



WOMEN'S CREATIVE MENTORSHIP ANTHOLOGY



LA TUTORÍA CREATIVA DE LAS MUJERES: UNA ANTOLOGÍA



IL TUTORAGGIO CREATIVO DELLE DONNE: UN'ANTOLOGIA

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FOREWORD

The feminist writer Mary Beard opens her book *Women and Power* with a discussion of Homer's *Odyssey*: "I want to start very near the beginning of the tradition of Western literature, and its first recorded example of a man telling a woman to 'shut up'; telling her that her voice was not to be heard in public." The International Writing Program's Women's Creative Mentorship Project is one effort inside contemporary Western literature aiming to work directly against that kind of silencing, doing what it can to bring as yet unheard female perspectives into the global public square. The project was born out of the refusal of the notion that some stories, some places, some people, some women, need not speak out, need not share their words. This anthology is the public voice of 20 women with stories to tell.

The sixteen mentees selected to participate in the Women's Creative Mentorship Project, whose work is included herein, showed relentless devotion to cultivating the craft and practice of creative writing; their mentors, highly accomplished women writers from Kenya, Botswana, South Africa, Mauritius, Somalia/Italy/Australia, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina, guided them with prowess, candor, and generosity. Their collective work, through the course of this project and in their continuing creative lives, reflects their belief about literature: that it is necessary for all people.

When I think about these writers, each with the talent and will to pursue a life in storytelling, Rebecca Solnit's words come to mind: "The struggle to find a poetry in which your survival rather than your defeat is celebrated, perhaps to find your own voice to insist upon that, or to at least find a way to survive amidst an ethos that relishes your erasures and failures, is work that many and perhaps most young women have to do." This project and this anthology exist as resistance to erasure. I ask you to consider the work of these women as I did during the time we spent together: with awe.

Cate Dicharry
Iowa City, March 2020

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WCM was in part modeled on the mentoring program Diane Zinna put together for the Associated Writers & Writing Programs (AWP); we are grateful for her counsel in developing it.

And finally: arts administrator and novelist Cate Dicharry, thank you for literally everything. Without Cate, the project wouldn't have gotten underway, the grant would not have been written, the roster and programs would not have been organized, the mentees' texts would not have been finetuned and re-finetuned, the volume wouldn't have been introduced ... hers was the most devoted of mentorships.

ARGENTINA

Misterio cirílico

María Sonia Cristoff

Hay una escena de mi infancia que transcurre más o menos así: mi madre lava los platos, yo los seco. Charlamos. Lo pasamos bien. Mi mamá trabaja en un colegio, y muy activamente, con lo cual la cocina es uno de los pocos lugares en los que la puedo encontrar más o menos a solas y tranquila. Hablamos de libros y de lo que sea. Somos compinches. Después, con los años, los psicoanalistas me dirán que estuvo mal ser compinches, pero la verdad es que a mí me encantaba y, además, en esta noche de la que hablo yo todavía ni sabía que existían los psicoanalistas. Tendría entonces unos siete, ocho años, y vivía en un pueblo patagónico. En la escena, entonces, seco los platos, los vasos, las fuentes. De pronto, inusualmente, una tabla de cortar frutas se me resbala de las manos y se estrella contra el suelo. Es una de esas tablas que tienen madera en la base y una especie de mosaico en la parte superior, como para que los líquidos frutales no se impregnen. Lo que estalla, evidentemente, es el mosaico. Tenía dibujados unos cítricos horrendos, de trazo burdo, lo último que hacemos es lamentarlo. Siguiendo advertencia de mi madre, junto los fragmentos astillados con unos guantes de jardinería, después levanto la tabla y ahí, al darla vuelta, veo que, pegada en la superficie donde había estado el mosaico, hay una página escrita. Primero pienso que estoy soñando: ya por entonces era adicta a la lectura y por un momento se me aparece un mundo en el que las páginas de los libros se desperdigan para corporizarse en los lugares menos pensados. Miro otra vez, atónita, paso el dedo por la superficie. Es una página manuscrita, sí, una página que alguien garabateó y pegó en la madera y ocultó bajo el mosaico. Y no solo eso, sino está escrita en un idioma que no entiendo y que, dirá después mi padre, es ruso. Mi padre tiene legitimidad para asegurarlo, porque él, como sus padres, mis abuelos, habla búlgaro a la perfección. Pero no tiene ganas o valor o curiosidad como para traducirlo. Ni siquiera para intentarlo. Pasan unas tres horas entre esa escena, que ocurre después de cenar, y la hora en la que ya todo indica que tengo que irme a la cama, que no puedo seguir dando más vueltas. Me acuerdo de que en esas tres

horas hice varios intentos, pero todos en vano: ni mi padre quiso traducirme el contenido de la página, ni mi madre me apoyó en la insistencia.

Me fui a dormir en total disidencia. Pocas veces me habían decepcionado tanto. Escribí unas líneas furibundas contra ambos en mi Diario íntimo y después, mientras miraba el techo, intentando en vano conciliar el sueño, asocié el hecho con otro bastante reciente que me había generado igual mezcla de impotencia, de rabia y de pena. La quema. La tarde en la que, en la chacra de mi abuelo, que quedaba en las afueras del pueblo, en medio de un valle, mi padre había quemado todas las revistas en caracteres cirílicos y colores variados, luminosos, que solían llegar desde Bulgaria. Me acuerdo de esos colores intensos, que yo adoraba, convirtiéndose en nada, en un negro vetusto, en papel carbonizado. La situación. Es por la situación, me decían, y no mucho más. Con el tiempo yo aprendí a asociar esos silencios, esas frases entrecortadas, esas páginas destruidas, con los rumores acerca de la fuga de presos políticos que había ocurrido hacía muy poco en ese mismo pueblo en el que yo vivía, una fuga que terminó con fusilamientos clandestinos en la Base militar y que preanunció la ola de muerte y violencia de la dictadura que por entonces se avecinaba. Pero esas asociaciones y sus notas al pie, igual que los psicoanalistas, vendrían después. Esa noche de la que hablo, en cambio, solo podía pensar en la página manuscrita que había encontrado adosada a la tabla. No solo en lo que diría esa letra en birome azul, sino en la cadena en la que esa página estaba inserta. Quién le había mandado el mensaje manuscrito a quién, eso me obsesionaba, porque estaba segura de que esa cadena no involucraba al alumno que le había regalado la tabla a mi madre para el día del maestro. ¿Un agente ruso a su contacto patagónico? ¿Un preso ruso a su amante? ¿Una amante rusa a su amante patagónica, que era una estanciera bien casada con un inglés que tomaba brandy al desayuno y odiaba todo lo que sonara a ruso? ¿Un anarquista de Moscú a otro en Punta Arenas? Porque si algo estaba claro es que ese mensaje había caído por error en nuestras manos. Y que, si de caídas hablamos, no habría aparecido frente a los ojos de nadie si no hubiera sido porque se me había resbalado la tabla que lo contenía, que lo escondía. Hubiese quedado para siempre vedado detrás de ese mosaico con un dibujo de cítricos horribles hasta que un día, hartos del diseño o de las tablas ya muy percutidas, en mi casa la hubiéramos tirado a la basura para reemplazarla por otra cualquiera.

Y de hecho así quedó aquel mensaje, vedado. Al día siguiente, para mi consternación y espanto, lo que encontré no era, como pensaba, un frente paterno adverso que me obligaría a buscar estrategias de persuasión más eficaces que las de la noche previa sino, directamente, la tabla lavada. Sin mosaico, claro, pero sin hoja manuscrita tampoco. Borrada, raspada, desaparecida. ¿Cómo? ¿Cuándo? ¿Por qué? Siempre con excusas para no tomar el desayuno, me dijeron, y minimizaron por completo el hallazgo del manuscrito. Siempre exagerando, dijeron también. Y apurate, dale, sobre todo apurate. Mientras me tocaban bocina desde el auto para llevarme al colegio, fui hasta la tabla como si me acercara a un cadáver, con respeto y con dolor, y vi que, a pesar de los raspados, que evidentemente habían sido hechos con una esponja de alambre, una mísera y cómplice esponja de cocina, en los tres o cuatro puntos donde había estado el pegamento quedaban, como adheridas, unas palabras sueltas, o restos de palabras sueltas, fantasmas de caracteres cirílicos hablándole a la nada. Mis horas de clase transcurrieron en un blanco total después de esa escena, me acuerdo, en un aturdimiento absoluto. Seguía pensando posibles combinaciones. Quién se lo había mandado a quién. Y, también, cómo se había producido ese error, cómo es que esa cadena se había cortado y había hecho que la página manuscrita fuera a parar a nuestras manos. Manos de censores, pensaba, y me volvía la rabia, ahora ya mezclada con vergüenza, porque me sentía cómplice de la destrucción. Si me hubiese ido a dormir con la tabla bajo la almohada, pensaba. Si hubiese salido corriendo en medio de la noche con la tabla bajo el anorak. Si hubiese llevado la tabla a alguno de esos programas nocturnos de la radio local. Las horas seguían pasando y las opciones en mi cabeza proliferando.

Casi al fin de esa mañana siguiente, mientras alguna maestra gesticulaba allá a lo lejos, pensé que ahí, no tan lejos, estaba el colegio en el que trabajaba mi madre y, por lo tanto, también el chico que le había regalado la tabla. Andrés. Mi madre había sido capaz de acordarse de su nombre, y también de decírmelo. Andrés B. Pensé, seguramente carcomida por la intriga irresuelta, que no había sido buena idea descartarlo del engranaje. Tal vez, se me ocurrió, alguien en su familia -su padre, alguna hermana mayor- había escrito ese mensaje en la hoja y estaba por mandarlo a otro alguien que vivía en Punta Arenas, o en Moscú, en la frontera con Chile, en la Antártida, quién sabe adónde, cuando la madre de Andrés, que también trabajaba mucho, se acordó de pronto que era el día del maestro y que no había comprado nada y entonces echó mano a la tabla sin saber que ahí debajo latía un mensaje oculto, crucial;

o tal vez el pobrecito Andrés, un chico un poco abandonado que no quiso llegar a la escuela sin regalo para el día de la maestra, agarró él mismo esa tabla con mosaico que justo vio ahí. Me escabullí en el último recreo, que yo sabía bien cómo hacerlo, y fui a buscarlo. Espié detrás de un vidrio hasta adivinar cuál era la cabecita de Andrés B. Cuando lo vi bajar las escaleras para irse a su casa, me presenté como la hija de MT y, como mi mamá era especialmente querida entre sus alumnos, aproveché esas influencias y me hice invitar a almorzar. La madre ocupada no estaba, pero sí una hermana mayor que nos sirvió unos fideos pegoteados. Ese descubrimiento de una hermana mayor me aceleró el ritmo de la sangre, me indicó que una de mis hipótesis podía ser la cierta, pero al final de la tarde, después de haber comido todo lo que me ofrecieron y de haber participado de juegos de un infantilismo bobo, tuve que asumir que no había nada en la pista de Andrés B. Tampoco en ninguna de las otras que seguí en esos días aciagos: ni en la dueña del local en el que la hermana de Andrés había comprado la tabla, ni en el ruso que arreglaba relojes en esa callecita que estaba a la salida del pueblo, ni en las rusas que cruzaban la plaza y cobraban por sexo, ni siquiera en aquel pariente lejano al que todos en mi casa tildaban de comunista. Nadie, nada. Todas las noches, antes de dormirme, pensaba cuál era la trama que se había desarmado por la desaparición de ese mensaje: si un amor había quedado trunco por ese malentendido, si un nuevo orden mundial se había trastocado para siempre, si un secreto atómico había perdido la clave fundamental, si una fortuna enterrada había terminado consumida por gusanos, si un par de gemelos separados al nacer no había logrado jamás entender de dónde venía esa extraña falta o esa súbita presencia que los asaltaba de pronto, si algún esquilador de porte raro no había llegado nunca a saber que su bisabuelo le había cortado los bigotes a un zar, si el dato para localizar la mítica Ciudad de los Césares se había perdido ahora sí irremediablemente, si los artistas que planeaban fundar una colonia libertaria habían terminado escribiendo informes oficiales. Y así. Cada noche se me ocurría una derivación diferente.

Creo que a esa hoja borroneada le debo mi pulsión literaria, el hábito de estar siempre elucubrando otras derivaciones posibles de las cosas, otras facetas de los seres. Y creo que a esa hoja le debo también mi extraña pasión por los manuscritos. No hablo solamente de los encontrados en circunstancias estrambóticas sino de los manuscritos corrientes, los que rondan toda práctica literaria, como si en el fondo sospechara que en alguno de ellos encontraré aquellas frases vedadas. Así es que me he

convertido en lectora adicta de esos materiales frente a los cuales muchos de mis amigos directamente huyen espantados. Durante muchos años leí manuscritos para redactar informes editoriales, para premios literarios, para personas recién jubiladas que no soportaban el abismo del tiempo libre, para grupos que querían ejercitarse en la práctica de dar a leer lo suyo pero también de escuchar a otros, para amigos, para parientes, para amigos de amigos, para ricos que querían regalarle una autobiografía a sus nietos, para seguir la pista de estudiantes especialmente interesantes, para impulsar postulantes en un programa, para filtrarlos. Hice de la lectura de manuscritos una forma de ganarme la vida, y también, en paralelo, una disciplina para vivirla: esa práctica de lectura como forma de afinar la percepción, la capacidad de escucha, de tolerancia; para foguear la curiosidad y la resistencia y, flanco nada menor, para ensayar estrategias de persuasión, porque en un punto todavía creo que, si hubiese sido más efectiva aquella noche, en el momento preciso del hallazgo, esa página nunca hubiese terminado destruida por una vil esponja de cocina y entonces yo me hubiese visto involucrada en una trama mucho más interesante que la dinámica pueblerina a la que me vi conminada durante una década más después de aquella noche. Ni Biblia ni Corán para mí: con las páginas de los manuscritos alcanza.

No soy bella

Ivania Cox

Estoy atada a una silla. Una cuerda une mi pecho al respaldo. La misma soga baja en forma vertical hasta llegar a la cadera, donde se vuelve horizontal, da vuelta y con un nuevo nudo sale entre mis piernas que están amarradas a las patas de la silla. Puedo mover los dedos de los pies y sentir el piso frío. También puedo girar levemente la cabeza, pero no mucho más. Podría tirarme de costado y arrastrarme hacia el ventanal que da al balcón. Pero prefiero no hacerlo.

Al principio se siente más la tensión, luego el cuerpo se acostumbra, los músculos ceden, las articulaciones se acomodan, el pecho aprende a respirar constreñido. El material de la soga es bastante suave, pero aun así deja marcas y es quizás lo que más me gusta. Una vez libre podré palpar en mi piel las hendiduras y los bordes, podré seguir las líneas con los dedos, y luego con el tiempo comprobar cómo van desapareciendo. La primera vez que experimenté algo parecido, estaba en el baño del trabajo; me bajé el pantalón y vi que tenía moretones en la parte interna de cada muslo. En la oficina entre computadoras, reportes, carpetas, hojas de cálculo, y caras largas mirando pantallas, tenía mi pequeño souvenir de un lugar mucho más interesante.

A esta hora estaría en mi trabajo, probablemente frente a la pantalla. En un rato más pediría una ensalada para el almuerzo y la comería en mi escritorio, tratando de estar lo más lejos posible del ruido del comedor, y las conversaciones sobre series de televisión, hijos o vacaciones. Esta actitud discreta es especialmente valorada por mis jefes. Es bueno no llamar mucho la atención para así poder irme antes del horario de salida o arreglar los encuentros amorosos de la noche en las horas muertas de la tarde oficinesca.

Ahora siento que me pica la punta de la nariz y por reflejo muevo los dedos de la mano que están atados del lado de atrás del respaldo. Trato de acercar la cara a mi hombro para rascarme pero el movimiento hace que presione mi cuello con la soga y un poco me ahorca. Así que decido quedarme quieta y respirar. El aire le hace bien al cerebro y al proceso de pensamiento que me revela cómo fue que acabé así desnuda, atada y amordazada.

*

Él jugaba con su voz al hablar así como un rato antes había hecho lo mismo con su guitarra en el escenario. Elena sentía que si hablaba sus palabras serían un ruido molesto, pero tampoco quería quedarse callada y correr el riesgo de desaparecer. En un momento sintió una corriente de aire que iba dirigida directamente hacia él y que le movía el pelo largo y castaño lentamente. Él hablaba de la vida y de aprovechar las oportunidades, a veces hay que saltar, le decía, ¿vos saltás? Te tirás, dijo, como a una pileta sólo que abajo no hay agua, hay vida y le dio un trago a su cerveza. Elena aprovechó para respirar. El brillo estaba de lado de él, en los ojos que miraban sin mostrar mucho interés, que se contradecían con cierta vehemencia en sus palabras.

Esa noche fueron a su casa, entraron a un living casi vacío excepto por un sillón y un tocadiscos. La llevó a una habitación en la que había una guitarra, dijo es una 57 y es mi último amor, quiero hacerte el amor a vos y a ella. Elena accedió. La guitarra estaba

apoyada en un mueble, Elena subió, apoyó sus rodillas en el mueble de madera. El siguió haciendo ajustes, le pidió que levantara la cara y el culo, ella cerró los ojos y obedeció. Percibió un cambio de luces, también un sonido de piel contra piel, pero él no la tocaba, le dolían las rodillas pero no dijo nada, el ruido continuó hasta que lo escuchó decir la puta madre y cuando abrió los ojos lo vio sentado en una silla mirándose el sexo. Elena estiró una pierna adormecida afuera del mueble para bajar, tratando de esquivar el cuello de la guitarra se resbaló y fue a dar al piso. Al caer se golpeó la cara con un atril, lo que le provocó un corte en el mentón. Al día siguiente y frente al espejo del baño de la oficina Elena se miró la cara, era a pesar de todo, una herida de la que sentía orgullosa.

*

Hoy mi partenaire trajo una soga cortada en tres partes, al final de cada una hizo un nudo y las ató de manera que si se suelta uno de los nudos los otros tres también se desatan. El entramado está sobre sobre mi pecho, y de allí salen las tres partes de la soga. Esta vez se trata de una cuerda de yute natural. Sus últimos experimentos tiñendo las sogas de rojo no resultaron muy bien. Imagino que habrá usado las ollas viejas de su madre. Mi partenaire vive con su madre y antes de vernos para tener sexo o ir a sus

putifiestas come fideos que ella le prepara. Imagino a la sexagenaria entrando a la habitación y encontrándose con la colección de sogas, y las fotos de mujeres desnudas atadas. Ella no sabe nada, dice él siempre que le pregunto. Pero hoy no hablamos de eso, hoy no puedo hablar. El ángulo de visión me alcanza para ver dos paredes de mi departamento y la ventana que da al balcón. Frente a mí está el estante, sobre él están las fotos. Hay una imagen en blanco y negro de una playa con palmeras. El resto son fotos familiares, en una estamos mis padres y yo el día de mi graduación de la Facultad de Ciencias Económicas. Era diciembre y hacía mucho calor. Ese día era más fácil fingir alegría que dar explicaciones. Sí, me aliviaba no tener que madrugar para cursar, ni estudiar por las noches, ni rendir exámenes, pero aparte de eso, nada sumaba realmente a mi felicidad. En la facultad había una creencia de que si entrabas por la puerta del centro nunca te graduabas. Mil veces entré por esa puerta desafiando la superstición, porque muy pronto en la vida tuve el deseo de tentar la suerte.

Al día siguiente en el trabajo compraron empanadas para festejar, el jefe hizo el brindis e intentó hacer un chiste diciendo que a partir de ahora no podría pedirle más días de estudio. Gerardo de Finanzas me dijo que tendría que hacer pronto un posgrado, porque hoy en día cualquiera tenía una licenciatura, Celeste de Recursos Humanos preguntó si me iba ir de viaje, Gabriel de Ventas me aconsejó en voz baja buscar lo más pronto posible un trabajo mejor, Caro de Administración me preguntó si me iba a mudar con mi novio o casar o algo así. Dos de cuatro. Dejé ese trabajo al poco tiempo. Al principio sentí alivio, después me di cuenta de que la oficina nueva no era en mucho diferente a la anterior. Era Constanza en lugar de Celeste en Recursos Humanos, Germán en ventas y Cari en Administración. Y yo con el tiempo dejé de ser la nueva, y la más joven, para convertirme en una más.

Y me fui a vivir con un hombre. Convivimos ocho años en los que pasamos del amor romántico a la anhedonia. Una noche volvíamos por la autopista de noche, yo manejaba, él dormía en el asiento del acompañante, de pronto vi los carteles al costado. Al tomar la

curva me desconecté, tenía las manos sobre el volante pero no guiaba, el auto se fue hacia la banquina y si bien no aceleré, tampoco llegué a pisar el freno, entonces el auto se detuvo con un golpe no muy fuerte. Creo que todas las veces que él se emborrachaba hasta caer en el fondo deseaba también morirse.

Después de separarnos empecé a salir por ahí, yo era un animal moribundo que olisqueaba por donde sentía que podía encontrar algo que comer.

*

En la sala de espera del sanatorio Elena hacía su lista mental: *El divorciado que lloraba. El vecino del quinto. El terapeuta de los cuencos tibetanos.* Mientras en su mano sostenía el número 47 D y miraba la pantalla digital esperando enterarse a dónde debía dirigirse para saber su destino. *El skater peruano. El del forro roto. El kinesiólogo casado. El mozo del bar. El padre de familia.* Los números parecían avanzar cada vez más lento. *El marido de la prima. El de sistemas. El arquitecto.* Por fin ve su número en la pantalla y va al puesto correspondiente. La empleada le pidió su credencial y luego se dio vuelta para buscar en una caja detrás de su escritorio. *El técnico del cable. El mozo del bar y la novia. El que robó 50 dólares. El primo del ex. El del balcón en Caballito, sin preservativo y sin consentimiento.*

Los días previos a hacerse un test Elena estaba con mucha angustia, de noche y con insomnio se imaginaba las peores cosas por venir. Sentada en el cubículo mientras esperaba el resultado sentía que le iba a salir un animal por la boca, que algo desagradable y baboso le apretaba la garganta, que iba a vomitar un sapo y este saldría dando saltos enloquecidos al ritmo en que latía su corazón.

La empleada se dio vuelta y le entregó un papel. Ese solo gesto era suficiente, nada de pedirle que esperara, nada de mandarla al sector de infectología, solo el sobre con el membrete del sanatorio, que dentro contenía el resultado tan esperado: negativo.

Y esa era la confirmación de que todo estaba bien, el mundo daba vueltas, la vida es esto se decía Elena, dios no existe, o si existe le caigo bien, pensó. Tenía ganas de correr por el medio de la calle, el corazón volvía a su lugar habitual, y latía con gracia y salud. Percibía la certeza de estar viva, así como de que algún día estaría muerta.

*

Shibari es el arte japonés de atar con cuerdas con fines eróticos. Mi partenaire dice que es muy vulgar pensar que los fines son solo eróticos o de satisfacción genital, que más bien son un medio para la

introspección, que cuando el cuerpo está sujetado e inmovilizado entonces ahí empieza la verdadera meditación, y que implica conectar el ser y el estar para acceder a niveles superiores de conciencia. Hace unas horas que estoy así, y puedo notar que las ideas vienen a mi mente con un ritmo lento, no sé si a un nivel más profundo, pero definitivamente dilatado. Del departamento de al lado llegan algunos sonidos, debe ser la hora en que la niñera va a buscar al chico al colegio, aún falta para que vengan los padres. Si para ese momento no he sido liberada, podría quizás intentar tirar algo contra la pared y llamar su atención. A ellos le alegraría verme así, desnuda y atada. Cuantas veces la gente casada repite mentalmente los peligros de la vida soltera solo para no caer en las tentaciones, ya sea de añorar o de buscar aventuras extramatrimoniales que los saquen del ahogo de la rutina. Mirala, lo menos que le podía pasar era terminar atada por un loco, diría la mujer, y él sin duda pensaría, esa cara de putita no era un vano. Se lo buscó, dirían ambos en coro y al mismo tiempo. Me tranquiliza pensar que va ser un gran final feliz para todos.

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El tipo le pedía que se la chupara. Desde que iban en el auto y mucho más insistentemente una vez que llegaron al hotel. El abogado con quien había tenido una reunión de trabajo era un hombre gordo y con la piel de la cara enrojecida. Durante la reunión ella notó que la camisa se le abría cerca del ombligo. El cuello del saco azul estaba cubierto de caspa. Elena acercó la cara al sexo. Notó un fuerte olor a sucio. Un rato antes, y por distraerse durante, pensó en que ese tipo existía también fuera de ese saco y camisa, que se desnudaba, que tenía pija, que alguien cogía con él, que alguien lo besaba y lo chupaba y le acariciaba la panza peluda. Y ahí surgió como un pensamiento recurrente, coger con el abogado, coger con el batracio, cogérselo. Sin razón, sin esperar nada a cambio, solo saltar al vacío que se formaba estómago. Caer, caer más.

Durante la reunión, se habló con entusiasmo sobre las operaciones financieras de la empresa. Pronosticaban ganar grandes cantidades de dinero y se felicitaban con mucha efusividad expresada en pequeños golpes en los hombros y brazos. Elena miraba desde un costado, afuera de todo, no solo porque ella trabajaba por un salario, sino que la camaradería que había entre ellos, era algo de lo que nunca podría participar. Nadie hace plata por bien, recordó Elena escuchar decir a su padre. Y esa frase

en cierta manera explicaba su vida, la de ella y su familia, en el departamento en Nuñez que los padres se habían esforzado en comprar, las vacaciones en Miramar que la familia esperaba todo el año, la ansiedad en las crisis, el miedo constante a perder. Muchas veces escuchó a su madre decirles a ella y al hermano, estudien una carrera, pero que sea buena, algo con números, eso es lo mejor.

En la entrevista que le tomaron a Elena antes de entrar a su trabajo, el jefe le preguntó que para ella qué era ser un buen contador, Elena respondió con seguridad: un amplio conocimiento de las leyes fiscales y gran capacidad analítica, ella se sentía conforme con su respuesta, hasta que él la interrumpió y le dijo que lo más importante era la confianza. Elena asintió, el jefe hizo una pausa y continuó explicándole.

- Si te pregunto cuanto es 2+2, me vas a contestar 4, ¿no es así? Alguien en quien yo confíe debería responder que el resultado de 2+2 es igual a lo que la empresa necesite que sea. ¿Entendés?

Ahora Elena solo quería ocuparse en chuparle los labios de bife crudo al abogado, sobarle la papada prominente, dejarse tocar por unas manos pequeñas con uñas crecidas. Por el asco, por amor al asco. Ella no era una puta, era una contadora pública de la Universidad de Buenos Aires. Una chica graduada de un colegio católico de Belgrano que frente a la pija sucia, debía probarse a sí misma que era capaz de hacerlo. Él le decía, mamita, mamita, qué rico me la chupás, ella abrió ojos, era una ocasión para contemplar y contemplarse desde afuera, como si su mirada estuviera en el techo de telo. El abogado tirado en la cama y ella sobre el él.

*

Veó mi cuerpo dividido por las sogas. Cada uno de los pechos está rodeado por dos partes de la cuerda, a uno le sienta mejor que al otro la atadura, la soga es un marco en el que se alza turgente, el otro, el más caído ha quedado aplastado. Después una doble cuerda me divide la cintura, como si la parte de arriba, la pensante se separara del sexo. En cierto momento siento que la cuerda podría cortar las partes y éstas caer al piso, y así mi cuerpo desarmado podría escapar. Me pregunto ¿cuál parte será capaz de huir primero?

Miro mis pies, dedos, tobillo, uñas, muslos. Son cada vez son más extraños. Los ojos se me cierran, los abro, mis pies siguen ahí.

*

Después de la primera copa de vino, Horacio le confesó que era casado y que su mujer vivía en Córdoba así como sus dos hijas adultas. Dijo que lo importante era ser realista, que nadie se satisfacía cien por ciento con una sola persona. Y que su mujer era feliz, a su manera.

- Y de mí ¿qué querés? preguntó Elena.

- Aún no sé ¿tenés novio?

- No.

- Deberías.

Fueron a su departamento en un piso alto cerca de Libertador. Él le ofreció un trago y después la llevó a un vestidor. Abrió un placard en el que había batas de seda, vestidos de noche y varios pares de zapatos de tacón alto.

- Elegí lo que quieras.

- No quiero ponerme ropa usada por otras mujeres.

- No es para vos, es para mí.

Era un hombre que evidentemente cuidaba su cuerpo. Elena adivinaba unos pectorales trabajados debajo del vello canoso en el pecho. Tenía un pene largo y grueso, que le costó acomodar en la bombacha de encaje.

- Decime Luli o Juli, Juliana, decime Romina, decime Pili, Pilar, Tini, mientras le hacía sexo oral. Esto es todo lo que puedo hacer con vos, dijo un rato después. Por eso me parece mejor que tengas novio. Igual creo que nos vamos a divertir. En ese cajón hay algo para vos. Elena abrió el cajón, dentro había un bolso de diseñador.

- ¿Te gusta?

- Sí, Bebi.

- Ahora podés volver a decirme Horacio.

*

Hago movimientos con la boca y la lengua tratando de librarme de la mordaza. La saliva mojó el pañuelo y me molesta bastante. Muevo un poco la cabeza pero siento otra vez la presión de la cuerda que me aprieta el cuello. Si lograra estirarme hasta el hombro podría correr el pañuelo y hacer que se deslice por el mentón. Pero no llego. Trato de alcanzar una de las cuerdas más altas que ata mi pecho, y tras varios intentos logro correr el pañuelo. Ahora tengo mi boca libre, tengo voz. Podría gritar hasta que me encuentren. También podría hablarme. Decirme cosas con dulzura. No vas a estar atada para siempre. Debería cantarme una canción hasta dormir. Estrellita ¿dónde estás? Siento ganas de hacer pis. Estrellita me pregunto qué serás. Esto me pasa drato y aunque trato de distraerme cada vez es más difícil. Estrellita, estrellita. No sé qué hora es pero la luz aún entra por la ventana. Estrellita dónde estás.

Una vida posible

Jimena Repetto

Ana le dice a Ludo que van a ir igual, pero Ludo está encerrado en su habitación llorando. Ana golpea y golpea desde afuera y no pueden hacer nada. Ni él, ni ella. Hay cosas contra las que no se hace. Se espera. Nada más. A veces se espera a que todo lo que pasa, pase. Ludo llora. Ana se sienta contra la puerta. Como si pudiera así sostener su peso. El peso de lo que no es. Flor, la novia de Gustavo, el ex marido de Ana, tuvo un ataque de pánico. Uno nuevo, oportuno. Uno que dejó a Ludo afuera del micro en el que se fueron sus compañeros de escuela de campamento. Es difícil de explicar, pero Ludo estaba con la mochila hecha y Gustavo tenía las bolsas de dormir y la carpa, e iban a salir cuando justo llamó la madre de Flor, o Flor. Una de las dos dijo: Flor no puede respirar y es el día de su cumpleaños. Justo el día de su cumpleaños se le cierra el pecho y siente que se está muriendo. Algo de eso entendió Ludo o le explicó Gustavo a Ana. A Ana no le importa la voluntad de llamar la atención de la novia de su ex marido. Le importa que su hijo es el que ahora está encerrado y llora. Una causa que en este momento para Ana es más importante que el hambre en el mundo.

A Ana le vibra el celular. Llega un mensaje de Javier. Javier es algo como su novio. O un amigo. Le pregunta si quiere que pase por su casa. Ana quiere, pero no contesta. En verdad lo que desea es que alguien le derrumbe esa puerta, que saque a Ludo, que arme la carpa y prenda la fogata. Ana está ida. Golpea. Ludo llora. El presente es un agujero donde nada existe salvo lo que podemos ver.

