti-Japanese and anti-American
resistance?"
   ‘Yes, but it’s not that. Something is changing. I shouldn’t be telling you, but … father said something about a special report in the Soviet Union that criticised great leader Stalin. Do you know anything about this?’
   ‘I don’t,’ Dalenka said. ‘I only know that he was very cruel.’
   ‘What?’ I was confused to hear this.
   ‘You have so much admiration for him, I know, and you follow his ideas very well.’
   ‘What is this about cruelty, Dalenka?’
   She was silent for a moment.
   ‘He had too much power, Cholok. He didn’t know how to use it.’
   My body was shaking, though not from the cold. I could feel in my heart that Dalenka was not lying, but I couldn’t accept what she said.
   ‘Cholok, let us change the subject. It is a nice evening, and the festival is beautiful.’
   My heart was beating heavily.
   I was in my room at the house later that evening, looking at the wooden ceiling obscured in shadow. Father was up with the kerosene lamp, writing another lecture.
   I was thinking about my childhood after liberation and why I joined the league when I was fifteen. That is the time mother died.
   I joined because we were liberated and because father told me that being a member would have made mother proud. So I did, and I read everything father read, and I studied everything father studied, and I believed in it, too. I still do.
   My thoughts turned to Dalenka, and I felt like I was sinking. I fell asleep.

I was teaching the children at the primary school again, and I noticed that some of the Czechoslovakian engineers, technicians, and their families were walking through the village with a couple of party cadres. The peasant children ran to the door and window of the school and were waving and shouting out to our foreign friends.
   I got the boys and girls to sit down and not make such a scene. I noticed Dalenka pass by, but I pretended that I didn’t see her.
   I was giving a test, and that was more important. The children resumed writing with their tipping pens.
   Their attitudes were getting better, though there will still a few troublemakers. Maybe things were better because I was giving more attention to our national traditions, as the party and league had emphasised.
   While I continued to teach about great leader Stalin, Lenin, and Marx, and our liberator the Soviet Army, I was now devoting more class time to General Kim Ilsong and the anti-Japanese fighters, as well as to our patriotic ancestors of Koguryo, Koryo, and Choson, who safeguarded our nation from foreign invasions.
   There was a lot for the children to learn, but it was their duty and mine, too.
   When teaching finished that afternoon, I sat in the empty classroom, looking at the empty desks. I thought about myself as a little girl. I scratched my right cheek and felt a pimple.
   Sometime later, I met father, and we walked home together. He seemed more fatigued than usual.

‘Dalenka,’ Alzo David-West.
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
‘Is everything okay?’ I asked.
‘Ah, yes. Just tired. That’s all.’
‘What did you lecture about today?’
‘Oh, it was about our party’s agricultural policy. Some of the peasants claim land, abandon it, and reclaim other land to avoid agricultural tax in kind. It’s a headache and doesn’t help our postwar recovery or expansion of the socialist sector.’
‘The party cadres need to give the peasants more guidance,’ I said.
‘It’s a problem of insincere guidance, Cholok. Not everyone is as committed as we are. We are also seeing more rich peasants now and the growth of private economy.’
‘But we had our land reform, and our propaganda work is stronger.’
‘I have been doing this for many years, daughter. Not everyone is really interested in the system we are building. They just pretend. Meanwhile, we do what we must.’

I was reading Goryky’s novel *Mother* and was now at the closing scene, the one in which Mother was distributing leaflets at the train station.

Why didn’t the people do anything? I sometimes thought.
Mother was so old, yet the gendarmes pushed her and beat her, on her shoulders, on her head, but she didn’t give up, even as they choked her to death.
There was a great lump in my throat when I spoke out the words ‘They can’t kill my spirit – my living spirit!’ and ‘Not even an ocean of blood can drown the truth!’

The Democratic Youth League had assigned me to read the novel to the workmen at the machine tool factory as part of our intensified weekly study sessions, and we finished the fifty-eight chapters in twenty-nine days.

The reaction from the workers was mixed. Some of them were furious that the gendarmes could do such a thing to an old woman. Others blamed her son Pavel for being immoral and getting his old mother involved in an illegal movement. One worker said it was a stupid story and a waste of time.

Those last words created a lot of excitement, and the young men started arguing among themselves, standing up, pointing fingers, and raising their voices at each other.

I watched them for a little while and finally asked everyone to calm down. I was the only woman at the study session and much younger, but they listened to me.

I said we must not miss the point of the story, and I turned to the chapter where Pavel spoke in court.

*We hold that a society which looks upon the individual as nothing but a means of making others rich is inhuman and hostile to our interests. We cannot accept its false and hypocritical system of morality. We denounce the cynicism and cruelty of its attitude toward the individual. We want to fight and will fight against all the forms of physical and moral slavery enforced on the individual by such a society, against all means of crushing human beings in the interests of selfish greed. We are workers, people by whose labor all things are made, from children’s toys to massive machines; yet we are people deprived of the right to defend our human dignity. Anyone is able to exploit us for his own personal ends. At present, we want to achieve a degree of freedom that will eventually enable us to take all power into our own hands. Our*
slogans are simple enough: ‘Down with private property!’ ‘All means of production in the hands of the people!’ ‘All power in the hands of the people!’ ‘No one exempt from work!’ You can see from this that we are not mere rebels!

‘Older brothers,’ I said, ‘this is what we want to achieve … so that we can have dignity as Koreans, as human beings, as workers.’

We finished for the evening, and the men went home.

I got up early again and decided to go for a walk. The spring weather was still a bit cold in the mornings, but I could bear it with my light jacket and skirt.

I had not planned to meet Dalenka, but as I walked through the paddy fields, I saw her sitting at the place where we first talked.

She was looking at the mountain once more.

I was feeling a little strange around her now. I am not quite sure why. Things were changing.

‘Good morning, Dalenka,’ I said as I approached her.

‘Cholok,’ she turned around. ‘How nice to see you. We haven’t seen each other in a few weeks now.’

‘Yes. I’m sorry. League work has been in the way.’

‘Come. Sit next to me,’ she said.

I didn’t know what to say, and I looked at the mountain with her for a few minutes.

‘So,’ Dalenka started, ‘how are you and your father these days?’

‘We are okay,’ I answered. ‘Father is a little tired now, though, and I have more responsibilities at the primary school and machine tool factory.’

‘Doesn’t the factory look wonderful?’ she remarked. ‘What have you been doing there?’

‘Study sessions with the workers. We read Gorky’s Mother recently.’

‘That’s nice. We read it in Czechoslovakia, too. I never really liked it.’

Dalenka’s words reminded me of the factory worker.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘Don’t you think it’s a great and inspiring work?’

‘This is what we are taught, isn’t it? Gorky is too sentimental for me. That’s all.’

We were silent again for a moment. The wind was blowing through the trees ahead of us. They looked like waves.

‘Cholok,’ Dalenka started again, ‘I have something to tell you.’ I was listening. ‘My family and I, we are leaving.’

I felt an involuntary movement on my face.

‘I thought you would stay until summer,’ I responded.

‘Some specialists will stay, but we are finished. That’s what my parents told me. I wanted to let you know.’

I couldn’t help myself and started to cry. Dalenka didn’t say anything.

My face was wet with tears. Suddenly, Dalenka did something I didn’t expect. She held my hands, hugged me, and kissed my lips.

She said she would write to me, but I never heard from her again.

Many years later, long after father had died and our country had changed and
no one studied Marxism-Leninism anymore, I visited a bookshop and saw one of our magazines published for foreigners. There was a story about the machine tool factory and how we built it by our own efforts after the patriotic war.

I still think of the paddy fields and how I saw Dalenka at the river.
Prison in Macedonia

Tamara Lazaroff

Zharko, Alek and I are sitting together on this warm summer night, under a dudinka, a mulberry tree, enjoying some rakija, home brew, soda and wine. The Ohrid lakeside breeze is blowing gently over us and Alek, with wry eyes, is telling me – he is telling us – me and Zharko – about prison in Macedonia – from experience – how you have to take your own cup and bowl and spoon.

I'm not sure whether to laugh.
'Seriously?'
'Seriously. Why would I lie? And all they give you to eat, in your bowl, if you are lucky enough to have one, is boiled mung beans and beetroot. As if you are an animal on a farm.'

Zharko's elastic face chuckles into sudden creases and lines. From his relaxed, buoyant expression, I would say he has heard the details of this story before, but he leans in to listen, generously, as if it is for the first time.

Zharko and Alek are old friends. I don't know for how long. But, I can see they have an easy familiarity like two old comrades, like high school chums. Me? I am no-one special, probably, for them, just another tourist passing through, a paying guest at Zharko's pensione in Ohrid on which the dudinka stands.

In my mind, of course, I am someone. I am more than just a tourist. This country was my almost-homeland. It is the country of my parents and grandparents, my great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents before that. And this is my 'return' 'home' to gather knowledge, stories, alternate realities, the possibilities of the life I might've had, lived, breathed, owned, been owned by, had to break free of – as from a prison – just as anyone attempts to break free of what is expected, conventional, known.

Zharko and Alek are good people to talk with, now, about these possible realities. We are generacija, of the same generation, all of us in our late thirties now. But we all notice that I've got a baby-face, in comparison to them, as if I've had it too easy, as if I've lived in a match-box all my life in Australia padded in cotton wool. I've got no lines or scars or cuts on my cheek or forehead, like Zharko, especially. He catches my eyes running over them.

'I know, I know,' he says. 'I look like a criminal, like our Alek. But, I swear, I got this one' – he touches the freshest scar above his left eyebrow – 'from running into a door.'

He has spent the winter just gone, he says, with too many things to think of, renovating: trying to quickly turn the crumbling ground floor of his mother's house, the family home in the old part of town, into rooms that people will want to pay to sleep in during their holidays.

He laughs. 'This one here is from walking into a pole on the street, when I was trying to decide which plaster to use. I'm ashamed to say it's true!'
I like Zharko's face. I like his scars. I would like to trace over them, the sticking-out seams, with my fingertips. But I don't – I can't – because it would seem too intimate, like a romantic gesture which it isn't, it couldn't be. Instead I praise him with words.

I say, 'You've done a good job' – with the renos, I mean – even though every time I brush past the walls in my room the plaster crumbles away, even though the shonkily-hinged door to my bathroom doesn't close properly. Who cares? It's the effort, the trying that counts. And the warm welcoming atmosphere that Zharko creates, in his house, just by being himself.

Because of this – Zharko's warmth – I am always forgetting the line, between us. Maybe, there is no line. It's confusing sometimes. I don't know whether I am just a temporary tenant or now a friend, because of the generosity he exudes, the genuine connection that seems to exist between us.

Yesterday, he invited me to go for a swim with him in the late afternoon. We did lazy laps together in the lake and then we lay down, side by side, under the sky and soaked up the sun until we were dry. It was the first time I had seen him wearing so little, just a pair of sagging speedos, and so I got to see, to study the rest of his many scars – on his chest, his arms, his legs – a lifetime, I thought, of distraction, absentmindedness, dreaming whilst awake – and not the result of crime or violence as it might seem.

I also got to hear what came before.

Up until last spring Zharko lived in South Africa. He lived there for ten years – as, Macedonian, professionless and cashless as he was, no other country would have him. But he badly wanted to get away. He would've gone anywhere he said, to see what else there was to see of this world. And he saw it – some.

He worked in a semi-legal gambling house in Johannesburg with other people, from other countries – Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Kosovo, Bangladesh – whose citizens no-one else wanted.

He earned good money until one night the Chinese mafia arrived with machine guns – there'd been some kind of unpayable debt. So, Zharko with some of his fellow workers, in an attempt to save himself, ran up to the first floor, jumped off a balcony, broke ankle bones – but didn't feel the pain till afterwards – and fled into the night.

But this isn't what made Zharko want to return to Macedonia.

He said he could feel himself changing, becoming the kind of person who likes to live alone, like a Western European, all locked in himself, with alarm systems, for everything, going off. Zharko didn't want this to happen, he said. Even though he had his own house, a good car, money, it wasn't enough.

I said I understood as we drove back to the pensione along the pot-holed road in his old, beat-up Yugo. We were silent the rest of the way.

But here, now, there is no silence. There is only Alek, gregarious, who wants to talk and laugh, to steer the conversation back to the topic of prison in Macedonia. For him it's almost one big joke.

'Can you believe it?' he says. 'All they gave us to eat was boiled beetroot and mung beans. Every day! But this is the food I hate most in the whole of the world.'

We all laugh. The terrible, terrible tragedy of it.

I watch the way the two of them do – laugh – free in their bodies. It delights

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me. I see the two old men they will become, inshallah, if they make it that far.
Zharko slaps his thigh and makes a sucking in and out sound, like an old-

fashioned air pump. And Alek laughs with no sound at all coming out of his wide-

open mouth. You can see all the fillings and the gaps where he's already lost some of
his teeth. Zharko's body vibrates. And then there's one final wheeze.

But I want to know how Alek came to be in prison.
We will get to that.
First, Alek and Zharko want to laugh some more. They do. Their laughter is
infectious. It is also intelligent, deep, dark, ironic. Its meanings I can garner just the
edges of. They are remembering a mutual friend – Lupcho – who went to prison a
couple of months ago – not in Macedonia but, in all places, Belgium, for something
petty, an unpaid fine.

'Imagine! Lupcho!' Alek says. 'In prison! In Belgium!'
There is more open-mouthed, uncontrollable laughter, the wiping of tears from
eyes.

This Lupcho, I gather from the two, is the most law-abiding citizen you could
meet. He is honest to a fault. This is what makes the prison sentence so funny for
them.

Alek is saying, 'But remember, he wouldn't even cross the road unless a
policeman waved a flag and gave him the nod.'
Zharko is saying, 'I remember he wouldn't give me the answers to the driving
exam – even when I offered to give him a hundred dinar.'
Alek is saying, 'Better he went to prison in Belgium than here, in Macedonia.
He wouldn't survive. But imagine! A TV and DVD in every cell! Special food to suit
every allergy. Free medical care. In prison in Belgium, Lupcho, I hear, is studying to
be an astronaut. You can do everything in prison in Belgium. You can fly to the
moon!'

Lucky Lupcho. We all agree about that.
But Alek...
Apparently, as Alek tells it, he once lived quite close to luck but not close
enough. He used to share a one bedroom flat in Brussels with Lupcho, five other
Macedonians and one Serb – Toni – that was his name. Alek makes a point of
repeating it again.
'Toni, be.'
Be means 'man'. Alek flicks the back of his friend's head to wake up his
memory bank.
Zharko says, 'Ah, Toni.' His eyes flare up a moment in recognition.
There's a story there, but not for me, not this time.
Alek goes on. He faces me, intently.
'We were all, you know, trying to enjoy the luxuries the West still does best:
good times on film, good times in style, label whiskey, sunglasses, sexy music, sexy
art.'

Alek was a student then. He was studying to be an architect. He had dreams. He
also, obviously, had a student visa and a working visa too, but then they both ran out.
They lapsed.

Now, Alek explains, under the dudinka, what I already know.
'We all go to other countries to make money. Everyone does from here – like

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Zharko. Sometimes we like it better. And we want to stay. Life is good in Belgium. The stars shine brighter there. I did not want to go home. So I didn't. I became an Illegal Immigrant.'

Alek and Zharko begin to laugh now, afresh. 'An Illegal Immigrant,' Zharko repeats again and again. In English with his thick Balkan accent, he sounds out all the syllables, emphasising every one. Gives each rendition a new intonation, all of them filled with menace, evil.

'Yes,' says Alek. Proud. 'This is what I was. But then I got sick of being poor.' Alek's face shows mild disgust. 'I got sick of asking my parents, like a baby, for twenty euros here, twenty euros there. I got tired of waiting for the money to arrive, also. I wanted to be my own man. So I slipped back across the border, into Macedonia. I went to Skopje, the capital, and I got a job in a bar along the banks of the stinking Vardar. This river will stink, for me, always. And I waited.'

We wait too – for the rest of the story – as Alek pauses briefly to fill his shot glass with more rakija, downs it and then goes on.

'Friends, this is how it happened. In the bar, I worked. One week, one month, two months, three. It didn't matter. I knew they would come. You can't overstay your welcome in the EU without someone taking notice. But I was calm, I was patient. It was the middle of summer. It was Skopje. Skopje, our capital, you have to know, is just one giant dupka, a hole that collects the humidity and dust. This heat, it makes us Macedonians more lazy. Everything takes twice as long. So I had time. I knew that.

I also knew there were people ahead of me in the queue. So I waited my turn. And then they came, as I knew they would. It was right at the end of August. And they were just as I expected. Two middle-aged coppers in plain clothes. One with a flabby stomach hanging over his pants from too much pork, and the other one with large sweat patches under his arms and bad breath like sour milk. Lazy, in no hurry. They sat down at some stools by the bar and asked for two beers, a couple of Skopskos. They said, ‘Don't worry about glasses, young man. Just give us the bottles.”

And then they drank and smoked a bit. They eyed off the waitress' arse. They made some lewd remarks, loud enough for everyone to hear. They tried to bring back their youth.

After a bit, one of them, the one with the stomach said, “So, you'd be Alek Nikolovski, then?” taking a swig.

I said, “Yes, that's me.”

The other man with the sweat stains said, “Well, here’s our man.”

I didn't put up a fight. It was too hot. Forty-four degrees. If I really wanted, I suppose, I could have run but where would I have run to? I took off my apron. I went to tell his boss why I wouldn't be able to finish my shift. My boss accepted my reasons. He wished me luck. I was ready, but then the coppers didn't want to rush.

One of them said, “Just get us two more Skopskos for the road, hey pal?”

The other one added, “Well, you might as well get one for yourself too.”

So I did. Then we sat and drank together, we talked about the football, this and that, and then when we finished the fat one pulled out the pair of handcuffs from his pocket. I offered him my wrists.

As we left, one of the other barmen – a good man – a Muslim – called out, “Hey, Alek. Here. Take these.”

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He knew, from experience, I'm guessing, about prison in Macedonia. There are more Muslims and gypsies than anyone else in there. He gave me a bowl, a cup and a spoon. His own, goddamn it. He probably carried the things with him, in his bag, just in case. And I just looked at him, as if he was mad.

I said, “What is this?”
He said, “In case your parents can't come to see you straight away.”
I said, “What?” – because I didn't know. I'd never been to prison in Macedonia before.

The coppers just gave my friend a wink and waved, pulling me by my collar towards the van. They pushed me in. They put the siren on, for fun. Then they took me where I had to go. And that was that.'

I have lots more questions. I want to know if Alek made friends in there. And what he did, how he spent his days. But Alek, all he wants to do is take off his shirt. He's sweating, he's hot, I suppose.

Then he turns. He is showing me his back. He wants me to see.
He says, 'This is what I did in prison in Macedonia. I got this tattoo.'
It's huge. It would've taken weeks, months to complete. It's of an intricate eagle with outstretched wings – a power symbol – and then over the top in a horseshoe kind of arc are the Cyrillic letters. They say: СО ПАТНИК ПАТНИК.

I read the words, out loud.
'But you don't know what that means, do you?' Zharko asks.
Zharko wants to tell me it's a Macedonian kind of idiom, an old saying. He wants to tell me that in Macedonian ПАТНИК (pronounced patnik) has a double meaning. The modern – 'journeyer'. And in the old Macedonian – 'suffering' – the noun.

So the tattoo reads: 'With the journeyer, suffering'.
I say that I understand, that even though I have not been to prison in Macedonia – and I probably never will – that this saying makes sense. With any journey there is the accompanying suffering – and also, you hope, some joy.

For me, for example – coming to Macedonia – being here – it's hard – I feel so much emotion. It's a tangled knot I have no words for, yet. It makes me tired all the time. I sleep and sleep till midday. I go to bed before nine, exhausted as if I've been carrying, dragging around with me a heavy weight all of the day. Of course, I know, my suffering is a privileged suffering, different to the suffering of these two good men. But suffering is suffering any which way – it's relative.

Never mind. Tonight, I am warm and lighter because of the company of Zharko and Alek. I smile at them. I smile at the lake. I smile at the starry sky. I smile at the whiskey on the table. If I don't smile, I'll probably cry.

'Prison in Macedonia.’ Tamara Lazaroff.
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Hiding in Full View

Maija Mäkinen

1974

It wasn’t until she left behind her home that she became an American, and the system truly swallowed her.

Pit-stops, barrooms, and the highway were all that was left. The structures she had learned to operate within, that had brought her success and safety in her new land, crumbled as she drove with shaking hands, in the Eldorado, covering the distance between remaining and barging ahead in whatever fashion – forgetting dignity, getting away. Body soul and beyond.

All of America opened up in front of her, but she followed signs that promised west and south. She saw that it was possible to do anything, go anywhere.

She moved into the backyards of America, staying within the gaps: highways and parking lots; in-between the satellites where average life took place; family homes, shopping malls, schoolyards, suburbia. Where she roamed was unsafe and unregulated and outside. It was like being on the wrong side of the set divider, she thought, recalling her television days: it was where spiders and dust balls skittered and the black tortured knots of cables and wires rambled.

She felt no loneliness or sense of danger, and drove without hurry, allowing anyone to pass. She stopped for gas and food, usually at diners, preferring the lack of curiosity of their clienteles and the solicitous friendliness of the waitresses.

The first time she got out of the car after New York was when the gas was about to run out on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Following a long, deserted service road flanked by shuttered warehouses she came to an intersection with a service station and an attached diner.

After filling the tank she entered and chose a booth in a mirrored corner in the back, next to the swinging doors to the kitchen. She turned her back to the restaurant and ordered an omelet from the menu printed on the plastic place mat. In the mirror she observed a woman, perhaps a bedraggled twenty-five but possibly a carefully cultivated forty-five, come in alone and sit down. The woman’s breasts were bursting out of a modest green stocking dress, her shoulders sloping a little from shyness.

A face appeared in each of the porthole windows on the swinging doors, to stare at the woman. The men, one wearing a chef’s hat and the other a white beanie with a brown smudge on it, smiled as they watched the woman and exchanged delighted glances.

As the chef turned away, he saw her looking him and he winked before disappearing from sight.

*Kusipää*, she thought in Finnish. *Asshole*. She ate her omelet and hash browns diligently. It would be her only meal that day and she emptied the entire plate then wrapped the four triangles of toast and the tiny packets of soft butter and grape jelly in her napkin.

Returning to the Eldorado she plucked out two garment bags from the backseat and deposited them into the trash bin next to the diner. The time for fancy dresses with plunging necklines was over.

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She drove through the days starting out as grainy mornings, watched them turn grey, then blue. Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, it didn’t matter, she was on the road. Moving outside of things she had finally ceased to be the outsider; on the highway no one belonged any more or less than anyone else. At a truck stop, everyone was on foreign soil.

In the warm cocoon of the car she kept her eyes on the blacktop above the red dashboard lights. At night when the reflective painted lines of the road, the concrete barriers and the oncoming flow of traffic began to dissect and the geometrical lines and ropes of light got jumbled, she braced herself, blinking and tensing the muscles along her back and legs and arms, and forced herself to stay alert and not give in to the lure of the undulating streaks of paint and light, sneaking her slyly in the wrong direction.

It was only when she and the car no longer seemed to be in direct contact with the road and the boundaries of physics began to fail, she stopped for the night. She took the nearest exit and looked for a roadside tavern near a motel, a place with trucks and traveling salesmen.

She sat in those bars reading old newspapers and answering the occasional question. Where was she headed? Was she on vacation, travelling to visit family? The silence began to form during the long days and weeks of crisscrossing the country. Each time she spoke, her own voice surprised her, disrupting the smooth quality of her new reality and it was easy to make do without speech in bars, stores and gas stations; it was not necessary to talk to order a drink or take care of business.

She drank until too exhausted to sit up; then drove to a quiet place, an unused-looking side road, a parking lot, a flat bend of a river. Sleeping stretched across the seat she pressed herself against the backrest and pulled the blanket she had bought at a rest stop up to her chin. Her eyes closed, her mind seethed, jittery with the alcohol turning to sugar in her veins. She was unable to deny the images that were nudging, one here, one there, until finally a picture slid through, emerging wetly from the inky pool of memory.

When they came, she covered her ears against the noisiness of the memories. Greenwich Village bar rooms, fights with Steny, PR people, producer visits, cameras, lights, parties, the scrutiny… A banquet hall, opulent, crystal chandeliers, shiny floors, large crowds, a woman surrounded by a crew of men in black, all leaning forward from the waist, eagerly, drinks in hand, teeth bared. The walls were lined with mirrors, perpetuating the scene in endless reflections. Offensive mirrors – that’s how she had come to think of them. Always she was being replicated, blinded by flash bulbs, spied upon by the whirring Cyclops’ eye of a film camera, gaped at by fervent faces, distended eyes touching her.

There was no sound in these recollections, only what the eye could see. It was as if she had caught her own eye in a mirror through time, behind the shoulder of a fawning man. She looked deep into his pupils staring back. What are you doing there, she asked, but her own eyes looked back inscrutably.

And then there was the other past. The humming screaming silence the instant before the announcement of her name, too early, before the name of the actual winner of Miss Finland, though she couldn’t believe she heard her own at all, couldn’t believe the entire process.

Forget about it, you’re too chubby! You’re just like me her mother had exclaimed

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when told about the pageant. Seeing her practicing the splits in the living room she walked by and shook her head: *You just aren’t very athletic, are you.* Even though she’d had occasional modelling jobs, even though other people called her ‘stunning.’ She had thought, why not me? When she had ended up in the final, televised top-10, her mother had chortled angrily and made a sucking sound with the saliva in her mouth.

The initial chaos was unreal now, reporters shoving big round microphones into her face, their eyes fake-conspiratorial, hungry for her innocent half-whispers that they mangled and twisted so that she never recognised the girl in the magazines, the one they wrote about.