En una vida paralela, una vida que Ana nunca vivió, pero que podría haber vivido, trepa la montaña. Es joven, mucho más joven de lo que alguna vez fue la Ana que transita nuestro universo. Ana andinista tiene los cachetes rosados y un cuerpo vigoroso. Los músculos firmes, en su lugar. Es intrépida. Hoy pernocta en el refugio donde escucha historias que algunos cuentan como propias. Podrían considerarse mentiras o exageraciones. Pero son el simple placer del relato. Los refugios son construcciones solitarias, atractivas para los andinistas. El cansancio y el hambre desafían a Ana y sus amigos. Ana comparte latas, mantas, canciones. En esta vida, Ana conserva la alegría. Es extraño que

ese sentimiento, un poco infantil, un poco ingenuo, le sea parte. Sobre el comedor, de mesas y bancas de madera, duerme el encargado. Escucha lo que sucede mientras desea que los visitantes desciendan. Que le devuelvan su soledad. Ana toma un té. Mira hacia afuera, es verano. Hay tres gatos, una mula. No se imagina anciana. La vejez, siente, es la pérdida de la potencia. No está dispuesta a perder nada. Tiene en sus pies medias que Ron le prestó, aunque le quedan grandes. Ron es un alemán que la acompaña. En verdad es mitad alemán, mitad austríaco y vivió en los Alpes suizos. Sabe cazar y cuidar la naturaleza en su equilibrio justo. Escala porque no está preparado para ser padre. Nunca va a estarlo. Pero, a esta altura, a Ana le importa poco. El encargado, a través de las tablas del piso de su cuarto, acerca la cara, los ojos. Vigila cómo Ana canta, duerme y se abraza con Ron. Ana es observada. Ron lo sospecha. Así que, en el momento justo, le sugiere que se cubra, que sea pudorosa un rato. Ana lo obedece. En esta vida, sabe obedecer. Delega todas las decisiones. Abraza esa tranquilidad. Su pequeña certeza. Con la llegada de la mañana, Ron le dice a Ana que es momento de partir así que salen con las mochilas. Dejan atrás al encargado. Ascienden. Cerca de la cumbre, Ana le pregunta a Ron si imagina que el encargado sobrevivirá al próximo invierno. Si se abrigará con las medias que pierden los escaladores. Si habrá hecho algo en su vida más que cuidar el refugio. ¿Cómo llevará la soledad con la llegada de la nieve? ¿Recordará una vida diferente? Ron apenas responde, tensa las cuerdas. Dos o tres días después de hacer cumbre, Ana y Ron descienden. Ana se siente orgullosa de haberlo logrado. Ron, que conoce las montañas del sur porque es mitad alemán, mitad austríaco y vivió en los Alpes suizos, insiste en bajar por el sendero paralelo. Ana lo sigue. Cada paso presenta cierta dificultad. Se agarran de los arbustos. Clavan las zapatillas de escaladores, que tienen una suela que evita los accidentes. Pero los accidentes pasan y Ron se resbala y cae al vacío. A un vacío inmenso. Ana lidia con los helicópteros, la policía, los medios nacionales e internacionales, la familia y amigos de Ron. En esta vida posible, que quizás transcurre en un universo paralelo, Ana pierde la alegría, pasa a ser una persona cínica. Se victimiza a veces. Se encierra en los baños, se hace vegana, sale con un hombre divorciado que tiene un hijo que va a irse de campamento casi dos días y no puede tolerar ese abandono justo el día de su cumpleaños. Tiene un ataque de pánico y llama a su madre, que llama a su novio, que cancela el viaje con el hijo que tuvo con otra mujer. Odia el presente.

Flor odia el presente, se dice Ana. Ludo llora. Ana se para. Va a su habitación. Saca la ropa del ropero. Ludo, nos vamos, grita. Ludo, nos vamos. Ana pone su ropa en un bolso. No piensa bien cuánto de abrigo, cuánto de día, cuántos pares de medias. Se acuerda de la lista de campamento de Ludo y trata de empacar más o menos lo mismo. Dos mudas de ropa interior, un abrigo, un par extra de zapatillas. Ludo abre la puerta del baño, deja de llorar y observa la actitud de su madre. No sabe a dónde van, pero se van. Ludo es pequeño, frágil. Se limpia las lágrimas porque no entiende. Ludo no entiende. Tiene la manga del buzo llena de mocos.

Salen del edificio. ¿Vamos al campamento, mami?, pregunta Ludo. El micro ya se fue. El micro ya se fue, insiste. Ludo no sabe qué destino piensa Ana, pero se acomoda la mochila como un explorador. Se pone el gorro. Sabe que algo pasa y acelera. No protesta. La sigue. La sigue firme. Ana para un taxi y suben. Cuando escucha la dirección, Ludo le pregunta a su mamá si van a la casa de papá. Está enferma la novia de papi. ¿La vamos a visitar? Ana no sabe cuánta plata tiene encima, ni si lleva el celular, ni si hay algo más que se esté olvidando. ¿De qué me estoy olvidando?, repite. En su cabeza suena la vocecita de Ludo: el micro ya se fue. Y Ana está harta, agotada, exhausta de lo inevitable. En el furor, cuenta por dentro ovejas, colores, capitales. Se detiene en la injusticia de haber ganado el cargo docente para realizar de por vida un trabajo que detesta. Aunque tal vez solo ahora lo detesta porque tiene que tomar exámenes finales. Sabe que va a faltar sin previo aviso, para cumplir con la infancia de su hijo. Acaba de decidir eso: a la mierda con la facultad. Será que ahora es una irresponsable. Piensa en la beca en Berlín de Román, en lo desafortunado que es tener un amante que migra. En las ganas de ver a Javier, pero solo para hablar con él. En la voluntad de Lili, la niñera de Ludo, de sumarla a la red de mujeres que se prestan plata o se regalan plata para ser felices. En el amor en todas sus formas. El taxi se detiene y Ana paga. ¿Le llevamos un chocolate? pregunta Ludo. Y sigue hablando, pero Ana no lo escucha. Se paran en la puerta del edificio de Gustavo. Ludo toca el timbre. Sexto A. Gustavo baja algo preocupado. Está en pantalones cortos. Hace frío, dice. Lo hace saber. Hola papi, lo abraza Ludo.

- Necesito las llaves del auto. El auto.

- ¿Para qué?

- Es también mi auto.
- ¿Vamos al campamento, mami?
- Yo necesito el auto, Ana. Flor está medicada.
- ¿Está en el hospital, papá?
- No hijito, está conmigo en casa.
- ¿La puedo saludar?
- Necesito el auto.
- No, no se siente bien. Tiene que descansar un poco.
- Gustavo.
- No te puedo dar el auto.
- No me hagas ir a declarar que no me dejan entrar a mi auto. Porque te recuerdo que todavía tu auto es de los dos.
- ¿Vas a llamar a la policía, mami?
- ¿Estás loca?
- Tranquila, ma, no pasa nada.
- Es mi auto. Es mi auto también.
- Lo siento, Ana, pero no te lo puedo dar. Lo necesitamos por esta emergencia. Además, ¿no era que vos tenías que tomar finales en la facultad?
- Las llaves.
- Deberías cuidar más tu trabajo, Ana.

Ana junta aire. Recuerda las clases de kendo que tomó el último mes, esa especie de almendra que los médicos le encontraron en la pierna y no saben ni cómo afecta su salud pero la lleva de estudio en estudio, la solemnidad de la vida, el viento de primavera para controlar las emociones intensas, el llanto de Ludo a través de la puerta del baño. Revuelve en su cartera. Cae el lápiz de labios que le robó a la mujer de Javier, paquetes de caramelos, papelitos. Encuentra su celular. Se lo da a Ludo para que juegue un segundo. Gustavo está por cerrar la puerta y Ana, rápida como una gacela de los dibujitos de animé que mira su hijo, pone los dedos en el borde para evitarlo. Partime los dedos, piensa. Se acerca a Gustavo. Atrevete. Su cara, casi contra su cara. Lo que antes aproximó el amor, ahora la furia. Pese a la aparente calma, el orientalismo, la sapiencia de la cultura occidental y toda la tranquilidad que se supone que debemos asumir con los años, la lava de todos los volcanes de este mundo corre por las venas del mamífero que Ana es. Se transforma en ese oso blanco que sabe que, si va a morir, antes va a aplastar a quien porta el puñal que lo amenaza. Ahora es esa montaña dispuesta a tragarse a quien la desafíe. Traza su propio sendero. No teme decir algo incorrecto o empíricamente improbable, porque solo quiere que su hijo y ella escapen. Escapar de todo lo que sabe para llegar a todo lo que no. Se muerde los dientes y susurra para forzar a su ex marido a escucharla. Para que le preste atención esta vez.

- Te acabás de bajar de un micro frente a los padres de todos los compañeros de nuestro hijo porque tu novia que se jacta de ser muy vegana, anarquista y antinatalista hoy tuvo un ataque de dícese pánico. Supongamos que pánico. Justo, justo cuando vos te ibas dos días con nuestro hijo de excursión escolar. Entonces.

- ¿Te das cuenta de cómo estás frente a nuestro hijo?

- Sigo. Entonces, te juro por Dios que si vos no me das ese auto, yo voy a tener que hablar con el mismo juez que nos va a dividir los bienes que nunca dividimos, sobre cuáles son los argumentos por los cuales evitaste no asumir cuarenta y ocho horas de pura y absoluta paternidad.

Ludo observa cómo su mamá lo ata en el adaptador para niños del asiento trasero del auto. Ana sube y cierra la puerta. No se cierra así fuerte la puerta, dice Ludo. Ahora es ella la que mira a su hijo por el

espejo retrovisor. Se abrocha el cinturón de seguridad. Pone las manos en el volante y la atraviesa el poder de saber que maneja las cosas. Algo de vergüenza propia le genera haber ganado una discusión apelando a todos los argumentos en los que no cree o nada subsanan. Pero Gustavo siempre fue un conservador vestido a la última moda, piensa, con lo cual tampoco se sorprende tanto de que haya caído ante la amenaza. Ana olvida a Dios y la Ley y hace girar la llave. Arranca. Mami, ¿vos sabés manejar? Ana no contesta. ¿Vamos a alcanzar el micro? ¿A dónde vamos? El auto va. Avanza entre las calles del barrio de casas donde vive el padre de su hijo en un edificio moderno con camaritas de seguridad. Ana le pide a Ludo que mire las luces de la noche. Pequeños estallidos entre todo lo oscuro. La ganancia de la civilización sobre la barbarie. Ludo no entiende. Vamos a la playa, Ludo. Después de unas cuerdas de silencio, Ludo responde: Yo quería ir al campamento, mami. Ya sé, mi amor, pero el micro ya se fue. Vamos a la playa. ¿Está abierta la playa afuera del verano?

La ruta es un lugar seguro. La promesa de un destino. Habitar un destino. Habitar un proyecto. Habitar la maternidad. Lo incomprensible. Manejar. Ir hacia delante. La ruta, todo derecho. Con sus rayitas amarillas. La ruta y todo lo que la rodea. Ludo se queda dormido. Ana lo ve por el espejo retrovisor. Y avanza. Aunque algo de ella se quiebra. Por el miedo a perder el control. A no ser suficiente. Pero va. Esa es una garantía. Estar ahí.

- ¿Llegamos?

- No, falta. Estamos por la mitad. ¿Querés hacer pis?

Ana acompaña a Ludo a ese baño mugriento. Ludo hace pis. Pasa Ana y mientras está adentro, le pide a su hijo que le hable desde afuera, porque le da miedo dejarlo solo. Entonces Ludo le tararea la canción de apertura de su dibujito favorito, Sheishú contra los zombis galácticos.

Ana sale del baño. Pone las manos bajo el agua fría del grifo. Se moja la cara, le lava las manos a Ludo, que se seca con la manga. Están listos. Empezar un viaje es reconocer que estamos en un baño que no es nuestro. Ana se pinta los labios. Se mira con el color de otra. Ahora es la mujer de Javier que se fue de un día para el otro. Te queda lindo, ma, dice Ludo. Ana se siente bien. En el reflejo del espejo se ve el muñeco de Sheishú que Ludo acaba de sacar de su mochila. Ese cuerpo de plástico ridículo y dispuesto a la mordida de un perro. Ana, con el rosa robado en los labios, con toda la ruta que tiene atrás, no esquivo la sensación de tener los pies sosteniendo el peso de la Tierra. Los hombros erguidos, para atajar el impacto de la vida con el corte preciso de su espada. Lista para esquivar el golpe. Ana con Ludo. Uno al lado del otro. En guardia. ¿Vamos?, pregunta Ludo. Y Ana sabe que sí. Que van porque están lejos de lo que podría afectarlos. Lejos de lo que no eligieron y cerca. Cerca de lo que conocen. Se conocen.

El bosque tiene algo de frío. De frío y de vértigo porque los pinos y las araucarias se van muy para arriba. Arriba está el cielo. El cielo se nubla y llueve, a veces más de una vez por día. Pero después sale el sol. Los lagos en verano sirven para tirar piedras. Con puntería llegan lejos. Cada golpeteo de una piedrita en el agua genera una onda expansiva en forma de aureola que modifica todo el sistema. Es pequeña, pero está ahí y se da cuenta todo el lago. Esa piedra es tan como otra, pero distinta porque es la que acaba de caer. Ana ahora lo ve. El oso es blanco. Debería ser marrón, todo marrón, pero es blanco. De tan inmenso parece nieve. Es una montaña. El oso se acerca. Ana, la Ana que en esta vida no ahorra coraje, cree que lo mejor es matarlo. Para matar a un oso hay que lograr, primero, que se pare sobre sus dos patas traseras. Para eso hay que enfurecerlo. No es tarea fácil. Ana lleva días sin comer y podría comer un mes entero. ¿Por qué hace días que no come? Porque no caza. No ha cazado nada. De noche, duerme en una tienda hecha de ramas, piñas, hojas entrelazadas. A veces hace pozos en la tierra para dormir más tranquila. Cierra los ojos. Piensa en las constelaciones. Antes, hace una fogata. Acerca sus manos curtidas al fuego. Para que levanten temperatura. De tan dura que está su piel, casi tiene que tocar las llamas para sentir el calor. El calor de la combustión de los leños que partió con el hacha que lleva atada al cinturón. A la noche, se acuesta en las piedras y sueña con el oso. Y ahí está, frente a frente. Pero Stellita, su madre, le prohibió matar a cualquier animal. No hay que matar animales. Stellita antes la echó de la casa. Vivían juntas en una cabaña que había hecho Enrique. Enrique no es el padre biológico de Ana, pero Ana no lo sabe. En esta vida posible lo odia igual. Lo odia por todo lo que le cuesta odiar a

su padre en la vida real, en la que va en la ruta. En este universo en el que Ana nació en el bosque, Stellita se dio cuenta de que Ana tenía un romance con Isolda, la zapatera del pueblo. Y no se lo perdonó. Porque en Ana todavía estaba la posibilidad de casarse con un hombre bien posicionado, de salvarse, de salir de la miseria, del frío, de la naturaleza. Así que Stellita hizo que la hija se fuera para que aprenda. Para que se acerque al día a día de las mujeres solas. Y la hija ya casi había aprendido a sobrevivir cuando le llegó el hambre más grande del mundo. Así que ahí está. Con sus botas gastadas, que son el único recuerdo de su amante. Los recuerdos son fotografías que, si quedan expuestas al sol mucho tiempo, borran a los retratados del papel. Los diluyen. En esta vida, Ana nunca vio una cámara fotográfica ni se preocupa por la memoria, ni los recuerdos, ni el arte, ni la reproducción de la existencia, ni el sentido de la vida. Solo piensa en comer. En devorar a ese monstruo blanco y delicioso. ¿Cómo enfurecerlo? Ana se prepara para el ataque. Saca un cuchillo para enfrentar al oso. Un cuchillo que hizo ella golpeando la piedra contra la roca. Curtiendo las tiras de intestino de jabalí al fuego, para sostener el filo. Usando la técnica de los nudos que aprendió de Isolda. ¿Cómo hacer que una fiera nos muestre el punto exacto donde guarda su corazón? ¿Cómo hacer para que pierda su estabilidad? A Ana el hambre no la deja pensar del todo bien. El crujido del estómago le recuerda de a poco la voz de su madre, como una musiquita. La lleva a gritar, a correr hacia el oso, hacia toda esa montaña blanca que, al verla, se yergue. Tapa el sol, tapa las ramas, tapa todo lo que existe mientras Ana flexiona su brazo y luego lo extiende. La sangre brota. Ana se tiñe de rojo, de un rojo tan cálido como un vientre. De un rojo que es todo lo que existe porque nada se ve fuera de él. Un segundo antes de quitar el puñal, de poder escuchar el rugido del oso, Ana dobla las rodillas. O se le doblan solas, sin voluntad, por el peso que cae. Porque lo que muere, cae. Y cuando nosotros lo matamos, se nos cae encima. En esta vida, Ana muere aplastada por un oso. En la sucesión de segundos antes de cerrar los ojos, Ana ve a Isolda lustrar sus botas de leñador. Así como el día en el que se enamoró de ella.

En el bar de la estación de servicio un empleado baila cumbia. Baila solo, como si nadie más pudiera verlo. Ludo entra haciendo sonar las campanitas de la puerta. El chico, de unos veinte años, no las escucha. O no las quiere escuchar. La música tiene ese aire a radio del interior, con un ruido sucio y una melodía demasiado llevadera. Ana observa a Ludo que se pone a bailar. Para sí. Se deja llevar. Mueve los brazos para arriba y para abajo. Las caderas hacia los costados. Y Ana se mueve un poco también. Junta

alfajores, paquetes de caramelos, una gaseosa, una bolsa de papas fritas. Ve un aparador con CDs que ya nadie va a comprar. Agarra dos. Conjuntos musicales de hombres vestidos con chaquetas brillantes y pelo engominado.

El auto arranca. Ana pone uno de los CDs en el equipo. La música suena a todo volumen. Cumbia entrerriana. Ludo canta con ella. Te seguiré amando. Por siempre, por siempre, mi amor. Yo te amaré. Es una música de mierda, piensa Ana. Pero algo le gusta. Viene bien.

- Ma, ¿vos lo querés a papá?

- Lo quise. Lo quiero. O sea, lo quiero porque vos lo querés.

- ¿Pero cuando me tuvieron a mí, se querían?

- Queríamos tenerte.

- ¿Por qué?

- ¿Qué?

- ¿Por qué querían tenerme?

- Porque. Porque yo quería. Tu papá quería. Los dos queríamos. Porque hay cosas que no se explican, se sienten.

- ¿Querías que yo fuera tu hijo?

- Sí, eso. Yo quería ser tu mamá.

- ¿Y por qué nos vamos?

- Porque no llegamos al campamento. Y me dieron ganas de hacer un viaje con vos.

- No trajimos el protector.

- ¿Qué?

- El protector solar.

Es de noche, pero muy de noche. Ya no queda esa línea finita de atardecer. Ludo gira la cabeza con cada auto que pasa. Pasan muy rápido. Ana maneja a más de cien y no se acuerda cuándo fue la última vez que hizo eso. Cuando fue la última vez que se animó. Ma. ¿Sí? ¿Ese señor que vino el otro día es tu novio? No, es mi amigo. Ah. Ah. Flor es la novia de papá. Sí, es la novia de papá. ¿Flor va a tener un hermano mío? No sé. Ah. Ah. ¿Un día voy a tener un hermano de vos que sea mío? Ana ve hacia adelante. Sin dudar. Una sucesión de su pasado. El día de su casamiento. Las flores en la cabeza. Llegar tarde al registro civil. El arroz entre la ropa. Conocer a Gustavo. Pensar que nunca iban a poder proyectar nada juntos. Acostumbrarse. El olor de otra en él. Las sábanas y el ventilador. El escalón donde se besaron por primera vez. El banco donde se dejaron por primera vez. El llavero con las llaves de su casa. El test de embarazo. Los seis tests de embarazo. La panza que crece. Dormir separados. Dormir juntos, pero lejos. El mate con dos medialunas. Los domingos con el sol en la cara. La vereda de su casa juntos. Los ambientes con libros acumulados. Los gatos en la terraza de enfrente. Lo que él soñaba. Lo que ella soñaba. Lo que nunca soñaron compartido y así se dio.

- Ma, ¿qué es antimatalista? ¿que no mata a nadie?

- Sí, eso. Que no mata a nadie.

- Yo soy antimatalista entonces.

- Sí. Y un nene muy guapo.

- No, soy un zombi muy guapo. Pero soy guapo igual.

- Claro.

- Podemos tener un perro.

- ¿Si podemos tener un perro me estás preguntando? No sé. Sí. No. Un día podemos.

- Ma.

- ¿Qué?
- ¿Cómo te ataca el pánico?
- Bueno. Te deja quieto. Es algo que te deja quieto.
- Como una momia.
- Como una momia.
- Pobre Flor, ¿no?
- Sí, pobre.
- ¿Sabías que tiene el pelo violeta?
- No, no sabía.
- Un día, ¿me puedo teñir el pelo de violeta? Papá dice que sí.
- Un día.
- Mejor de rojo que es mi color favorito.
- Mejor.
- ¿Entonces puedo, ma?

En otra de sus vidas, An lleva una pollera escocesa fuera de moda. Nadie usa esas polleras, pero ella trabaja en una galería de arte entonces tiene que verse distinta. Para eso elige lo que nadie elegiría. Rescata ropa abandonada, evita la profusión de la comercialización de productos fabricados por grandes marcas de países del primer mundo en países del tercer mundo y logra una impronta diferencial en el universo de la moda. Nadie explota a nadie. Eso es ser socialmente astuta, ideológicamente progresista y económicamente autosustentable. An trabaja en la Tate Modern y se conmueve cada vez que entra al salón de Rothko. Todos esos plenos la hacen llorar. Esa es su garantía: llora ante lo hermoso y puede justificar sus lágrimas con palabras sofisticadas. ¿Hay algo más adorable en el universo del arte? Cuando cruza el puente que la lleva al museo, siente la felicidad de ingresar a un espacio perfecto. Si bien su

primer trabajo fue como vendedora en el Gift Shop de llaveros y bolsos con la marca distintiva del museo, fue escalando hasta ser ahora quien coordina la producción de las muestras. ¿Cómo escaló? Eso no importa, porque An ahora está ascendiendo literalmente. Desafía la fuerza de gravedad y sube por las escaleras para ver el río desde arriba. Le gusta hacer ejercicio y se ahorra la claustrofobia. Y eso es paradójico. Es paradójico porque no sabe por qué justo hoy quiso verlo. Y hoy una de las cuerdas que sostienen la escalera de diseño se suelta. El material no estaba preparado para soportar tanto peso, tantos años de cargar los cuerpos de los turistas bien alimentados que visitan ese espacio. La escalera, que alguna vez fue tapa de más de un suplemento de arquitectura, se derrumba. Cae en picada hacia un vacío. Cae con An y un turista argentino. Ana curadora de museos a nivel internacional se despierta después de la caída. La vienen a visitar sus amigos. La vienen a visitar sus padres. Pero, producto de los golpes, su nariz se partió junto con sus piernas, brazos, caderas y ahora su andar quedará deforme para siempre. ¿Entiende An que la belleza es un don superficial? No. No lo necesita. No lo necesita porque el médico que la opera se enamora de ella. Y ella de él. Es una resolución perfecta. An parte del hospital con una caminata errante, una cara curiosa, la necesidad de implantes dentales, la pérdida absoluta de todo encanto. Pero con el útero lleno de la niña que An y su médico concibieron en una camilla uno de los días en los que él le fue a llevar el parte médico. An abandona la vida de artista para dedicarse a la vida de madre. Y ahora usa las mismas polleras que antes, pero a tono con las otras madres que se visten con lo que encuentran mientras corren para llevar a sus hijos a inglés, natación, yoga, cocina, radio, taekwondo, música, danza jazz, arte, expresión corporal, fútbol, robótica, guitarra, ajedrez, computación o cual sea la disciplina que intuyan que los va a hacer exitosos o los va a rescatar de este mundo horrible. An no. No hace nada de eso. Porque los hijos de An en esta vida heredaron la belleza de la madre y el dinero del padre. Así que tanto esfuerzo no es necesario.

Cada tanto, Ana le toca el pie a Ludo. Se aferra. Enumera para sí todas las veces en las que no era ella la que manejaba, sino la acompañante. La que guiaba por el camino correcto. La que sostenía la charla. Incluso, si en ese momento tuviera una pareja comprometida, tal vez le tendría que decir por qué está haciendo lo que hace. A dónde va. Ana ya lo que quiere explicar nada a nadie. Se acuerda de haber viajado con Gustavo en esa ruta con Ludo bebé, dormido en una sillita. En su memoria se fija la secuencia en la que Gustavo, sin preguntar, salteaba de la playlist compartida las canciones que le gustaban a ella y

a él no. Porque no podía tolerar cinco minutos de algo que no fuera de su agrado. También se acuerda de otro viaje. Anterior. Bajar del auto, besarse tras un cactus y tomar una foto entre los cerros, como si en eso residiera la esencia del amor. Ana apenas baja la ventanilla y entra algo de viento. Somos las decisiones que tomamos, piensa. No más que eso. Un cúmulo. Apuestas. Perder para ganar. Arriesgarse. Hacer con miedo. Ana a veces se siente agotada. Son las diez de la noche y pone en internet videos de gatitos bebés, para reírse con su hijo. Por eso ahora Ludo insiste: Mami, ¿puedo mirar videos de gatitos en tu celular? Ana le dice que ahora no, que necesita el celular para guiarse en la ruta. Y Ludo le cuenta las cosas que hacen los gatitos y a él le dan gracia: toman leche y se salpican los bigotes, se caen en las bañaderas llenas de agua, atajan las hojas que salen de las impresoras, atrapan moscas, se asustan con el pan cuando salta de las tostadoras, duermen despatarrados con la panza al techo. En un tercer viaje, Gustavo le dijo a Ana que ella no sabía controlar a Ludo. Ludo era chiquito y estaba haciendo un capricho. Era la última noche después de pasar las fiestas en la Costa. Gustavo tenía que manejar porque a Ana la ruta le daba miedo. Y Ana no lograba que su hijo se durmiera. Un padre se supone que controla a un hijo, pero nadie te enseña cómo. Ni tampoco es eso del todo posible. Cerca de la una de la mañana, Gustavo iba al volante y le dijo a Ana: No estamos bien como pareja. Estamos bien como familia, pero mal como pareja. ¿Qué significa eso?, preguntó Ana. Vos tenés mucho trabajo, le dedicás demasiado. Y además estás encima de Ludo y a mí no me escuchás cuando te digo lo que necesito. ¿Qué necesitás? No sé, ir al cine, dormir bien y llegar descansado al trabajo, salir con mis amigos los viernes como antes, que no discutamos, sentirme cómodo. ¿Me amás?, le preguntó Ana. Claro que te amo, pero me falta todo eso. Esta vida no es la que quiero, sentenció Gustavo. Cuando llegaron al departamento, juntó sus cosas. Ludo dormía en la habitación de al lado. Siento que me voy a morir, dijo Ana. No, mi amor, no podés. Vos tenés un hijo y un trabajo al que cuidar. Vas a estar bien. Vos también, sos el papá, respondió Ana. Ya sé, dijo Gustavo, él va a entender. La vida a veces duele y él va a entender. ¿Pero no te duele esto a vos? Me duele, pero me alivia. Las dos cosas.

Ludo le toca la cabeza a su mamá. Le pregunta por qué está triste. Ana no sabe bien qué contestarle pero siente que tiene que decir algo sobre las emociones. Por qué estamos tristes. Estamos tristes cuando sentimos que hay un límite que atravesamos de algún modo, pero que no sabemos cómo sobrevivir del otro lado. O añoramos. Cuando perdemos, desde ya. Cuando perdemos y no ganamos nada a cambio.

En el momento en el que nos damos cuenta de que por más de que lo intentemos, el destino siempre nos va a poner frente a cosas que no decidimos. Que hay una parte de la batalla que está perdida. Y aunque esa dosis de azar a veces también juegue a nuestro favor, esa aparente ventaja no deja de ser la señal de que hay cosas que tan solo ocurren. Más allá de nosotros o nuestras voluntades.

Ana quisiera guardar dentro de ella esta imagen para siempre: con Ludo en la ruta. Ir es todo lo que la adultez nos enseña. La maternidad es dejar de ser hijos, para ir hacia nuestros hijos. De una u otra forma se trata de mirar en el espejo de adelante, el reflejo de atrás, para que el pasado no nos lleve puestos. Y prestar atención porque el movimiento es continuo. Perpetuo. Hacia el frente. Ana siente que en ese momento no le hace falta nada. Y ese caer que va por dentro tal vez solo sea derrumbar un palacio como garantía de que está levantando otro. Uno solo suyo, que sea refugio y no frontera. Nada más peligroso que estar cómodo, piensa Ana cuando se pone a llover. Y toca todos los botones del panel para encender el limpiaparabrisas. Lo logra. Ludo se ríe. Ana también y ya no sabe cuál era la música que escuchaba cuando estaba con Gustavo y él evitaba sus canciones. No se acuerda. Ahora está a cargo, con su hijo, en esa ruta. Y eso que suena es todo lo que quiere escuchar. Ludo aplaude.

- Mami, ¿este es tu auto ahora?

- Sí, ¿no ves que estoy manejando yo?

Ana mira a Ludo por el espejo. Está rodeado de migas de dulce y de salado. De todo lo que no se debería comer, pero se come en la infancia. En determinados momentos. En las fiestas. Es un bombón asesino. Un bombón bien latino. Eso dice la canción. Ana canta. Ludo también.

BOTSWANA

Selected Poems by Mandisa Mabuthoe

When the Call Comes

When the call comes
I think she will burn
her intuition will be numb
for she's been too coy
too coy with the tiny fires in her heart
too timid around her extraordinary fires
afraid of all the stillness fires want from her.

When the call comes
she might not even hear it
and surely she will burn.

Ailing Empress

She's been far away from home before
when she could swallow the distance
and wash it down with tea.

Most stretches seemed easier then
She was younger
maybe tougher
a little kinder to herself.

Her priorities have shifted
they've drawn lines around her desires
an internal private segregation
where phone sex is number twenty-nine on her list
after updates from the passport office
whatever she needs to pray for
paperwork
things to sign
baby having nightmares again.
Her list has become, *their* list.

More of her is aching for home now
more of home
they're all sick
no active fetus
just a numb dull aching in her belly
and guilt.
No potion for this in her kitchen

not enough ginger tea to heal her little growing family.

She wants to go home

Just until she's well enough to pray for her children

She wants to touch him again

She forgot how his skin feels at night

She wants to be his Empress again

But she's not fit to hold fort any more

She's holding the whole kingdom back

She's homesick.

Where I'm From

The air is thick and moaning for a cleansing
thick with the memory of blood
blood that was spilled here without remorse
tired of holding our fears in its belly
hosting our rituals to the strange gods we follow
strange gods in grey suits
thousands of us blind seekers
into giant gaping dark churches.

Where I'm from
the old way is dying
dying under the influence of a Jesus complex we don't understand
people are impatient with the will of the All Mighty
willing to make sacrifices of themselves.

Our ancestors don't have their backs to us yet where I'm from
patient ancients that they are
they are watching
watching us dig graves for our culture
burying all its artifacts
killing off all its teachers
hiding from the dreams they send us
hiding behind strange gods in dark churches
hiding in small dingy crowded bars playing loud aggressive music
hiding behind shiny desks, shiny hair and dull skin
sleeping meek and malleable under shiny make up and numb auras.

our dreams have lost their value in this new economy
where I'm from Jesus is a living threat to these grey gods
threatening to expose the fog they created
to clog up the atmosphere
to hide the real wisdom in the scriptures.

If only they knew that there are more of us like Him
where I'm from.