In the backseat of the Eldorado she admonished herself – *stop stop* – summoning other images, frantically seeking one that would bring peace. The old realities hissed in her ears like a physical awareness, and the only thing that settled their noise was to keep on driving, and close to the whiskey the rest of the time.

Passing Augusta, Georgia she saw a sign for Memphis. The romance of the name drew her west, but the city’s long avenues flanked with businesses and warehouses did not bear out her imaginings. It was just another town.

*I love you so much that I have to leave, and that means that I don’t love you, not really, so I have to leave so I don’t stay* played on the radio and she thought of him. It wasn’t too late, she could still go back. She could cancel it all, get the girl...

No. East was cold, east was wrong, east was the past.

She became used to movement, forgot what it was like to be in a place. The movement buffered her thoughts. Eat and sleep, empty the bladder, start again.

She stopped tending to herself, and people no longer noticed her the way they had. Seeing herself in the splotchy bathroom mirror of a bar room she knew that from now on, her facial features, her breasts, everything, were on their way down. Only in heady moments of alcoholic jubilation did her cheeks look flushed again, her eyes shine, shoulders jaunty and relaxed. Those would be the only moments of illusion from now on, and the rest, the majority, would be gravity. She welcomed it.

By the time she reached Oklahoma, the radio was abrim with predictions of *the biggest snowstorm in three decades* and a long cold front. She dipped south at Oklahoma City, imagining a straight line passing Dallas and ending in the Gulf of Mexico.

She had been thinking about Texas, curious about what else it was besides the Dallas cul-de-sac where she and Steny had once lived and where she had made her immigrant mistakes.

*Look, Steny, sparks! In the grass.*

*That’s unlikely, baby. Do you see a fire?*

*But look! There. And there.*

He had shaken his head, wavering between anger and tolerance as he watched her crouching enthusiastically in the grass in her tight, white skirt.

*Those aren’t sparks, baby, those are fireflies.*

*Fireflies,* she had pronounced, and he had pulled her up by the arm. She had followed him to the car, craning her neck to see if there were more, but all she could see were trees receding into the thickening dusk.
She had made many more mistakes and Steny had ridiculed every infraction. Like the long and silky dress she had bought, akin to a flapper frock of the twenties. When showing it to Steny he had torn his sides laughing: a *maternity dress*. Or the lovely necklace of black beads she had discovered in a trinket shop in downtown Dallas. He had howled, hobbling back and forth doubled over. *That’s a rosary, baby, that’s a fucking rosary!* She had never seen one; there were only a handful of Catholics in Finland and she had only heard he Finnish word: prayer ribbon.

That was the nature of immigrant mistakes. First you made one, and then it was explained to you, and you had no idea what the explanation itself meant. It was wearying and it was endless. The most innocuous events of daily life could turn into a source of limitless hilarity to some lunch counter server and his backroom cronies upon her answer to a simple question of ‘Would you like broccoli with that?’ and herself asking innocently, ‘Excuse me, what is broccoli?’ in her burgeoning Texas accent. She always smiled along but inside she memorised yet another possible mine in the field that lay between her and American life. But she had conquered it all, and now no one could place her on a map by her actions, accent or vocabulary.

After crossing the Texas state line she slowed down to savour the state, her last. She chose local roads across the expanses of fields and drylands, seeing the occasional pinwheel of a tarantula careening across the road, sent on its way by a car passing in the opposite lane. She caught up with an old tractor with a tiny old man in the wooden driver’s seat and followed his ten-mile-per-hour turn into the parking lot of Gus’s General Store, a wooden shed with a large hand-painted sign that said COLD BEER.

The man descended from the tractor as carefully as a cat. Once on the dusty ground he turned his head in slow motion to regard first the Eldorado, then her behind the wheel. She waited until he had gone inside and then got out. She tugged at her clothes, which had stuck to her skin during the long drive, and smelled the air. It was close with heat and the metallic scent of dust, but adorned with a humid aroma of grass and wildflowers.

Inside, the old man had sat down with man in a smashed Stetson, at a fold-up card table set in a dark, dusty corner. They were playing checkers and identically fingering their whiskers as they watched her, a stranger, entering gingerly through the screen door. She ignored them and went straight to the wooden counter facing the doorway, and without meeting the gaze of the man standing behind it ordered a tuna sandwich by pointing at one of the two slim sandwiches in wax paper in a tiny cold case set upon the counter. She took a paper coffee cup from an upside-down tower and filled it with the bleakly brownish liquid. She put down sixty cents and turned to go, without a word or glance being exchanged. If someone had asked, she would not have been able to describe the man behind the counter.

Sipping the puny coffee she avoided every sign that would have taken her to Dallas and every glimpse of the skyline. She passed tiny towns along county roads: Angus, Cotton Gin, Snook – drive-through towns where people sat on porches in one of a dozen leaning houses.

For every person there was just as surely an equal number of pickup trucks. Alive and dead, she thought, the rusty carcasses of the dead ones jutting from the wasteland behind the flimsy houses, on their way to sinking into the hand-dug ditches carved into the hard red dirt.
From their porches people watched her approach in her silver car. They turned their heads when she passed, looking straight at her, tired, curious and aloof, and she looked right back. Once in a while she caught the eye of someone – a fraction of a second was enough – and safe in her car she didn’t mind these quick exchanges.

Years later, improbably, she could recall some of those gazes – a dusty little boy of perhaps ten whose eyes had been so full of unknown yearning that she had fantasised about going back; and women whose vacant eyes dared her to consider her own troubled mind.

She knew she was headed for the coast but didn’t know where the road would eventually take her. The radio played Glen Campbell’s Galveston and she was tempted to look for the town, but was then beckoned by a sign for Highway 77 to Corpus Christi and Padre Island.

She liked the idea of an island and drove the ten hours stopping only once, hitting South Padre Island Drive after seven in the evening, and crossing the Queen Isabella Causeway, so long and tall that she couldn’t concentrate on looking at her surroundings and had to focus on driving. When she landed – and it felt like landing, descending from the bridge on the other side of what a sign said was Laguna Madre – the view at dusk caused her skin to prickle.

An expanse of salt marsh, like a map of placid pools interspersed with clusters of green reeds and grass, reflected back the enormous sky burning down into the embers of sunset, and she felt what had come before on that day already evaporating behind her.

She ground to a stop in the gravel lot of a bait shack with a Closed sign and no other cars. Getting out, she walked a few steps onto a small sandy mound to face the falling sun, revelling in the soft whiff of ocean on her skin, breathing deeply the rich smell of decaying marsh.

In astonishment, she followed the shadow of her own legs extending from her feet all the way across the bait shack’s parking lot, over the road itself, and then continuing as far as the eye could see across the watery landscape. She lifted her arms – somewhere, hundreds of yards away was the end of her.

She drove on and saw that it was indeed a completely flat island – there wasn’t a single rise on it. The road came to a ‘T’ at a small clump of buildings – another bait shack, a general store and a wooden saloon. She hazarded a guess and turned left onto State Highway 361. There was nothing after that for miles.

When she finally came upon the falling-down, weather-beaten dilapidation of the town’s shabby wooden lean-tos and colourful handmade shop signs, she felt tremulous heat and excitement. It was like going back to childhood: safe yet strange, set apart yet teeming with life, and surrounded by the vastest expanse of sky she had ever seen. The end of the known world. She kept driving until there was nowhere to go, until the road let out into a parking lot, and the parking lot ended and the sea began.

She followed a brown sign with BEACH ACCESS carved into it, saw a few people standing on a long pier farther down, fishing.

The sound of the surf was like the ascending rumble of a symphony orchestra coming to life accompanied by the violin-squeaks of the gulls and another birdcall she did not recognise. The breeze burrowed into the roots of her hair, lifting it gently off her scalp like an intimate caress. Years ago she had been excited to visit Coney Island.
– along with thousands of others – the beach littered with hot-dog wrappers, soda bottles, and ruined life-buoys. But Coney Island had just been a poor man’s appetiser, concealing the spine-tingling romance with this less tarnished shore.

The earth shook beneath her feet as waves crashed into the unfettered sand.

2004

At seven in the evening, the front room of her weathered trailer was dappled by the shadows of tall poppies swinging in pots in front of the window. The trailer sat high on a blustery sand dune, and when she let go of the door to reach for the lamp, the wind from the gulf heaved it back against the frame with a clap.

She found the switch for the table lamp, turned on the transistor radio and latched the flimsy aluminum door with its scratched plastic window behind her, wiping off the sheen of sweat on her forehead. Outside, the wind howled and she could hear electrical wire dragging across the roof over the sound of a big cat scratching slowly.

First, as always, she went down to the unused bedroom at the back and cracked open the miniature door, taking a quick look to make sure nothing dangerous lurked within. Through the wall, across the five or six feet of tangled brush that separated her trailer from the shipping container housing the vet’s office, she could already hear the thump of music. Shelley, the vet’s assistant had come by for her nightly check and had switched on the Corpus Christi dance music station.

She had heard Shelley at the café explaining to people that the electro-pop and the human voices of the DJs calmed and comforted the dogs at night. She herself knew otherwise: the dogs baying in tune with certain dance numbers was the biggest reason she had long ago abandoned use of the bedroom.

In the living room, she took off her sunglasses, baseball cap and shoes and stood on the creaky floor in her shapeless, long-sleeved blue dress. She peeled off her long-johns and sighed in relief, looking around the little room, bathed in green from vegetation surrounding the trailer. All of the things she needed were there: the cavernous Indian print-covered couch on which she slept, the red-top Formica kitchen table, the tiny nook of kitchen.

She took the little transistor radio from the table and opened the front door to a small porch set on top of concrete roadblocks; even with the wind gusting it was too hot in the metal box of the trailer. When she had lived up north, dusk had usually conjured up a cooling down, an easing off of the stark light and burning heat of the day. Not so in Texas, where dusk was dense with an after-burn.

A gecko sunned itself on one of the rotting one-by-fours, catching a last triangle of sunlight. She crept out quietly so as not to disturb it and turned on the radio. The gecko fled. She stood in the vast maritime hum of the outdoors, with nothing to look back at her but the sky, her silhouette framed in the doorway by the electric light behind, facing a sea of reeds that gradually darkened as they receded toward the fore dunes.

The wind washed against her face in deliberate waves, died for a moment, then rose to greater intensity until it hardly ceased at all and the poppies whipped frantically against the tin side of the trailer. She turned up the volume on her radio as the wind mounted, letting the music swell as the air swelled until There’s an old flame burning in your eyes evaporated into the wind and only shreds of sound could be

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heard through the din of the tropical storm.

She stood transfixed as violent gusts transformed the landscape and something inside the trailer toppled. Not even when there was a loud crash did she turn back, not even when the wind began to slash rude drops of water across her face, and even when the front of her was soaked she kept her face turned up to the sky.

She awoke to the sound of the screen door gently tapping against the aluminum door frame – she had left it unlatched. The digital clock showed 3:56 am. and her head still hummed with last night’s whiskeys.

She entered the soft dark, made her way down a sandy slope to Beach Street and walked in silence through the sinking sand the few hundred yards to the water’s edge. It was still dark when she slid into the waves, the lump of her clothes left behind on the sand.

The moment of skin meeting sea was familiar and old, reminding her of summers at the yellow cottage as a child. She luxuriated in the water that held her body, imagining her pores drinking in the salt, carrying the sodium to her depleted brain. The searing, nauseating ache began to recede.

In the last darkness of night she swam seaward leaving behind the hiss and hum of the surf, toward the silence of the Gulf of Mexico. Once in a while a gull floated past and called briefly, half-heartedly. She no longer had to count her strokes, as she had before learning to swim here, a grown woman, initially counting to fifty before turning back to shore. By the time she had improved enough to reach five hundred she had stopped counting.

As always when she swam she felt the vastness of the water beneath her. It was a feeling that had been with her since she had realised as a child that the narrows where their own rickety pier was anchored was actually connected to the seas and oceans beyond. She had made the discovery the day her father rowed their old wooden skiff past the Narrows Bridge, their usual turning point, laughing too broadly in that way she knew not to trust. He had been drinking and kept rowing with his strong, brown construction worker’s arms. She hadn’t known how to swim and was nervous about passing under the shade of the bridge, across the deep whirling eddies of greenish water created by what her child’s mind thought of as the thick concrete thighs of the bridge, the structures that diverted the stream striving out to sea.

Her father gathered speed so as to pass beneath quickly, and the cold moment of being underneath and hearing the echo of water lapping against the bridge structures was brief. On the other side the sun splashed onto her face and the narrows opened and widened. She could smell the sea and it dawned on her that the shallow shore flanking the small strip of sand and reeds in front of their sauna, where she played and waded every day in summer, was part of this big, grey body of water and, ultimately, the great big seas, the same ones that she now swam in.

Her father had stopped the boat and pulled out a flask saying ‘Welcome to the great big world, little girl!’ Her skin had tingled with the excitement of this new knowledge, and although, when she waded into the water back on the home shore it made the cold lip of water brushing her ankles more frightening, she liked the idea that her feet shared the water with thousands of others. And fish. And boats.

She swam with her eyes closed and focused on being one with the water and air and the marvellous experience of not having to worry about which way was up or
down. It was the simplest, purest way of being she had ever known. As long as she swam, nothing else mattered. This was it. She was the luckiest person in the world.

She stopped and flipped over several times in the waves, diving down head-first and turning over like a dolphin. From sea-level she saw the lightening strip of shore half a mile away and a fringe of cloud cover approaching from the direction of Mustang Tower. The darkness was spoiling. It was time to get back before some lone surfer turned up. She made spears of her arms and kicked vigorously from her hip to get a good start for the swim back, smiling at the image of her old-woman’s body emerging naked from the waves, breasts swinging.
I retraced my steps, attempting to visualise from memory what I had barely been able to see the first time: the light-smeared cobbles of St John street; the high Victorian gate and edifice of the Church of the Holy Rood; the closed bowling green to the left; the battlements with their plugged, black-lacquered cannons facing King James Park; the jaundiced remains of Cowane’s hospital; the hunched, easily missed gate into the cemetery itself; the crooked gravestones; the glass-encased, angelic statue of the martyr Mary Shellway, who drowned miles from home on the West Coast, praying to God with such fervour, the story runs, that she was unaware of the rising tide and its sweeping undercurrents; the steps of the hill, stones gouged into earth, higgledy piggledy, a staircase remaining makeshift for hundreds of years.

A cold wind brought me back to reality and I pointed my dim eyes towards the sunset. I felt the awe that precedes collapse, a despairing euphoria. I enjoyed the flare of light as I refocused my eyes, getting a morbid kick out of how little I could see. The way I used to feel picking at scabs. It’s better than getting upset. I directed my gaze from one vista to another, wallowing in the protracted light refracting through the serried bens. I recalled what it used to look like. All I could see was a flat band of gold. Then I saw the aliens.

My plan had been to enjoy a view from my childhood while I still could, but my vision was too watery; everything smeared into a patchwork impression of the old amber and the new blue lights, of fog and chimney smoke. And again there was that absurd sensation, that distance from myself. This can’t be happening. At least it’s better at night when the spots disappear.

The doctor explained the situation with that vexed professionalism doctors always adopt. Although I understood the gravity of what he said, his voice seemed far away, as if he was talking to me from the end of a long, high-ceilinged corridor. I zoned out. With my head downturned, I let my eyes go in and out of focus, ignoring the blotches blocking out the left corner of my vision. It felt as if someone had taken a pair of scissors and simply cut out whatever had been there. Eventually my concentration was such that I forgot about my body. For a while, I felt like a spirit haunting the room.

‘It’s called diabetic retinopathy. Currently it is non-proliferative, but at this late stage and due to the nature of the condition, it’s only a matter of time before it turns severe and proliferative.’

The room had become a montage of still images. The photo-shopped pictures of various demographics undergoing the same symptoms. They were all skinny, and a ginger-haired child and Asian woman were smiling. An advert for type-one diabetes. They don’t smile in the type-two adverts, which are about making old, fat people feel guiltier about their slovenly lifestyle.

‘So what has happened is that the blood vessels nourishing your retinas have become blocked. Your retinas are then sending signals to your brain to replace these blood vessels. Understand?’ An advertisement for an insulin drip that sticks in your belly. Pamphlets in metal sconces by the door. More on a small table in the corner.
Multicoloured diagram of cartoon patients, for children. The way the halogen light attacked the white walls, making the room swell and contract.

‘The new blood vessels are very weak and can burst easily, accounting for the blotches and bloods specks you have been observing in recent months.’

The blue floor. The neat desk. The medical tomes on the shelf below the window. The doctor. The coffee stain on his left cuff. The pen in his right hand that he used like a conductor’s baton.

‘Generally, in ninety per cent of cases, it is an easily prevented condition. His dark Indian skin, shiny in the hard light. His cropped black hair. His nose a little too large for his face. His chubbiness. A mole on his left cheek.

‘In your case, however, because it has been diagnosed so late, it is very unlikely that we can stop debilitating, if not complete, blindness. Are you listening?’

His voice, the voice of a native Hindi speaker, with its rolled ‘r’s and thick vowels like dollops of ghee, a voice which had paused for effect.

‘In your case, I advise you to prepare for the worst case scenario, and rejoice in anything better than that.’

The room filled with the noises from the corridor. Other patients’ names being called. Someone pushing a trolley. The hum of various diagnostic and vending machines. I had listened and not listened, the way I always hear bad news.

‘Rejoice?’ I said, with a half-smile.

‘Yes.’

‘I think you’ve used that sentence before. You’ve prepared that.’

The doctor laughed without making a sound. His head waggled slightly, a cultural tic from his childhood that he had probably worked on eradicating: ‘Well...’

‘It’s a good sentence, don’t worry.’

He looked as if he were about to say something and then stopped himself. The smile disappeared and was replaced with sternness. He stared at me for longer than was comfortable. Only then did I realise how tired he looked, his eyes raccouened and bloodshot. Finally he spoke again.

‘Do you understand how serious this is?’

‘Yes,’ I replied.

‘You have something in your eye.’ That was the first sign, two months ago now. My mother sitting across from me; the twilight filtering through metal blinds and linden trees; the small blotch beside her head, a red non-space, like a whispering demon. The kitchen was quiet after rush hour, and her words sounded accusative. Everything she said sounded accusative.

After eleven years and two months of regular tests, I had given up. I had given myself up for this. Not an easy feat for a brittle diabetic – the sudden surge of sugar-spiked blood turned sour, hypoglycaemic. It was as if I was removed from my life and merely staring at it from a high vantage, and yet it was a cowardly form of self-harm.

This happened shortly after my parents’ divorce – my one concession to the melodramatic impulses propelling us through that time, when every sentence sounded like a line from a bad TV drama, or too real and faintly ludicrous.

Anyway – there were few warning signs, although I should have been prepared for it. Blood specks that disappeared in a half-hour. Easily ignored.
A chain of glowing rectangles suspended in the night. Had they come for me? I grew cognisant of their movement: a subtle bobbing and a stately progress southwards.

They were lanterns. Someone, somewhere, had released them. I watched as their flames grew in the encroaching darkness. I could ascertain every detail of them. The cuboids of craft paper and tissue held together by superglue and copper wire. How was this possible? I was so mesmerised, I didn’t even question my suddenly perfect vision. I thought the lanterns were the realest things I had ever seen. One of them in particular, second from the end, took my focus. I stopped thinking. I could hear the susurration of the forest engulfing Back O’Hill road. Then silence. I tunnel-visioned into the lantern. It moved slower than the others now. In fact, everything was slow.

Then I discovered that I was the lantern.

You can feel thermal upwinds. The subtleties of vectors. The moisture logging in your thin paper walls. And an inner heat, which propels you upwards, ineffably upwards, beyond the troposphere, to where there is no more oxygen. You realise you are committing suicide. Or, more nobly, that which allows you to fulfil your function, your inner flame, your inexorable trajectory upwards, is also killing you.

You can see as you never have before all 360 degrees of the sky and the globe below. Its curvature. The setting sun rising as you drift higher. A flock of birds silhouetted against the sky, like ticks: seagulls far from the sea. You can see the smudge on the hillside. The old you, slumped like a rag doll.

The air thins. Not long now. You can taste oblivion. It’s close. Death once seemed like an absurd proposition, but it had always been the truest thing. You realise that now. Another lantern gutters in front of you. It wobbles in the air, like a spinning top losing speed and plummets towards the country road below. You think how much will be lost. You, who have seen so little, felt so little. Your flame dwindles. Almost extinguishes. More dead lanterns descend. Then the sun goes out.

Birds claw and scrape at your side. They live in a sudden world. Your wall rips – a thin slit on the left side. Are you a bird now? No. A seagull collides with you. It is madly painting itself onto your walls. Your flame returns, but the elm trees loom, their tops a mere foot away.

Your mother’s tears splash into the kitchen sink, mingling with washing up liquid and old pots. Your father is a slammed door and ten empty Stella cans hidden in the recycling bin. You are buffeted by the vortexed wind from the trees. The seagull’s legs catch in your metal frame. You tumble through the tops of the trees, dodging branches. Then you soar out from the thicket, and wheel over King James Park. The seagull pulls you across the sky like a pony pulling a cart. You turn right towards the cemetery and castle, towards Mote hill. You see the beheading stone. The seagull caws maniacally as if speaking to you.

The stone is naked and bloody. The familiar black iron enclosure is gone. As are the benches and cannons. You see the rail lines, the council houses, the new bridges, the tenements swallowed by a wave of green, by grass and trees and hillocks. By thatched hovels and dry stonewalls.

A sombre group of townspeople stand around the stone. A priest holding a large wooden cross addresses them. As you fly over, an axe lifts and lops off a pagan head.
At the north side of the River Forth, the battle is finished. A fleeing knight in full armour jumps into the river and does not emerge. A cavalry soldier making for the bridge tries to manoeuvre his horse over a pile of bodies. The horse missteps and both fall into the blood and viscera. A broadsword slices into the back of a naked man and moves downward to his heels, cutting off a curtain of skin. The remnants of the army at the south bank of the river retreats.

The seagull squawks again. It is winter. Volleys of snow attack you. You turn towards the castle. A pyre blazes into the afternoon, melting the surrounding snow. There is a snowball fight, and then cheers as a young queen slides down the castle hill on the skull of a cow. She falls into a drift in the bottom of the hills and one of her minders, a hunched old nun with strong hands, picks her up.

The seagull glides and dips. A light in the south like the sunrise. The blast reaches you as a hot breeze. Your flame dances. You have little wax left.

Vines climb through the few glass and stone buildings that rise above the frosted mulch. You see floodlands in every direction. There are no humans.

The seagull calls again, but now it sounds like crying, a voice raised in anguish. The hospital lumbers up from the swamp, shedding its refurbished layers. You fly towards a window. You see your mother holding the old you, swaddled, newborn. Your father stands next to her. You can see their frantic love as a red aura. Superimposed upon your father’s face flicker images of the shy diffident souls of your ancestors; all of them frustrated; all hand their anger to him like a torch. Turning to your mother, you see fractious intellectuals, schizophrenics, crybabies, bullies. And you see past all of them to a frailty that is your parents’ alone.

The seagull gulps down chips on the pavement below. When did it escape? It looks up at you and squawks a final time before taking off towards the ocean.

You float away from the hospital, ascending. The clouds rave overhead. Thunder. The world holds its breath. Everything looks loaded and purplish. You reach the clouds just as the rain starts. Inside them your fragile panels absorb vapour; turbulence strips them bare. As you break through the clouds into the troposphere, you realise you are no longer the lantern. You are nothing. You drift higher.

All of Stirling lies below, pummelled by lightning. As you rise, you can see further, beyond the storm. You can see Scotland, England, Europe, Africa and the world.

And you see it as it is, as it was, and as it will be. A boiling mass solidifying, pinballed by meteors. One meteor is so big it takes a chunk out of your nascent planet and creates the moon, another brings water, brings life. Oxygen. You see broiling pangea, the time before names, life in the waters. Tectonic drift. Life on the land. Dinosaurs and their slow demise. Grass. Humans and their slower demise. The cycles of the planet and then death. The sun expanding, its dwarfing. And then nothing. Nothing anywhere. Lifelessness that lasts for eternity.

I wake on the wet grass. I cannot see a thing. My clothes soaked through. How many hours have passed? What has happened? It takes me a while to get to my feet. I’m shaky. I need sugar. I remember the chocolate bar in my jacket pocket and devour it. I feel my way with my hands. As I crawl I touch metal. It is a frame. I laugh. It is me; my lantern.

Evolution is a rogue engine, raging, unrelenting. The lantern quashed by its
own flame, me blinded by my own blood cells. I pick up the tangled frame. The wet paper walls stick to my forearm. Slowly, I feel my way home.
Blackberry

H. Oby Okolocha

The unrelenting song disrupted the frenzy of the tangle of arms and limbs. The ambience of the posh hotel room was disturbed by the exotic ring tone but the impertinent song would not cease. It was lying in the folds of sheets, waiting to strike. The phone sang, ‘when I get older, I will be wiser, I will be smarter…’ Capt. rolled over in apparent irritation. The huge artistically carved mahogany bed-frame creaked in gratitude for the respite. Chio, the sleek young lady whose limbs made up half of the tangle sighed, bed and young lady united in gratitude for the break. Grateful for the brief respite from drug-induced stamina, she stretched out languorously, her slim curves outlined.

The ringtone amused the street-wise Chio who secretly thought that Capt. was old enough to be wiser considering his sixty-five to her thirty-four years. How much older should a man get before he grabs some wisdom? Two things she had learned way back during her university days in Makurdi were to feed a paying man what he wants and to be as sweet as sugar syrup while doing it. These are the ways of profit, and skills the smart girls learn without a degree in business. Chio knew that she had the acumen for business, and a natural aptitude for extracting investments and multiplying cash. Having worked in several of these new-generation banks, she had seen it affirmed countless times that cash rolls out when egos are well stroked, so she had perfected the art and a lot more. Perfumed packaging and good behaviour equals talent, and modern Nigerian banking is about diverse talents.