The Borders and The People

The people came to Africa with borders to create
big-budget blueprints for doctrines as their gates
spun around in an old sturdy machine
fabricating thin strands of something sweet
that scattered between our teeth
a new name we didn't even try to pronounce
we swallowed it quickly.

We didn't hear our spirits protesting
from underneath our tongues
they fed it to us till it fattened us up
till it altered our palettes and hardened our hearts.

Some of us are hardening further
slowly becoming robots for the people
forgetting we're *all* people
people trying to keep homes across these borders.

We're harvesting expensive foreign ideologies
keeping them warm
oiling the old machine
keeping it spinning
spinning our own stories into the distortion
thin sticky strands of something sweet we can't pronounce
we swallow quickly

dismissing remorse with a stamp of disapproval
on yet another passport
as we wait our turn to go home too.

We're just people after all
tiny soldiers all wearing the same resentments on our faces
fighting against one another
at the borders that the old machine did come here to create.

Lady

God is a gentleman
He has never forced Himself upon me
He doesn't need to touch things
He already knows how I feel.

I'm learning how to be a lady
perfect lady for my beloved
while I have time to perfect things
maybe grow wings and become wise.

I won't be perfect
I won't come close
He will be patient.

I'll try to be patient
with myself, my wisdom, my wings
and the crazy bitches that move shit between my head and my tongue
my patience will not last
neither will any tall building with His name on it
neither will my mortality.

Baptism of the Gifted Tribe

Restless, rebellious

hungry for a new cause

inciting harsh truths

and revelations.

Unbreakable principles will be tattooed

like barcodes on each seventh chakra.

They are not breakable this time

not with a fierce hammer

not with a big book

not with all the lies about God

heard amongst their people.

We're heading back to the gifted tribe,

the ancient ones of the pristine laws,

back to the ways of a simpler world,

a kingdom where pride is just a player in the cautionary stories we tell our children
about fearful tribes from desperate times.

These times are ours for dancing on the water

walking was never sufficient for us,

this time there will be drums and nyunga nyungas,

there will be chanting and chibuku,

our emperors will take off their clothes and submit to all the imagined perils of the river
to be cleansed from all the Christianing our ancestors endured.

Remedy for Grief

My mother liked to sugar coat our losses
soak all the limitations of our flesh in home-made ginger beer
barrels full of it for every heartbreak
lost race on sports day
failed exam
fight with friends
and sickness and death,
the sweeter the brew
the more you could count on it to help you forget.
People die, I can count on that
even my mother died like people do
before she taught me how to make her trusted remedy for grief.

Selected Poems by Mmakgosi Tau

Goo Rra Sebegu

Is home to scattered seeds that never want to be found.

A village where dreams don't make it out alive.

Rain won't wash the pale brown soil we picked

Up along the road. Girls play Safe

Unbothered about dusk hiding home.

Everyone knows each other's morning breath,

Fears and affairs. Dense Eucalyptus trees swallow

The innocent. Grime ridden grave diggers who wear

Brown overalls that should be yellow are easy to find.

Silence is a gift between winds that never stop wailing.

Lullabies are dragging hymns that put the dead to sleep.

Where I come from, death is not expensive. Night is a moon

In mourning and love never dies even when people do.

Goo Rra Sebegu - The village ward where I come from.

Safe: a game young girls play with wool.

Sex

At the age of five

A boy whispered the word 'sex'

Which I screamed at the top of my lungs.

The teacher's pet heard me and so did my teacher.

Next was my mother,

Fire like, sunset golden, face filled with fury

She says nothing, walks with her hands swinging wildly in rage

I duck, and dive, head bent so my eyes don't meet with my makers

The word 'sex' lingering on my mind like the never-ending howl of a lost dog.

I am the daughter of burnt orange volcanic lava

A remnant of matriarchs, conquerors

"Daughter, sex you cannot conquer," she said.

Healing

When your skin feels like it's being
Hammered with a million nails and
Seasoned with salt for the wolves.
I will blow breath to your sores and calm
The heat, kiss your pores and leave some
Healing balm on the bare flesh of your wounds.

My spirit will move
You to the altar of
New beginnings
On bended knee
Head bowed.
I will Christianize
Your soul to carry
Everything you are
To a better place.

My child when you feel
Like you are nothing to the world just know
That you are everything to your maker.
If, on coal dark nights you try too hard
To move the stars with prayer and they don't,
Remember that you are not God.
Remember to own your falls and wins.
Remember, you are human.

Stone Skipping

She tilts her body
Swings her arm to throw stones across the Boro River.
Her waters refuse them many times
before they lay beneath the Okavango
just another pile of rocks

Scattered trees of the Khwai
Once temples where lions prayed for Buffalo.
Time has seen death slide through these floodplains
The floodplains are now cemeteries
Where roses will not grow. Sometimes I feel the mist of God's
Breath suspended in the air to blow some beauty back into them again.

She tilts her body one more time and swings her arm to swish stones,
This time she throws towards the bandwagon
telling the scarred to forget the sting
Of coarse hands slithering over their skins
Telling them that they are too heavy
They drown against the strength of these raging waves.
The ones that built heavy clouds from God's tears that
won't fall anymore.
When she got home the sound of stones bouncing on water
still lingered in her mind. Stones were never meant to swim.

They Were Born to Be Wives

Danced on loins of lovers

Older than dragons. *Born ripe.*

They age with time like dark grapes.

Wives were born

For men that convinced them

That time was God and so were they.

Sir: An Ekphrasis Piece Inspired by a Still image from Section 82

Fear is called, 'Sir.'

We sold our women

Now they kneel on the

Hot sandy plains of pain

Pleading the mercy of man.

We clothed them with

Long loose skirts

Long shirts.

We scrubbed their skins

Until melanin weaned herself

From the breast of truth.

We buried their heads

They could smell

The dryness of the land.

We called it love.

We sold more girls than women

Gave them to whoever paid more.

Some of them died.

Here, where our women live

Fear is called, "Sir."

Relic

The last relic of an ancient age
Where men made women out of girls
Whose navels were wells of freedom.

Innocence bound these men
Unmoved by hostile sands
Burning the soles of their feet.

Her warm bread and half burnt
Black eyed beans kept them at her
Feet in worship.

Sweat sodden, thirsty for her waters
To answer their prayers for healing beauties
Breasts filled with aloe, honey and milk.

Her womb is confused over whose baby to birth
Her mind a cage for the seven-year-old in her that
Never got to shout, "Ntlo ntlo se thubege motsetsi o mo teng."

Her memories of folktales over bonfires do not belong to her.
But to men obsessed with tattooing their names on her love handles.

Ntlo ntlo se thubege motsetsi o mo teng: a Setswana phrase in an old game that young girls sing to ask the mud hut not to break as they mould it from clay on their feet for a nursing mother and her infant.

The Noise

Sometimes it reminds us that we are human.
That counting our blessings adds up to more
than the sound of coins we gathered during the day.

Life speaks and in silence we cannot hear it.
Life sings it sets its tune to the rising of the sun. It can
Be heard when the rooster claps the silence of dawn into day.

Life aloud
Heavy breathing of a mother that just gave birth.
Her son
His song
Skin moist with sweat as he works out
His first gut-wrenching sobs.
The first thing we hear when we are born is what
We spend the rest of our lives running away from.

Questions

If your mind has no voice
But a need that only one can meet.
What will you do?

If you want warm chocolate
Rubbed all over your skin.
What will you do?

If love looks you straight in
The eye and calls you by name.
What will you say?

If you meet the spirit of all
Things you tell no one about.
What will you say?

If you could love when its
Easy and when it's not.
Who would you love?

My friend, give like your heart knows no wounds.
Breathe like the ocean when heaviness hurts.
If you heal, love is only a question of when.

The Girl

I set out to trouble the meaning of Woman.

Wrestled with the sun to prove that I was more than warmth.

Wore a blue lit lamp on my head to contend the stars

Until my neck hurt and the weight of tire burnt me out.

I am the girl who fought the sun and won.

I only long to belong with women who carry my tears well.

COLOMBIA

Escribir con un bebé en la teta

Pilar Quintana

Mi cabeza está llena de ideas que podrían convertirse en cuentos o novelas. Siempre estoy pensando más de una, dándoles vueltas, imaginando sus posibilidades. Hago anotaciones en libretas. Tengo libretas llenas de premisas, planteamientos, personajes, universos, escaletas... Hago investigaciones en Google y en la vida. Dibujo diagramas y desarrollo cronologías detalladas.

Al tiempo que trabajo mentalmente en las muchas ideas siempre estoy concentrada escribiendo una, la que está más elaborada, la que en algún punto llegó a tener personajes y universos que parecen potables y una escaleta que por lo menos en abstracto se ve sólida. La escaleta es la lista de acciones narrativas que deben cumplirse para que ocurra la historia.

Cuando digo que estoy concentrada escribiendo quiero decir escribiendo párrafos a mano en una libreta dedicada a esa sola historia, en el bloc de notas de mi teléfono o en mi computador. Ensayo la voz narrativa, intento dar con el tono, trato de insuflarles vida a los personajes, de erigir un universo que parezca verdadero, de llegar a la escena donde por fin todo se me revela y cobra sentido.

La mayoría de las veces esto no ocurre. La mayoría de las veces la historia en la que trabajo no cuaja. Puedo escribir treinta o doscientas páginas. Puedo llevar dos años de trabajo. Y un día, de repente, frente a mis ojos, el universo se rompe en pedacitos como si fuera un panel de vidrio. O al personaje se le ven las costuras, el relleno de algodón. O la historia se estanca, resulta absurda, no dice nada, ya no me mueve o me doy cuenta de que podría ser espléndida, pero no contada por mí, de que ese tipo de historia es para otro escritor, alguien como Kurt Vonnegut o John le Carré.

Así que el destino más probable de casi todo lo que escribo es la basura. Después de veinte años de carrera lo tengo claro y me pongo a trabajar con esa conciencia. No hace más fácil la escritura, pero me evita dramas.

Siempre es un triunfo cuando una historia cuaja, cuando está claro que –bien o mal– la llevaré hasta el final.

Soy una escritora lenta. Las palabras salen a cuenta gotas. Me puedo demorar una semana en una página, dos días en un párrafo. Y es igual si la idea es de las que van a cuajar o de las que voy a botar.

Aunque soy lenta, en otro sentido escribir es para mí como correr.

La distancia más larga que he corrido de un tirón son catorce kilómetros. Me parece que escribiendo un cuento sufro como cuando corro diez kilómetros y que una novela es como entrenar para una maratón y luego correrla.

Un amigo que corre triatlones pero no es escritor sino lector dice que escribir una novela es muchísimo más difícil que correr una triatlón.

Cuando corro, sean tres kilómetros o catorce, sufro de principio a fin. Todo el tiempo estoy pensando "Yo para qué me metí en esto," "Lo voy a dejar ya" o "Estoy a punto de caer muerta." Solo al final de la carrera siento satisfacción y me parece que soy la atleta más consumada de todos los tiempos jamás.

Escribir representa para mí tal esfuerzo que desde hace un tiempo prefiero decir que no a los encargos –los artículos, las columnas de opinión– y dedicarme solo a lo que considero mi obra: las novelas, los cuentos, los guiones de cine, las obras de teatro, lo que escribiría aun si no me pagaran.

En estos tiempos, para ganar el dinero que necesito para vivir, antes que escribir prefiero enseñar: dar talleres, clínicas y asesorías de escritura creativa.

Yo tenía rituales de escritura.

La casa debía estar limpia y ordenada. Todo en silencio. Los habitantes dormidos.

Escribía a mano en hojas recicladas tamaño carta dobladas por la mitad con un tipo letra que solo yo entendía pero me salía rápido. Eso para el primer borrador.

Escribía el segundo borrador en un cuaderno rayado marca Norma de los que se usan en primaria, también a mano, pero con otro tipo de letra, una más grande y separada que resultaba legible para cualquiera.

El lapicero era un micropunta Pelikan preferiblemente de tinta negra aunque podía vivir con azul.

Luego lo pasaba todo al computador, en Word, a doble espacio, con fuente Times New Roman tamaño 12. Y ese era el tercer borrador.

Eso hasta que tuve un hijo.

Luego de que tuve a mi hijo escribí una novela en el celular.

Estaba embarazada cuando empecé a trabajar esa novela creyendo que se trataba de un cuento. Tuve algunos viajes de trabajo y en los aviones me dediqué a hacer la escaleta.

Me gusta trabajar en los aviones. No hay internet y de entrada miro con cara de pocos amigos a mi vecino de puesto para que no se le vaya a ocurrir hablarme.

Recuerdo que la escaleta final tenía veintipico acciones narrativas. Un cuento de veintipico páginas, pensé.

Mi hijo nació y esa escaleta quedó relegada.

Escribí un par de cuentos cortos cuyas escaletas también había trabajado en los aviones. Hay una foto que tomó mi esposo. Nuestro cuarto a oscuras, solo iluminado por el resplandor del portátil, y yo frente a la pantalla, muy concentrada, con un pequeño bebé en un cargador que me atravesaba el pecho.

También planeé y dicté un taller de escritura creativa. Pero en esa época, sobre todo, fui mamá: di teta, cambié pañales, limpié vómitos, me acurruqué en la cama durante horas y horas con un ser humano diminuto.

Un día volví a la escaleta que había dejado relegada y la pasé a otra libreta. En el proceso algunas acciones narrativas se convirtieron en párrafos y pude vislumbrar un tono, la naturaleza de la narradora, la índole del personaje, el universo como si fuera orgánico...

Habría podido seguir y no parar hasta terminarla. Olvidarme del mundo. Sumergirme en otro que no existía sino en las palabras. Pero ahí estaba ese hijo que me necesitaba, y tuve que dejarla.

Ahora mi bebé tenía ocho meses. Pasaba más tiempo despierto, gateaba, se erguía apoyado en los muebles: requería mi atención permanente. La escaleta, sin embargo, se resistía a ser abandonada. Ocupaba mi mente. Cada vez que entraba al estudio y veía la libreta cerrada sobre el escritorio me parecía que, atrapada ahí adentro, la escaleta me gritaba "Por favor rescátame y escribime."

Ahora mi casa nunca estaba limpia ni ordenada. No había silencio. Nadie dormía: mi bebé aún tomaba teta y por las noches se despertaba cada dos o tres horas.

Ni modo de escribir a mano. Me arrancaría el lapicero, me arrancaría las hojas, me arrancaría el cuaderno y se lo comería. Ni modo de escribir en el computador. Ya no cabía en el cargador, ya no se quedaba quieto, babearía el teclado, hundiría las teclas, golpearía la pantalla con sus juguetes.

Si por un milagro se distraía con otra cosa que no fuera yo era solo por un par de minutos que no me alcanzaban ni para elaborar una frase. Y si esos minutos llegaban a extenderse y yo lograba escribir algo más que una frase entonces era mejor que me preocupara porque seguro había encontrado algo para meterse en la boca, estaba decorando la sala con la tierra de las materas o jugando con el agua del inodoro.

Durante el día hacía una siesta de dos horas. Para quedarse dormido necesitaba estar pegado a mi teta. Cuando se profundizaba me soltaba y yo podía alejarme un poco de su cuerpo, solo un poco, nunca tanto como para irme de la cama y sentarme en el computador.

Pero –se me ocurrió– sí que podría quedarme acostada junto a él y escribir en el teléfono.

Cuatro meses después, escribiendo dos horas al día en el teléfono mientras mi hijo hacía la siesta, terminé el primer borrador.

Pasé las páginas del bloc de notas a mi computador y les puse mi formato preferido, ahora con fuente Georgia. Hacía poco un amigo escritor, que también es lento, me había dicho que con ese tipo de letra la escritura le estaba saliendo más rápido que con Times New Roman. “Haberlo sabido antes,” me dije muerta de risa.

El documento quedó de setenta y dos páginas. Lejos de las veintipico que había prefigurado en la escaleta. Yo sabía que al texto le faltaba trabajo y entonces supe que no era un cuento.

¡Había escrito una novela!

A menudo me pregunto cómo escriben las mujeres que tienen más hijos o menos privilegios que yo.

Yijhan tiene cuatro hijos. Dos adolescentes, una con autismo, y unos mellizos de la edad de mi hijo cuando escribí la novela en el teléfono. ¡Mellizos! Hace poco su marido se fracturó el codo y lo tuvieron que intervenir.

En cuatro meses Yijhan ha entregado 86 páginas.

La imagino frente al computador con un monigote trepando por su pierna, otro ya en su cabeza, el marido detrás con el brazo enyesado y medio torso inmovilizado tratando de cocinar con una sola mano, las hijas adolescentes a cada rato yendo a quejarse de algo, zapateando, alegando, y ella con los ojos fijos en la pantalla tratando de neutralizar el mundo de afuera para poder concentrarse.

Paula es madre soltera y su ex marido maltratador no es puntual con la pensión alimentaria ni con la parte de la custodia que le corresponde. Ella tiene que bandearse y proveerse sola.

En cuatro meses ha entregado 90 páginas.

La imagino de pie en la calle, muy temprano, mientras espera con su hijo la ruta que lo llevará al colegio, ella con la mirada en un punto distante, pensando. En su bicicleta, masculando las ideas, al tiempo que pedalea hacia el trabajo. Tecleando a toda velocidad en la oficina mientras cuida su espalda para que no la pille el jefe. Volviendo de noche al escrito, cansada, mientras su niño duerme. En los viajes de trabajo, un ratito en los aviones, en los hoteles, en los aeropuertos y los restaurantes.

Yijhan y Paula son mis pupilas en el Women's Creative Mentorship Program.

Hace dos años, como asesora de un proyecto del Ministerio de Cultura, visité todas las ferias regionales del libro buscando entender cuál era el estado de la escritura creativa en mi país.

En esos viajes, entre otras cosas, aprendí que en Colombia más mujeres se preparan como escritoras que hombres como escritores: más mujeres cursan el pregrado en creación literaria, las maestrías, las especializaciones, los diplomados, los talleres...

Una podría pensar que en Colombia hay más escritoras que escritores. No es así. El número de hombres que al año publican libros en Colombia es desproporcionadamente mayor que el de mujeres.

A menudo me pregunto por qué las mujeres que se preparan para ser escritoras no llegan a publicar, qué hace que se pierdan por el camino.

¿Es porque las discriminan? ¿Porque el machismo literario todavía es muy fuerte? ¿Porque ellas le dan prioridad a otra cosa? ¿A una carrera más segura y rentable? ¿Porque no pueden darle prioridad a la escritura? ¿Porque tienen hijos y no encuentran una habitación propia para escribir?

El Women's Creative Mentorship Program es una habitación propia para dos mujeres colombianas que de otra manera tal vez no la habrían conseguido ni habrían escrito ese número de páginas en cuatro meses.

Un amigo director de cine una vez me dijo que él creía que la incomodidad favorecía el trabajo creativo, esto era, que al artista le hacía bien crear en un ambiente desfavorable.

En Colombia tenemos un dicho: “Maluco también es bueno.”

Yo no estoy tan segura. No creo que por estar incómodas vayamos a escribir más o mejor.

Pero sí creo que los impedimentos ponen a prueba la escritura y que la mejor escritura –la verdadera, la necesaria– es la que se sobrepone a todo y brota incluso en las condiciones más adversas: con dos monigotes trepados encima de una, con la sensación de estar robándole horas al trabajo que paga las cuentas, con cansancio, con frío, con miedo, con dudas, con un bebé chupando la teta.

Si una tiene rituales de escritura es porque puede darse el lujo de tenerlos.

Hay una escena de *Jurassic Park* que se me quedó grabada cuando, veinteañera, la vi por primera vez.

El parque todavía no abre al público y llegan unos inspectores que deberán dar su aprobación. Los creadores tratan de convencerlos de que es un lugar seguro. Los dinosaurios no podrán reproducirse,

aseguran, pues el equipo científico ha conseguido manipularlos genéticamente para que todos sean hembras.

Uno de los inspectores, interpretado por el actor Jeff Goldblum, se muestra incrédulo:

“If there is one thing the history of evolution has taught us,” dice, “it's that life will not be contained. Life breaks free. It expands to new territories and crashes through barriers, painfully, maybe even dangerously.”

Cuando me piden un consejo para escritores aspirantes yo pienso en esa escena y doy uno impopular: que lo dejen, que se dediquen a otra cosa, que la escritura es una profesión difícil e ingrata y solo unos pocos llegan a vivir de ella, que si pueden ser felices haciendo tortillas, como abogados o en cualquier otro oficio mejor se pongan en ello.

Es impopular, pero yo creo que es el mejor consejo jamás.

Una se hace escritora en contra de lo que le dicta la propia lógica, de los deseos de los papás, de las advertencias de los mayores, de las consecuencias que pueda traer, del consejo de otro escritor.

Un escritor que se deja convencer de no ser escritor en realidad no es un escritor.

El inspector de *Jurassic Park* interpretado por Jeff Goldblum, para rematar, dice: “I'm simply saying that life finds a way.”

Mi yo veinteañera se aprendió de memoria esa cita porque sabía que un día la parafrasearía. Y aquí va:

Simplemente estoy diciendo que la escritura encuentra un camino.

Pero qué necesaria es la habitación propia.

Adentro

Yijhan Rentería

Así fue. A las seis con dos minutos llegó César, el otro nuevo en el equipo. Los tres restantes no estuvieron completos hasta cuarenta minutos después. Zarparon a las ocho luego de que Sánchez, justo en el último instante, les entregara efectivo y les hiciera firmar a toda prisa los formatos especiales que comprobaban la entrega del dinero. Quince minutos después, el sol brillaba espléndido y la llovizna había desaparecido de tajo, como controlada mediante un botón. Cuando giró hacia atrás, Belén vio cómo una línea definida y texturada marcaba sobre río el límite entre la zona soleada en la que ahora se movían y aquella donde continuaba lloviendo y que se alejaba como una foto de la que se toma distancia. Solo entonces, el viaje comenzaba realmente para ella. Durante el recorrido, de ocho horas gracias a un lancharo experto, llovía y escampaba de tramo en tramo, pero Belén no volvió a experimentar la sensación de esa primera transición que, en realidad, le anunciaba un cambio en ella misma. Las orillas dominadas por la poética de la carencia materia, sostenían decenas de pueblos. Algunos tan pequeños como seis casas separadas del agua sobre puntales de madera delgados semejando las patas de un zancudo. Al interior de muchas de esas casas una única bombilla permanecía encendida derramando su luz amarilla y lastimera en el interior. En un caserío tras otro se repetía la escena de niños y ancianos asomados a pequeñas ventanas mirando hacia el río. Conforme avanzaba el viaje río abajo y los intervalos secos se alumbraban con un sol más intenso, la vida saltaba de las riveras. Ocho o diez escolares caminaban hacia el muelle de un pueblo. Varias canoas se encontraban amarradas a troncos de árbol que enseñaban las raíces sobre el cauce; otras, encalladas en la arena resistían el embate del agua. Los niños descendían por escalones de barro con bordes redondeados y todavía resbalosos por la lluvia. Vestían blancas camisas colegiales de popelina combinadas con jardineras o pantalones de tela prensada azul claro. Caminaban descalzos, algunos cargaban bolsas plásticas de rayas en las que se advertía la forma de los zapatos o los llevaban desnudos en la mano. Abordaban con pasos firmes la canoa tambaleante que el último niño en subirse despegó de la arena apalancándose con un pie. Belén los observaba con la cabeza completamente girada hacia atrás cuando una niña de unos 11 años comenzó a remar contra la corriente, parecían irse para siempre de ese lugar de casas marcadas con siglas de grupos guerrilleros sobre las paredes frontales. Un par de horas más tarde se toparon con una

valla que, sobre logos estatales de gran tamaño, anunciaba la llegada a Puerto Grande. Lo único más grande que el letrero y el nombre del pueblo era el rico olor grasoso a pescado frito que confirmaba que desayunarían allí. Fueron atendidos ágilmente por cinco niñas en edad de secundaria y una cocinera cincuentona que mostraba sin pausa su sonrisa dorada; dos incrustaciones de oro le adornaban la cara de piel firme y oscura. El lugar estaba lleno de comensales, lancheros y viajeros que aprovechaban también para estirarse un poco o usar el baño mientras les servían el desayuno. A excepción del piso, marcado con huellas lodosas, el lugar era impecable; las tazas y cubiertos parecían recién lavados, las ollas colgaban como espejos de una pared de la cocina, y los manteles plásticos que cubrían las mesitas de madera estaban nuevos. Belén se sentó al lado de César, junto a la única ventana. Desde allí pudo comprobar que las casas coloridas, con tablas cuidadosamente pintadas al lado del letrero, no eran más que una fachada para los navegantes ingenuos del río. Detrás se ocultaban hileras serpenteantes de casitas idénticas a las del resto del recorrido, algunas, incluso, más estropeadas. Mientras comía el pescado frito con plátanos hervidos y café, Belén se preguntaba si la sonrisa perpetua de la mujer del restaurante no sería también una mentira.

Antes de regresar a la lancha le lanzó una cabeza de pescado a un perrito regordete que le meneaba la cola con gracia bajo la ventana. Desde una banca de maderos clavados al piso a la sombra de un árbol, un viejo que trataba de sintonizar la radio le recomendó a Belén que no le diera más comida, que por eso el animal estaba tan gordo, por recibir las sobras de tantos viajeros al día. Ella sonrió condescendiente mientras bajaba las escaleras de concreto mohoso del muelle.

Retomó su puesto en la primera fila, frente a César, el otro nuevo, quien viajaba apostado en un asiento alto dando la espalda al lanchero, aunque había más puestos libres. Resultaba incómodo para Belén viajar cara a cara con alguien que apenas conocía y que, además, la miraba desde cuarenta centímetros por encima de su cabeza. Se preguntaba si él habría leído, como ella, su manual del funcionario antes de zarpar o si seguiría la orden etérea de Potes, su jefe, de “dejarse guiar” por Arley, el más experimentado del equipo y consentido evidente Potes: durante los últimos tres días habían salido dos veces a comer juntos a la hora del almuerzo y se hacían chistes públicamente que solo ellos

podían comprender. Reían sacando a todos los demás de la escena. Belén recordó la risita descarada de Arley cuando Potes la presentó:

—Bueno, la señorita... —dijo mientras, mirando a Belén, levantaba las cejas a modo de pregunta.

—Belén Castro.

—Belén —dijo él dejándola sin apellido— y el compañero César trabajan desde hoy con nosotros. Espero que les colaboren en lo que más puedan. Este es un puesto de alta rotación —dijo volviendo la mirada hacia Cesar y Belén—, entra y sale gente por distintos motivos, así que mi recomendación es que hagan su trabajo sin apasionarse, sin meterse en problemas. Pasen sus informes a tiempo y no se tomen nada muy a pecho que uno aquí no sabe cuándo se va.

Belén lo escuchaba con los ojos fijos en su diastema y la gesticulación cortante de sus manos. A pesar de su aspecto cuidado, había algo en él que la repelía, una cuestión casi física la hacía desear tenerlo lejos en el espacio y el tiempo. Nuca esperó que en su primer día de trabajo la incitaran a no amar lo que hacía. Era todo lo contrario de lo que había aprendido durante dos años y nueve meses en Alemania. Su título de posgrado en ingeniería ambiental le alentaba los sueños, había regresado dos meses atrás y vio en el Instituto el escenario perfecto. Eso pensaba cuando se postuló al cargo luego de que su primera opción de trabajo en un centro de investigación universitario se le escapara de las manos. Nada de lo soñado se parecía a lo que acababa de oír de Potes. No habían nacido para moverse juntos, pensó Belén. Aun así, la entusiasmaba esta primera salida de campo, luego de tres días en el cargo de verificadora en terreno.

Mientras sentía la mirada inofensiva pero permanente de César prefirió pensar en otra cosa para distraerse un poco. Su mente la llevó a donde no hubiera querido ir. Pensó primero en cómo sería su experiencia en campo, las formas del terreno, el olor de los maderos frescos al sol y el verdor de los árboles pequeños recién sembrados. Luego, su cabeza le presentó una imagen de la caminata para llegar hasta la zona de tala. Presintió la picadura de los zancudos y el calor sofocante de la selva húmeda, plagada culebras escurridizas que huirían al sentir pasos humanos. Aún así, la idea de que pudieran

resguardarse en las ramas de árboles bajos para atacar le produjo una sensación de aire inyectado en su pecho. Experimentó una pequeña arritmia que comenzaba a menguar cuando dejó de pensar en serpientes para ocuparse de los “Esquemas de Seguridad Rural Armada.” Se escuchaba hablar de ellos en los pasillos del Instituto. Trabajaban como custodios de las multinacionales madereras que eran presididas a distancia por extranjeros, manejadas en Colombia por mestizos del interior y operadas en terreno por negros y contadas contrataciones indígenas. Se los habían descrito como hombres iletrados, sanguinarios, sin uso de razón más que para apretar gatillos y mutilar opositores. Entre las recomendaciones que le hicieron sobre cómo tratarlos, cuando era solo una aspirante al cargo, resaltaba la de hablarles en voz baja y con tono pausado en cualquier circunstancia. Mientras se lo contaban le pareció más ficción que realidad, pero ahora le quitaba el aire de respirar para ponerlo dentro de su tórax como un bloque denso de angustias.

La imagen de ancianos y niños de apariencia indefensa se mantuvo constante durante el trayecto. En varias ocasiones cruzó con ellos miradas largas y mutuamente interrogativas. ¿Sabrían quién era ella? ¿Sabrían lo que hacía? ¿Eran informantes de los Esquemas de Seguridad Rural Armada de las multinacionales? Sintió un escalofrío tremendo que no supo si atribuir a la brisa fuerte contra su ropa todavía húmeda bajo el impermeable o al nebuloso delirio de su cabeza.

La noche anterior al viaje, Belén organizó copias de los formatos de observación que ya para entonces había leído interesada. Un representante de cada una de las dos madereras que se proponían visitar los guiaría en la zona de tala, presentaría el plan de mitigación ambiental y mostraría los avances en reforestación y saneamiento de suelos. Con una de las empresas, debían corroborar las mejoras en la disposición de residuos, una tarea pendiente encontrada en un informe de visita anterior. Aunque se firmó un compromiso, el documento no estaba adjunto al informe y el verificador responsable ya no trabajaba para el Instituto.

Con la caída del día, el mundo entero parecía anaranjado y oro. El color de barro revuelto que las dragas mineras entregaban al río se ocultaba bajo el sol de las cuatro de la tarde, tan melancólico siempre. Belén pensó en la hora a la que habrían llegado si acaso hubieran salido a tiempo del muelle. La instrucción de Potes era estar en el puerto a las cinco y treinta, zarparían a las seis en punto. Diez horas de viaje río abajo, que era el tiempo estimado del viaje, debían iniciarse temprano. Cuando llegó a la hora acordada, en el puerto solo estaba Sánchez, el asistente de Potes. La saludó con cortesía. Llevaba puesta una capa negra de motociclista. Belén, un impermeable transparente que la cubría hasta la mitad de las pantorrillas, debajo vestía ropa de ejercicio y botas exploradoras. Una llovizna escarchada y pertinaz caía a esa hora y la visibilidad sobre el río no sobrepasaba los cien metros. Alcanzaba para distinguir las casas enclavadas en la orilla del frente; para ver alguna vegetación detrás de ellas que iba siendo lentamente devorada por el velo lechoso de las precipitaciones. Se sentó en el segundo escalón del puerto y abrió un paraguas que su papá le había entregado hacía unos minutos, cuando él mismo la acompañó hasta allí antes de irse a su trabajo, antes de decirle que tuviera cuidado, que no se desabrigara para evitar resfriarse y que, como era su primera salida de trabajo, abriera bien los ojos para aprender. Todas esas recomendaciones ya se las había hecho la noche anterior, esta vez solo olvidó repetirle que no llamara la atención, que como era tan bonita algún miliciano mañoso podía verla con malos ojos, que no se peinara mucho ni usara aretes. A Belén le causó risa entonces y también ahora, mientras esperaba. A su espalda comenzaban a escucharse las primeras motos, todavía sin la prisa del resto del día. Rugían parsimoniosas frente a iglesia que se alzaba tan rotunda mirando con desprecio el río a sus pies. Un olor a café recién hecho y frituras de maíz se propagaba lento por el espacio abierto. Belén se sentía cómoda respirando ese aire mojado y todavía fresco. La noche anterior se había acostado temiendo que el sol madrugara y los castigara durante tantas horas en lancha. Al ver la mañana, se sintió escuchada por el cosmos. Su cerebro calculaba cuántas horas de remo y natación a pulmón abierto le habían dado un tórax tan desarrollado al niño indígena que tripulaba una pequeña canoa, cargada de piñas casi hasta encima de sus pies, entonces, una mano se coló por debajo de su paraguas para pulsarle tímidamente el hombro derecho un par de veces. Era Sánchez ofreciéndole un café. Belén lo recibió avergonzada y agradecida.