The exotic song interrupted her introspection. Applying that talent now, Chio purred, ‘Dearie, why not answer it,’

Aggrieved that he had forgotten to switch the bloody thing off in the first place, or that he had forgotten to at least silence it, he had groped for it in the folds of the sheets. He snatched it up. He was always ready to pounce on anyone and anything that might cause him to blunt the sharp edge of erect equipment. He didn’t mind the expense of oiling off the rust, but he really minded wastage, especially the waste of a successful high-rise. He peered at the screen. The identity of his caller fuelled his irritation. He snapped, ‘It’s her again! You see what I have been complaining about? A reasonable woman would realise that I should be asleep at this hour. If she thinks she can keep track of me by telephone, then she is wasting her time. Foolish woman! God help all men married to women like this. Did my mother circumcise me for her?’

With sultry wisdom and the experience of dealing with a variety of egos, Chio moved over and gathered him close. ‘Dearie, do not let these people bother you. I am here for you’. Adept at pet names, and soothing ruffled feathers, she purred then offered, ‘my baby, relax with me and never mind her. Some never appreciate what they have until it is too late.’

Visibly, he calmed under her ministrations. Her mind recorded that Capt. was actually a baby. She was proud of her accomplishment. She thought: ‘impossible pet names and situations, that’s my specialty. What won’t a few well-chosen words and the right tone do?’ Adept at this job as well, she set out to justify the price he would pay for her birthday celebration, coming up on the 26 April, the following month.

‘Blackberry.’ H. Oby Okolocha.
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
At eight-thirty the following morning, Capt. called home. ‘My phone was on silent the entire night. We didn’t finish the meeting until two am. this morning and I didn’t want to start waking you guys up with calls at that hour…. No… no, I didn’t forget the folder… Just leave it there. We have started again early this morning. I am barely awake, even black coffee has not been of much help …’ He listened intently. ‘We are meeting with the governor at two this afternoon… I just stepped out of the conference hall to call you guys before I have to switch off the phone or switch the profile to silent… it’s been terrible. I had really hoped to be able to make it back home today but the way it’s going… I am really fed up with these endless meetings. Whatever happens, I hope to be out of this town tomorrow afternoon.’

Throughout the exchange, Chio was draped around Capt. like a climbing vine. With the ease of long association, she had been silently mouthing responses to his conversation in between administrating kisses and circular massages to different parts of his body. It was part of the reason why Capt.’s conversation had been urgent – like hurriedly performing a task for which there was really no time. While she knew that she also got variations of this ‘I am really busy’ conversation, it actually amused her. What did it matter when she gave as good as she got, and with phone calls too?

Her relationship with Capt. was six years old. A profitable time the years had been. During that time, he had taken her on weekend vacations to a number of luxury hotels in Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna, Jos, Warri and Port-Harcourt. He had also taken her on a four-day trip to Sun City, and plans for trips to Amsterdam and other places were in the pipeline. She had noted that, on that trip to Sun City, he hadn’t even bothered to call his wife and children. Not once. Not even to give them the usual litany of excuses: ‘busy’ and ‘stressed out’.

It had been her time with him. As always, he had spent money so generously. Secretly, she wondered if he spent half of that money on his family, considering how much time he was away from them, and how much money he spent on her. She knew there were other girls, and she wondered how many, considering the snippets of coded conversations she caught and calls hastily concluded with ‘I will call you back’. She too got a reasonable number of ‘I will call you back’ messages, so she recognised the contrived bland tone of his voice and the likelihood of another presence at his end of the phone. It was all part of the game, this cell-phone theatre of the absurd. Did they say that the devil has since ceased to be the father of lies? Was Blackberry the father and mother?

These thoughts, she kept locked up in her mind’s file. Smart businesswoman that she was, she kept the most important factors in focus. Capt. has been her most generous customer since her first employment, in her moves from bank to bank, and from one investor to another. His contacts had greatly enriched her work profile and enabled her to meet the almost impossible income targets that new generation Nigerian banks give their employees. The banks need these targets to stay alive and afloat in the rabid competition that modern banking has become. They also need smart, ambitious young men and women to achieve these income targets. Young, nubile, sensuous womanpower is particularly useful when summoning up major investments, and Chio knew her onions. She knew that she was not particularly beautiful but she was fresh, young and tight; such magic keys open doors. She also knew how to stretch every advantage: body, deposits, and the transfer of money. She
knew how much Capt. appreciated her talented investment eye.

He set the phone aside, and gave a long-suffering sigh. ‘This woman. I can’t imagine what I ever saw in her.’

‘Never mind her this morning,’ Chio soothed. And she rubbed him down, tending her good horse. ‘Dearie, I am amazed that she doesn’t realise how lucky she is to have you. What wouldn’t I give to have you for my own?’

Capt. gave a grunt of regret and affirmation. As a body therapist, she was good, so good, that he should have been too-rubbed-down to embark on the complaint trip that followed. But his anger was deep and had been nursed carefully to cover a horribly bruised ego – a fall from grace that could not be forgiven. He started again. ‘Can you imagine that she still goes snooping into my phone? Then she complains when she finds messages not meant for her. Apart from the violation of privacy, I have told her time and time again that whoever goes digging in the anus will find some smelly grease.’

Chio knew the usual complaints almost verbatim. This one was never modified as some of them were with each recounting. This morning, she was not in the mood for complaints. From experience, she knew it took some time. He hadn’t had the time to pop a pill yet. He didn’t know that she knew about his blue pills. He did not know that like his wife, she picked up his phone the second he stepped into the bathroom or to his car for a few minutes. That was how she knew he had sent one girl abroad. But, she worked hard to maintain his illusions. It was just practical and pragmatic to place his belief in the place of her disbelief. Who was it that sang the old blues ‘Who is fooling who?’ she wondered.

The phone rang; a different song this time– Chio’s phone. Alas! This morning was not to be. Was he relieved she wondered. She answered, ‘Hello, good morning. I am sorry. Yesterday, the phone was switched off when the meeting was going on… yes, we finished at about two am. It was too late and I was too tired… the hotel is fine. I didn’t even have time to notice the surroundings yesterday’. Looking around the coziness of a hotel room that spoke of price and high-class pleasure, Chio said, ‘I would have preferred it if the bank had just given us the cash instead of booking all of us into this expensive place. I could have stayed with my cousin or a friend…’. She paused and held the phone closer to her ear.

As she talked, Capt. reciprocated her ministrations. Quickly, she told the caller, ‘I am sorry, I have to go now, I hear them knocking on the door. Our meeting this morning begins in less than ten minutes. I am already running late. I will call as soon as I can. Love you too.’

As she ended the call, Capt. snapped in irritation, ‘Is that young man planning to marry you or what?’ His face looked dark and he scowled.

‘Dearie, he has been asking me to marry him for the past six months and I keep putting him off. How can any other man compare to you? It is just that it would be odd if I don’t have a steady boyfriend at my age…’

Perhaps convinced that he was spending enough to have exclusive use of her, he asked, ‘Must a woman have a boyfriend?’

Cheekily, she replied, ‘Why won’t you just divorce your wife and marry me? We have been together for six years now and all I get is two or three days in hotel rooms or a week abroad. I feel bad that I have to continue to tolerate the attention of other men. Besides, I would like to have children and I am not getting younger.’

‘Blackberry,’ H. Oby Okolocha.
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
He gave a snort of perfect understanding. ‘My darling girl, I would have divorced that woman in a heartbeat but what reason would I give? What about my children, family and friends? …I can assure you that what we have is the very best. You know, my folks at home do not see as much of me as you do’.

Chio knew that this might well be true.

‘I assure you from experience that this is the best way and without the stress that is inevitable when labels are added. As for having my children, we’ll work something suitable out for you eh?’

Secretly, she thought, ‘The wily old tortoise has to have it all, not even a real grievance against his wife!’ She gazed at him soulfully as she mentally rained abuse on him. ‘Crafty, old Monkey – Olosi (the purveyor of nonsense) and Olori buruku (bad head).’ As she had a multitude of times before, she wondered how it felt to have such a deceitful and absent husband; one who was always at work. Not even the president carried such a workload. Yes. Work covered up a multitude of things. Somewhere down the line, a thought had emerged that Capt.’s wife and children, heaved sighs of relief when he was absent. Maybe it was a case of good riddance. She wasn’t sure where the thought had come from but divorced from major payments he wasn’t worth much. Little things had added up to give her this impression. His wife’s phone calls for one. This morning’s call, and very likely, the missed calls of yesterday were made to find out when he would be back. She always seemed inordinately concerned with when he would return. Not in the manner of someone who was missing her husband, but in the manner of one wanting to know how much time remained before he returned; or one who had an agenda of her own.

That night, Capt.’s phone sang again. Yet again his wife wished to confirm that he wouldn’t be returning that evening and ascertaining his return for the next day. Chio gave him a silent ovation for his acting as she watched him yawn elaborately into the mouthpiece, saying, ‘I just entered my hotel room. No, I haven’t had dinner yet. I am just too tired to eat. I will just take a bath and go straight to bed. Ok, good night, see you people tomorrow.’ The call ended, and Capt. turned to face Chio. He looked a little bewildered but exclaimed, ‘She sounded so cheerful!’

Chio was sure her internal radar had picked up his thoughts and she asked, ‘Why don’t you want her to be cheerful?’

A little impatient, he retorted, ‘Not that! She sounded quite relieved that my return would be for tomorrow, not today. Imagine? I hope she is not up to anything, or else, she is out of my house. If I find out… I will just have to watch that woman carefully.’

She dared not laugh. These blackberry calls! Were she and he the only ones who took such prerogatives? Would his wife dare? Would she have the effrontery? She watched him and saw that his fuse had shortened with similar thoughts. Mindful of her role, she calmed his ruffled feathers. ‘Don’t even think it. You know she won’t dare.’

At ten a.m. the next morning his flight was delayed. Abuja international airport thronged with passengers. Capt. and Chio sat facing each other on opposite rows of leather airport seats. They kept their conversation to a discreet minimum. Chio knew that Capt. was not inclined to public acknowledgements; he was careful of his
reputation as a supposedly morally upright man. Not everyone cared about his or her reputation in the manner that Capt. did. The man on the other side of the seat did not care. He was permanently and loudly on the phone. In an earlier call, he had told whoever was on the other end of the line that he was in Port Harcourt. Now, he was claiming to be in Ghana. Chio discreetly watched as Capt. looked around in apparent confusion. Had they by some queer accident arrived at Kotoka airport instead of Nnamdi Azikiwe airport in Abuja? She watched him read the signs and billboards in the manner of someone verifying his whereabouts.

Chio remembered that, Capt., a veteran at making these calls knew how unwise it was for his passenger colleague to sprout such lies in a public place. She recalled the incident he had narrated to her just before their relationship had become personal. He had taken her shopping in one of the exclusive city stores as part of his courtship. They had been standing in the aisle of the supermarket close to a man talking loudly on his cell-phone and telling someone that he was out of town.

Quite clearly, she recalled Capt.’s tale of how a phone call, not even one as public as that had been, had cost him discomfort and more so long ago. As he recalled, Ije, his longtime skeletal girlfriend at the time, had called while he was in a meeting to say that she was stranded in transit in Kaduna during a National Labour Congress strike. She had arrived in Kaduna from Kano hoping to get easy transport to meet up with him for a planned three-day visit to Abuja capital city. There had been no transport to Abuja from Kaduna on that day; neither had she found a taxi to return to Kano, and she had had to call Capt. to rescue her. During that phone call, Capt. had quickly excused himself from a meeting of retired military officers. He told them that his wife was stranded in Kaduna because fuel had been really scarce that week.

All had sympathised as he raced to her rescue. Chio thought that a few must have suspected that the alacrity with which he had acted did not align with his nonchalance towards his wife, but who would dare say so? Surely, they must have wondered why his wife had needed to travel by public transportation. As he had boasted at the time to impress her, Ije was not even his regular girl but he made sure she was adequately compensated. Capt. had been casual when he said Ije was handy to have around because she was talented with complex computer jobs – a regular girl Friday. Chio came to realise much later that he particularly liked girls with additional talents. Soon after that phone call, two of his cronies had sympathised with his wife about being stranded in Kaduna. It had been an uncomfortable situation and he had had to be really inventive to cover it. The girlfriend’s name and the tale had stuck in her mind.

Watching as the scowl on his face deepened, Chio wondered if he was recalling his wife’s cheerful relief yesterday. Was he, like her, recalling a long ago phone mishap or was it just the shredding of dignity and phone antics of the man across from them that had pissed him off? Then it struck her. The man opposite must have been like a blow beneath the belt – the irritation of watching a parody of yourself on stage. A part of Capt.’s annoyance must have been that the man did not have his breeding. As she toyed with these thoughts, the exotic song once again drew her attention.

He searched for the phone in his suit pocket. ‘Who is this?’ he asked of the caller at the other end.

Chio watched him with keen interest. A finger moved and he terminated the
call.
‘I don’t know who that was! Anyway, it was an international number so they will call back.’

‘Madam or Miss?’ The wily old fox. He didn’t know who it was, indeed! Tales all around! No doubt about it, the world was a better place when ‘blackberry’ was just a fruit.
Gool was returning to Afghanistan, as poor as he had left. The old men of his village would mock him for returning without having made his fortune. Let them! They had no idea what it was like to be treated as even lower than the camels he tended; to be called a black heathen, dirty and stupid, and paid a pittance for his labours. Despite the fact that he had worked hard, trudging across dry lands, tending moody camels, bringing supplies to the stations and miners, he had been cheated and despised. The fortune he sought proved to be a chimera.

The ship Gool boarded in Fremantle was the s.s.Orient, which had been lauded as a ‘floating palace’ when it was launched. Palatial it may have been for the first and second-class passengers but Gool, returning to Afghanistan after three years working as a cameleer in Australia, could only afford steerage. It was impossible to sleep in such cramped conditions where privacy was at a minimum and where his senses were assailed by snores and grunts, night smells and unclean air. He chose to sleep on the upper deck, wrapped in his coat, using a coil of rope as a pillow. It was warmer than the desert at night and he could be at ease with himself because he felt free.

Taking a ship to Melbourne, sailing via Adelaide, which even he knew was not the direct route, was not as foolish as it might seem at first. He had a good chance of picking up a sailing ship from Melbourne taking wool to India, working his passage. Gool was too restless, too anxious to return to his family, too despondent, to wait around for another ship going directly from Fremantle to Karachi, so the Orient it was.

He had another reason for sailing without delay. It was the month of Ramadan, and it would be easier to observe the fast on a ship, saving his food until after sunset. On the first day at sea it became clear to him that keeping the fast of Ramadan might just as well be a hunger strike. Luckily, in his wanderings about the ship he discovered that the sailors coming off watch before dawn would stop for a warm drink and some bread or biscuits before retiring to their hammocks. Ghani the cook was a Muslim and he understood Gool’s situation, and welcomed him into his galley before daybreak where he could drink water or tea, and eat fruit and bread, refusing the meat, which was not halal. Ghani saved him some food to take to the deck at night when he could break his fast again after nightfall. Those who followed Allah and his Prophet should support each other, Ghani said. Thus the followers of Allah would have integrity, power and the respect of all other nations. As they broke bread together they talked of the time when the Sultan of Turkey would rule all Islamic countries in one great religious empire.

Ghani, Gool knew, found Ramadan difficult, because he was handling food all day. He carried a quotation from the Koran in his pocket, so that he could read it from time to time when he found the smell of food too tempting. ‘Here,’ he said showing the paper to Gool, who read: The month of Ramadan, wherein the Koran was sent down to be a guidance to the people, and as clear signs of the Guidance and the Salvation. So let those of you, who are present at the month, fast it.

‘He wasn’t thinking of working on board a ship, preparing meals, when he wrote that,’ said Ghani.

‘Fresh Pastures.’ Emily Sutherland. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012. 
‘He wasn’t thinking of walking all day in the full heat of summer, loading and unloading camels either,’ said Gool.

During the holy month he spent most of his time on the deck, looking at the flying-fish and the patterns and changing colour of the water rippled by the gusts of wind. He could appreciate why some men came to love the sea, but he remained a man of the mountains and the valleys, yearning for the feel of the desert air, crisp and clean, and the sight of the night sky imploding in stars. The sea was never still; the mountains never moved and the desert sands revealed the depth and breadth of life’s spirit. Sailing through the Bight he saw whales, spouting fountains of water towards the sky. He imagined himself being lifted on a column of water, stirred by a sense of adventure and danger. He would have much to talk about in the village when he returned.

Gool had had little to do with women apart from his mother or his sister who used to play with him when they were little. Now she was married and living with her husband’s family. He assumed that one day he would marry, and often thought about the sort of wife he would like. A nice looking woman, not too fat but certainly not skinny, with long hair that would hang down her back at night, when they were together; a woman who smiled rather than chattered. Rather like the young woman he was looking at right at that moment, as she stood against the deck holding the hands of two small boys. Gool guessed that they were not her children because she looked too young to be their mother. Probably they were her brothers, or maybe she was a nursemaid. As he watched out of the corner of his eye he saw her reach down and ruffle the hair of one of the boys. Yes, he decided, they were her brothers. His sister used to do that to him when he asked too many questions and his father too, when he became impatient. Was this little boy asking questions to which his sister had no answers? Gool wished he could move closer, could talk to her, but of course, that was out of the question.

She must have sensed his interest for she turned her head and before he could look away she smiled and nodded in greeting. The only women who had acknowledged him since he left his home had been the tarts who worked the gold fields, and these he shunned. Certainly this young woman was not a prostitute. Her smile had been one of friendly greeting, not solicitation. Gool wondered what would happen if he approached her, but when he glanced back to the place where she had been standing she was gone.

He looked for her the following day. Searching for her distracted him, until his stomach rumbled and feeling miserable and hungry, he gave up hope. Then he spied her, sitting with two other women, sewing. Her brothers sat nearby with an older man, probably their father. He was, Gool noted, a large man, running to girth, and not too steady on his feet. At first she did not look his way directly nor greet him but then she dropped a reel of cotton and, as she bent to pick it up, she turned her face to him and smiled. Smiling in return he moved away quickly before the other women, or more importantly her father, could notice his interest.

That evening he took particular care with his ablutions, before going up to the deck where he would eat his meal once the sun had gone down. Ramadan was not so difficult on the ship, in one way, because he did not have to work during the day. On the other hand it was difficult to distract himself during daylight hours from thoughts of how he had failed and he was very pleased when the time came when he could
drink some water and break his fast even if the food was not always to his liking. In a few months, he thought, he would be back home where the food was very much to his taste.

‘Is it a picnic you’re having? Can I join you? I’m Brigid, by the way.’ Only when she spoke did Gool become aware that the young woman was standing just behind him. He leapt to his feet, swallowed the food in his mouth too quickly, and began to cough. Finally he was able to speak. ‘It is my meal. I do not eat during the day. Not during Ramadan. I’m Gool Badsha Mohammed,’ he replied.

Brigid motioned him to sit down again and then sat beside him, putting her sewing basket between them.

He became acutely aware of her dark hair hanging down her back like a bell rope and tied with a green ribbon

‘This Ramadan, is it something like Lent?’ she asked.

‘Lent? I don’t know. Is that a month when you do not eat or drink during the day?’ Gool did not like to mention that sex was also forbidden.

‘Heavens no! We do eat during the day but not much, for six weeks, so it’s more than a month.’

Gool divined that Brigid was trying to balance the length of their privation against the severity of his fast. He still felt that Islam won.

‘Even when it’s not Lent we abstain from meat on Fridays. That’s Catholics, not Proddies. They eat meat all the time,’ continued Brigid.

Gool had some idea about ‘proddies’ from his Irish friends in shantytown, and he knew about fish on Friday, not that they often had any, but they always excused themselves to the Almighty on those Fridays when they did eat meat.

‘You’re a Muslim then?’ Brigid asked.

‘I am,’ he replied. He could think of nothing to add so to keep the conversation going he changed the subject, ‘Where are you from?’

‘From County Wicklow, Ireland,’ she replied. ‘And where are you from?’

‘The Khyber area in Afghanistan. I’m going home. Where are you going?’

‘We’re getting off at Adelaide. South Australia will be our new home. But I’d better go inside now. Me da is a heavy sleeper but if he finds me gone there’ll be the devil to pay.’ She moved lightly on her feet. All that remained was the brush of air as her skirts swung around, and the faintest scent of lavender water.

His sister would never have talked to any man like that, but Brigid did not seem immodest. In fact she had told him that really she was very shy, yet, somehow, she had felt totally at home with him. ‘At home’ puzzled him, until she explained what it meant. Then he told her that he had felt at home with the Irish diggers at Kalgoorlie, and her face lit up. His thoughts, as he sat on deck well into the early hours of the morning, were joyous. Was it her bright open smile that pleased him most, or the soft skin and pink glow of her cheeks? Like pomegranates, he thought. Smoother than apples. Or was it the easy way in which she talked? He wondered if she thought about him before she went to sleep in her cabin. Restlessly he waited for her on the upper deck the following evening, and was not disappointed.

‘Tell me of Ireland,’ he said.

‘It’s a beautiful country, but most people are poor. My mother and many of our family died during the Great Hunger when the potato crop was blighted. It was desperate. My father says this could never happen in Australia. He’s sure good
fortune will rain on us until we are drowning in gold.’

‘Australia is only dry land. Never rains.’

‘It must rain sometimes.’

‘Not much. Sometimes. Then it makes mud. Australia is a desert. On the goldfields they live in tents.’

Gool told her what he could about travelling with the camels and all he had learned of this alien country. He wished his command of English were better so he could explain more fully that the cities, like Adelaide and Perth, seemed imposing enough and there were green fields, but once you went away from the coast the land was savage, and the people lived rough. There was a sense of emptiness. Sometimes the only sounds to be heard were the cawing of crows and the footsteps of silent men, too exhausted to talk and resigned to their drudgery. At night the stars spread themselves across the sky, cold and indifferent, and the moon cast contorted shadows in the spinifex and shrubbery. The stars were unfamiliar, not like those he had known as a boy. There were black men and women who materialised like spirit people, watching, sometimes friendly, more often fearful for the degradation and draining of their waterholes after a string of camels had drunk their fill. He would have told her of people, those who came from England at least, who treated those who were not of their culture and religion as though they were inferior aliens. There was no respect shown to the Afghanis’ religion even though they were far more devout and assiduous in their duties than most of the Australians. He would have said that Muslims did not drink alcohol so there were no drunken brawls and violence in the Ghantowns, but they were criticised for peacefully smoking their narghiles. There was no way he could have explained their longing for family, for wives and children, for the sense of belonging. Neither could he adequately express his hope that Brigid’s father did not plan to go looking for gold or silver, making his daughter live in a skimpy tent and cart water from a creek or water carrier, trying to keep her two brothers out of mischief while her father dug for disappointment.

As though reading his thoughts she said, ‘We’re going on from Adelaide to the Clare Valley.’ Her father had heard that Irish people had settled there, and they preferred to be with their own people. There had been too much strife with the British in Ireland for them to want to settle amongst them in Australia.

‘My father wants to set up a hotel there,’ she continued. ‘He says that whether people are happy or sad they’ll always want to drink. He should know.’

‘We follow our Prophet. We are forbidden to drink alcohol,’ said Gool more primly than he intended.

‘Well, let’s hope there aren’t too many of your lot there, or my father will be disappointed. Mind you, I think a man who doesn’t drink mightn’t be such a bad thing.’ Brigid smiled up at him.

He noticed the dimples on her cheeks then and her long dark eyelashes. On impulse he reached out and took her hand. Brigid pulled it away, but not as quickly as she might have. It was a hand that knew work but was not as rough and calloused as his. He glanced to see if she was offended, but she smiled freely and then said that she would have to go back to her cabin. If her father found her talking to him ...}

‘The devil plays up?’ finished Gool. Brigid’s laughter rang out and he feared her father would appear at any moment.

‘Brigid,’ he called to her, ‘come back for a moment.’

‘Fresh Pastures.’ Emily Sutherland.

_Transnational Literature_ Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.

She approached him cautiously. ‘Yes?’
‘Here. This will protect you from harm. I don’t need it any more. I’m going home.’ Gool handed her the horsehair amulet that he had brought from Afghanistan and always wore around his neck on a leather thong. ‘It’s not a gem, but it’s precious,’ he assured her.

Brigid held it, still warm from his body, in the palm of her hand. Her eyes were suddenly serious, almost tearful for a moment, until she smiled. Such a smile. It encompassed him. They were the only two people alive at that moment. He moved towards her.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I’ll keep it always. Do you mind if I pray that you will still be protected?’ Without waiting for a reply she stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek, before hurrying away.

To Gool that kiss was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to him and it was a long time before he could settle to sleep. The next day, the day before the ship would stop to unload and reload at Adelaide, Gool was sitting on the deck near the bow of the ship, warming himself in the sun like a lazy cat. He heard footsteps then sensed a shadow. Those footsteps were too heavy for Brigid, so he assumed it must be one of the sailors. None of the other passengers had ever bothered to speak to him. Or they hadn’t until now, and what the scowling man with the florid face who swayed above him had to say was not friendly.

‘If you so much as think about my daughter, or lay a finger on her or defile her in any way I’ll have you horsewhipped.’

There was no language barrier. Gool understood exactly what Brigid’s father meant even if he didn’t understand each individual word. He stood up and faced the man. ‘Your daughter, I have never met. I am an Afridi, a man of honour.’ Having just lied he wondered how honourable he really was, but he wasn’t going to betray Brigid to this man with the red angry face who talked of horsewhipping.

‘You’re a bloody heathen! What do you know of honour? I’ve heard stories about you fellows. You’ll not ruin her life.’