—Usted se ve tan tranquila ahí, pero esta espera va para largo. Por eso le traje tinto.

—Muchas gracias. ¿Usted también va con nosotros?

—No. Yo los despacho y me voy para el Instituto. Esta gente siempre llega retrasadita, pensé que usted sabía. Antes de las seis no aparecerá nadie por acá.

El viaje seguía su curso y hacía más de una hora que el paisaje no ofrecía ninguna novedad. Entonces, todos en la embarcación se percataron de un grupo de muchachos que se batía en un duelo de fútbol sobre una cancha de arena a pocos metros del agua. Discutían sobre la validez de un gol mientras un voluntario se lanzaba a rescatar la pelota enredada en una maraña de ramas corriente abajo. Detrás, una mujer mayor sacaba a tirones la ropa del tendedero, con un ojo puesto en el juego de fútbol y la discusión. También Belén estaba embelesada en la disputa cuando los motores se apagaron y la lancha se movió con su último impulso hacia la orilla. Belén arrugó la cara, sofocada por los reflejos del agua. Lamentando todo el tiempo haber olvidado sus gafas oscuras. Desembarcó. Con las manos soportadas contra las asas de su morral, se giró lentamente de un lado a otro haciéndose una panorámica. A su derecha, cerca del muelle, un par de adolescentes acucilladas sobre una balsa lavaban lo que parecía ser los platos del almuerzo. Engrasados utensilios de plástico y vasos de metal de gran capacidad. A su izquierda, viajeros abordaban una canoa que llevaba adaptado un motor; se abrían lugar entre racimos amontonados de plátanos y neveras de poliestireno que, a juzgar por las moscas revoloteando alrededor, contenían pescado. Al frente se veían las escaleras de barro. Tras la voz de “llegamos” de Arley, todos comenzaron a subir. Belén miraba detenidamente las tuberías y basurales bajo las casas como tripas de animal avanzando hacia el río.

Se adentraron en el pueblo y de inmediato los deseos de dormir para trabajar al día siguiente de bañarse y tenderse fresca sobre la cama para desentumecer sus piernas parecieron anhelos románticos en la mente de Belén. Frente al hospedaje contratado por el Instituto, una caseta improvisada con tablones sin pulir y techo de zinc de segundo uso se estremecía por la vibración de la música vallenata que cuatro parlantes gigantescos lanzaban al aire. Alrededor de los parlantes, más de treinta personas se sentaban en sillas plásticas, bailaban y conversaban con gritos al oído. Por qué sentarse en medio del

ruido si lo que quieren es hablar, pensó Belén. Asumió que sobre las nueve de la noche la fiesta habría acabado y se dispuso a tolerar la felicidad de sus vecinos circunstanciales.

Dormirían en una casona con techos altos y piso de maderos gruesos, limpios y desgastados. Pasando el salón que los recibía y separadas por un pasillo estrecho se encontraban las habitaciones. Seis a cada costado de la casa. Las del ala izquierda, no tenían ventanas, una construcción contigua lo impedía. Las de la derecha, justo sobre la esquina, tenían ventanitas aseguradas con barrotes de madera de palma de chonta, resistentes al agua y la intemperie. En una de esas se quedaría Belén.

Al día siguiente, cuando se levantó, la fiesta continuaba, ahora con solo cuatro personas. El sonido inútilmente ecualizado se había filtrado sin pausa entre las juntas de las paredes durante la noche. Belén se sentía como un zombi disfrazado de explorador con su mochila a la espalda, sus zapatos de exteriores, cámara fotográfica al cuello y libreta de apuntes en el bolsillo de sus pantalones militares grises. Caminó hacia la sala, acondicionada como comedor y lobby. Arley estaba sentado viendo en el televisor las noticias de la mañana. Cruzaron los buenos días y después la casera la invitó a sentarse con un gesto amable de su brazo extendido señalando una silla. Sin decir más nada le sirvió el desayuno. Huevos revueltos, tostones de plátano y café. Ella aceptó los huevos y pidió que le cambiara los plátanos fritos por un par de bananos maduros. La mujer hizo el cambio de mala gana y con gesto de extrañeza. Mientras terminaba el café, sus otros compañeros de trabajo fueron llegando al comedor, ella les preguntó a qué horas salían a campo. La respuesta de Arley, que llevaba dos años en el instituto, la dejó pasmada.

—Nada de eso, la idea es que los madereros vengan a hablar con nosotros, ya los citamos.

—¿Y después van a mostrarnos la zona de tala?

— No, no... no me ha entendido, ellos nos dan los datos acá de una vez, ya se los pedimos. Acá llenamos los formatos y todo.

—Pero eso no es lo que dice el instructivo—dijo Belén asombrada, molesta.

—Uno hace los contactos por colaborar. Si lo que quiere es meterse al monte, hágale hija, como quiera —dijo Arley en un tono intermedio entre el reto y la burla.

—No le veo el problema. A eso vinimos ¿No?

Los otros tres compañeros siguieron la discusión aprobando con sus gestos la postura de Arley, se habían sentado de su lado en la mesa alargada y se pusieron de pie cuando él lo hizo. Era todo un alfa. César, a medias aguas entre uno y otro bando, al ver que Belén hacía ademanes de levantarse de la silla, propuso que esperaran a los madereros y después de hablar con ellos arreglaran la salida de campo. Belén estuvo de acuerdo. Solo los madereros podían guiarlos.

Los dos hombres llegaron juntos, aunque representaban a empresas distintas. Belén los había imaginado diferentes, con una presencia más imponente, más jóvenes y mejor equipados. En lugar de eso, eran un par de abuelos con aspecto agobiado que llevaban camisetas sin mangas, botas de PVC y un machete a la cintura. Obreros rasos, eso era seguro. Arley se adelantó para conversar con ellos antes de que se sentaran a la mesa con el resto del equipo. Belén sospechó que hacía arreglos de último minuto. Ya en la mesa, los hombres hablaron todo el tiempo mirando a Arley y, en menor medida a los otros varones del grupo. Belén no existía. Respondían titubeantes las preguntas explícitamente tomadas del formato de visita: *¿La tala se realiza dentro de los linderos del permiso de explotación obtenido? ¿Los procesos de reforestación son efectivos y acordes al plan entregado? Describa la relación tala-reforestación en la zona observada...* La forma en que hablaban, mirando hacia ninguna parte en el suelo, dejaba la sensación de que entregaban respuestas a interrogantes incomprensibles. Cuando la conversación terminó, mientras los hombres se daban apretones de manos para despedirse, Belén se mantuvo:

—Pues yo sí quiero ir a terreno, mirar todo y hacer unas fotos. Son las nueve y media. Usted dijo que estamos a dos horas de camino, el tiempo alcanza—dijo Belén dirigiéndose a uno de los madereros.

Los seis hombres intercambiaban miradas en todas las direcciones. Arley se daba golpecitos rítmicos sobre la boca mientras escrutaba a Belén con ojos de incendio. Ella sintió miedo, pero a sus 26 años, los altibajos de sus relaciones con la gente le habían enseñado que cuando alguien es demasiado explícito con sus sentimientos, lo mejor es soltarle una mirada fija e inexpresiva en respuesta. Así no gana la emoción más aplastante sino el terror de no saber a qué atenerse. Funcionó, Arley no pudo vencer a los ojos robóticos de Belén.

—Pues entonces vamos todos— dijo para no perder el trono—. Yo no traje botas de monte. ¿Será que por aquí me consigo unas?

La casera le prestó las de su marido enfermo y todos, guiados por los madereros, caminaron mudos. Belén agradeció no haber tenido que sacar su carta más explícita: si los hombres se negaban a llevarla a donde quería, ella se negaría a firmar el acta de visita, sabía que al no estar firmada por todo el equipo dando fe de la verdad del contenido, se anularía su validez. Lo decía su contrato. Quizá Arley había intuido que ese sería su próximo paso y eso lo llevó a ceder.

Avanzaron por la calle principal, infestada de charcos aquí y allá que parecían llenarse con agua proveniente de las entrañas del suelo. El resto era una mezcla de volátil arena negruzca y basuras plásticas de todas las edades revoloteando con la brisa; algunas, semienterradas ya, asomaban un extremo para afear más el paisaje y cortar el paso a los caminantes desprevenidos. A lado y lado se clavaban las casas a seis o siete escalones de altura, a prueba de desbordamientos del río. La última creciente todavía se veía marcada como un horizonte de lodo seco sobre los puntales de las casas. Belén alzó la cara para ver a una jovencita sentada a la entrada de una casa, dos escalones más abajo, otra niña se quejaba de los tirones de pelo mientras su compañera le tejía trenzas. De pronto, se rieron y Belén sintió que se burlaban de su ella. Cuando las dejó atrás, una de las dos dijo: y con zapatos de hombre. Soltaron a reír nuevamente. Belén frunció los labios y siguió andando en silencio. Cinco minutos de

camino, sentía gotas gruesas de sudor bajando por su espalda y debajo de sus senos. Caminaba en primera fila, junto a uno de los madereros, quien sin decir una palabra le indicó con el mentón levantado apuntando a la derecha que debían cruzar hacia un sendero curvo bordeado de maleza y árboles viejos cubiertos de líquenes. Tan pronto entraron en esa gruta el sonido de las cigarras se instaló en el aire, ensordecedor. Belén dejó que el hombre caminara adelante. El sendero era demasiado estrecho para moverse al lado de alguien sin tropezar las hojitas afiladas que cortaban la piel. Pisaban un suelo fangoso al que le habían procurado estabilidad rellenándolo con troncos de poco grosor. Aún así, ella se hundió en un par de ocasiones entre las juntas movedizas, también Arley y César y los otros tres. El maderero de adelante movía con certeza su machete para cortar las ramas demasiado largas que invadían el camino y así facilitar el paso al resto. Untada de pantano hasta los pantalones, se frotaba los brazos para espantarse los zancudos, y en esto había acertado su presentimiento, mientras avanzaba con Arley a su espalda. Con el curso de los minutos el silencio fue devorando todos los sonidos o el cerebro de Belén los naturalizó hasta hacerlos parte del silencio. Entonces, el maderero de atrás y Arley rieron, rieron sin abrir sus bocas, supo que eran ellos porque reconoció los timbres de sus voces al producirse en las gargantas y luego la eclosión de la risa de Arley, ella desconocía el motivo, no hubo chistes antes de eso, ni ninguna palabra, pero rieron brevemente como quienes se entienden con miradas y luego silencio y luego murmullos con los timbres de las voces de Arley y otro del equipo cuyo nombre no lograba recordar, pero sí su voz suave y casi femenina. Y después silencio. Solo escuchaba el tropel de las pisadas detrás de ella, grandilocuentes y amenazantes. Sentía una maraña de hilos pérfidos flotando sostenidamente a su alrededor como las telas de araña que se veían en algunas ramas de árbol. Quería girarse para mirar, pero temía encontrarse a uno de los hombres a punto de atacarla. Quizás conspiraban con miradas y gestos, solo a la espera de un paraje apropiado para desaparecerla.

Con el medio día tan cerca, el calor pareció exasperar el ánimo del guía, encendió un cigarrillo y exhalando el humo blanco giró la cara:

—Es aquí— dijo mirando fijo a Belén. —Y a la izquierda está la del compañero.

Ustedes me dicen por dónde empezamos a revisar.

Cuando llegaron, la realidad no era tanto como decían los madereros, no se estaban reforestando los terrenos, los límites de la explotación estaban claramente expandidos y se encontraban a menos de cinco kilómetros de la última zona habitada, una expresa prohibición de la norma. Eso sin contar que los desechos madereros eran arrojados deliberadamente a ríos secundarios de poco cauce. Una bomba de tiempo para la temporada de lluvias. Belén se lo hizo saber a los madereros. Lo dejaría en el acta y el informe, adjuntaría las fotos y las empresas tendrían que remediarlo. Se los dijo todo con calma y cierta simpatía, primero, porque sabía que los dos hombres eran obreros sin capacidad de decisión y luego porque, mientras hablaba, acudió a su cabeza la idea de que podrían ser miembros de los Esquemas de Seguridad Rural Armada. Arley, los madereros y César escuchaban atentos a Belén, los otros dos compañeros hablaban en voz baja y reían mirando a Arley. Un silencio tenso siguió a las palabras de Belén, su mirar robotizado estaba de nuevo entre ellos. Le sirvió para escudarse de su propia imprudencia. En medio de la nada absoluta que supone la selva, rodeada de cinco enemigos y un pusilánime, la integridad de su ser físico era un verdadero milagro. Segura de haber concluido, emprendió el regreso a toda marcha. La siguieron.

De vuelta al Instituto, río arriba, Belén se dio tiempo para ver los colores. Vio el negro terroso de las cinco de la mañana embarcada en la lancha, el verde marrón del agua batida por la hélice del motor, el tornasol de las diminutas fugas de gasolina sobre la ciénaga, el blanco brillante de las azucenas dobladas hacia el río, la fluorescencia de su reloj a prueba de humedad y el rojo fresa de los pantalones del lanchero. Como viajaba en el mismo asiento en que había llegado, pudo ver la otra orilla del río, las casas de decenas de madereros construidas con maderas menos nobles que las que entregaban a las multinacionales, menos bellas y menos aptas para la humedad que se acentuaba en la rivera. Sobre las ocho de la mañana comieron las galletas saladas y salchichas en lata que Arley había comprado. Sin dejar la lancha para ganar tiempo. Pararon en Puerto Grande para almorzar. Esta vez, la seguridad de saber lo que se encontraría la llevó a prestar menor atención a los detalles, a lanzar las sobras sin admiración al perrito afuera del restaurante, a reír por comentarios graciosos que no eran con ella y a responder que

sí, que claro cuando Arley le propuso redactar la primera versión del informe que presentarían al Instituto.

—Anoche vi tu luz encendida hasta tarde, pero como no bajaste a cenar no te pude decir que me gustó mucho tu trabajo. Fue buena idea ir a terreno.

Aunque no sabía si en realidad era un cumplido o, al menos, la verdad, Belén sonrió e hizo una venia con la cabeza mientras la mano de Arley se posaba en su hombro con una firmeza que, sumada al tuteo repentino entre ellos, no supo cómo interpretar. De regreso en la lancha, mantuvo el enfoque en paisaje y su olor. Su olor a victoria, a libertad, a estar a salvo.

Cuando tramitaba su primer informe y cobro, Belén notó la incoherencia entre la suma que recibió para su primera comisión a campo y lo que mostraba el comprobante. Había recibido veinte por ciento menos dinero del reportado. Se acercó a Sánchez.

—Acá siempre se hace ese descuento. Pensé que usted sabía —dijo el hombre.

“Pensé que usted sabía,” en adelante se convirtió en el comodín con el que Sánchez se comunicaría con Belén cada vez que se encontraran en zonas movedizas de la conversación. Dejarían, así, la fiesta en paz. Mientras enviaba por fax unas fotografías de su hijo recién nacido, Jairo Potes se encontraba suficientemente cerca como para escuchar con claridad la respuesta de Sánchez. Guardó un silencio desentendido. Fue todo lo que Belén necesitó para completar mentalmente la figura de Potes como un ave de rapiña. Cada salida de campo le dejaba más plata a él que a cualquiera de los que penetraban la selva para quebrarse el alma. Ahora que lo pensaba, hasta el comportamiento de los madereros le pareció algo que él sabía por anticipado. Seguramente, cuando los enviaba protocolariamente a campo, ya tenía claro lo que dirían los informes y hasta habría recibido su paga

fraudulenta de las multinacionales. Una repulsión hacia Jairo Potes, solo silenciada por la jerarquía entre ellos, comenzó a enraizarse en las entrañas de Belén.

Se esmeró en hacer un reporte impecable. Narró los hechos, documentó los hallazgos, citó las normas, planteó un capítulo de discusiones y presentó rutas alternativas de mejoramiento. Firmó el acta de visita luego de ajustar un par de imprecisiones. Se tragó el sapo del descuento sospechoso. Entregó a tiempo. Recibió la firma de su jefe. Tramitó su cobro. Recibió su pago. Nadie le respondió nada sobre el contenido del documento.

Leaving

Paula Silva

- 1 -

I waited, half awake – half asleep, throughout the night for my eighteen-month-old son to wake up. He slept soundly, his chubby arm around my neck and one leg sticking out of his covers, once I arrived in his room and lied down beside him just before midnight. He drowsily batted his lashes that Sunday morning shortly after the clock on my phone announced six in the morning and I quietly got us both out of bed, changed my pyjamas into the clothes I had worn the previous day – faded black jeans, a worn-out white t-shirt and a pair of leopard print ballet shoes I had purchased a couple of months earlier and wore compulsively – which were still lying in a heap by the stairs. Without changing his own night clothes I put a blue hooded coat on him, wrapped the blue scarf he always wore outside in cold weather around his neck, grabbed my handbag and, aiming for the doorway, made my way down the stairs of the duplex apartment in the north of Bogotá where the three of us had lived in together for the past five years.

I did not take his nappy bag. I did not even take an extra nappy or a bottle or a change of clothes for him. I did not pack my laptop or my tablet. I did not pack my half-read copy of Alain De Botton's *Essays in Love*. I did not put any deodorant on. The bathroom door was exactly beside the bedroom door, and I didn't want to risk making any noise that might shake Tristan out of his sleep, so I decided then not to stop to brush my teeth or comb my hair. *Just go, go*, I kept repeating in my mind as I went through the motions, softly cooing and whispering to Leon, trying to keep him quiet as I finished getting us both ready, as I grabbed him in my arms and walked through the hallway, finally reaching the top of the stairs.

I was startled by the sound of the bedroom door opening just as I was halfway down the stairs, clutching my wide – eyed boy to my chest as tightly as I could. It always made a loud, cracking noise as

it opened. Its hinges needed greasing, protesting each time anyone forced their nuts and bolts to rub against each other. He never got up early, especially on weekends. I was counting on that, and the shock of hearing the unmistakable cry of the door opening so early in the morning stopped me in my tracks.

- 2 -

I have a story: *my* story. He has his. My story doesn't coincide with his; he denies my story as much as I deny his. His truth is not my truth in much the same measure that my truth doesn't exist for him. In denying me the right to own my story he denies who I am now. If what happened for me didn't happen at all, then who am I? How did I become this person writing this story? How dare I type the words he once uttered, locked for safekeeping in my mind?

Remembering who I was during those years is extremely difficult; my character gone, my decisions hijacked, my resolve diluted. My memory falters and is biased against good memories. I know we must have built them, somehow, in the midst of him becoming a giant and me turning into a microbe. I can't remember them clearly anymore.

My story with Tristan is not a story of *haves* or *dids*, but rather a story of *should haves*, of *should have done*s. It is not the story of my expectations met, as they were merely a mirage, a simulacrum of something I thought I wanted but didn't know I never needed. It is rather the story of how I became someone I never expected I would need to be.

My story with him is not the story of all the times I chose to stay, but the story of all the times I should have left, of all the times I should have spoken, chosen, walked, talked, or stood up but didn't. It is the story of all the times I left a little bit, inside, but couldn't find the resolve to drag my body out the door

and went to sleep beside him, anyway. I guess, in some way, it is the story of how, like Shevek's rock, I always need to get halfway there before I get anywhere at all with him. It is the story of how I will forever drift away from him for as long as I am alive.

I never know anymore whether I drift apart or he pushes away.

- 3 -

I think I realised I wanted to be a mother a year and a half after our wedding, or so. It was like someone had turned a light on and then jammed the switch so that it couldn't be turned off. Whenever I saw pregnant women walking the streets of Bogotá or new mothers pushing strollers filled with soft blankets, I felt an acute sting of jealousy in the soft spot between my collarbones. I thought they were fortunate in a way I wasn't, felt like crying when I heard friends of mine were pregnant. "Congratulations; I'm so happy for you," I'd say instead, smiling with as much sweetness as I could muster.

"Okay," Tristan said, drunkenly, after we returned home from seeing his high school friends, one of them excitedly announcing he was expecting his first child.

"Okay what?" I asked, lying beside him in the dark, my head resting on my pillow.

"Okay let's have a baby."

I stayed quiet, sober, imagining his *okay* came from the two whiskeys he'd had, turning his *okay* in my head until I surrendered to sleep.

The following morning, over breakfast, I asked him if he remembered what he had said in bed a few hours before.

"Sure I do."

Then it was settled. I stopped taking the pill after three years of marriage. I wanted that baby with all my heart.

"I can't have any children. I won't," he said eight months later.

I spent the ten days before he uttered those words in bed, waiting for the drugs to kick in, begging my body to let go of the baby that had died inside me; waiting for her remains to leave my womb. Ten days hearing him tell me I was imagining it would be like a scene in *Frida*, all blood and tears and screaming but it wouldn't, I was wrong, it would only be like a heavy period. My gynaecologist had prescribed the pills telling me it would take a couple of days for labour to start. For ten days I clung to that baby, no pain but no morning sickness either, believing it would be over in a heartbeat, painlessly.

On the tenth day, it was. It was exactly like bloodied Frida, and he wasn't there. A monster colic took over my lower belly and I immediately called my mother. I called my doctor, who told me to come to his office as quickly as I could. I told Tristan as he was leaving the house on his regular business; he swiftly dismissed our goodbye with a "glad it's finally over" nonchalance. Of course he was light about it; I was just having a bad period, as far as he was concerned.

I arrived at my doctor's office, clinging to my mother's elbow. She held my hand as he helped me deliver a three-month-old foetus that had started detaching by the second month and despite my doctor's measures and my strictly following his instructions, died inside me without me noticing. My mother dried my tears as I lied in my doctor's stretcher while he worked, telling me it was almost over. She comforted me as I cried in pain and heartache and bit my lip, reminded me to breathe.

She drove me back home, never minding the mess my miscarriage was leaving her upholstery in. "I know it really hurt you, darling, I could tell you were in terrible pain," she said sweetly, holding the steering wheel of her car with one hand, stroking my knee with the other. She stayed with me while I sat on the shower floor, letting the warm water wash my blood away. I bled for so long my fingers

were wrinkled as raisins. Losing that baby hurt more than anything else has hurt in my life, my body indecisive between wanting to keep her and needing to shed her away. My mother put me to bed and cradled me to sleep. He still wasn't there.

"You got pregnant," he said four months afterwards when I wrapped my positive pregnancy test with the smallest onesie I could find in green paper and gave them to him when he arrived home one Tuesday night in early February. Then he went to the kitchen and depleted the contents of our cupboard; stuffed himself until he felt sick. *"You got pregnant,"* he said over the course of the next thirty-eight weeks; over the course of the years that have followed.

I am so glad I got pregnant. I have never wanted anything as much as I wanted that second baby, the one I got to cradle in my arms, breastfeed, take to school. Leon, the one I took with me in a blue coat and scarf escaping that Sunday morning.

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Saturday night I lied in bed, awake, besides Leon. It was the last night we ever spent together under the same roof. A single thought pestered me like a nuisance, like the buzzing of a relentless bug in the middle of nights spent in the tropic. An annoyance strong enough to keep me awake but not enough to drive me to turn the lights on and start a hunt, wet towel in hand. It was Daros, a massive giant of a dog that was five kilograms heavier than I was Tristan and I rescued a couple of years before Leon was born. He died shortly thereafter, but his dark round eyes haunted me throughout that night, clearly telling me that what happened to him when he left the fuming evidence of his food poisoning all over our living room floor would ultimately happen to me too.

He had probably eaten a rotting carcass of something or other out of the trash in the park without us noticing. His gut became invaded by an entire zoo of toxic bacteria and he spent the night suffering from exploding diarrhoea all on his own without waking us up. When we got up the morning after and found his liquid, smelly droppings all over the living room wooden floor I realised he was ill. Tristan, meanwhile, took our old, sick dog into the terrace and gave him the beating of his lifetime. He punched him in the face. He kicked him in the gut when he was lying on the ground, cowering in a corner. He picked him up by the head and threw him back against the ground repeatedly. He went on and on for minutes; it felt like ages. Daros did not bark at him. He didn't bare his teeth. He didn't bite him. He didn't fight back; that noble dog we had decided to rescue from a construction site because we learnt that he had been beaten and hurt and injured. Perhaps he was used to getting beat up by angry, spiteful men. Daro's lack of action echoed my own. He let himself get beaten to a pulp without a protest, while I watched him suffer alone without uttering a single sound. He might never have guessed that I would just watch and do nothing as he was brutally beaten up; as if I were a statue of a person made of stone, staring at nothing with vacant eyes.

We rescued him after learning that someone had put an iron rod through his leg. He had lost several teeth, he had a limp, he couldn't see very well (this we knew because he kept bumping into furniture and doors; we suspected his sense of smell was half gone too). His face showed the signs of his beatings so visibly I nicknamed him Scarface. And yet he was heavy and strong. When I walked him every day, I could see fully grown men whose heights towered over my head crossing the street and walking on the other side of the road in order to avoid going past me and my dog. I used to proudly walk in front of people who stopped and moved aside to let us through, him obediently walking on the leash I held securely in my hand. I felt protected and safe with him; I knew he would always have my back. I never imagined he would ever have to endure the same brutality from the hands of the man who had rescued him from violence as he had suffered for years.

His story, we learnt, was that he was born out of a litter of a Brazilian Phila and a Labrador at a big house in Suba, a suburb in the hills west of Bogotá that was being slowly being engulfed by the tall, red

brick buildings that had no more space to sprawl in the city. The owner of the house had sold it, along with his land, to a construction company, with the prospect of building several residential towers where the house once stood. The owner had his own stakes invested in the project and quickly saw to give the puppies away. After they grew, he was left with a bitch and my dog, finally getting rid of the female. Once building started and they set up the sales room, Daros roamed the field and the construction site alone. The owner felt his sheer size would intimidate potential buyers and started abusing the dog. He feared the dog and was probably right in doing so, but he feared the potential loss of his money more. Loss of his money would mean, I guess, loss of his power; and he wasn't prepared to let an animal strip him of his manhood. His fear quickly turned into hatred, and he unleashed it all onto him without restraint.

The site's workers quickly followed suit, giving him daily doses of verbal and physical abuse until we learnt of him through a friend and came to take him home with us. Since I was alone in the house almost all the time, Daros became my soldier, my friend, my protector. He almost never left his bed underneath the stairs; he only did so to greet me when I came home from work, and to go to the park with me.

I was petrified. I was four months pregnant with Leon. I sat there with a cup of tea cradled in my hands, allowing it to get cold with my eyes in a quiet cloudburst of tears as I watched him beat my dog up for shitting on our floor because he was ill and couldn't shit outside because we were sleeping. I couldn't stand up to stop him. I was aghast that I didn't try to protect him. I didn't stand up to him, just as my dog didn't stand up for himself either. We were two cowards, breaking down in our separate corners of the house. We both knew he wouldn't be satisfied until he was sure he had asserted his dominance, until he made sure we both understood that we were not to shatter his world order with our filth, our illnesses or miscarriages, that we had better abide by his rules--or else.

I spent the next days and weeks convincing myself that he would never harm me. I was carrying his child, his first-born boy, as he liked to underscore to anyone who would care to listen. Yet, he wasn't always that vicious. If he had been, I would have probably left, or been killed a long time before that morning. I did spend a lot of time alone, but never realised how utterly lonely I was. Despite his anger and his unattainable expectations, he had the ability to spend a month or two in tense peace. There would be stretches of consecutive weeks when there were no outbursts, just the constant poisoned criticism I never noticed anymore – I was so used to hearing how unskilled I was at everything. It was so confusing: I never knew who was the real him, which one to trust. There was the feebly distant husband who would demean me and idolise me in equal measures. There was the ugly monster who would yell, throw things, slam doors, commanded me to go rot. I chose to believe the apparition of the latter was my fault. I chose to ignore the one who demeaned me. I chose to believe that the charming one who was a terrific cook and said he adored me was real and the other wasn't.

I sobbed alone in the aftermath of Daros, sitting on the black tiles of our shower floor, holding my knees to my forehead, where he couldn't hear me. I wept on my way to work, driving the small silver Renault I had spent the last five years paying through the overcrowded and smog-grey streets of northern Bogotá, knowing he wouldn't find out I was torn up and scared. I never told him how afraid I had been that morning that he would ever be just as violent towards me. I never told him I feared for my baby inside me; I feared for him after he was born. The morning when he beat the dog up I feared for my life for the first and only time ever. Still, I didn't leave him. I didn't even bring it up in conversation, not even once; not even coyly. I failed to protect a living creature. I failed, I failed, I failed. I failed the dog I always knew would defend me if I needed defending. Would I ever need to protect my son? Would I fail again then, if the time came? I couldn't let him have the chance to put me in a situation where I would fail again. I was afraid I would fail, because I had failed my dog. I couldn't fail, because *it was* now my child I had to protect. I couldn't fail again because having watched him mercilessly kick my dog once, I knew I had one hundred per cent chances of one day becoming that battered body on the ground.

Even though I forgot to ask myself those questions after the sorrow of the beating passed, they all came back, like a monsoon, during that sleepless Saturday night. Lying on my son's mattress by the window, listening to him snore lightly as he slept, I couldn't stop wondering why I had so terribly failed to protect that dog. I kept going over and over my reasons that day and all the days that went by after that one, searching for that terrible character flaw that had stopped me from acting when I had to, prevented me from leaving when I had the best chance. 'I am weak, I am a pushover, I can't stand my ground'; I told myself repeatedly. I believed it. I wanted to justify myself just as badly. I was scared, I thought that calling him out on his violence would only turn him more violent, I might cause his violence to turn against me. I was pregnant. I chose to protect my unborn baby and left that dog alone to face his rage. Would I ever have to watch him hurt my child? Would my child ever have to watch him hurt me, just as he had to watch his own father before him beat his mother up? Lying there, holding his tiny body against my chest, I was certain there was no turning back. Push me once, push me a million times. I could see my near future in the hopeless eyes of the dog, lying defeated on the ground after he finally tired of punching and kicking him and coolly sat down to have his breakfast.

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Leon was six weeks old when I closed the front door, leaving him behind with Tristan, begging him to forgive me for the father I chose for him. My breasts were swollen with the milk he didn't finish, and I didn't have time to pump; the loose skin of my stomach hadn't completely reattached to my muscles after birth. I'd be gone for twenty-four hours and somehow, I didn't even consider that I could take Leon with me.

I had planned to take six months off from my job managing the arts programme at the British Council, but the fear of losing relevance as a professional once I became a mother became a nagging thought I couldn't shake off. The week after Leon was born a curator friend of Tristan's called him to ask him to recommend three curators or critics who could go to Cúcuta and be jury for an art prize he was

organising. Tristan asked me if I would want to go, and I responded with a firm no. I was still in pain, still swollen, learning how to breast feed, sleep deprived. He recommended his ex-girlfriend, an artist he was still in contact with, and one of my closest friends, a brilliant curator who lived in Cartagena and whom I hadn't seen in a very long time. When he called again four weeks later to ask again, I started doubting. Tristan convinced me to go, assured me I could go and come back in just one day, he would take care of Leon, it would be a chance for me to rest and see my friend. Finally, I agreed, and his friend booked me a flight.