Gool shook his head in denial of the desire to ruin anyone’s life. He turned away to lean against the deck rail, unsure of what to do or say. The man stood next to him. Two men radiating hostility, one tall, lithe, with olive skin and dark eyes, the other shorter, unshaven, beer belly, florid, hair more grey than brown. Gool could smell liquor on this man’s breath. They both gazed at the water. Unseen Brigid watched them, her face fearful.

‘Might be I were a bit hasty,’ Brigid’s father then said, more quietly. ‘One of the women warned me she was up to no good, and I thought it might be with you, seeing as how you’re always on deck. I should have known she wouldn’t be wasting her time on your lot. Anyway I’ve taught her a lesson she won’t forget in a hurry. Lord knows it’s hard to raise a motherless daughter. Here, have a drink. No hard feelings?’ as he handed Gool a hip flask.

‘No. No thank you. I do not drink and I am fasting. Sorry,’ said Gool waving the flask away as though its proximity would contaminate him.

‘Suit yerself. I’ll have a drop and shake your hand. You might be a good lad, but stay away from Brigid.

That night Brigid did not come to talk to him, and he was hard put to say if he was
disappointed or relieved. The ship docked at Largs Bay, near the mouth of the Port River. The long L shaped jetty, along which a railway line had been built, was designed for the loading and unloading of both goods and passengers. Looking across to shore Gool saw an imposing stone building with arched balconies, reminiscent of Islamic architecture. There were no minarets, so he knew it wasn’t the mosque, but he was surprised to learn that it was a hotel and office for the railway company. On the other side of the road were the stone Customs offices. Gool was to have a short break in Adelaide before returning to the ship and continuing on to Melbourne. Climbing into the tender, which was to take him to the jetty, he glanced back at the ship to catch a glimpse of Brigid, waiting to disembark, her face half hidden by a scarf. Her little brothers stood on either side, but he did not know if it was to guard or protect her. The amulet had not protected her, he thought. He fervently hoped that Australia would bring her the golden rain that had eluded him.
I don’t like not knowing when she’ll show up. I’d just finished ironing and folding the clothes, and was passing through the sitting room to put them away, when I saw her there – legs stretched out across the full length of the sofa, back propped up against the arm-rest, nose buried in a book. It was as if she’d never left for America…or Europe…or Australia…or wherever she had gone to university. She sat in the same position in which she’d spent most of her childhood and teenage years. Only now, the book had more pages and no pictures. The legs were longer, taking up more of the sofa. And her figure had plumped out, taking up more space in general. It’s true, I guess. Life in western countries really does make you fat. That’s what the woman who lives next door told me when she came over to borrow some chilli sauce a few months ago. She’d just come back from a trip to Australia. She said one person there is the size of three people here. And she said that each one eats enough for three people too.

Not that I’m so slender myself these days. Of course, anyone would grow flabby being cooped up inside the house day in and day out. I wondered if, over there, she spent all her time inside reading books like she does when she comes back to visit us – like she did when she was still living here. Her skin looked darker though. Positively black. I wondered if she’d gotten into the habit of baking her skin like white people do. A little blacker and plumper, but other than that, she was just a bigger, older version of the fat, spoiled girl who would come home from school and demand that I make her fried banana fritters.

I wondered if she had a boyfriend yet. Maybe she was even engaged. Maybe she was already married. Though these days, I’d heard that girls preferred not to marry – to grow into old maids. Who knew? It’s not like anyone in the family ever tells me anything.

I pride myself on my manners, though nobody else seems to have them. I asked her if she wanted something to drink.

Then, the strangest thing happened. She glanced up from her reading and smiled at me. How was I? she asked. Fine, I answered. She put the book down, swung her legs off the sofa, and looked directly at me, her head tilted to one side. How were things around the house, she asked. Had it been raining much? Where did the new painting in the foyer come from? Where did the pandan plants in the front yard go? Was the dog in good health?

Huh. I had some questions of my own running through my head. When did she get so chatty? And when did her Indonesian get so good? When she left home years ago, her language skills were limited to asking for things and giving orders. This made me nervous. And it was just plain strange. She ran out of things to ask and we stood in silence, me still carrying the laundry basket, resting it on my hip. I repeated my original question: did she want something to drink? Tea? Coffee? Tea, she said. Black tea, green tea, or chamomile? Black tea, she replied, with condensed milk if we had any. Suddenly, she yanked the laundry basket out of my hands, saying that she’d put the clothes away. And despite my protestations, off she went.
Strange.
What could I do but go into the kitchen and make her a cup of tea? Our electric hot water dispenser had broken down the day before, so I rummaged around for the old kettle and put some water on to boil.

*

The poor thing had aged. And shrunk. I thought of a line from a poem by Yeats I’d read in my first year at university, when I’d thought I was going to major in English. ‘An old man is a paltry thing. A tattered coat upon a stick.’ Or something along those lines. I couldn’t imagine her in a coat. Although given the temperatures inside air-conditioned buildings in Singapore, I’d often thought wearing one wouldn’t be a bad idea.

Precisely for that reason, I’d always liked hanging out at my grandmother’s house. Never one for new-fangled gadgets, she’s always preferred cooling down to the temperate breezes blown by rotating fan blades. As I stretched out on the sofa and continued my reading – an anthropological study on the conceptualisation of gender in rural South Sulawesi – I remembered the ancient electric fan that used to sit on the rosewood table next to her sofa. When I was little, I would direct it at my feet and turn it on. As I read, I’d imagine the coolness of the wind being absorbed into the blood vessels in my feet and ankles, then travelling up my legs, my torso, my head, my arms, and finally, through my palms and fingers, where they in turn would emit cooling energy onto the pages of the book they were holding. Three-quarters of my brain would be processing the story I was reading; one-quarter of it was devoted to the peculiar pleasure of having turned myself into a sort of human fan. I would even emit a low, sustained hum under my breath, which was drowned out anyway by the gravelly roar of the real fan, more akin to the sound of a wartime propeller plane than a household appliance.

The fan was long gone, of course – most likely chucked out by my mother or one of my aunts. Its replacement hung from the ceiling overhead, operated by a switch-panel on the wall. The blades were so white and shiny that the ceiling and walls looked a dirty yellow by comparison, even though my grandmother kept her place spotless. I guessed it was a concession made by my grandmother in order to prevent her daughters from modernising her abode entirely. A fan was a small sacrifice to make for the sake of the old-fashioned wrought-iron grilles on the windows and doors, the moss-green linoleum floors, the dark, dank bathroom where, rooted among the tiny square blue tiles, thrived a species of brown fungus so hardy that the most determined scrubbing and the most corrosive cleaning agents would never be able to evict it.

On this visit, I had noticed other changes as well. A canvas of Jackson Pollock-ish art in a slick black frame hung in the foyer between the calligraphy scrolls and the painting of koi fish that my second aunt especially hated (that was probably another concession). The pandan plants in the front yard were gone, replaced by an unremarkable shaggy fern. When Sri came in, I asked her about them. She said they had mysteriously died. She was growing another one in a big pot behind the kitchen. She looked suspicious as she said it, and her age made her look even more so: her hunched shoulders formed a protective shield around her body as if they were bracing it against incursion; the wrinkles around her eyes gave them a narrow and mistrustful
look. She was old and the universe was waiting to pounce on her—waiting to turn her into maggot-food and dust.

Suddenly, I felt sorry. Sorry that I’d taken her for granted for all those years growing up. Sorry that, even though she had been the one to raise me through adolescence (my mother and father both worked full-time), I never phoned after I’d moved away. Partly because she didn’t expect me to – why should she? Partly because my mother certainly never expected me to. Mostly because the idea of calling her was simply absurd, or at least it had been until the end of my first year of college, when I developed an awareness that my situation wasn’t normal – at least, normal by the standards of my American friends.

Over there, it was unnatural to be raised by someone who wasn’t your mother or father or some other relative. It was, at the very least, uncommon to pay someone small and brown to be at your family’s beck and call twenty-four hours a day for trifling wages, to house them in a tiny windowless room with a cheap mattress and a wet bathroom on the exterior of your house or flat, to expect them to do all the housecleaning and laundering and cooking and grocery shopping, to entrust them with the care of your beloved children. Only fabulously wealthy people did that in America. Evil ones (according to the TV shows and movies) who didn’t think servants were human beings and who didn’t care enough about their offspring to raise them themselves.

I, however, felt more inclined to forgive my people. This was how things worked in our part of the world. You didn’t have to be rich to have a servant; just reasonably well off. And why wouldn’t you have one? You could pay someone else to do the work and that someone else needed the money: a win-win situation.

Only, with every additional year I spent in that faraway egalitarian land of industrious people ironing their own clothes and making their own breakfasts, each time I came back, I could feel myself growing more uncomfortable, more disturbed at having these simple tasks done for me.

‘Iris, you have a maid?’ Nancy had asked me, her green eyes widening in disbelief. It’s funny the kind of people you end up befriending in college. Nancy and I might as well have come from different planets. She hailed from Wisconsin, her family a clan of hardworking dairy farmers who were so proud about her getting a scholarship to Cornell that they’d framed the letter and hung it in the living room above the television. Nancy had red hair and freckles, loved watching American football, and drank a glass of milk at every meal. Her favourite Chinese food was moo goo gai pan…whatever that was. When she’d asked the question, we had been hanging out in my dorm room. I’d known her for only for six or seven months at that point, but she was still surprised at this new piece of information. I wasn’t surprised. I’d kept it hidden: I didn’t want to be known as ‘spoiled’ or ‘rich’.

‘I don’t have a maid,’ I answered. ‘My family has one.’ I gestured to the heap of unfolded laundry at the foot of my bed and tried to turn what I had just said into the light-hearted joke I’d intended it to be. It had come out too defensive, but it wasn’t too late. I grinned. ‘I wish I had a maid.’

This worked. Nancy laughed. ‘But seriously. You have a maid? Or your family does? And she raised you? Where’s she from?’
‘Indonesia.’
‘What’s her name? How old is she?’
‘Her name is Sri,’ I answered. ‘I think she’s around…fifty? Maybe sixty?’
‘Does she have kids?’
My discomfort grew. ‘I think so,’ I lied. Truth was, I had no clue.
‘How many kids? Who brought them up when she was working for you?’
I lied a little more. I answered that there were two sons and that Sri’s sister
brought them up. Then I suggested we take a trip to the pharmacy in town. I had run
out of shampoo.
‘Do you want something to drink?’
The question jolted me into the present, to the aged figure now standing before
me, shifting her weight from one foot to the other in discomfort. I’d kept the poor old
thing standing all that time, carrying that heavy load. Impulsively, I took the basket
from her. Go make the tea, I told her. I’ll put these away. It was the least I could do,
and I was glad we were alone, or else the opportunity would never have arisen. My
family would have said that I was being silly, that I was spoiling her. What do you
think we pay her for, they’d ask. But that was beside the point. Isn’t everyone entitled
to a small kindness every now and then? To some nod, some recognition of our shared
humanity? Before she could say a word, I whisked the basket off to my grandmother’s
room and put the clothes away for Sri. And I wondered if she really did have two sons
after all.

*%
Having to boil the water gave me some time to read a little more of my article. And
with my boss out of the house, there was no chance I’d get caught. I put on my
spectacles and took my Femina magazine out of its hiding place. I was hardly allowed
out of the house anymore, except to go to the market. But the woman next door had
been kind enough to buy it for me on one of her days off. Some of us have all the
luck. Not only did she have Sundays and public holidays free but her employers – a
middle-aged couple with two children and two sets of elderly parents – even brought
her with them on family vacations. In addition to packing and ironing, she had to take
care of the children and old parents, which didn’t leave her with much free time. But
occasionally, when they went to a restaurant too expensive to have her come along,
they would give her a little spending money and let her have an hour or two to wander
around by herself. On this latest trip, she’d even brought me back a souvenir: a
keychain with a little grey fuzzy bear doll hanging from it – a kuala, she told me. I do
envy her sometimes, but I suppose I couldn’t wish anything less for someone so
generous. When she gave me the magazine, she wouldn’t even let me pay her back.

Times flies. She’d brought this issue for me a little under a year ago and I was
still working my way through it. I’d been reading this particular article for several
weeks now – an interview with a successful businesswoman in Surabaya who had
started her own bakery at the age of thirty. Her husband worked as a manager in a
travel agency and she had three daughters. The bakery specialised in making cream
puffs. I’d reached the part where she was giving Femina readers advice on running a
business and caring for family at the same time.

I found the place where I’d left off (marked with a star), and as usual, just a
few words into reading, I ran into a word I didn’t recognise. Slowly trailing my pencil
across it, I sounded it out under my breath, syllable by syllable. Still unfamiliar. I
ended up circling it so I could look it up in my dictionary later. Not that it ever really helped. Whose idea was it to explain the meaning of words with more words? They should make dictionaries with pictures.

I was reading through the sentence one more time when I heard a noise behind me. To my surprise, Iris had come into the kitchen. What are you reading? she asked.

Just a magazine, I answered. I tried to look calm. It wasn’t a big deal, but I was sure I’d be in trouble if Iris told her grandmother, who would probably accuse me of being lazy and wasting time when I could be doing other chores. She would take the magazine away. Iris looked at the pages with interest. Do they sell Indonesian magazines here, she asked. Yes, I answered. Oh, the water’s boiling! It wasn’t, but I used that as an excuse to put it away. I prayed she wouldn’t mention it to her grandmother. My boss is a mean old bird.

Are you sure the water’s boiled? Shouldn’t the kettle make a sound?
I made a show of checking inside the kettle. You’re right, I said. It hasn’t boiled yet. A little while longer. You really don’t need to wait, Miss Iris. I’ll take care of it. Go sit down on the sofa. I’ll bring the tea out to you.

Iris did sit down, but on the stool near the oven. How irritating can you get? She’d already made enough trouble for me by putting my boss’s clothes away, probably in all the wrong shelves and drawers. I’d have to do the job properly once she left. But why wouldn’t she leave me alone? Why was she asking me all these questions? I didn’t like being watched like this. I already got enough of this from her grandmother: inspecting each fork and spoon to see if I’d washed the dishes properly; checking to see which spices I’d used for seasoning the food; accusing me of using too much rice or too many eggs to prepare my own meals. I’d preferred working for Iris’s parents. They didn’t ration my food so tightly and they let me have Sundays off. Sometimes, when they went out to eat at a hawker centre, they’d even bring back something especially for me: nasi lemak or roti prata from a Muslim food stall.

Then when my boss’s previous maid died of a heart attack, Iris’s parents gave me to her as a replacement. I heard the two of them discussing it over dinner one night: she told him that her mother was too old to live by herself and too old to handle training a new maid, and he had agreed. Why not give her Sri, he suggested. Sri was obedient, honest, and hardworking. Sri could take Yani’s place and they could get a new maid. Within a week, I was doing Yani’s chores. Within two weeks, they had moved me into the room where Yani had died. My new boss didn’t even bother change the mattress. How I prayed to Allah all through the night not to let Yani’s ghost harm me. Even now, every night before I go to bed, I pray for protection. I sleep fairly soundly these days, but those first few weeks I lay awake, out of my mind with fear. I begged my boss to let me sleep on the kitchen floor instead, but she told me I was being stupid and superstitious. She still tells me I’m stupid at least three times a day.

I really do miss working for Iris’s parents. I don’t get Sundays off anymore. The old woman claims they’re included in my annual holiday back to Indonesia. And forget about her buying any food for me when she goes out; I’m lucky if she brings back leftovers, which I don’t dare to eat most of the time because she lies about whether the food has pork in it. I’ll admit that I’ve never been very devout – I don’t keep fasts, I only perform salat every now and then, and I gave up hope of going on Hajj a long time ago. But I still have my standards. Mean old bat.

‘Old Maid,’ Tiffany Tsao,
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
‘Sri, do you have children?’
I almost choked and the kettle began to sing.

I had obviously surprised her when I entered the kitchen. When she turned around, she looked flustered and confused, as if I’d caught her doing something she wasn’t supposed to be doing. She’d been reading something – an Indonesian women’s magazine I discerned from glancing at the pages. Odd. I hadn’t pegged Sri as the type to read articles on beauty tips or fashion. Maybe she was reading it for the recipes. Then it occurred to me that it was unusual for Sri to be able to read at all.

Even if I didn’t know a lot about Sri herself, I’d learned a lot these past few years about people like her. Funnily enough, I think it had all started with that conversation with Nancy: realising how little I knew about the person who had essentially been my second mother; how I couldn’t even communicate with her that well. Compelled by a mixture of guilt and curiosity, I enrolled in an Indonesian language class. I took an anthropology class on rural Southeast Asia. I switched majors. An obsession with Indonesia took root and grew. I applied to grad school in anthropology. Once in the program, I brought my Indonesian up to near fluency and picked up Javanese. After passing my qualifying exams in my third year, I set off for eight months of fieldwork in Central Java – eight months in a small, isolated village kept alive by the absence of its able-bodied men and women.

At least one member of every family had gone abroad to earn the livelihood that the village’s small-scale agriculture simply couldn’t sustain. Fathers and husbands departed to labour in mines or on plantations, or sometimes, to become factory-workers and day-labourers in the cities and industrial areas. Mothers and wives too sought work in the factories or as maids in the big cities. If they were lucky, they became maids in other countries, where the wages were positively astronomical by comparison: Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong. The same story repeated itself in villages the archipelago over.

Those in their teens and twenties usually had some rudimentary reading and writing skills, picked up in the ramshackle schools that had come to be more common in the rural areas as the result of educational reforms. But the women from these areas who belonged to Sri’s generation were almost always illiterate. How did Sri learn to read? Perhaps she never did. Perhaps she was just looking at the pictures in the magazine. But then why had she marked the pages with pencil?

Of course, what did I know? Nothing. Not even the name of the village she came from, though from her accent, I knew she was from somewhere in Java. Even after spending so much time absorbed in the study of Sri’s language and country – sprung from the gnawing guilt of not knowing anything about her – I found myself hesitant to converse with her whenever I returned to Singapore. It seemed strange to ask her about these things, to suddenly take an interest in her as a human being, to treat her like one, after all those years of spoiled thoughtlessness and absence. But now, after eight months of talking to unfamiliar people about their lives, their beliefs, their circumstances, I felt surer, more confident. It was high time that someone paid Sri attention.

I asked Sri if they sold Indonesian magazines in Singapore, which was a stupid question. Of course they did: there were lots of Indonesians living in Singapore. Why
wouldn’t they have stores selling magazines for them? As she bustled around and murmured something about how I should go rest and wait for my tea in the sitting room, I thought of another question.

‘Sri, do you have children?’

She looked startled. Of course she would look startled. Until this moment, I’d never shown the slightest interest in anything about her. Then her eyes came to rest upon me and her gaze softened.

Yes. She sighed, as if the fact hurt her somehow. A girl.

Only one?

Yes. One girl.

She filled the teacup and jerked the teabag about in water by its string. It looked like an injured fish, bleeding currents of dark red.

How old is she now?

Oh, she’s grown up already. Married. Has two children.

So you have grandchildren? Boys? Girls?

A boy and a girl.

Do you see them when you go home for leave?

Yes. Here’s the condensed milk. She set the glass jar on the counter next to me, along with a spoon.

* 

I don’t have a daughter. I don’t have a son-in-law. I don’t have grandchildren. And I don’t know why I lied. I think part of me just felt very annoyed about her asking so many questions. They think that because they can make you do work twenty-four hours a day, that they have a right to know everything about you. Actually, I was on the verge of saying something really rude about her minding her own business. But then I looked at her and thought to myself: what was the use, really? What was the use of being so sensitive after all these years?

For a second – half a second – I could smell him. It was an awful smell. A combination of sweat, sour curry, and a hint of something else I could never pin down: damp clothes that hadn’t dried properly; dog saliva; stale beer. I met him when I was working for my third employer, right before I started working for Iris’s parents. His name was Ragesh – a construction worker from India. He was already married and had a family back at home to support. But he was lonely. And so was I.

That smell. It surprises me every now and then, invading my nostrils and starting the memories going. The missed period. The dizziness every morning. The panic. Ragesh’s sudden disappearance. The old Chinese crone in Geylang who promised to make it all better, and who did.

I don’t think it affected me that much at the time. A few weeks of crying every now and then. A bit of moping around. But I could stay in Singapore. I could keep my job. And life went on. But something’s changed these days. Whenever something sets the memories running, whenever that Ragesh scent catches me unawares, my skull collapses in on my brain and my ribs collapse in on my heart. Maybe it’s because, now, it’s too late. It’s all too late. A life spent being at other people’s beck and call. A life assisting other people so they can live theirs. A life measured out in meals served, shirts folded, toilets scrubbed, floors mopped and swept, over and over and over again.

‘Old Maid.’ Tiffany Tsao,

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.
What was even the use of practising my reading anymore? Practising during
snatches of free time for the last…what was it? Fifty years? Crawling through reading
material like a snail. I feel like I’ve been slowing down even more in the past few
months too. By the time I get to the end of a sentence, I’ve forgotten all the words at
the beginning and have to start over to understand its meaning. I know I’m circling
the same words again and again. And the definitions seem to make less and less sense,
and take longer for me to get through. I end up circling words in those. And I look up
those words. And I draw more circles. And more circles. And the circles multiply and
spread like mould, and I sit among them, pencil in hand, more confused than when I
started.

Iris, what was the use of explaining anything to you? Fortunate gir
I have a girl. Maybe in another life, I have this girl. And grandchildren. And
I’ve retired from being a secretary working for a big comp
* Sri had a daughter. From the villagers I’d talked to, I knew the story all too well. She
never saw her daughter grow up because she watched me grow up – a spoilt
Singaporean-Chinese girl she’d had to tend to in her own daughter’s stead. I wanted
to ask her about her husband too. Was he still alive? How was their relationship? How
often did they see each other? Where did he live?
I didn’t. The questions felt a little too personal – too heavy a load for the
slender thread of communication we’d just established. I was just about to continue
asking her about her daughter. I was going to ask her name.

To my surprise, she cut me off with a question of her own. We really were
connecting! Are you going to move back to Singapore, she asked?

* She’d just opened her big mouth to ask another question, and I couldn’t bear it
anymore. So I asked the first thing that came to mind.

It took her so long to reply that I thought that she’d decided not to answer. At
first, I felt relieved. This whole exchange had left me exhausted, and I began to think
about what other tasks needed doing before I had to start the preparations for dinner.
Then she answered.
I don’t think so, she said. I’m probably going to stay in America. (So it was
America.) She wanted to teach at a university, and there were more opportunities to
do so over there. She fell quiet again. Don’t tell my parents or my grandmother, she
said. I haven’t told them yet.

I wondered briefly why she didn’t want her family to know. But then another
thought popped into my head. If the woman next door could see the world, why
couldn’t I? Was this opportunity knocking at my door?

When I told Sri I wasn’t moving back to Singapore, she lapsed into silence. Had I
saddened her? Angered her? I couldn’t tell. Her eyes fixed themselves on my cup,
now almost empty of tea, and her age-spotted forehead wrinkled into a patchy brown mountain range of thoughtful valleys and ridges.

Do you want more tea, she asked. I wondered if I’d offended her in any way. Maybe I shouldn’t have told her to keep my decision to stay in America a secret. Shaking my head, I stood up. No, it’s all right. I have to read some more anyway.

As I was heading through the door, she called me back.

Miss Iris?
Yes, I asked.

What if I went with you to America?

* I had to ask. I had to try. What did I have left here? What if I went to America and worked for you? I could cook and clean and take care of you, like I did when you were little. And if you ever started a family, I could take care of them as well. I could raise your children just like I raised you.

* I was the daughter that she’d raised. She was the mother who took care of me. How did I think that connection could be severed so easily? Not a blood kinship, but one of sweat and tears and time. Brushing my hair, playing hide-and-seek with me. Singing me lullabies and telling me bedtime stories that drowsed me into sleep. Those words lingered on as unintelligible sounds in my memory until I learned the language that imbued them with new meaning. And when my parents forbade her from speaking to me for fear that I’d mix too much Indonesian in with my English and Mandarin, she would stroke my forehead and hum softly. I’d convinced myself that Sri was the one who scared the nightmares away. I made her put me to sleep this way until I turned eight.

Now, of course she wanted to come to America with me. To be my servant-mother and servant-grandmother to my young. Of course.

I shuddered. I didn’t want this life anymore. Even if it was touching in a sick way. Wasn’t this part of the reason why I didn’t want to come back? Why I wanted to stay in the land of the free? Where I was free to toast my own bread and roast my own chickens; to mop my own floors and to keep the clean underwear crumpled in a drawer because who the hell could be bothered to fold underwear?

* In America, with Iris, I could have an easy life. Light household chores, simple meal preparation. In America, with Iris, I could start anew. The girl could be annoying, but nowhere near as fussy as the rest of her family. In fact, she was positively a pushover since she went away to university. Though of course, I would never take advantage of her like that. But Iris would let me have some freedom. Iris would let me go out and experience life in America. Iris would let me have one day a week off. Iris would let me read magazines and whatever I wanted. Maybe I could even learn English.

* She looked at me with such hope in her eyes, a washed out blackish blue, the familiar colour of old age. I knew I had to say no.

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Well, I wouldn’t say no directly. You’d be lonely there, I’d tell her. Nobody speaks your language. Nobody hangs out in roadside stalls watching TV together and drinking endless coffees. Everyone keeps to themself and you begin to want to do the same. Prices are never negotiable because haggling requires communicating. They come in faded print on tiny stickers you have to hunt for. It snows in winter and the trees look like they’ve passed on into the next world. It’s so cold, you’ll feel like following them.

*I

I will run away with Iris and escape that dreadful future. I don’t want to live my days shuffling between these rooms, cooking and cleaning and taking care of a stingy old hag. And when I can’t shuffle fast enough, and my back is too bent, and my eyes are too dim, I don’t want to be retired and sent back home. What waits for me there? An endless trickle of greedy relatives who will wheedle my earnings from me. And a mat in the corner of a nephew’s house where my existence will be barely tolerated.

I don’t want it. I’m not over yet. There’s so much I have to do.