I was due to leave in the early afternoon one November Thursday in 2011. I didn't even need to pack a suitcase, but I packed my breast pump, several bottles, an ice pack and an insulated lunchbox I would use for bringing my milk back to Leon. As I got ready to leave, my stomach churning at the thought of leaving my tiny new baby behind, Tristan decided to look for his passport. We had taken a trip to Greece and Turkey with my parents when I was six months pregnant and we returned to live with them until a week after Leon's birth. He turned his bedside table upside down, pulled socks and underpants from drawers, getting increasingly impatient.

"Where is my passport?" he suddenly turned to ask me, eyes wide.

"I don't know. Where did you leave it?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be asking you, would I? You took it when we came back."

"Honey, why would I take your passport? I know where mine is; wouldn't I have put them together in the same place if I had taken it?"

"I don't know. Would you?"

"Of course I would. What would the point be of not keeping them together?"

"You took it"

"I didn't"

“You took it and you put it in the safe at your parents’.”

“I promise I didn’t.”

He went on and on. We sat down to have lunch, Leon sleeping in my left arm, my right busy with the lentils and rice in front of me. His insistence escalating, my patience diminishing. I had a vague recollection of having seen his passport casually thrown in one of the desk drawers in my old room at my parents’, but I doubted my trust in that memory. I could almost see the safe in their flat. Did they have a safe? I was almost certain they didn’t, but Tristan was so confident that I had taken his passport without telling him and put it there that started picturing a safe in their closet. It was a metallic color of sand the size of a shoebox. It remained hidden behind my father’s shirts. But no. As his insistence turned to yelling, I trusted myself for a brief moment, finally losing my patience. I banged the table with the palm of my hand. “I didn’t take your fucking passport and my parents don’t even have a safe,” I snapped.

He stood up, the legs of the chair protesting loudly as they scraped against the wooden floors. He yanked Leon from my arms and walked away, passing by the remaining empty chairs at the dining table. A red fibreglass Panton chair stood to his left before the kitchen door and the landing underneath the stairs. Time elongated as I watched him kick the red chair, Leon still asleep in his arms, chair spinning in the air, landing in front of the kitchen door, bouncing once, landing several metres away from its original location, nearly at the main entrance besides the stairs. Leon did not wake up. I had less than thirty minutes left before I was due to go to the airport.

Tristan coolly went upstairs, put Leon in his crib and sat on our bed, legs outstretched, feet casually crossed, shoes on. I finished my lentils and rice, went to clean my teeth and pick up my handbag. Called a taxi. As I waited for it to arrive I bent over the crib, looking at my sleeping baby, convincing myself that the reason I wasn’t taking him with me was that he was still too fragile to go on an airplane and could catch a virus and fall horribly sick. I’d be putting him at risk if I took him with me. Was I

putting him at risk by leaving him with Tristan? Which was the greatest risk? Could I cancel the trip and face Tristan's wrath with Leon in the house, or should I go and let him miss me and cool down? I took as long as I could saying goodbye to Leon, thinking no amount of time could be long enough.

I left him sleeping in his crib and took my taxi. During the ride to the airport I became fully aware that I had chosen the wrong father for Leon, the magnitude of my mistake crushing me. I begged Leon to forgive me a million times through the traffic jams and the passing trees and the red buses crowded with people, I asked for his forgiveness like a mantra, chanting "please forgive me" in my mind until I reached the airport.

I only released my mantra when I met my friend at the airport. It was only then that I broke down, sobbing into her shoulder. She gave me the phone number of the couple's therapist I saw on a weekly basis for eighteen months, unaccompanied by Tristan.

KENYA

Excerpt from Chapter Two of *Jumping Hurdles*

Sarah Ochwada

Following all the court drama on Tuesday afternoon we got the signed court order from the Sports Disputes Tribunal the following day on Wednesday afternoon and dispatched copies to AK and AK's lawyers, Triple OK Law. But I didn't receive the clearance letter from AK until Thursday morning at around 11 am.

That same morning Josephine called to inform me that she had been summoned to Prisons Headquarters, Magereza House in Milimani, to meet with her superiors concerning her case. What she didn't know is that her superiors didn't want to talk to her alone. They wanted to have a meeting with her and the AK president, General Toroitich. So as soon as she got to Prisons HQ she was bundled into a vehicle and driven to Riadha House.

In her company were two of her superiors one of whom is Kenyan track legend Catherine Ndereba. Josephine's coach, Osbourne Maziwa, was also with her. Immediately after they were done with the meeting at AK, Josephine called me in a panic. According to her narration of events her superiors were surprised by the suit she had filed against AK and they were worried about the information that they had read in the Newspapers. They wanted clarity but did not want to influence the ongoing legal proceedings. General Toroitich, however, was more concerned about administrative issues like who would receive her once she gets to Italy, what if her former manager attempts to block her from racing and who would claim her earnings on her behalf if she makes money off that race. She told me that General Toroitich had proposed that since there is a dispute about her management AK should write to the Italian race organisers to manage her affairs for this particular race and route any earnings to her through AK. He told her to discuss the proposal with her lawyer and report back to him on the way forward.

It seemed very strange to me that General Toroitich would make such a suggestion as it would vary the court order significantly. In any case I had made a request on Tuesday afternoon in open court for the order to specifically state that the agent who was in charge of making arrangements for the Rome race should also handle any earnings as a result. The Panel declined to add those specifics. They pointed out that it would be unnecessary to do so as the Italian race organisers had sent the race invitation through a specific agent and that nobody had raised any objections about it.

I told Josephine to head to my office so that I could quiz her on what exactly transpired at AK. She arrived in the company of her coach Osbourne. Their story was exactly the same; that Josephine was summoned for a meeting with Prisons officials but as soon as they arrived, they were ushered into a vehicle and driven to AK where they met with General Toroitich. They also repeated the proposal from Toroitich. As they finished explaining this I handed Josephine her clearance letter but as soon as she was done reading through it she told me that the passport number that was quoted was for her old passport and so it would cause her problems if she presented the letter when she applies for her visa.

I slumped in my seat. Not again. Not another problem with AK. I phoned Toroitich immediately.

"Hello, General, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Sarah, how can I help you?"

"Yes, I need to speak to you about two urgent matters. First, there is a problem concerning Josephine's clearance letter which needs to be corrected. It indicates her old passport number, yet she was issued with a new one."

"That can be easily corrected."

"Okay, thank you. The other issue is that I'm here with Josephine and she told me about a suggestion you'd made to her. She says that you want to write to the Italian race organisers and to recommend AK to handle her administration and winnings from Italy?"

Toroitich breaks into a nervous laugh... "No, no. Nobody wants to take her money. We're just worried that because there is a dispute between the managers, there'll be nobody to receive her and handle her

once she gets to Italy. So I told her it'd be good if we assisted with that. But nobody wants to take her money."

"Okay. But I did ask that the Panel give a specific direction on who should handle her administratively and they said that it would be up to the agent who had registered her for the race so I don't understand why this should be an issue."

"You know such matters can usually be handled and agreed upon for the sake of the athlete. We don't want her to suffer in case the other manager blocks her on the other side. We can always reach an agreement and I told her to speak to you about it first."

"I think if this is the case the best thing to do is to go back to the Tribunal and get an interpretation of their order. But I think it is best to come and speak with you directly together with Josephine. Will you be available later this afternoon, say at 3 o'clock?"

"Yes, come in at 3 and we can talk about it, and the clearance letter can also be corrected when you come. That is a small thing."

"Alright, we'll see you then."

After I hang up, I had a long conversation with Josephine and Osbourne about the proposal that had been made. Josephine was extremely worried about the legal implications. I assured her that we would get to the bottom of it but by the time we were done with our conversation it was 3:13 pm and she was not thrilled about making a return visit to AK that afternoon. So I told her she could head home and leave me to have the chat with Toroitich. I made copies of her old and her new passports and sent her on her way

I prepared a letter for AK requesting correction of the error in the clearance letter attaching copies of both her passports. I made 3 copies, packed Josephine's entire file in my backpack and was off to Riadha House. I managed to get there at around 4:30 pm on account of the late afternoon/early evening traffic which is a nightmare in Nairobi. I climbed up to the main reception and found the same AK guard seated there.

"Habari ya leo?"

“Nzuri.”

“Nimekuja kumwona General Toroitich.”

“Yuko ndani lakini nadhani yuko kwa mkutano. Wacha nipige simu kwanza. Utangoja kidogo.”

“Sawa.”

She picks up a landline receiver, punches in some numbers, “Hello, Sarah Ochwada is here for Toroitich. Oh. Sawa!” She places the phone down in bewilderment. “Amesema uingie.”

“Asante.”

Things had changed.

Aunt Rahab's Calves

Stephanie Wanga

London evenings in July are over-bright, pumping, pulsing, confusing things. The city teems with tourists high on the bigness of a city that has allowed so many to be so much. It is through this smorgasbord of colour, coltishness and commotion that I spot a woman walking a little ahead of me, her legs boasting the honey-smooth sculptedness of Aunt Rahab's calves. Her skin: the same bronze. A brief relief, a remembrance, a translocation, fresh air. I see Aunt Rahab's calves and all my body has been aching for is supplied. I am home but I am not.

The woman is as short as Aunt Rahab, who is 5'2 and plump. She wears a peach mid-calf-length dress that dances on evening wind, the only kind Aunt Rahab would ever wear, and those are Aunt Rahab's calves. But it is not Aunt Rahab. Aunt Rahab always has a Bus Station wig on. She has a big-big laugh, punctured by questions she will not ask. Aunt Rahab is a giddy, chatty woman, leaking wit and cunning.

I take a deep breath and I am 12 years old again. It is 2007 and we are heading home from school in a tiny corner of Nairobi. The air is sultry, carrying the aroma of nyama choma on hot coals, accented by the pungency of spilled alcohol and a man wailing about something only he and an Akinyi will understand. Kenyatta Market. An everything-sanctuary. There are women sitting on benches, armed with hair extensions, waiting to strike: "Auntie, salon?" There is a man on the prowl for carelessly held mobile phones and wallets. In front of him is a grey supermarket, heavily grilled, paint peeling off its walls. It does not try to impress—you will walk in anyway; you need it more than it needs you. Fabric in reds and yellows and greens and other shades of joy hang on the doors of tailors' stalls, and tailors hunch over beneath the weight of their false promises. A hotel lurks at the corner—for those who would like to do more. A 24-hour chemist. Drycleaners. Newspaper vendors. Mobile phones for sale. Shoes? Bags? Near the hospital, which is near the petrol station. Chickens bak-bak-bakwaking, ready for slaughter or purchase. A garage. Bus stops. Bars blaring benga. A man somewhere by the road at the edge of the market, waiting for a vehicle moving fast enough for him to both suffer and enjoy his compensation for the impact. A heap of trash, rank and rotting.

Aunt Rahab is laughing with Shipo the fruit vendor. She squeezes a mango I know she will not buy, and then moves on to the tangerines. Aunt Rahab enjoys being seen. Letty, Mama Njoki's house help, is eyeing Aunt Rahab from just behind Shipo: curiosity riddled with admiration-disdain. Aunt Rahab has not tried to fit in with the clique of house helps that gathers in a corner of the estate, clutching lesos, dangling toothpicks from lips, their flip-flops slapping tarmac, for the daily serving of neighbourhood gossip. She looks very much the *madame* of our house as she fiddles with the chunky brass chains around her neck. She drops a tangerine back to its pile—not good enough, of course. “Sasa Letty!” She says in sunny greeting and, turning to continue on our way, sways her hips, leeeeft-riiiight-leeeft, her calves rising and settling in the rhythm of her peacock-proud strides.

Aunt Rahab's determined self-assuredness is both a balm and a questioning of my weak neediness. Here she is, a woman who cannot be told, ducking whatever life throws at her by clutching onto pride and brass necklaces. Here I am, 12 and liking boys who only want to touch me in hidden places but will never claim me boldly in the way girls like Rose and Ciku are claimed.

Rose and Ciku are delicate, wonderful-looking and slight, untouched by any real worry. They must buy their school uniforms from Uniplus, because theirs are much darker and better-fitting than what we have to buy at Bazaar School Uniforms Ltd. I imagine I may look prettier in better uniform, more claimable. They use colourful cartridge pens from Yaya Centre, while I buy my maroon fountain pens from Kevo's shop. Soon, though, I will beg Mama to buy me a cartridge pen, so I can offer my box of Pelikan cartridges when Ciku turns to me, smiling wide, relaxed hair black and stern pulled into a ponytail, pearl earrings shimmering, drawling as she does, “Giiiiirl, do you haaaave cartridges?”

Girls like Ciku and Rose are taken for movies at Village Market. I have never been to Village Market. My family does not go out much, and not to places like Village Market. We go to Kenchic, or to Sonford. There, we scoop a red, vinegary, home-made onion, tomato and chilli sauce from a bowl in the middle of the restaurant and slip it into little polythene packets. We then carry home our quarter, half or whole rotisserie chickens, wrapped in paper, deliciously dripping in oil. When I get home, I lick the oil-soiled paper, because one must gather the flavour from where it strays. Village Market is for sitting down and smiling and flipping hair. It is for forks and knives and napkins. It is for parking spaces and reservations and tips. When I am 20, 8 years from now, and dating a Village Market type of boy, I will

take him to get some Kenchic, but he will frown after finishing it, saying he expected a lot more from all he had heard about it. I will find this odd and disappointing, but I will also realise that maybe Kenchic is not just about the chicken.

For the boys who like girls like Rose and Ciku, I am only for touching. I do not understand why I am accorded even this attention, because I have a large-large birthmark, coursing over my whole body. At school, most people look at me sideways. At home, Mama makes weak, painfully conscious attempts at telling me how I look so nice in these yellow shorts or that blue floral print dress. I take what I can get.

When I was in pre-unit, one of my teachers looked at me, clucked her tongue, shook her head and said, “Shame, Kakhua, I hope those marks disappear as you grow older.” I stood at the door of the pre-unit class, desperately pressing my fingers crossed, begging God never to take my birthmark away. How would I be exciting without these streaks of wheat against my otherwise-chocolate? The only person I admired half as much as I did myself was Linda, who tied her shoelaces around her legs. Clucking her tongue again, the teacher rubbed the top of my head, sighed and said, “It will be okay.” I nearly spit. But I have now swallowed everyone else’s opinions whole, and I do not know how to scratch them out.

I am in school with a girl whose father owns the big, shiny blue car that is always parked in the farthest corner of the church parking lot, faux-modesty. They own a swanky hotel too, in the side of the city where embassies are built and roads are cradled in flora. One of those girls with DSTV, of course. We do not have DSTV and we do not have a big car. I only catch glimpses of DSTV on the early morning news broadcasts on KTN. I cram the DSTV adverts as I have my breakfast, learn the bits of the movies advertised and then spout them out in school. “Have you watched *Mr Bones*?” I might ask. “Do you remember when—?”

Some girls came to be suspicious of me some time back, and one day, three of them strutted towards my desk.

“Kakhua,” they said.

“Yes?” I.

“On DSTV, is there SuperSport 0?” One of them, Hannah, asked.

Now, from my keen study of early morning DSTV adverts, I knew SuperSport was a channel on DSTV. There were a number of SuperSport channels. SuperSport 1, SuperSport 2, etc. Was there SuperSport 0? It did not seem likely.

“Oh, I never watch SuperSport...don’t know...not into sports,” I said.

“Ah, just as you flip through...have you ever seen SuperSport 0?” Hannah pressed.

“No,” I said, finally.

“Ho hooooo,” Hannah said. Ice in her eyes. Was I right? Was I wrong? Wacera sniggered.

*

My father is a farmer. When he comes by to pick me up from school, I say that my uncle has come for me, because my father is very-very busy. I began to say this after Hannah came to me, looking determinedly unimpressed, saying “Ho hoooo, your father’s head looks like Mwai Kibaki’s.” I did not understand what this meant, but I supposed it was better to dissociate.

“How is school?” My father will always ask when I get home.

“Fine,” I will always answer.

“What did you learn?” He will always ask.

He will not hear the answer if I make it obscure enough, and he will not ask anything else, and that will be all.

I occasionally talk to girls like Rose and Ciku, and I feel very nice afterwards, as if I am maybe finally part of something. They laugh with me briefly and are generally friendly. Even so, when they have sleepovers, I only hear about it months later, when one of them might reference it in conversation as I skulk about in earshot.

“Rooooooooooooose,” Ciku might say, “Did you see Ivy’s brootheerr come out of the shoooweeer?”

Rose does not speak much, just giggles often, and so she might giggle and say, “Yes!”

All this said, I take love where I can get it. I let these boys who like Rose and Ciku in the daylight touch me in shadowy corners. I tell someone—anyone—in class that “I am stressed” and when they ask why, I take delight in that brief moment in which they are *concerned*. Sometimes, I show them a dance move I have spent the whole weekend learning—show them as if it is second nature.

The first time a boy touched me in a shadowy corner I did not like it at all. It was during evening prep when Edward, Arnold and Paul came to my desk and Paul said: “We want to talk to you.”

Confused. Flattered. Chosen.

I found none of these boys good-looking. They were not even interesting to speak to. Arnold smelled funny, Paul was a little dull, and Edward was always injured, but it was what they represented. These were the same boys girls went mad for when they started wearing their clothes inside-out. It was the confidence that so easily sat atop their shoulders that drew us all in.

“Can I come with Abura?” I asked. Abura was sitting next to me, my only actual friend, and I reluctantly decided that she, too, should be invited to partake of this privilege.

“No, just you,” they said.

Skittishness. Pleasure. I pretended to be a bit upset by the inconvenience, but willing to indulge them some anyway.

I did not make eye contact with Abura.

I followed them to the wing of the building nobody really went to, especially not during evening prep time, near a dark flight of stairs. Edward stood to my left, Arnold to my right, and Paul stood at the centre.

“So, I just wanted...I just wanted to say...” Paul started, as he walked towards me. Before he finished his sentence, he had grabbed the parts of me he desired to, and held on, ghoulisish smile on his face. I slapped and slapped and slapped him. I slapped him all the way downstairs. Edward and Arnold laughed. I was confused.

I do not know how I moved from anger, confusion, violation, to having an unspoken agreement with Arnold, Edward, Paul and their friends. I let them touch me covertly, whenever they wanted. I

enjoyed their attention—attention I had not received before on any other terms. I do not know if I actually moved from anger, confusion, violation, or if I am still there. Perhaps I hoped that one day a boy might touch me and find that I am after all, just as delicate as Ciku or Rose. I hoped that one day one of them would turn and look at me and ask if maybe I might want to be his girlfriend. Even after conceding these large swaths of ground, I wondered where it was that I still had never been that boys and girls went to ask each other out on Village Market dates. I wondered where it was that I still had never been, that girls made themselves interesting enough to be seen, where people got the currency to be talked about without trying.

In all this, even in all the questions that were asked about my birthmark, such as if my mother swallowed gasoline when she was pregnant, or if my body was bleaching gone wrong, I always went home to Aunt Rahab. Aunt Rahab, soft and cushy and squat, knows that I cannot have beef stew without dhanias, knows to put Blue Band in my githeri, and knows how to make everything alright. Sometimes, she will get me earrings or bracelets. Sometimes she will come and sit with me when I am studying. And then she will go out, brass necklaces and all, to claim life.

Aunt Rahab's joy colours my childhood. Her stories season it. Her laughter resounds. My childhood is hot with her anger—her refusal to be controlled. She tempers life with her hugs. She does not ask me what is wrong, when I ask her to hug me, she just hugs me, warm and hard. When she does ask what is wrong, and I say nothing, she does not push me any farther, just hugs-hugs-hugs.

When I am 19 and seeing boys in the daylight, Aunt Rahab will look at their cars suspiciously, peek through the window, firm frown pressed across her face. When they come inside, she will be friendly in that way of hers, and ask seemingly innocuous, innocent questions. She is gathering intel. She is ready for defence. She will offer juice afterward. When they offer her gifts, she will accept them with guileless fervour, but there her walls will be, rock-hard.

When I am 22 and we move to another neighbourhood, Aunt Rahab and I will steal dust-coated rosemary from the neighbours' gardens for our beef stews. We will watch TV—DSTV at this point—late into the night. We will scour through Bollywood soaps, Hollywood reality TV, Nollywood drama, or the Riverwood newbies to find something suitable. Aunt Rahab will never be able to stay awake past 11:30 pm. I worry about her and what will happen to her once I “grow up” and leave home. I wish her love, a

marriage, someone to care for her when I am chasing life, but she seems so content it is almost blasphemous to wish her more than her present happiness.

I must tell you about the day, towards the end of 2007, when Aunt Rahab walked up to me in the church compound after the service, laughing, because I was staring at nothing and clutching a stone.

“Umerukwa akili?” She asked. Have I gone mad? Maybe a little. Or not much more than before.

I tried to laugh. The taste of chalk in my mouth.

“Twende,” she said, and so we went to the car.

Later, in the evening, when my mother came from the Luhya women’s meeting she attends after the service on the last Sunday of the month, she came in to the living room, heavy with story. She shook her head, smiling a bit, laughing a bit. She dropped her handbag on the couch and asked me to get her water.

“Heh!” The start of story.

“Ehe!” The encouragement of story. It was my sister in the corner, teeth already bared, ready for entertainment, ready for news in the way only Mama can tell it.

“Nasikia gari ya Professor Njoroge imepigwa mawe,” she says.

“Eeh!” Shock, engendered by story.

Mild panic, inside my heart.

Professor Njoroge’s car had been stoned by God-knows-who, some time during the service.

“Nasikia ka-bibi kake kalililia kwa parking,” my mother laughs. I smile a little at the horridness of laughing about someone’s wife crying in the parking lot. Perhaps at this moment my mother remembered it was Sunday, the day of the Lord, because she said: “Eh, but it is unfortunate. Poor lady. Mungu atamsaidia.” God will help her? I wonder about this God, this helper, a lot, and how he goes about choosing who and when to help.

I happened to look out into the backyard and saw Aunt Rahab standing there, staring at me, angry, motionless. I felt the blood rush to my ears, and my body broke into a tingling sweat. I knew she had understood; I knew she knew.

*

When I come back to this moment, this moment in London in 2019, with Aunt Rahab's calves before me, I will have missed my flight to Nairobi. I will have missed my flight, not so that I stay in London—it is thorny here too—but to decide where I will go from here, because I know it is not Nairobi. I will have passed a group of teenagers who laughed when they looked at me. Maybe I will have buttoned my shirt wrong. Maybe it will be the woman walking closely behind me they laugh at. Maybe they just laughed while looking in our direction. It may also be the short skirt I will be wearing, the skirt that will finally show all I have been trying to hide, that they will find funny. I will, for the first time in a year, be feeling my wounded self, creeping out of the debris of 2007 to claim me, and I will not like the look of her. I will turn the corner that leads me to anywhere but Nairobi.

But here Aunt Rahab is, taking me back to me, yet holding me even here, hugging me, warm, cushy, hard.

Alas.

It is not Aunt Rahab. Those are not her calves.

MAURITIUS

The Last Sacrifice

Priya Hein

Unable to sleep, Anita eased herself out of bed and reached out for the pile of crumpled clothes on the floor. Careful not to disturb her mother, she managed to slip out of the house at dawn unnoticed. The heat and humidity were pressing against her shoulders as she wandered about the empty streets, not sure what she was looking for or where she was going. Attracted by a thin plume of smoke coming from the foot of the hill surrounded by fields of sugarcane, she trudged towards the end of the village in the direction of the smoky trail.

She followed a dirt track, off the main road, trying to find shade under the odd trees that lined the dusty path until she found herself in front of the gate of a dilapidated temple. The paint, probably once a bright shade of fuchsia, had been erased by years of rain, sun and neglect.

The floor was littered with debris: incense sticks, a discarded plastic bag, bits of discoloured bunting and a scattering of dead leaves. Something scurried away across the floor. A rat? A field mouse? It was hard to tell in the shade.

Although it was too early for visitors, she opened the old gate and followed the narrow stairs, which seemed to be missing railings, until she was greeted by a statue of a blue-faced Krishna playing his flute. His neck was adorned with a garland of fresh flowers. Also enshrined on the altar were Hanuman, the monkey God and Ganesh, the half-elephant and half-human God. The air was heavily scented with camphor and burned sandalwood.

‘Can I help you, beti?’ A pandit appeared from the back room holding a set of prayer beads in his hand. His greasy face was marked with remnants of an unfortunate bout of acne. It was strange to be referred to as beti, daughter, by a man who was only a couple of years older than her.

‘I was just passing by,’ she was caught off-guard and was about to turn around.

‘Shall I perform a blessing for you?’

Indifferent, Anita shrugged her shoulders in response.

‘Thik hai, beti.’

The pujari placed his prayer beads on a wooden table next to the altar and assembled a few items from the puja paraphernalia. He rung a little copper handle-bell and sprinkled some water on her before reciting a mantra with his eyes shut in concentration. He dipped his finger into a small terracotta pot and painted a dot of bright vermillion in between her eyes in guise of blessing.

‘May you stay blessed, my child.’

She pushed away a single strand of hair that got stuck in the red paste on her forehead, smudging the tikka on her face.

The pandit looked at her expectantly. Anita dug into her pocket and found some coins which she dropped into the metal donation box that was prominently displayed in front of the altar. Satisfied with the heavy clinking sounds of the coins as they hit the metal, the pandit thanked her and uttered a few more verses in Sanskrit before picking up his prayer beads again, leaving Anita free to go back downstairs and roam about in the empty courtyard.

Preparations for some kind of function were under way behind the temple. A couple of men could be seen clearing the site, poking hot ember and removing ashes from remnants of a previous fire into a

bucket. It was only when she saw the freshly stacked wood, a few metres away, that she made the connection with the Hindu ritual of *antyeshti*, the last sacrifice.

She was suddenly distracted by the sounds of chanting. Looking up she saw a retinue of male mourners carrying a palanquin covered in fresh palm leaves and marigolds. The procession of chanting men, in full spate, was slowly making its way through the fields towards the back of the temple. The chief mourner kept whispering the mantra '*Ram naam satya hai. Ram naam satya hai. Ram naam satya hai*' into the dead person's ears. It then rippled through the crowd like a wave. It was eerie for Anita to hear her maiden name being chanted over and over to redeem the dead from bad deeds.

The corpse bearers' faces were dripping in sweat as they struggled with the weight of the pallet on their shoulders and the assault of the morning heat. A branch of palm tree fell on the ground, exposing the naked skeleton of bamboos and planks. From behind a tree, Anita watched as the palanquin was placed on the stack of dry logs, the dead person's feet facing south according to traditional rites.

A reverent hush fell over the crowd as the lead mourner circumambulated the pyre chanting hymns and sprinkling the body and the wood with ghee before setting it alight. He took a step back as it went ablaze. The roaring flames seemed to be dancing wildly to the loud chanting of the mourners as it reached crescendo.

Did the dead ever really leave? She could not help but wonder.

From her hiding place, Anita stood mesmerized by the unfolding scene until a sharp voice behind her made her jump.

'*Madam. Pa bon gete sa. Li pou aport ou mofinn!*' The man, who had appeared out of nowhere, admonished her: 'You shouldn't be here! Don't you know it's bad luck? The rituals must be conducted properly, amongst males only, otherwise the soul won't be able to find its way into afterlife and will

come back to haunt the living.’ Anita ignored him and continued staring at the cadaver being ravaged by the hungry flames. The great blaze, immolating all.

‘Mo finn dir ou napa gete!’

Anita was sufficiently miffed by his hectoring tone to tell him to mind his own business before submerging herself in the darkness of the shadows.

A non-believer with no respect for the dead!’ He muttered under his breath before pulling phlegm up his throat and spitting it off loudly in the courtyard. *‘Tchi, tchi, pagli!’*

The man proceeded to sweep the dead leaves into a pile in the corner of the courtyard leaving them to rot and decompose until they could be buried into the earth as compost, to feed the seedlings that spurt new life from the fertile soil. The caretaker ignored her and retreated back into the shade. He was darkness in the darkness, his pointy face reminded her of an angry mongoose.

She was aware that according to Hindu traditions, cremation ceremonies should only be witnessed by the male relatives of the deceased, but Anita had been exposed to death and had seen corpses since she was a child.

The first time she saw a dead body she was about seven years old, at the funeral of her young aunt who had committed suicide over a scandalous affair. Anita still remembered how the fleas had angrily circled the open casket, on full display, in the middle of the crammed living room. The dead woman’s swollen lips and throat had turned almost black from the traces of the deadly bottles of insecticides she had gulped in despair. It looked as if the insidious liquid had not only taken away her life but had literally devoured the skin as it navigated its way to her stomach.

To this day, despite Anita’s probing, she still did not know the full story. Mam simply refused to talk about it. From the snippets of hushed conversation overheard, she had constructed a picture of an illicit

liaison with a wealthy married man who lived in a nearby house with his wife and young children. Her lover had led her to believe he would leave his family and run away to Italy with her.

With the help of a book bought in town, the young aunt had secretly taught herself some rudimentary Italian, dreaming of the day they could be together freely, at last. She eventually found out that he had no intention of leaving his family for her. He had blatantly used her, spinning lies after lies. She had been a mere distraction.

Rumours began to swell. An amateurish live butchering of a raw seedling resulted in a bout of depression which ran deep in the family. Life had cruelly and painfully been sucked out of her young aunt, literally and then metaphorically. Whatever really happened, Anita knew it was an ugly story that the family preferred to bury. A dark family secret locked in a tomb like the proverbial skeleton in the closet.

When the relatives and neighbours from the village came to pay their respects to the dead woman and to partake in the morning funeral rituals, an uncle, whose penchant for cheap rum got the better of him, was too drunk even at that hour to understand what had happened. He had tottered amongst the crowd, dishevelled, barely able to stand straight let alone string together intelligible words without slurring. He collapsed on a nearby rattan chair with his flies undone. A murmur of shock rippled through the crowd as they witnessed the uncle, stretched out in his state of drunken stupor, wet the crotch of his khaki trousers in full view of the mourners who were already sick with grief. Two male relatives had quickly materialised to lift the drunk man out of his slumber and carry him to his bed while another relative rushed to get a bucket of water to mop away the urine that was trickling down the chair onto the concrete floor to form a small puddle. Some of the women had the presence of mind to chase away the children, but it was too late. Anita and her young cousins had witnessed the scene where the dead had been upstaged by the living, albeit drunk.

A small thrill of repulsion went through her as the strong stench of burning flesh, intensified by the scorching heat, hit her until the unsettling smell of death made her cover her mouth and retch.

Unable to bear the sight and the nauseating odour any longer, she left just as the chief mourner started the *kapal kriya* ritual of piercing the burning skull with a stave in order to set the spirit of the deceased free to enter afterlife.

Treading over the trail of fresh flowers left by the procession, Anita navigated her way through the dispersing crowd until she was on the main road where she boarded the next bus heading towards the coast. Sandwiched between two factory workers about to clock in their morning shift, Anita caught a glimpse of the sea from her seat. As the bus left the village behind, she could see the clear blanket of ocean spread at the bottom of the sugar fields beckoning her in, calling her, ready to envelop her. Inviting her to immerse herself into the lagoon. To surrender herself completely to the sea. Unrestrained. To let go. To be cleansed. Purified. To float free. To be carried away by the waves. Weightless. To drift. To sink in. To become one with the ocean. To escape the sickly smell of death that lingered on, even in her sleep.

That night, lying on her back in total darkness, Anita could still hear the funeral mantra being chanted above the crackling noise of the burning firewood. Calling to her in the blackness of the night. The flames were approaching her. Luring her. Finding her in her sleep. Whispering her name, Anita Ram, in her ears. She could not escape. The chant of death. Echoes. In her head. Repeatedly. Getting louder and louder until the voices woke her up. An internal stampede. Like the playing of a mad drum that only she could hear.

Anita, Ram naam satya hai. Anita, Ram naam satya hai. Anita, Ram naam satya hai.

Ram. Ram. Ram naam satya hai.

Anita Ram. Anita Ram. Anita Ram.

Anita. Ram.

Anita.

I, Shaitan

Haddiyyah Tegally

Nani doesn't like me. If I ever dared say this out loud, people would tell me that I'm imagining things, that she's just a bit peculiar, that she's getting old now and as such that it's up to me to accommodate. They can say whatever they want, I know *for a fact* that she doesn't like me. She caters for me because she has to, not because she wants to. She feeds me every day in the same way that she would reluctantly tell relatives who've sprung up at the house unannounced to stay for dinner. Every time I hear other kids at school talking about their grandmother, I can't help but feel a sting of jealousy. They all look so happy when they go to their grandparents' for the weekend – it puzzles me. Everything seems so different here at home. Well, I say "home," but I don't feel like I belong there Just the other day, I wanted to help Nani cook and she literally slapped my knuckles in response, pressing me not to touch anything because my hands were dirty... even though she clearly saw that I had just washed them a moment before. To her, my hands are always dirty. And if my hands were only her sole cause for offense! There's my mouth, too. I can't even count the number of times she's told other family members about my "dirty mouth," whenever they pay us a visit — which is increasingly rarely. And I can't blame them. Most of the time, they haven't even had time to sit down on her old brown velvet sofa that she's already complaining about the Shaitan she keeps at home. I'll admit I'm often rude to her, but only because she keeps pushing my buttons. She knows full well that I don't want to hear about my dad and she takes great pleasure in reminding me constantly how like him I am. According to her, I have inherited both his eyes and his nasty temper. But that's not true! Everyone says I have my Mom's eyes; as big and mysterious as the universe, as black as my first morning coffee. Sometimes I think she's just jealous that people pay attention to me at all. Then I realise it is a silly thought to have. I just don't understand. Aren't grandmothers supposed to care for their grandchildren, spoil them even? The only thing she ever fills me with is a furious desire to leave the house and never come back. But then again, if I ever did that, she would probably only shrug and say that it was all to be expected, that I had been bound to fall into my dad's old patterns...

I get her, though. Sort of. But not really. I know she didn't have an easy life, and that I should probably be more compassionate towards her ... but as much as I try, I can't hide or dismiss the loathing I have of

her. I hate the thought of her touching me, holding my hand There are times when I wish I could break open her skull to discover what's hidden in there, to probe deep into her brain, like a scientist patiently analysing the structure of living cells under the eye of his microscope. I'd shout, "Eureka! I've got it!" I would wave the anomaly I'd have found and made tangible in front of everyone. No Sir, no Ma'am, see for yourself, I'm not the Shaitan here, unlike what you've been told to believe!

Last night, I woke with a start. I thought I'd heard a noise before realising that I was the one who'd screamed. I could feel a throbbing pain in my lower back. It slithered from my left kidney to my stomach, bringing tears to my eyes as I lay down, helpless. Nana burst into my bedroom less than five minutes later, red-eyed, his face bearing obvious signs of distress. Ever since *it* happened, he's been a light sleeper, and he quickly realised that this was not a nightmare or a panic attack. After having placed his hand on my forehead and asked me where the pain was coming from, he left the room. I heard him whisper a few words to Nani. Oh! So she wasn't sleeping either.... Shortly after, he reentered my bedroom with my toothbrush in hand, and slipped it into a small case that was lying on my bedside table. Then, he took out some clothes from the cupboard and put them in a small red suitcase. He handed me a sweater and told me, with his ever-so-calm-and-collected tone of voice, "Put this on, I'll take you to the hospital!"

I needed surgery. The doctors said I had renal calculi. Kidney stones! I'd heard of those before. One of Nani's cousins was diagnosed with the same thing last year. Her and Nana had discussed it during dinner, to my utter disgust, and I hadn't been able to finish my plate. Well – it had served as a good excuse anyway: truth was, I'd never been fond of Nani's brinjal curry. After the surgery, the doctor asked me how much water I drank per day. When he learned that it added up to less than one litre, he immediately took it upon himself to scold me. Nothing too serious, but I must admit that I felt quite embarrassed. He then went on to explain that I'd know if I was drinking enough by examining the color of my urine. "With proper hydration, urine is pale and odourless." Yes, thank you doctor. I already knew that. Not content with leaving well enough alone, he made sure to pat me on the shoulder on the way out to see his next patient and to add with a laugh, "And I don't want to see you again!" As soon as his back was turned, I did the most unforgiving eyeroll I could muster. Nana noticed it and frowned as if to say, "Stop overdramatising, Sanya!" Then his expression changed, he came closer and with a slightly embarrassed smile, said: "Nani apologises for not coming to see you at the hospital, she was tired."

"I see."

"Tired" is the excuse we give all the time because it is the one justification people actually accept to hear. When you're asked if everything's okay, you never say, "No, I'm unhappy!" you say, "Yeah, just tired!" When you're asked why you didn't go to the party of X or Y, you don't reply "Because I don't fucking care!" you say you're tired and usually no one asks you any more questions.

Kala Leyla popped in to see me. She straightened the pillow behind my head, then leaned over to kiss me. Her veil brushed past my stomach, and I instantly felt like my skin was being slashed anew. Despite the morphine injections, I was still in pain, even though I tried not to show it. Suffering is ugly as sin... The nurse told Nana that he had a brave granddaughter. He nodded, looking very serious. I could see that he was thinking of something else. I don't know what's been going on but lately, he's been acting distracted.

I really like Nana. I look at him through the eyes of a child, through the filter of much tenderness. I like to tease him about the contrast between his big ears and his thin lips. How fitting though! He's a much better listener than talker. It's no coincidence that his favourite motto is *parlons peu, parlons bien* which literally means "Speak little, speak well." When he does speak, everyone listens to him. It's a shame he so rarely goes there. In front of his wife, he has never been able to side with me, even when he knows full well that she's in the wrong. Because she has suffered a lot in the past, he's constantly walking on eggshells around her, afraid he'll upset her. According to him, whatever she does, whatever she says, we shouldn't take it to heart. He repeats this so often that it's become some sort of omerta. And of course, Nani always succeeds in making him do whatever she wants. With him, she has all the rights, all the power. She wields him as if he were a brush between her fingers. All she has to do is stroke him until he closes his eyes and surrenders to painting the world through hers. I've lost count of the number of times I've felt like shaking him, like telling him, open your eyes Nana I need you too listen to me Nana don't you see what she's doing to you what she's doing to me Nana. But I'm a child of silence. My words don't count. No more than Mom's ever did. Hers flew into space and exploded into a supernova. One day I'll go and join her. Then I'll know.

After several days at the hospital, I was more than happy to be back home. As soon as I entered the living room, I took a deep breath. Here, at least, I didn't have to endure the smell of disinfectants, of sick

people or of visitors' sweat A sweet orange cake scent filled the house. Oh! Remorse smells pretty good. I slowly made my way to the kitchen and kissed Nani on the cheek. She turned her face one way, then the other, nothing more. She didn't seem particularly moved to see me. Why did I still find this surprising? I don't remember her ever taking me in her arms or showing me any kind of affection. She asked me how I was doing, if I wanted cake. Did she really think she was going to buy my forgiveness with cake? As I shook my head "no," she handed a slice to Nana, who had just then joined us in the kitchen. She didn't ask me any questions about the surgery, and I didn't ask her why she didn't come. She then went on to argue with Nana because he forgot to take off his shoes at the door. Annoyed, I went back to the living room and turned on the TV, delving into the comparatively fascinating world of animal documentaries.

The good thing about having kidney stones (one needs to look on the bright side, right?) was that I got exempted from school for a week. I must admit that Nana had played a great part in influencing the principal's decision. Both men had come to the conclusion that I had a hard-enough time as it was At first, I was happy. I had no trouble picturing myself chilling out in front of the TV all day or reading a good novel until the wee hours of the morning. I had forgotten Nani and her crazy episodes. Dirty hands. Dirty hands, always Whatever I touch, whatever I do. Nani and her screams. "Still in front of the TV? What is this dirty movie you're watching?" She sucked on her teeth disapprovingly, making a tchipping noise, while heading towards the TV with the firm intention of turning it off. Of course. Because seeing two people kissing on the mouth was dirty? As soon as she left the room, I grabbed the remote and turned the TV back on. Predictably, she wasn't going to let it go at that. She yanked the remote control out of my hands and turned off the TV once again. I got up. I don't know how, but we quickly came to blows. I pushed her. She slapped me. I did the same. She grabbed my wrist and squeezed it between her stubby fingers. I had no idea she had such strength left in her. I should have known, she's out of this world, Nani. She is, and forever will be, my *vipère au poing*. After hurling a few insults at her, and grappling around with her some more, I managed to free myself from her grip. Infuriated, I unplugged the TV cable, ran up to my room and locked myself in. She pounded on the door for about fifteen minutes before finally giving up. Nani Fury. I didn't want to see her anymore, I hated her; her absurdity, her insanity There was no way I was leaving my safe spot. Tonight, like several other nights, I would go to sleep on an empty stomach. It's stupid, I know, but it's one of the only ways I have of rebelling against her.

Today, Nana came home from work looking particularly joyful. After greeting Nani and laying a kiss on my forehead, he began to tell us about his day. In the family, tea is sacred, especially after a hard day's work. Like every day, Nana's is ready when he gets home. Nani poured cardamom-scented tea into his cup. Between two sips, he explained that he had met an old friend of his while walking along Edith Cavell Street in Port Louis. They had shared old memories, exchanged nostalgic thoughts of their carefree childhood. When he finished drinking, he went upstairs, whistling. The phone rang. I heard him laugh along with the person on the other end of the line. I quietly finished my tea as well, absentmindedly trying to catch a few snippets of their conversation. Nani was waving a fan near her face in an attempt to get some air. It was made of chiseled wood, adorned of apple-green silk fabric with a cherry blossom pattern. I might have made a sharp and sudden move when I got up because I instantly felt like I'd been stabbed in the stomach. I sat down immediately. Too weak to scream, I asked Nani to seek Nana's help. Undisturbed, she called out his name in a weak voice as if he were still sitting right beside us. I was soon begging her, "Please call Nana. Please call Nana." She pretended not to hear me. Standing next to the window, she kept waving her fucking fan. Her gaze was fixed on something outside, while she stood patiently waiting for me to stop whining. Head on the table, I pressed on my stomach in an effort to contain the pain. Tears rolled down my cheeks without a sound. I waited for it to go away. Everything goes away, eventually.

When he learned, Nana was mad at himself. His call had lasted a long time. He apologised several times, saying that he should have cut the conversation short, knowing that I needed him. But he hadn't known. He hadn't heard me. Upon finding me in such a dismal state, he took me in his arms and carried me to my bedroom, just like he used to when I was four and I'd fallen asleep during a car ride. I was too weak to talk so I didn't tell him anything. Would he have believed me? Did he know how cruel his wife could be? Even I, sometimes, still find the extent of her meanness hard to believe. I had sensed such indifference in her gaze when I had asked for her help, I couldn't help thinking that as in a Andersen tale, she must have had a shard of glass stuck in her heart and glass dust in her eye.

Nana took us all to Tamarin, a beach on the island's western shore. He felt that we all needed to relax, unwind and get some rest, and he was right. It was a beautiful day, and I opted to keep my thoughts to myself. At one point, though, I couldn't help but laugh. Not needing to understand why, Nana joined in, heartily. I took a quick look at Nani. Her eyes were fixed on the road, as if she were the one driving.

Whenever Nana sped, she reprimanded him, nervously repositioning her black shawl on her shoulders. Annoyed, I opened a book — I always have at least one in my bag — that, and also mint-flavoured candy — and almost immediately lost myself into the fantasy world of Harry Potter.

Nana barely had time to stop the car that I was already running towards the sea, glowing. The sun tickled my skin pleasantly. I've always found it funny that we have to protect ourselves from such a glorious sensation. As far as I'm concerned, the sun can embrace me as much as he wants. I won't be the one to shy away from its rays. Behind me, I could hear Nani yelling after Nana because he had let me go without checking if I was wearing sunscreen. She treats me like I'm still a child. And sometimes, like a rival When I talk to my friends about her, the word that invariably comes up is "weird."

Nani doesn't like to feel the sun on her skin or the sand under her feet. As for the sea, she does find it in her to cherish it, but from afar. Although she lives on an island, she never learned how to swim. It doesn't matter to her. What matters is to keep her feet firmly on the ground, always. Nani cannot be counted among those who let themselves be carried away by life's melodies, even the sweetest. She is dull, boring. Still, she fascinates me. So much that I began, very early on, to study her every move. With her, every word, every action usually hides another. Nobody has even seen her sway to sega rhythms. It's not like her, either, to close her eyes in appreciation of jazz music. Unlike Nana, she will never be seen stomping her feet to any kind of beat, or hum while going about her daily chores. One lives, the other merely exists. My grandparents are as far alike from each other as Curepipe and Port Louis. Mango and goya. An ice cube and a cigarette. They don't have anything in common. Yet, they've been married for forty years now. I often find myself thinking that they would not be together today if they had ever loved each other. Paradoxical, I know. But it was probably more convenient to see the face of someone you've never loved day after day than that of someone who once made your heart skip a beat with every glance and was now only a source of revulsion. For me, there was no question that theirs had been an arranged marriage. If they were still together, it was out of habit, out of fear of gossip, that kind of stuff. They never made love: they made children. Five, to be precise. But love, passionate, fusional, striking-thunder-love, never. And yet, who could blame them? They did nothing other than what society expected of them at that time.

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Lately, looking at Nani as I stand at her doorstep, as is my habit, I can't help but notice that she's forever wearing a slightly glazed expression. Her skin has become yellowish, her mouth stands permanently ajar, as if she were fighting for air. She looks like one of those zombies in the TV shows I was forbidden to watch as a kid. Seeing her like that causes me, in turn, to suffocate. Unfortunately, I have to walk past her room to get to mine. If I had a choice, I would remain shut in my corner of the house until it all stops. Kala Leyla says Nani sees spirits. I think about it all the time and, quite frankly, it gives me the creeps. As soon as I close my eyes, I can picture her face rotting, her skin wasting away in tatters. Her moans echo persistently in my head. The worst part are the howls she'll emit, calling out Mom's name, and that make all the hair on my body stand on end - like little soldiers - waiting for ... what? I don't know! What does it all mean? I'm ashamed – so-ashamed – to be such a chicken. Like a child, I am afraid all the time, and of everything. Fear of the dark fear of nightmares fear of ghosts over my shoulder fear of insomnia of strangers' diseases of my heartbeats becoming louder and louder fear of death fear of noise fear of silence.

Someone once told me that people never entrust others with a burden that's heavier than they could bear. Well, the one that takes the shape of Nani is rather heavy, Allah! Deep down though, I know that what I've been told is true. I sincerely believe that in the greatest misfortunes, we always end up meeting the person we need at that very moment in our lives, the one who manages to lift our spirits no matter what. Thank you Allah for putting Marjorie on our path. She's so much more than just Nani's nurse. Marjorie has the most contagious laugh on the face of the planet. When she laughs, she makes the walls shake... as if the house were laughing along with her. Even when she's sad, she always somehow ends up laughing between two sobs, which only increases the affection I have for her. And to think that when she'd just arrived, I'd felt intimidated by her Tall, impressive, her ebony skin seemed to me to be shielding a thousand of the universe's wonders. Even though since then, I've gotten to know her a little better, she still retains an aura of mystery. I have trouble understanding, for instance, how a nurse should be able to stay in such a good mood, day in, day out. Marjorie loves to sing for Beauty, which is the nickname she's given Nani. The other day, while Marjorie was talking to her, I caught Nani wincing. But it wasn't a grimace. She was actually smiling! The first time I can remember her smiling since her illness

began. When the smiles became increasingly frequent, I had to give in to the evidence that Marjorie had magic powers. I wouldn't go so far as to say that with Marjorie, the house radiates happiness, but she certainly has a way of making things brighter by the mere fact of her presence.

On my birthday, when Marjorie and I were both in the kitchen and Nani was asleep, she gave me a letter, urging me to read it later on. I was puzzled. In that letter, she confessed that she had never been able to have children and that she thought of me as her own daughter. Nana told me that she was illiterate and that he tried to help her when he could, especially when it came to looking over her bank statements. When I asked Marjorie about it, she told me gingerly that it had been one of her neighbours who had written the letter for her, and I had hugged her. Hard. I think that was when I realised that I loved her more than any other member of my family. I now affectionately call her Mary Poppins. She gives me nicknames that I find simply ridiculous such as "cutie pie" or "lil' shrimp," but coming from her, it doesn't bother me in the least. Once Nani has recovered, she will have to leave. Although I force myself to think about it from time to time, the truth is, I can no longer imagine our life without Marjorie.

Nana likes Marjorie less and less. He thinks she has a hell of a nerve. To be honest, it's one of the things I like most about her. The other day, he says he caught her "emptying a bottle of Chanel perfume" all over herself. The one he had given Nani for her sixtieth birthday. I'm sure he's exaggerating. Besides, it's a good thing that someone actually gets to use it, right? "This is not too high a price to pay for enduring Nani's lamentations for a whole day," I'd countered. Offended, Nana had slapped me, and we hadn't spoken to each other for a whole week after that. I also know that Marjorie steals chocolates from the refrigerator, but I'm determined to remain as silent as the grave. I'm too afraid that Nana will decide to kick her out if he comes to hear about it. I need her so much. We all need her; her chortles, her songs, all the pieces of her that adorn the house. No one ever realised how hard it was for me too. Only Marjorie understands. I can never bring friends home. I wouldn't want them to get scared when they hear Nani's cries echoing down the stairs. Or to be bothered by the smell because she frequently has diarrhea. I have no one to talk to about the anxieties and little hassles of being a teenager. No one in the house has time for that. In those moments, I miss Mom more than anything in the world – my idea of her at least. I was

just a child when she died. I only have a few memories left and my grandparents rarely talk about her.
The list of taboos in our family is endless.

MEXICO

La madre espera

Ghada E. Martínez

La niña camina por los pasillos del supermercado pero no encuentra a nadie. Los estantes están vacíos, las lámparas se balancean y la luz titila. Es de noche, no se escucha nada más que el golpeteo de sus pasitos apresurados. Continúa buscando sin encontrar, ahora por un callejón oscuro, frío. Siente el latido de su corazón en los oídos. Quiere gritar pero no puede porque tiene la voz congelada. Corre y avanza por la callejuela que parece interminable hasta que a lo lejos ve un farol. Cuando está lo suficientemente cerca distingue la silueta de su madre bajo el chorro de luz amarilla. Está de espaldas. La niña suspira de alivio y corre hacia ella, pero antes de que pueda rozar una de las manos de su madre, ésta se voltea y la mira como si no la reconociera. Después se parte a la mitad como un aguacate, incluso puede verse el hueso café y redondo en el vientre de una de las mitades. Las partes del cascarón de la madre quedan balancéandose en el suelo como dos pequeñas cunas. Por fin consigue gritar. Se levanta y corre a la habitación contigua para zambullirse en la cama de su madre, que se revuelve y le hace un lugar a su lado. Shhhhhh, no pasa nada, aquí estoy. La madre la abraza, le acaricia la espalda que sube y baja con sollozos entrecortados, y le besa el cabello. Poco a poco, la niña se tranquiliza y comienza a dormirse de nuevo. Shhhhhh. Aquí estoy.

Las nubes se cierran sobre la ciudad y el olor a lluvia se mezcla con el de la basura acumulada en las banquetas. Lidia camina lo más rápido que puede evitando los charcos de agua sucia, el viento le zumba en los oídos. Es tarde. La pintura descascarada de las fachadas y el grafiti de los portones desfilan frente a ella, el sonido de sus zapatos sobre el asfalto y su respiración agitada son segundos apresurados. Su teléfono no deja de sonar, la madre sabe dónde está, pero quiere confirmar. Lidia está molesta, pero sabe que es mejor que todas porque se lo han dicho siempre y no hace falta ponerlo a prueba. Los tontos son ellos por no haberla contratado. Se ajusta los anteojos que se le resbalan constantemente de la nariz

y se acomoda el portafolio bajo el brazo. Observa por el rabillo del ojo las luces que se encienden poco a poco en las avenidas que va dejando atrás. Casi oscurece e intenta ganarle la carrera a la lluvia y al regaño de la madre. Al llegar se detiene frente a la puerta del departamento; se alisa las arrugas de la ropa y se pasa la mano por el cabello recogido para aplacar cualquier mechón fuera de lugar. Mete la llave en la cerradura y entra sin hacer ruido. La televisión está encendida y la madre en el sillón con una taza en la mano. Lidia se acerca despacio y busca sus ojos, ella la mira un instante y vuelve a concentrarse en la pantalla. La mesa está puesta, la comida fría. Es tarde. ¿Dónde estabas?

Lidia se sienta a la mesa y empieza a comer. El caldo tiene una capa de grasa gelatinosa encima, la carne está dura, las papas aguadas. La madre repite la pregunta y Lidia responde con un hilo de voz que se distrajo en el camino de regreso, después elogia la comida. La madre se levanta del sillón, se acerca y le acaricia la cabeza. Son las nueve de la noche. Pudo haberle dado un ataque de nervios por la preocupación y se pasó toda la tarde cocinando. Además no contestaba el teléfono. ¿Y si hubiera sido una emergencia?, ¿y si le hubiera dado un infarto? Debe ser más considerada. Es muy distraída, no entiende que las calles son peligrosas. ¿Te lo dieron? La hija niega con la cabeza y no menciona que tras cinco o seis minutos de entrevista la despidieron con un te llamamos. Le dieron el puesto a alguien más. A una más joven, más guapa, con medias y tacones. La madre suspira, recoge los platos de la mesa y tira la comida a la basura. La hija es muy desconsiderada. La madre se encierra en su habitación y Lidia se dirige a la suya para echarse en la cama. Su puerta no tiene cerrojo. Después de un rato se levanta sin hacer ruido y pega una oreja a la pared para escuchar los ronquidos apagados de la madre.

Lidia arrastra con cuidado un banquito de madera y se sube en él para alcanzar la parte más alta del armario. Revuelve hasta que encuentra una caja que toma con cuidado. Se sienta sobre el edredón rosa y esparce sus tesoros en la cama. Dos botellitas de perfume, cuatro anillos con piedras engarzadas, un par de *stilettos* nuevos envueltos en papel de China, una cajita con sus ahorros y labiales de todos los colores: bermellón, granate, jade, cobalto, malva, cian, cerúleo, ámbar, púrpura, dorado, marrón, escarlata; todos sin usar. Cada cierto tiempo aguanta la respiración y se queda muy quieta para escuchar cualquier movimiento de su madre. Luego recorre los empaques lujosos con cuidado y huele cada objeto. Ahora que ya no tiene trabajo no puede permitirse los labiales. Le urge encontrar algo. Guarda sus cosas de nuevo y tiene el cuidado de esconder bien la caja entre su ropa. Apaga la luz, se echa en la cama y se queda dormida arrullada por los ronquidos de la madre.

Al día siguiente la humedad de una mancha de saliva sobre su almohada la despierta. Son las siete de la mañana y tiene programada otra entrevista de trabajo a las diez. Es martes y por eso está de buenas. Se revuelve entre las sábanas y escucha a la madre dar vueltas en la cocina. El tintineo de los cubiertos y el chisporroteo del aceite en el sartén terminan por despertarla. Se levanta y se mete a bañar; se frota con jabón todo el cuerpo minuciosamente, cada pliegue, cada curva. Al salir se pone una camisa blanca y el pantalón de vestir perfectamente planchado que la madre le ha dejado sobre la cama. El desayuno está listo: el pan crujiente con mantequilla, el café negro y humeante como le gusta. La madre la mira mientras desayuna y le arregla el cuello de la camisa. Después la recorre de arriba abajo con la mirada. La hija se concentra en la sala mientras la madre inspecciona: las repisas que acumulan polvo, el piano que la madre hubiera querido que aprendiera a tocar, varias pinturas hechas por la madre, un juego de té despostillado. La madre le acaricia una mejilla con sus dedos artríticos. No te distraigas en el camino de regreso.

Lidia sale de su casa en dirección a la preparatoria donde va a pedir trabajo. Camina mirando su reflejo en cada escaparate que pasa: el cabello opaco, las arrugas alrededor de los ojos, la grasa acumulada en los muslos, sus senos firmes. Al llegar a la escuela se detiene en la entrada, insegura. Varios estudiantes entran y salen constantemente; unos compran comida en los puestos callejeros, otros fuman recargados en la pared, varios se ríen a carcajadas. Abundan pantalones rotos, mechones teñidos y manchas de delineador negro bajo los ojos. Lidia se fija en dos chicas que caminan hacia la entrada y las observa con desdén: la piel brillante, las sonrisas amplias y despreocupadas. Una de ellas lleva unos *shorts* encima de un par de medias de red, la otra una falda de flores corta. Sus piernas largas; tersas.

La madre todavía no despierta, así que Lidia tiene algunos minutos para contemplarse en el espejo. Se desnuda y no le gusta lo que ve: las caderas cada vez más prominentes, los senos pequeños y puntiagudos, las piernas cubiertas por una capa de vello delgado, oscuro. Recorre con las manos todo su cuerpo y se mira desde varios ángulos. Salta al escuchar un sonido en la habitación de al lado y se viste lo más rápido que puede. Acaricia la tela de la falda negra que descansa sobre la cama. Karen se la prestó al enterarse de que ella no tenía ni una sola falda o vestido, sólo los pantalones aguados que llevaba a la escuela todos los días. Habían quedado de saltarse las clases e ir a casa de un amigo a beber y a pasar el rato. Lidia quería aprovechar para cambiar un poco de estilo. Le gustaba el de su amiga: ropa negra

ajustada, delineador de ojos y los labios de un color distinto cada día: azul oscuro, magenta, negro, esmeralda.

Esconde la falda debajo de su cama y saca el rastrillo que robó del tocador de su madre, se mete a bañar y se quita el vello del cuerpo lo mejor que puede. Luego de unos minutos, la madre entra a orinar. Al salir, Lidia se viste y guarda la falda en su mochila. Madre e hija desayunan juntas. Lidia intenta platicar con su madre pero ésta sólo gruñe y se concentra en su plato. Antes de irse a la escuela, la madre le devuelve el rastrillo lleno de vello que dejó en el baño. Se te olvidó. Lidia siente cómo se le enciende la cara. Se dirige hacia la puerta sin mirar a la madre. ¿A quién vas a ir a ver? Lidia se quiere morir. La niña no se habría depilado si no quisiera enseñarle las piernas a alguien, a un hombre. Al llegar a la escuela, Lidia le devuelve la falda a Karen y le dice que no piensa saltarse ninguna clase.

Lidia arrastra los pies sobre el pavimento. Se tardó más de lo planeado en el centro comercial. Estaba a punto de salir, pero los escaparates del área de maquillaje llamaron su atención y terminó comprando de más. En una de las bolsas de cartón que trae consigo tintinean los empaques de varios lápices de labios nuevos que la reconfortan y evitan que piense en su cartera vacía. Mira su reloj y se apresura. La madre no tardará en llamar una, dos, tres, cuatro veces hasta que conteste y le explique que ya casi llega a casa. Uno de los labiales lo compró con su madre en mente, es color salmón, pensó que combinaría con su piel pálida. Lidia camina nerviosa y dobla en la calle que llega hasta su departamento. Su teléfono no ha sonado. Eso puede significar que la madre está tan molesta que decidió ignorarla o que le dio un infarto por la preocupación. Lidia siente un agujero de ansiedad y enojo en el estómago mientras saca sus llaves. Abre con cuidado, se asoma y entra sin hacer ruido.

El departamento está en silencio, su madre está sentada de espaldas a la puerta y frente a un caballete. Sólo se escuchan las débiles pinceladas que la mujer da sobre el lienzo. Lidia camina sigilosamente, espera un reproche, un comentario ácido o que la ignore deliberadamente. La madre trabaja en un paisaje lleno de flores violetas y azules. Lidia sabe que antes de que ella naciera, su madre le dedicaba mucho más tiempo a la pintura. Donde viven está lleno de retratos de geranios y azucenas, pequeños perritos y paisajes montañosos; incluso hay algunos retratos.

Lidia se detiene y observa el cuadro inconcluso. Le asombra cómo la madre parece escoger siempre el color correcto en la medida correcta. Cuando pinta arruga un poco la frente y respira con

exhalaciones largas, acompasadas. La madre se voltea y le sonríe a su hija; Lidia retrocede. ¿Cómo te fue? Lidia murmura que bien y piensa en el lápiz de labios color salmón. Observa el cabello oscuro de su madre y sus mejillas coloreadas. Está indecisa, ¿y si a su madre le parece una frivolidad? ¿y si la reprende por haber gastado demasiado en cosas inútiles? Decide no mencionar nada y continúa observando el cuadro. ¿Te gusta? Todavía no estoy segura si debería poner más rojo aquí. Lidia responde que le gusta cómo está quedando. La madre sonríe de nuevo y se voltea para continuar pintando. La hija suspira aliviada y va a su habitación. Quita las envolturas de plástico de los labiales y los guarda en su cajita de tesoros. Excepto el que es color salmón, ese lo conserva cerrado y lo guarda separado de los demás.

La entrevista fue bien. Le pidieron dar una clase muestra y lo hizo con soltura. Al salir, el hombre que la entrevistó le dio la mano y le dijo que le gustaría que comenzara cuanto antes con un grupo de segundo. Lidia se dirige hacia su casa, pero cinco calles antes de llegar se desvía para detenerse frente al escaparate de una *sex shop*. Observa la ropa interior de encaje, los vibradores y algunos arneses. Hace una mueca que podría ser de desprecio o de fastidio. Su teléfono comienza a vibrar y lo saca del bolsillo: tres llamadas perdidas de casa. Lo vuelve a guardar y retoma su camino. ¿Cómo te fue? La madre sabía que se lo iban a dar porque la hija está bien preparada y es muy profesional. Ahora van a tener más dinero para sus medicinas y para los paseos dominicales.

Como la madre sabía que le iba a ir bien, preparó pasta, la favorita de Lidia. Comen juntas y la hija le cuenta todos los detalles, que entrevistaron a varias personas, que había algunas mujeres vulgares con mucho maquillaje, que el coordinador elogió su dedicación. Cuando terminan de comer, la madre se retira para dormir la siesta y Lidia dice que hará lo mismo porque tiene que descansar para iniciar con pie derecho su primer día de clases. Al escuchar la puerta del cuarto de su madre cerrarse, Lidia cierra la suya y bloquea la entrada con una silla. Revuelve entre su ropa, saca la caja del armario y apila todas sus cosas en la cama. También saca un sostén con relleno, una falda negra que le llega a la mitad de los muslos y una blusa con escote que se adhiere a su vientre abultado.

Después de vestirse se sienta frente al tocador, se observa un momento y desvía la mirada: tiene algunas espinillas en la nariz y ojeras violáceas, una ligera pelusa oscura le cubre el labio superior. Pone sus labiales uno detrás de otro y al final se decide por el púrpura. Si se da prisa, le dará tiempo de volver antes de que la madre despierte. Abre la boca y se lo pone rápido, saliéndose del contorno. Guarda

silencio, aguza el oído y se relaja cuando oye los ronquidos débiles de la madre. Se calza los *stiletto*s negros, toma una bolsa con ropa de repuesto y se mira al espejo por última vez. Le gustaría tener una amiga a la cual preguntarle cómo luce, si le queda mejor esta blusa o aquella. Le gustaría tener una amiga.

Es su primer día de clases de primaria y la niña regresa feliz. Le encantan sus veinticuatro lápices de colores y la bolsa morada en la cual los guarda. Además ya tiene mejor amiga, sólo se acercó, le dijo quieres ser mi amiga y ambas jugaron todo el recreo juntas. La niña le cuenta emocionada a la madre, que la mira atentamente. ¿Te acabaste toda la comida que te mandé?, ¿cerraste bien tu mochila?, ¿guardaste bien tus lápices? La niña responde que sí a todo y la madre la abraza y le da un beso en la mejilla. Ambas se ríen. Como no tiene tarea van al parque juntas y la madre le da varias monedas para que se suba a un helicóptero mecánico que sube y baja. Persiguen a las palomas que se amontonan frente al kiosco y les dan de comer alpiste. De vez en cuando la madre le recuerda a la niña que no se aleje, que no hable con extraños. Compran un globo de helio y chocolate caliente, luego pasan a una librería y juntas hojean libros con muchos dibujos. Regresan alrededor de las seis de la tarde, después de un baño se acuestan a dormir. La madre huele el cabello húmedo de la niña, la abraza para que no se aleje y cierra los ojos.

Al día siguiente, la niña se pasa la tarde llorando. Su mejor amiga ya no es su mejor amiga. Cuando la saludó ni siquiera la volteó a ver. Durante el recreo le dijo que si jugaban y ella la ignoró. No funcionó ni cuando le ofreció parte de su comida, así que la niña se pasó el descanso sentada en las escaleras, comiendo en silencio y con la garganta apretada. La madre la consuela, le dice que pronto tendrá más amigos, que esa niña no vale la pena y que no llore. Le besa las mejillas y dice que nadie la va a querer nunca como la quiere ella. La niña asiente convencida. ¿Quieres ir al parque? La hija se seca las lágrimas y sonríe.

Una vez en la calle, Lidia se concentra en caminar lo mejor posible con los tacones de aguja a los que no está acostumbrada. De vez en cuando se le doblan los tobillos, pero no mira sus pies. Un hombre le chifla desde el otro lado de la acera. Camina por un buen rato y siente que las miradas se le quedan pegadas al cuerpo. Entra al hotel que visita todos los martes, se detiene un momento en la recepción y toma el

elevador. Habitación 201. Kenia la espera desnuda. Desde el primer día acordaron hablar lo menos posible, así que Lidia entra sin saludar y se sienta al borde de la cama. La chica se sienta en sus piernas y le acomoda el cabello detrás de la oreja; es joven, más de quince años menor que Lidia. Kenia la besa y ambas terminan con la boca púrpura. La chica sonríe y baila para ella, Lidia la observa sin expresión. Kenia intenta besarla de nuevo pero ella se aparta. Tampoco se deja tocar. Se mira en el espejo y se da cuenta de que tiene labial en los dientes. Diez minutos después se levanta y se cambia de ropa, también se limpia los restos del labial de la cara. Deja el dinero sobre el buró y sale de la habitación antes de que Kenia tenga tiempo de vestirse.

Tenía dieciséis años cuando descubrió que tenía otro hoyo además del de la pipí y el ano. Se lo habían mencionado en la escuela pero no estaba segura de dónde estaba y cuando veía los esquemas del aparato reproductor femenino no reconocía su cuerpo en ellos. Sabía qué era la sangre que salía cada mes, pero nunca pensó de qué hoyo salía. La madre se lo explicó alguna vez, pero apresuradamente. Cuando Lidia descubrió una mancha marrón en sus calzones a los catorce, la madre sólo le dio una toalla y le dijo que no usara tampones porque eso era para mujeres que ya habían tenido hijos, aunque Lidia no sabía lo que eran los tampones. Habría querido preguntar más, pero sentía que había hecho enojar a su madre. Fue en el baño de mujeres de la escuela que escuchó una conversación entre sus compañeras. Ese mismo día se encerró en uno de los cubículos y hurgó entre sus piernas; olió sus dedos, jugó con la consistencia del flujo y lo probó. Luego descubrió que si se tocaba más arriba sentía un hormigueo en todo el cuerpo. Las siguientes dos semanas, cada que iba al baño se metía un dedo para comprobar que seguía ahí. Le gustaba sentirse por dentro, pero nunca se atrevió a hacerlo en su casa porque la madre se horrorizaría si lo supiera.

Al salir del hotel pasa por una panadería y se compra una bolsa de galletas de mantequilla, de ésas que la madre dice que no debería comer porque ya no es jovencita y cada vez se le nota más la celulitis. Camina arrastrando los pies y se dirige al parque. Hace años que no va. Se sienta en una de las bancas frente al kiosco, saca la bolsa de galletas y observa a las palomas. Sus ojos vidriosos no enfocan nada. Estaba decidida a dejarse llevar, a dejar que Kenia la tocara, pero se vio al espejo. Tenía labial en los dientes, la ropa ajustada, la carne saliéndosele por todos lados. Le compra una bolsita de alpiste a un

vendedor y alimenta a las palomas toda la tarde. La madre la llama. Una, dos, tres, cuatro veces. Lidia se la imagina hiperventilando, pensando en llamar a la policía o pensando con qué mano la va a cachetear cuando vuelva. Decide volver una hora después de que ha oscurecido. En cuanto atraviesa la puerta de su casa, la madre le jala el cabello y le araña la cara. Cómo puede ser tan desconsiderada, qué tiene en la cabeza, por qué nunca contesta el teléfono, por qué trae la boca manchada, de dónde sacó ese maquillaje, con quién anduvo revolcándose.

Lidia no puede evitarlo y le contesta que está harta. La madre dice que sólo quiere lo mejor para ella, que si no se acuerda de cuando estaban todo el tiempo juntas, de cuando se cuidaban la una a la otra. Ya no te soporto. Malagradecida. Me voy a largar para no tener que aguantarte más. Sin mí no serías nada. Lidia azota la puerta de su habitación, pero espera que la madre toque después de un rato y se reconcilien con un abrazo cariñoso. Una hora más tarde, la madre toca la puerta pero para decirle que ya está lista la cena.

Al día siguiente se viste lo mejor que puede. El desayuno la espera en la mesa como todos los días. No se despide de la madre. Cuando llega a la escuela observa a la multitud de estudiantes desgarrados y busca el salón donde va a dar su primera clase del día. Mientras sube las escaleras, la rebasan varias chicas que parlotean en voz muy alta y las sigue con la mirada. Al llegar a la puerta del salón suspira y entra, los hombros hacia atrás, la mirada altiva. Los estudiantes guardan silencio y se sientan. Lidia comienza su clase, les aclara que no va a tolerar faltas de respeto ni mediocridades; explica su plan de trabajo y establece claramente las reglas dentro del salón de clase. Le pide a un estudiante que está masticando chicle que se salga. Comienza a hablar y a hablar; le da calor, se quita el saco y lo pone sobre el escritorio. Después de un rato escucha murmullos. Se voltea y observa furiosa a los estudiantes, que desvían la mirada. Vuelve a escribir en el pizarrón y escucha murmullos de nuevo, luego risitas ahogadas que terminan por ser carcajadas. Sólo ha transcurrido una hora de clase. Lidia pide silencio, pero no la escuchan. Observa al grupo y siente que su corazón late tan fuerte que sus alumnos pueden notarlo a través de su blusa blanca. Apenas puede contener las ganas de gritarles que se callen, que son unos estúpidos.

Siente las miradas de los cincuenta chicos sobre ella. No distingue lo que dicen pero reconoce algunas palabras. Siente las mejillas al rojo vivo, las burlas resuenan en sus oídos durante el resto de la clase. Lidia deja tarea y les pide a sus alumnos que tomen nota porque no va a repetir las instrucciones.

Más murmullos, más risitas. Cuando termina la clase toma sus cosas y camina lentamente hacia la puerta del salón, con la barbilla en alto. Alcanza a ver de reojo a los grupitos de alumnos que se reúnen para cuchichear. Le toma cerca de diez minutos encontrar el baño de mujeres. Las luces blancas e intensas del tocador hacen que su piel se vea más arrugada de lo que está. Se mira y siente que la cara le hierve de vergüenza. A contraluz su blusa blanca transparenta el sostén *beige* y los rollos de carne que se forman en su cintura. Bajo sus brazos, dos manchas amarillentas empapan la tela que cubre sus axilas. Le empiezan a arder los ojos. Baja las escaleras lo más rápido que puede y sale de la escuela. Comienza a caminar, sabe perfectamente a dónde tiene que ir. Va a casa. La madre la espera.

One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand

Lupita Vega

It wasn't until we took that trip that I started to dwell on the disadvantages of my quotidian actress career. I did not choose it. It was more of a pact that regulated coexistence between my father and I. He would always turn himself into different people depending on the situation, accustomed as he was to having multiple avatars. I grew up fully believing in his capacity to transform; when I was a little girl he used to tell me he could be anything except an astronaut, which made it kind of difficult to answer my friends' questions regarding my dad's job. Yet, it was harder for me to deal with those questions I asked myself about his identity. However, little by little, he let me into his chameleonic game.

As I grew older, I began to notice he would introduce me in different ways when we ran into people in the streets. I was not always his daughter. Sometimes I was his niece, every now and then I was some lost child. If I didn't play along, after his acquaintance was gone, he would simply carry on walking without saying a word to me. I had to run to catch his pace, and even though he would take my hand, I thought something was off. At first, this made me believe there was some kind of unlawfulness regarding my existence. It got into my head that maybe he had some other family, or that I was adopted, or that he had kidnapped me after an incontrollable fatherly urge. But it wasn't like that.

At the beginning, my fluctuating identities were off-putting for me. For a while I did not want to go out with my father. To escape his invitations, I would fake headaches or mention I was on those days of the month and that would keep him at bay (he had his traditional father avatar, as well, who got uncomfortable with anything related to my period). However, I knew I could not hide forever. Acceptance is the first step. Denial does not exist in this game. One has to adapt to say yes to whatever it comes. It was crucial to be prepared for anything: my father never actually defined the limits of the game, he never said whether I could be anything, even an astronaut.

It is amazing the amount of knowledge one can acquire with constant change of identity. Lying demands foundation and good memory. At first, I simply made things up, without wavering, but as

certain roles would repeat themselves, I began to improve on the details, the texture of each character. It was in the means of this alternate life's investigation that I became an assiduous reader. I figured that if I visited enough stories I could, at least, steal something from those characters. As my dad had grown accustomed to my large periods of isolation on my room, I dedicated those moments of solitude to my investigation tasks. I even asked for several cork boards, to keep my notes in sight.

Dad went into my room as I was placing some of my findings. I was excited, putting on post its everywhere. He stared at me as I was writing one of the quotes I wanted to memorize: "from the big Chassaignac forceps, or Colin's speculum vaginal no. 16, to the little catheters and ophthalmic probes or tweezers for hemostasis." I used a red pin, because I had to rehearse it a lot. I turned around, satisfied with myself. He excused himself saying that he merely wanted to know if I needed something from the store. I listed a few things, giving him time to take a look at my wall, maybe he hadn't understood yet. I thought he would comment something, but he simply nodded, closed the door and later on forgot everything I said.

Maybe we weren't supposed to talk about it aloud. Or I assumed that by not praising my efforts, he was making sure I wouldn't let my guard down. So my research followed other paths of general culture. I already knew accurate data regarding terrestrial and climatological changes. I was unbeatable in geography trivia. I watched life's movement on different countries: one had to be prepared for being from a different nationality, I figured. Every now and then, when I could get some time for rehearsals and technicalities, I read travel blogs; I needed material from real life experiences, recommendations far beyond what tourists may know. Also, I studied the basics on history art, in order to play the intellectual, I had to be familiar with one or two cliché comments about paintings and sculpture.

But I am exaggerating, really, I did not put as much effort as I should have, I made up more than I could account for. I had become many mediocre persons, despite training. Even so, regularly, it was a simple deal, mostly because of that tendency people have to feed the lies. This is true, I cannot explain why, but most of the times it was my interlocutor who would give me all the information I needed.

Before noticing that, of course, I lived under more pressure. Very few times I had a script I could follow, my dad almost never provided me with one. Other people's candor, I learned overtime, would rescue me in every occasion.

Dad: This is Mariana

Dad's college friend: Oh, right, this is your daughter, what are you up to these days?

Me: Well, you know me, this and that...though I'm kind of going through a rough patch.

Dad's college friend: I see. Being a writer must be quite difficult.

I was an accountant. But the artist character always suited me well. Almost everybody expects a bohemian personality, with a couple of decadent anecdotes, and some big publication in sight. Besides, I liked playing eccentric: I used to pretend I collected blue birds for inspiration and that I wrote better under a crescent moon. Truth to be told is that, for a while, I actually considered dedicating my life to it. It seemed to make a lot of sense, it would even encourage my game of disguise. It could make my ability to make up characters a lot better, I would become a better liar. It would be a nice way to tell all my experiences, to finally write my *Quotidian actresses manual*, even. But I used to be a bad reader, I bought it all, no one can learn to write being as naïve as that. Apart from that, I needed some kind of link to reality, had I pursued a writer's career I would've ended schizophrenic. Numbers, on the other hand, though boring, made me feel real.

At work I was an ordinary woman. I packed my lunchbox to take to the office, because I did not want to get too fat. I was careful with my looks, like any professional actress. I liked people from work. But my co-workers did not have that spark of imagination that I felt I carried around with me. They thought I was simple and childish, yet normal within some boundaries. Even so, I was a professional. I would dress accordingly to the occasion and keep my accountant disguise in a different drawer than my daily clothes.

Mariana the accountant: Good morning. How was your weekend?

The front desk man; the girl next to my cubicle; my superior: Good morning. Quite pleasant in fact. But here we are, one more Monday to go.

And that'd be it. Even when I couldn't really share my hobbies with them, they sure knew how to follow a script, however dull it could get. They were all these formal yet kind people who would answer nonconsequential things, and I'd felt comfortable with that too. Also, we shared the ability to say "yes, I'll have it in time," with a smile, and bit our lip to hide the anxiousness of producing a report that was asked without notice. I would've like telling everybody what a relief could be an intentional and-non-utilitarian performance. Maybe if I did, one day, someone would come in the right character and say aloud "I would prefer not to," or "do it yourself," or pretend to have muscle spasms, kick our boss, and we would all see what happens then. But I could not find a way to do so.

One time I tried to talk about my transformations. It started to seem like a pathological acting, so maybe, I thought, if I were to share it, I would feel a little bit better. Or maybe I just wanted to brag about it. So I decided to tell it to the only girl I kept in touch with after college. Back then we were, I suppose, sort of best friends. "That's called multiple personality disorder, you know?" she answered and walked away from me. Actually, now it's called dissociative identity disorder, but she wouldn't give me time to clear that up. Maybe I did not make myself clear, maybe I left my athlete's disguise on, the one that makes my body agile but not my words.

It concerned me as well that I was only inspiring myself for my roles on stereotypes. Then the challenge came to find me. My dad invited me to a trip throughout Europe with some friends of his. The plan both excited and troubled me. What if I had to be a different person with each one of them? If so, I would only be able to interact with one human being at the time. I dared discuss the matter with my dad. However, when the moment came I wasn't sure how to make the question. I figured that discretion was something he expected so I could disguise my worries as well:

“Will I manage to fit in the whole group?”

“Don't worry, you only have to fake being one of them.”

His friends were part of that city neo-aristocratic kind. Most of them had very good jobs on political affairs, from where they had obtained a great deal of their fortunes and, to spend it, they traveled a lot. I had to make it seem like I had been all over the world and found it flawed, boring, with the only rush of knowing that I could spend my money on pretty much anything.

How hard could that be? I had faked before the role of an international woman, citizen of the world. Still, it was my first trip outside the country, and it did affect me a little bit not to live it as the person I was but as somebody that, bad as it could be, was unable to understand the thrill of being in Europe for the first time. My monotonous occupation did not mitigate my ability to be amazed. One of my father's avatars was that of a cultivated person, and he had always encouraged me to explore artistic expressions other than our particular set of skills. However, be it as it was, a challenge was a challenge, maybe the final test that our game could reach its end, that I was finally prepared. For what, I don't know, but I always assumed that with quotidian acting, my dad was passing on the most important part of his life experience.

On the plane I pretended I wasn't scared at all when turbulence woke me up in the middle of the night. I even laughed at the trophy-wives we carried around with us, who squealed for hours in the seats near mine. When we arrived at Rome's airport, I walked with so much confidence that everybody followed without even glancing at the screen, thinking I was leading them towards the correct luggage strip: I justified myself by going into the bathroom without even looking at them.

In the ride that took us all to the hotel, I acted out, impatient and worn-out. But my eyes were glowing, I assumed I would have to rehearse in front of a mirror to conceal it. I even skipped our first day

of touring around, pretending that jetlag affected me too much and, either way, I knew Vatican Museums by heart.

In Venice, I lead us successfully in the *vaporetto* all the way to Piazza San Marco. Luckily, public transportation logistic is pretty much the same in big cities. Thrilled, I approved the proposal of having dinner at some random restaurant, few blocks away from the *piazza*; I pretended I had eaten there for the most part of my last summer, when I was hosted at one of the *palazzos* owned by a so called Madame Bordereau. I only missed saying I knew the owner. I was thorough when it came to choose my order, both food and drinks. I selected dishes with names I had no clue what they meant, with an Italian accent I hoped to God did not offend the locals. Regarding alcohol, if it wasn't wine, I glanced at my father to consult him, I had to make sure whether my character could allow herself this or that. She turned out to be quiet the inveterate drinker this neo-aristocratic woman, something that almost caused my fall into the canals when we were heading back to the hotel.

I didn't want to take pictures of everything without actually enjoying the sight. So I managed to justify myself with the pretext of forgetting my camera back home. Why would I trouble myself with new pictures, risking a bad quality by using my phone, if I had plenty of great ones filed on my computer. In order to make tangible my *ennui*, which I thought would make me merge into the group, I redirected the boredom caused by their companionship to an apparent attitude towards life. I thought I was doing great.

But boredom began to control me in a more intimate way. Not only did Mariana the bourgeois feel smothered, but also Mariana the accountant, the middle-class woman with enough sensibility to wish to enjoy the works of art that were at her reach. Then, I began to escape at night. I couldn't get into any museum, of course, but the cities were enough. Architecture was beautiful and I created for myself the character of a fugitive princess that walked amongst her city for the first time.

I enjoyed the easiness of being all by myself, of not being someone all the time. Even so, I had no idea what to do with myself, without museums and without my guides I did not know how to figure out

what it meant to be in a European city. I walked aimlessly for a while, looking at closed window shops, at girls walking around the cobbled streets in high heels with a breathtaking attitude. I thought to myself I could never pretend to be an Italian Mariana, and that made me sad for some reason. I felt a little bit overwhelmed, so I head towards one of the cafés at one corner of the piazza. Movement continued around me; gold sculptures garnishing the palace's roof right in front of me caught my attention; pointed arches on the same building reminded me of the oriental cities my dad's stories talked about, the ones he used to tell me before bed time, before the game began. Afterwards, I did not know what else to do. To prevent a possible crisis, I asked for a piece of paper and a pen. I thought it was sensible to check the balance of my expenses so far. The figures matched, I felt eased.

Those night getaways were supposed to help me keep going with the charade. Our Italian tour ended in Florence. I had already kept my emotions to myself for most of the masterpieces we've seen until then. Back in Rome, when we stood in front of *The Rape of Proserpina*, I did not say a word. I did not gasp. I did not comment on how long I had been wanting to see something like this. Uffizi's Gallery would be a challenge of its own, but after Bernini's sensuality I felt unbeatable. Or so I thought until one of my father's friends suggested that we should hire a pseudo-gallery service. Apparently, it was a common thing that old buildings of the city would house replicas of renowned museums. When you have the money, you get to pay for the commodity of seeing "the same thing" but far away from the crowd. I cheered for the idea; my character was not too fond of multitudes either.

The entrance looked walled up. They took very seriously their underground role. Apart from that, everything else was exactly the same: an inspection before entering the site, warnings about losing our ticket, even markings for exits and stuff like that. Columns were on the exact same place than on the original gallery, and big halls would adjust themselves into the outside frame without any problem. We hired a guide. She was nice, but my travel experiences had increased my sense of intellectual superiority. I walked around with the fear that if I looked at each painting with enough intensity, with admiration, walls may fall and the whole building would collapse. I must admit that the replicas were amazing. Each brushstroke looked exactly the same. If only I did not know the truth...

I saw dad taking his own tour around the room, separated from the group. I tried to follow him but one of the pieces called my attention. It was a cover for a portrait. I did not know that kind of things existed. Another woman came closer to take a look; she had a notebook under her shoulder. I saw myself mirrored in her expression, I felt as though our faces were a perfect match, our eyes would stop on the same details; the mask on the center of the piece hypnotized us, we went over the curvature of the grotesque designs with the same parsimony. We read the inscription almost in unison.

“It’s an old motto, by Seneca and Quintilian,” she said without me asking. “It means ‘to each his own mask.’” Then she explained to me that it was a false relief technique, it was used to hide a portrait. Somehow, it could be placed on the picture’s frame and slid in, either to show or hide as needed. She kept on saying that no one seemed to be sure who made it, nor whose portrait was concealed behind it.

And there we were, both of us, pseudo-intellectuals pseudo-appreciating art inside of a pseudo-gallery, looking at a mask on a false relief.

I came back with the group, confused about a lot of things. I carried around with me all the Marianas I had been before, which is the same as saying no one.

Cerumen

You would've liked to explain to him that you were hoping for a bit of pleasure, one of those that seemed unspeakable of. You wanted to grub and grub, to feel the grainy texture of the accumulated filthiness that you kept hidden. It was the only thing you could've said after all those years together. You thought about that while he looked at you scratching your ear with a little emery board.

You found it earlier that morning in the living room. You saw it as you bumped against the coffee table you hate, because it keeps hurting your knee. It was there, waiting for you. It could've been like that metallic emery board that is sometimes attached to nail clippers, also, it could be some random piece of metal that would end up transmitting tetanus. But it didn't matter, you kept it in your sweater's pocket, the same one that got sticky with syrup last night, and you did not intend to wash it yet.

He was sitting at the table, trying to ignore you in the nicest way possible, eating breakfast. The kitchen table was somewhat small, and he had this ability to expand in it. Even with just a plate, the bag of bread and jar of marmalade, you felt like you couldn't place any other thing there. You weren't hungry; still, you sat in front of him and silence bored you. It also gave you confidence. Amidst that silence, you took out the emery board and relieved the imaginary itch inside your ear.

"You'll hurt yourself," he said when it would've been too late, when it didn't matter anymore, but still he said it. His warnings annoyed you, as if he knew what was of your best interest and what wasn't. You wouldn't listen to his advice anymore. You ignored the anticipated pain. Instead, you focused on the walls surrounding you. You ought to redecorate them if you are staying.

"It makes me nervous seeing you do that," he said as if his words could still restrain you. What he did not know and what you won't tell him is that it makes you nervous not seeing him, sometimes. Other times, that he pretends not to see you.

"Please."

You looked at him. What was it that he wanted? His words reached for you from far away, it did not matter whether they were requests or complaints, you had learned to dampen his tone, to place a barrier between you two throughout the entire house, as a war strategy. Now, you pin picked what you wanted and what you did not want to hear, now that you both had said it all and there was nothing left but boredom. You did not hear, for example, the crunch sound of his teeth biting the toast. Yet he was half way finishing it, when you lift up the barrier with the suspicion that he was wondering why you were doing it. Then it occurred to you that maybe, in reality, he was not talking to you at all: it was not the first time you pretended to hear an interesting question.

Either way, you chose not to answer. Not yet, anyways. You did not explain a thing because he would not be able to understand that pleasure, that little and disgusting pleasure of yours, hideous, the kind that would make him gag. But you were immune to that by now. Those pleasures that you never say aloud nor can you confess during dinner, even when they are the only thing left to say. Those teeny tiny pleasures, so different from his, your small preferences, if you must.

The metal piece had already finished running through your ear, where so long ago he convinced you to pierce. But that was before, when you cared about his opinion. You went through each cartilage twice, parts of your skin that you now imagined red, and you wallowed in his supposed uneasiness. You waited impatiently for a little trickle of blood drawing a red line down your neck, something that would confirm his worries. You decided to dig deeper, with that same need you have of knowing it all and saying it aloud. Silence, however, has grown stronger; silence consumes you two since you grubbed too far, you asked too much and he said the last important words. You know there is nothing left to save nor discover.

You reach deeper each time, you get closer to the vulnerable tissue, with a subtle smile. You feel the dirt, expecting to extract grime and grime alone. Although you must always hope for the worst. Inside, your mind projects the small cavity as if to increase the level of preciseness, one you don't really wish for. You slide slowly the metal, which you feel more and more infected, you slide it at the edge of

your ear canal. Now you did pay attention to his bites, the crumbs falling from his mouth. Then you come back to yourself, you can feel the contact, the mudslides, the expectancy of an injury, you feel it all while you drag the emery board, and you extract it, triumphantly, to take a closer look to the whole thing. You believe that is the worst part of it, what troubles him the most, your urge to see it: all those alien particles trapped in your bodies, threats covered up by some yellowish batter that can be molded up together or disarmed with the same easiness. That thing that blanketed you on the inside. You want to touch it, to play with it with your fingertips before throwing it away all together, but it might be too much. You clean what you can with a tissue and smile before starting the procedure again.

He looks at you, nauseous. Even so, something in his eyes gives away his yearning. Something always helps you figure out his expectations. He looks at you, excited, as though he is confirming you what is about to happen. The metal slides one more time. Then, it happens, what he anticipated and what you were waiting for, something red and viscous runs down from your ear. He scolds you as if he forgot that between you there are no more words, just a specific kind of filth mixed with pleasure.

SOMALIA/ITALY

Milk and Voice

Ubah Ali Farah

The foreign newspapers came once a week, on the Thursday plane. I remember my father during siesta, his shoulders leaning against the headboard, the white sheets, the pages of the paper resembling outstretched wings. Their fissures could be distinguished in the dim light, wings perforated by the scissors of censorship. The newspapers always arrived in the city mutilated: the morality police never tired of snipping pages, with decency as their excuse, even though there were contents much more compromising than those they wanted to excise. Not images of half-dressed women. But rather corruption reports, failed revolutions, bombings and dictatorships.

I can't say I grew up in a country where reading was easy. Books were rare and, the few around were feverishly exchanged. They were read over and over again. They were narrated to whoever couldn't read them. In the evening, during dinner time, seated on the mat, we kids would tell stories to one another. Fairy tales in which the lion was always powerful, the jackal clever, and the donkey, refusing to live under his master's yoke, would miraculously transform into an antelope. Whenever it was my turn my cousins would ask me to tell the stories of the Book; that is, of the illustrated Italian volume where Andersen's fairy tales were collected.

It was always the little mermaid that they asked about, each time hoping she wouldn't be deceived by the sea witch. As though, by clinging tightly to that story, we'd have the power to change its ending and, thanks to us, the little mermaid wouldn't give up her voice in exchange for a pair of legs.

Out on the veranda, the adults would listen to the radio. One evening they broadcast a song, and the song began more or less like this: *Without you, mother, the men would have never left the darkness*

and would have never reached a moon suspended from the sky. We heard our youngest aunt rejoice and clap her hands, repeating the words and rejoicing again, “Tape it, quick, tape it!” she said to someone, so we understood it must have been a special song. And it was, in its way, or maybe the story behind it was even more special, the story we heard repeated in the days to come.

The story was about the Poet who had composed the song: he was a very famous Poet who had ended up in jail for his verses. It was said that, just as soon as she’d found out about her son’s imprisonment, his mother started walking to go beg for the government’s clemency. She was a nomad, she lived in a remote area inland and, because she knew that in the prisons they let inmates die from hunger, she’d brought some *ootkac* as a gift, dried meat in butter and wild basil.

She arrived in the capital and, despite her best efforts, they wouldn’t allow her to see her son. She knew no one in the city so she had no choice but to sleep outside near the prison, with the hope that, by seeing her so determined, the authorities would mend their ways. Moved to pity by the circumstances, a guard told the poet about his mother, and offered to help.

So the poet decided to dedicate a long song to his mother and, when he’d finally composed it (keeping the verses in his mind by repeating them out loud), asked for some milk. With the milk he wrote the song, he wrote it on the woven jute blanket covering his bed. The verses written with milk weren’t visible to the naked eye, so the guard was able to take the rolled-up blanket out of the prison, without running any risks. Instructed by the poet, he tracked down one of his trusted friends, known for the sweetness of his voice, and gave him the precious bed cover. The trusted friend opened the woven blanket, fastened it to two sticks, lit a large fire and, when the flames were high, he made sure that the cloth was saturated with smoke.

The verses written with milk became visible and, interpreted by the trusted friend, they came back to voice. The poet went to prison for his verses, because they resisted authority and could escape surveillance only if hidden in fabric and milk. The song was broadcast on the radio and that’s how we, along with his mother, found out that the poet—unlike the little mermaid—hadn’t given up his voice.

Translated from the Italian by Hope Campbell Gustafson

Il Mio Nome Non E' Najira.

Djarah Kan

Mi ero messa in testa di non parlare più a nessuno. Ero stufa marcia, stanca! Perchè in questo Paese, se non racconti la tua storia, nessuno ti aiuta. La commissione, la chiamano ma nessuno mai mi ha chiesto chi sono queste persone e che cosa vogliono da me.

“Aiutarti” mi hanno detto le donne che lavorano al Centro di Accoglienza, ma questo non è aiuto, questo è uno schiaffo.

La prima volta che arrivai qui in Italia con la barca, mi portarono in un Centro. Sembrava un enorme tendone, il più grande che avessi mai visto e dentro c’era gente, tanta gente, messa lì in attesa di essere toccata, schedata, misurata.

Avevo addosso una specie di busta della spesa di colore oro. Avevo detto a quei bianchi in uniforme che non ne avevo bisogno, che stavo bene. E sono sicura di averglielo detto in inglese, correttamente. Non mi hanno nemmeno guardata. Era come se fossi invisibile. Ho preso la mia vaschetta di pasta e sono tornata a sedermi sulla brandina.

Qualche settimana dopo, mi dicevano, sarei stata pronta a raccontare la mia storia. Dovevo solo stare tranquilla e ripetere a memoria tutti i luoghi in cui mi ero rovinata la vita prima di arrivare a Lampedusa.

Ho detto loro, no. Non lo farò. Semplicemente.

All’inizio, per convincermi avevano fatto di tutto. Mi hanno detto che se non avessi raccontato quello che mi era successo prima di arrivare lì, sarei tornata dritta in Libia.

Ma io ho sempre raccontato la stessa cosa. La storia del porto, una storia come un’altra. Di quelle che ti raccontano quando hai fame o ti hanno picchiata così tanto da farti dimenticare che un tempo, a pronunciare il tuo nome, non ti faceva male la bocca.

Perchè le storie che si scelgono al porto, quando si scende dal gommone ... beh, quelle storie non si cambiano. Mai.

E se te ne hanno data una. Ti tieni quella e basta.

Poi un giorno mi hanno portato in questo posto. Era grande, la stanza puzzava di Questura e tutto intorno c'era gente, perlopiù bianchi vestiti bene. Giacca, cravatta, scarpe solide e nere.

Ma non tutti erano importanti o si davano delle arie da presidenti. Gli assistenti sociali stavano in piedi. Vestiti male, tutti con gli occhi cerchiati, tutti con la voglia di salvarsi il culo e filare via da quello stanzone con il soffitto altissimo.

Anche loro non volevano stare lì credo, tanto quanto me. E devo dire che questo mi consolava parecchio.

A un certo punto uno degli uomini con la divisa da ufficiale si è acceso una sigaretta. Parlava al telefono, la voce sottile di chi si è ritrovato mille volte a dover discutere di comunicazioni importanti con un mucchio di gente inutile attorno.

Non avresti colto il più minuscolo dei suoni nemmeno con le orecchie aperte a metà ma nonostante ciò, tutti parevano terrorizzati dai suoi occhi pallidi e grossi, che si chiudevano ad ogni sì, certo, vedremo di chiuderla in fretta.

Doveva essere il capo. Il capo supremo a gestire la baracca. Pensai che fosse lui l'addetto a lasciare scarabocchi sulle scartoffie che avrebbero deciso o meno per il mio rimpatrio. Un uomo così insulso, pallido e brutto. Un uomo che non aveva nemmeno il tempo di tagliarsi la barba o di lavarsi i capelli. Un uomo così, avrebbe deciso se rispedirmi in Libia o lasciarmi in quel posto di merda a sperare di poter rivedere il sole. Senza guardarmi o accorgersi di me, tutti in quella sala riuscivano a passarmi attraverso con lo sguardo. I loro cerchi neri intorno agli occhi, cerchi neri di chi dorme solo se costretto, mi roteavano sulla testa, sbattendo dritti sul muro bianco contro la quale mi avevano costretto a rimanere seduta, ferma e zitta. Le gambe chiuse, strette intorno a un vortice. Chissà se lo vedono. Chissà se l'hanno visto. Lo spirito maligno che il witchdoctor mi ha legata addosso con il sangue. E' successo in Libia. Lo fanno a tutte le ragazze e ai ragazzi. Gli spiriti ti rovinano la vita. Non è che ci credo troppo, io andavo a scuola, sapevo leggere e scrivere e avevo anche letto molti libri europei, ma da queste paure non fuggi solo perché leggi o la maestra ti fa diplomare.

Agli spiriti non importa che tu ci creda o no. Fanno quello che vogliono e vincono. Vincono sempre. Desideravo solo che lo vedessero. Che qualcuno me lo levasse da dosso. Ho pensato allora che, ecco, adesso vedranno, sì! Lo vedranno finalmente e sapranno tutti che non sono matta, né sola.

Magari qualcuno dei loro preti lo scaccerà e io potrò andare a vivere in Svizzera.

Chiederò di parlare con un prete.

L'ho pensato. L'ho chiesto. Insieme a una bottiglia d'acqua. Non me lo hanno concesso. Ma mi hanno dato due bottiglie d'acqua frizzante.

Dovevo bere per forza. L'intervista stava cominciando.

- Queste persone sono venute per te, Najira. Lo sai già che la tua situazione non ha convinto del tutto il parere del giudice. Loro sono qui per te. Sono buoni. Brave persone venute da Roma per te.

- Io ho detto già la Storia. Perché non gli piace?

Non riuscivo davvero a capire, cosa ci fosse di sbagliato nella mia Storia. Le mie amiche avevano preso tutte i documenti. Una era stata picchiata, una cacciata di casa, una violentata, una torturata. Raccontavano tutte la stessa storia, ormai da anni, ma anche se non era vero, la Commissione voleva sentirselo dire. Solo se soffrivi e lo facevi vedere, loro ti accettavano nel Paese.

La mia Storia era perfetta. L'avevo pensata per due settimane. Aveva tutte quelle cose che piace sentire ai bianchi dai neri. Che quando ero piccola sono stata venduta, che mio padre era povero e che eravamo troppi in casa, che il futuro si faceva corto corto ogni volta che respiravo in Nigeria, che aria nuova era quello che serviva ma l'Europa funzionava solo per le puttane e che se volevi i soldi dovevi raccontargli solo storie di puttane. Ma poi ho cambiato idea. Se qualcuno avesse scoperto che andavo in giro dicendo di essere una prostituta, i miei genitori avrebbero pianto per tre giorni e tre notti. Allora cambiai la storia.

- Io non sono una puttana, sono cristiana.

Gli ho detto di nuovo.

- E non voglio il diniego per tornare a casa, perché il mio fidanzato è Musulmano.

Io sono Cristiana, capito? La sua famiglia non vuole che stiamo insieme. Vogliono uccidermi. Questa è la Storia. La mia Storia, ho ripetuto a voce alta, fissando con tutte le mie forze la nuca gialla del bianco vestito elegante, quello coi capelli sporchi e la barba lunga.

Oh sì, era lui il capo. Non voleva ascoltarmi, si vedeva lontano un chilometro. Per un attimo ho avuto paura di rimanere chiusa lì dentro per sempre, in quella stanza col soffitto alto e la gente dagli occhi cerchiati di nero.

Ricordai che mia nonna mi diceva sempre “prega quando hai paura.” Ho detto, Mio Dio ti prego fammi uscire di qui.

Penso che Dio mi abbia ascoltato. Qualche volta lo fa, mio Dio ascoltami! Gli ho detto, e lui lo ha fatto!

Mi ha sentito forte e chiaro e all'improvviso quei bianchi erano tutti agitati come formiche sul cadavere di una scimmia. Agitando le penne e scambiandosi fogli e sguardi nervosi su un'ascrivania di plastica nera graffiata credevano di darsi un tono importante, anzi di minacciarmi. Leggevano, poi stampavano e intanto nessuno mi diceva niente, o diceva nulla a proposito dell'uomo pelato, il Padrone del mondo a cui ogni decisione sulla mia vita spettava di diritto.

Doveva essere fantastico essere Dio. Perché solo Dio crea ciò che è vero decidendo quello che è falso. Solo che lui non era Dio. Era solo un uomo senza doccia con un vestito da Dio.

- E quindi confermi di non essere mai stata a Lagos city? mi chiedeva l'avvocato stringendo tra le dita rosse un fascicolo rosa.

- Sì, gli ho risposto, secca. A Lagos non ci andavo perché non mi piaceva. Ci sono solo problemi a Lagos. Problemi e villagers, bifolchi.

- Najira, noi vogliamo aiutarti. Siamo qui per questo ma la tua Storia ... con tutto il rispetto, non ci basta. Ci serve qualcosa di più forte.

- Perché? gli ho domandato.

Volevo saperlo davvero perché mai la mia Storia non poteva essere accettabile per quella gente. Il mio avvocato è sempre stato uno stupido con la faccia di un serpente. Non lo volevo nemmeno, uno che con la sua faccia come il diavolo.

Se avessi potuto scegliere avrei scelto meglio. Magari uno grasso, con la pancia grossa. Sì di certo avrei scelto qualcuno che mi credeva e basta, senza fare troppe domande, come avevo visto fare tante volte agli avvocati delle altre ragazze.

Loro ti credevano. Ti aggiustavano la Storia, e addirittura la scrivevano con te, mettendoci dentro tutte quelle cose che a una Commissione sarebbe piaciuto sentire. Ma la Commissione a me non voleva credermi e anche dopo tre ore e mezzo passate a gambe strette, non volevano credere alla mia Storia. A un certo punto però la faccia tosta che mi ero portata già da prima di vedere il mare, si è fatta più stanca più morbida. Quando sei stanco e i tuoi nemici cominciano a vincere su di te, nemmeno te ne

accorgi. E' la sconfitta più dolce, come morire nel sonno senza sapere di essere andati da qualche altra parte. Non tenevo più la voce dritta e chiara, né il collo teso, o le gambe strette.

Avevo un marito da qualche parte. Me lo aveva scritto e ho perso il numero nei jeans fradici che mi hanno fatto cambiare quando sono arrivata in questo Paese. Maledico me stessa per averli tolti.

Maledico me stessa ogni giorno che passa, senza mio marito né i suoi jeans.

Stavo cedendo, lo sentivo e ogni domanda era come una tormentata di saliva sparata da bocche sottili affamate della mia verità. La verità che cercano e che io, non gli darò!

Smisi di urlare verso le cinque di pomeriggio. Il mio stomaco si stava divorando. E' incredibile come la resa sia sempre preceduta dalla fame. Quando i soldati smettono di combattere, lo fanno per la fame, non perché la guerra è sbagliata. Smetti di nutrire il tuo esercito e la prima cosa che farà sarà mangiarti la testa.

Sognavo il Fried Rice delle mie zie con peperoncino rosso e Palm Oil. Riso caldo che ti bruciava le narici solo ad annusarlo e platano fritto con cipolle e pepe nero. Oh quel riso saporito, stavo forse avendo le allucinazioni? Perché riuscivo quasi a percepirne l'odore, quello stesso odore dolciastro che quando scivola con un soffio rabbioso fuori della pentola, ti pizzica la mente, riempiendoti la gola. Diniego, sentì sussurrare dalla donna con le unghie laccate di viola. Ma spassò subito.

Il pensiero del riso caldo mi aveva ormai devastato l'anima e il corpo.

Diniego. Presto avrei rivisto il riso cucinato alla maniera tradizionale, che fossi stata considerata vittima di tratta o meno.

Ho sbagliato ad accettare cibo dalla moglie di mio padre. Non era nemmeno la mia vera madre. E' stata lei a farmi il juju. Dovevo far portare quel cibo dallo stregone ma, non lo feci ed ora ero lì a cercare di convincere quegli estranei a darmi una nuova vita. Forse se gli avessi raccontato di quella Storia mi avrebbero creduta una volta per tutte. Non ero sicura che fosse stata la moglie di mio padre o la mamma di mio marito a maledirmi, ma anche se in Chiesa il Pastore dice sempre che mentire è un abominio, Dio mi avrebbe perdonato per quella cosa.

Cominciai a parlare della cintura, del fatto che fosse stata maledetta, che un witchdoctor mi aveva legata a un demonio per farmi soffrire come all'inferno, che a volte mi sentivo obbligata a fare delle cose che non mi andava di fare e così via. Sembravo convincerli di più con quella Storia. Gli stava

piacendo. Il Capo comandante padrone vestito elegante aveva appena spento il telefono e adesso mi ascoltava.

- Ho preso la barca e sono venuta qua. C'erano anche altre ragazze.

- Ed eravate state tutte maledette? Mi aveva chiesto il Capo Comandante.

Gli dissi di sì, ovviamente non tutte dalla mia suocera musulmana, ma che sì, condividevamo tutte quella situazione. Che anche se non ci credevano "E' vero!" dissi mettendoci tutta l'enfasi che potevo.

Rimasi su quella sedia per altre quattro ore. Erano usciti tutti, mi avevano lasciata sola. L'ufficio non era male ora che la gente aveva smesso di ronzarci intorno.

Ho immaginato casa mia. La stanza in cui abitavo con le mie sorelle e i miei fratelli, misurava più o meno quanto quel posto di merda. Con la differenza che da me il Pastore non ci permetteva di tenere appesi dei crocifissi. Rappresentare Cristo in quel modo era sbagliato. Lo pensavo anche in quel momento, mentre tutto intorno a me era un tripudio di sofferenze sulle croci, mani e sangue inchiodato ai pali. Di Gesù Crocifisso, uno ne bastava. Perché appenderne così tanti?

Sentii un rumore. La porta fece click.

Venne un ragazzo spettinato, era solo. La camicia infilata nei pantaloni neri.

Allora glielo chiesi:

- Perché appenderne tanti? Uno solo non basta?

- Ciao Najira. Piacere di conoscerti.

- Rispondi.

- A cosa?

- Mettete tutte queste immagini di Gesù Cristo in croce. Mentre soffre e muore. Perché?

Non mi rispose. Non sapeva cosa dire. Sotto la fila di capelli spettinati, una lunga striscia di sudore venne a fare compagnia al suo sguardo. Pareva così preoccupato e sofferente che ho cominciato a compiacermi. Non che mi piacesse vederlo soffrire, ma adesso capivo perché a quella gente piaceva così tanto il proprio lavoro. Inquisire. Attendere. Domandare.

Era come spintonarti e tenerti inchiodato all'angolo più brutto della tua vita, con un dito puntato sulla fronte e uno infilato nella bocca. Non c'era bisogno delle mani, bastava fare una domanda e dire "non ti credo" per mandarti a puttane l'esistenza. Mi stavo eccitando. Il ragazzo non rispondeva e mi sentivo

potente, come non ero mai stata prima di quella giornata. Volevo sentire la sua Storia ma lui non rispondeva.

Se non mi fosse piaciuta la risposta, avrei detto “diniego” stampandogli sulla faccia tutta la mia sfiducia per il genere umano in una firma a forma di “levati di torno.”

- Che fine hanno fatto gli altri? Ho chiesto.

- Si sono riuniti.

- La nuova Commissione?.

- Si.

- Ma tu non hai ancora risposto alla mia domanda. Credi in Dio?

Il ragazzo sorrise.

- Non ci credo.

- Fai male. Oggi Dio mi ha dato una mano. Hanno creduto alla mia Storia, alla fine.

- Ci credo anch'io Najira. Ho letto le tue carte. Ma devi aiutarmi se vuoi che io ti aiuti.

- Non sai rispondere a una semplice domanda. Adesso mi dici che vuoi aiutarmi. Sei ancora un bambino, torna a scuola.

- I tuoi documenti dicono che abbiamo la stessa età. Conosco il tuo caso.

Lo sapevo! Lo avevo detto dall'inizio che era solo un bambino. Dio aveva mandato un bambino a risolvere i problemi degli adulti. Non capivo cosa stava succedendo. L'ombra sulla grana della sua pelle adesso, aveva il colore di uomo adulto.

- La commissione sta valutando parte della tua Storia. Mi hanno mandato da te per aiutarli a capire come aiutarti. Mi segui?

Non gli risposi. Avevo capito dove voleva andare a parare.

- Voi bianchi non credete a nulla, nemmeno alla minaccia degli spiriti maligni, ma loro esistono. Io ne ho uno, mi segue. Mi rovina la vita.

- Io ti credo Najira. Prese la sedia e la trascinò di fronte a me, accomodandosi lento appena a un passo dalla punta dei miei piedi.

- Voglio capire, in che modo questo spirito ti tormenta.

Ho urlato Jesus! Saltando sulla sedia. Battendo i piedi, schioccavo la lingua. Ho pianto, ho riso, ho battuto ancora le mani perché Dio aveva aperto il cuore di quell'uomo. Aveva aperto le sue orecchie, e adesso si stava aprendo la mia bocca come una vecchia diga sul fiume.

- Io non mi chiamo Najira. Io mi chiamo Korra. Najira è il nome di una puttana che ho incontrato nella mia vita. Quando mio padre mi ha cacciata di casa e non avevo soldi nemmeno per mangiare. Najira era una puttana, e mi ha dato da mangiare. Quando sono stata bene e mi sono trasferita in un'altra città, Najira se ne è andata. Ma ogni volta che le cose andavano a male e la città diventava più piccola e affamata, Najira tornava. Per darmi da mangiare. Io sono Korra, non sono Najira.

Quando la fame è arrivata di nuovo ed ero troppo lontana per tornare a casa. Avevo la bocca secca, tutti stavano bene quando andavano via e io volevo stare bene, come loro. Najira mi ha detto di andare in Europa. Mi sono sposata, ma quando la famiglia di mio marito ha scoperto che Najira mi aiutava a vivere, mi hanno detto di andare via da casa loro. Mio marito mi ama ma non gli piace Najira. Ha detto che avrebbe lavorato per farmi vivere bene, a quel punto Najira non sarebbe più tornata nella mia vita. Il lavoro non c'era, io ho avuto di nuovo fame e Najira mi ha detto vai da questa donna che è come mia madre e chiedi aiuto che lei ti manda in Europa ad aiutare tuo marito, io ti accompagno. Dio mio non dovevo ascoltarla, era un'agente del male, mandata per maledire la mia famiglia e mettere la vergogna sulla mia testa, ma ho avuto fame anche quella volta.

Sono arrivata in Europa e, Najira mi ha dato da mangiare ogni giorno. Facendo la puttana, facendosi picchiare, facendosi arrestare. Solo per me. Un giorno ho capito che dovevo smetterla, che mio marito non sarebbe venuto qui se ci fosse stata ancora lei. Ho chiamato un Pastore e ho detto allontanate questa strega da me. Fammi avere prosperità, fammi avere i documenti, fammi avere un matrimonio felice con mio marito. Ho raccontato alla Commissione che sono andata via di casa perché mio marito era musulmano e io ero cristiana. Ho detto che in Africa non avevo lavoro. Qui in Europa ho cambiato nome e sono diventata Najira, tanto qui tutti cambiano nome appena arrivano. Ma poi me ne sono pentita, è stato il demonio a consigliarmi. E da allora quello spirito cattivo mi segue, mandato da non lo so chi. Questa è la Storia di Najira. Vogliono solo Najira per darmi i documenti. Mi dicono di raccontare la stessa storia che ho raccontato al mio avvocato, quando gli ho parlato di Najira.

Ma io non voglio. Perché io non sono lei. E adesso, ti prego, dimmi il mio nome.

E tirami fuori di qui.

Il ragazzo si è alzato. Ha compilato un foglio e mi ha sorriso. Di nuovo. Chissà se sorrideva agli spiriti maligni messi lì sulla mia schiena. Rimasi da sola in quella stanza. I crocifissi erano quattro, uno per parete. Mi alzai per guardarli da vicino. Avevano il sangue dipinto male sui piedi e sulle mani. Ne staccai uno dalla parete e me lo strinsi sul petto fino a farmi male. Avevo ucciso Korra.

Korra era morta e sepolta sotto un cumulo di fogli fotocopiati. Cadavere di inchiostro, non registrato. Ebbi una sola preghiera, per quella donna che avevo martoriato.

Dio mio, tirami fuori di qui.

Lo giuro che il mio nome non è più Najira.

SOMALIA/AUSTRALIA

N-400 April 24, 2019

Suban Nur Cooley

I'm already behind schedule as I frantically drive over to the Lansing Mall to get my eyebrows threaded at one of the island booths in the center of the place. Other than the mall walkers (postpartum women with their strollers ridding themselves of "baby fat" and elderly people doing laps around the mall to get their steps in for exercise) it's eerily quiet in there, as the elevator style music plays softly in the background. When I get to the booth, the sweet Pakistani woman who threads for me isn't there and a sign is posted saying she'll be back at 9:45 a.m. It's already past 10 in the morning and I've made the extra trip out to the west side of town so I decide to cheat on her and head over to the small salon called Lux just a two-minute walk from the booth. Surprisingly, my Pakistani threader (whose name I cannot recall) is working there. We talk about a lot in the few minutes we spend together every three weeks, but today I'm quiet. I leave and forget to tell her I'm trying to become American today.

...

We're sitting at a Coney Island somewhere in between Lansing and Detroit, trying to decide whether to order food and eat quickly, or rush back in time to see Isaac's first track meet at Sexton High School. Isaac is Tashmica's middle child. He's been training for a while and today he's finally competing, at 5 pm. I didn't want to drive to my naturalization test by myself, so I asked Tashmica, one of my dearest friends in Lansing to join me. We decide to sit and eat. She orders a club sandwich and in the spirit of cultural fusions I order a mediterranean wrap: a tortilla filled with grilled chicken, feta, tomato, avocado, and lettuce, wrapped like a burrito and grilled. As I look down at my wrap, I can't help but think of the many ways our world is a fusion of communities. Here I am at a Coney Island eating a mediterranean burrito, basically. I laugh to myself. I should have just ordered a hot dog and not complicated my life. I make a comment about cultural fusion to Tashmica and we both laugh out loud at the nonsense.

Though the process didn't take very long, there was a lot of waiting. Lines of people signing in to be tested on their English language proficiency and American civics, proving how worthy they were of naturalization. Some came dressed in suits and business attire to emphasize their respectability and preparedness for this moment. Others came as they were from the jobs they took leave from (nurses, uniformed workers, etc.), or dressed in cultural garb as a show of resonance with the nation they might soon have to give up as they chose to pledge allegiance to the United State of America. "Number 442." I'm called to a window and placed under oath. I answer simple questions: Who is the current president of the United States of America? What is the name of the national anthem? What territory did the United States buy from France in 1803? How many people are in the House of Representatives? These are questions that citizens should know, right?

The room is abuzz with languages I recognize and ones with cadences I've never heard. I stare at the Somali woman frantically reviewing her materials as she prepares for her interview. I want to tell her she'll be just fine, but I have no idea. I probably look frantic myself, I'm just not holding any papers which starts to make me nervous. What did I forget to bring? Next to me is a family that appear to be Congolese refugees. I say this because they switch between Swahili, French, and linguistic forms unfamiliar to me. We all smile at each other, hopeful and restless, waiting for our names to be called for our final interview to prove that we are ready for naturalization. A young multiracial girl runs up and down the aisles, playing hide and seek with her older brother. Her father (one of those who came in suits) smiles at the people by him then sternly requests they stop mucking about. The sun is bright today, and the well-lit waiting space on Jefferson Avenue is a welcome site for those of us who are ascertaining our futures in this country.

"Suban Cooley."

A woman calls my name. She looks gentle and kind. Social-workerly, if I had to make up words to describe someone. I note when we get back to her office that she has a giant Ziploc bag of Ricola cough drops on her desk. Original flavor. She says it helps her talk, which she has to do a lot of for her job. The interview is a swift process. I am under oath again and so we scour my passport stamps to ensure all of the dates I put on my application match what's in my passport. It seems I was thorough, and all my travel

dates are accurate. We talk about her friends in Australia and all the interesting people she gets to meet through her job. We talk about my schooling and my aspirations. How she wants to be a writer, too. She asks me if I want to change my name and I say yes. When I become American, I will be called Suban Nur Cooley officially. In a state of rebellion, I took on my husband's name only when we married to shy away from the traditional practice of the Somali community where women keep their last names. I saw it as a backwards feminist move. A way to tell my community that I was more than my father's daughter. Yet in the process, I just became my husband's wife. How odd that naming can become so political. I joke about just going with the last name X, officially. And then I sign away my allegiances to all other nations, including my former allegiance to Australia. I do pause and confirm that my allegiance doesn't mean a loss of dual citizenship, and she says it doesn't. So I sign and she congratulates me, letting me know that she has recommended me for naturalization.

Tashmica had a work meeting she had to attend, and so she sits outside of the waiting space where no electronics are allowed. She's on the call still, discussing budgets and events when I walk in to let her know I've passed the gauntlet of questioning to become an American citizen. That's when we decide it's time for food. We had only eaten a donut on our way to Detroit as we stopped for coffee. This is when we find the Coney Island somewhere near the highways by Brighton.

SOUTH AFRICA

Maxine Case

When I was first asked to be a mentor on the Women's Creative Mentorship Project (WCM), I was flattered to be selected when so often I second-guess myself and my writing. I worry about my career: goals I don't think I've hit, markets I haven't broken into, awards I haven't won. This was only part of how I felt; sometimes I feel deserving of having been chosen. I won't be falsely modest. I've had several successes in my career too, and have been mentoring writers before I was even published, thanks to a writer mother who roped me in to facilitate creative writing workshops at the prison where she volunteered when I was in my early 20s.

I've also mentored a number of writers in my parallel career as a communications manager, and take pride in the young people I helped establish in their careers. So, I had high expectations of the two writers I would be mentoring.

Prior to the selection of candidates, Cate asked me whether I knew any female writer I thought would benefit from the program. My recommendation would carry weight, she said. I grappled with putting a name forward, especially since one came to mind instantly—someone with natural talent, but who I worried would not be able to deliver and on whom I felt the opportunity would be wasted. I agonised over this since I knew that this opportunity could be life-changing, but ultimately decided not to recommend this writer. In my defence, I had recommended this young woman for a job previously, but she had not stayed the course, deciding to study something else instead after working at the organization for a year. I'd been frustrated that she hadn't taken her writing seriously when she had such talent. This program wouldn't make her take her writing any more seriously than that job had.

I first met Buhle and Firdous, the two writers selected as my mentees, on the page, through their writing and applications. Buhle and Firdous are both accomplished writers and have successful careers outside of writing. I hoped that I'd be able to teach them a thing or two: lessons on craft I'd learnt from my own creative writing studies at the New School and practical wisdoms that had been shared with me by my own mentors.

I've mentored enough people to know that I too would be learning from my mentees. What I learned gave me great insight into what motivates me as a writer and also how the narratives I believe about myself impact my writing career.

During our discussion on how the relationship would work between me, Firdous and Buhle, we agreed that each writer would submit 20 pages at the end of each month for the duration of the 6-month program as well as respond to a writing prompt. Before their first submission was due, I realised that it would not be fair to have such high expectations of my mentees if I could not match their output. After all, Firdous has a day job and Buhle is a busy actress and playwright. My freelance career had fewer challenges, I thought. So, I wrote and within four months, I completed a project I began four years ago.

I started writing a screenplay in 2016 as part of a screenwriting course run by the National Film and Video Foundation in South Africa. The final deliverable of this course, in addition to an outline, was the first act of the screenplay, which was then performed in front of a panel of industry professionals. My screenplay, based on a concept so far from my comfort zone, was well-received and I was approached by two local production houses interested in seeing more. I met with representatives from both companies but did not sign on the dotted line. I knew that I would not be able to deliver.

One of the reasons was my own fear about creating a character so far from my own familiar world (my protagonist is a time-traveling Zulu warrior). The main reason was that this project was not a priority. In the intervening years, I completed and published a novel, *Softness of the Lime*; I held down a demanding day-job as the head of communications at a Cape Town non-profit and I helped my mother nurse my grandmother, who succumbed to her illness at the end of 2016. In 2017, the company I worked for

folded, and I had a team I needed to help find work. I began freelancing. I travelled and spent a month in Cairo at the end of the year with my younger sister, who lives there. In Cairo, I began work on my screenplay again and returned home in January 2018 having added a few pages more.

Britain's Queen Elizabeth spoke about an *annus horribilis* and 2018 was mine. The only writing I was able to do after Cairo was corporate writing for freelance clients. My father, from whom my sisters and I had been estranged for about 20 years, suffered a catastrophic stroke and I assumed responsibility for his care. Just as I thought things were looking up, in November, my mother, who has health problems of her own, was brutally attacked and left for dead on the side of a Cape Town road when her attacker drove off with her car. Luckily, my mother survived, and her attacker was apprehended. I came face to face with him on the same day: her blood was still on his clothes, as it was on mine for I'd been allowed into the emergency room where the doctors worked to save my mother's life. Violence has never come so close to any of us before and I'm not sure that it's something from which I'll ever recover, this loss of innocence and knowledge of just how random and commonplace evil can be.

Earlier this year, 2019, I used to joke about how gracious more seasoned adults were with their reception of my first novel, *All We Have Left Unsaid*, which I wrote in my 20s and which deals with a 20-something lead character coming to terms with the impending death of her mother. I never imagined what I would be dealing with now that I am in my 40s and perhaps it is better that way. I feel sad when I deride myself this way, even if I know it's a coping mechanism. I feel like I'm disavowing my book in a way, even when what I'm merely doing is contextualising the premise in the reality of my life now that I'm older.

But back to the mentorship. Working on a screenplay I'd started so many years ago and which had many stops and starts was hard. Even though I'd completed the screenwriting course, I bought and read several books on the subject because I told myself I didn't know what I was doing. I read many, many books on Zulu culture and warfare, telling myself that any mistake would be inexcusable since I was trespassing on this culture.

Meanwhile, my mentees' work came in. I noted the difference in their process and writing style and tried not to think too far ahead to the conclusion of this project.

One of my mentees reminded me of a younger version of myself. Her innate ability is astonishing, but her process too reminded me of my own: relying heavily on research instead of just diving in, as my other mentee does. I began to put the reference books away and began diving in. I completed a detailed outline of my screenplay within the second month of the WCM project. Completing the screenplay took another two months. Is it perfect, or even good? I can't say. I'm still holding it too tightly to submit it anywhere though I have a plan. Some days I think it's good, better than good and I am happy. Most of all, I'm happy it's done. I have something to work with.

I don't think that I'd have a completed screenplay were it not for the WCM and what my mentees taught me. The biggest lesson I'll take from them is that most times, tenacity trumps talent. The best ideas are stillborn, unrealised, unless we get them down and stop obsessing over the finer details or worrying what people will say. Life has taught me that there are greater concerns.

Tears of Glass, 1820

Firdous Hendricks

Chapter 1

Sophia stood quietly behind Miss Cornelia's chair in the dining hall. Miss Cornelia was to be Baas Jan's new bride; she had come to visit the farm with her mother.

"Bread." Baas Jan ordered, slightly nodding his head to Sophia's mother, Sara, who stood behind his chair. Sara stepped forward and handed him the bread, which was right next to him.

"I don't see a reason why we should have a long engagement," Baas Jan said.

"Not at all, but I would like a grand wedding. The grandest wedding in the Cape!" Miss Cornelia replied.

"A celebration of such prestige can take months to prepare," Miss Cornelia's mother cautioned the betrothed pair.

"How many months?" Baas Jan asked. "Surely no longer than four?"

Sara and Sophia stole nervous glances at each other, taking in all the information that they could as the three diners discussed the wedding plans. Sophia and her mother were listening so carefully that they hadn't noticed the plates were ready to be cleared.

"Clean up!" Baas Jan shouted at them, clicking his fingers and shaking his head. "We shall have tea in the sitting room. And Sophia, tell Adam to come and see me immediately."

Sara and Sophia carried the dirty plates into the kitchen. Adam, Sophia's father, waited for them there.

"Well, what's the news?" he asked.

"I'm telling you, for a miss that young she has a stiff face." Sara began to explain. "She looks like she just took a bite of a sour grape!"

"Well, what did you expect? He has the personality of a rotten egg, of course his bride will look like one," Adam joked. They all giggled quietly together.

"Papa, Baas Jan is calling you to the sitting room," Sophia said to her father.

Adam hurried to the sitting room and Sara began to prepare the tea.

"Sophia," Sara whispered. "Go clear the rest of the table, take your time so that you can listen to what they say. But don't let Baas Jan see that you're listening!" Sara warned.

A heavy wooden door inset with panes of thick glass separated the sitting room from the dining hall. Sophia peeped through the door, careful not to be seen from the other side.

Adam stood a small distance away from Baas Jan with his head bowed down.

"This is my tailor," Baas Jan announced to Miss Cornelia and her mother.

"Boy," he addressed Adam. "Have you heard this nonsense of slaves buying their freedom lately?"

"Ridiculous!" Miss Cornelia cackled.

"No Baas, I heard nothing, Baas." Adam answered.

"Do not play dumb with me!" Baas Jan shouted at him. "Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No Baas, of course not, Baas." Adam said, shaking his head.

"Do you think I don't know about you and that kitchen girl?" Baas Jan scowled. "Eleven years, going around calling her your wife after you made that child. You are a slave. Slaves cannot marry."

"Yes, Baas." Adam said, looking down.

"And that child is not your child. She is mine. I own her, just like I own her mother, just like I own you."

"Yes Baas." Adam's brown skin turned maroon.

"But I am a good master. I could have sold the child. I could have sent Sara away to one of my other farms. But I kept you all here. I'm a fair man."

"Yes Baas, thank you Baas."

Baas Jan watched Adam closely. "As you know I am getting married. My betrothed hails from one of the most esteemed families at the Cape."

Miss Cornelia arched her back and spread herself out like a peacock at his words.

“You are to make me the most beautiful wedding suit the world has ever seen.” Baas Jan continued. “A suit worthy of my bride. If you succeed, I will grant you, Sara and Sophia your freedom. If you fail, you will never leave my estate and, you will have to work double time to make double the profits on the goods you sell for me. I’m giving you six weeks.”

Adam tried to hold back his emotion – a mixture of excitement and fear all held in a single reply. “Yes, Baas. Thank you for the opportunity, Baas.”

Sophia scrambled back to the kitchen to tell her mother what she had heard. It wasn’t long before Adam joined them, but there was no time for talk.

“Baas Jan and the ladies will be wanting their tea,” Sara said as she fussed with the tray. “We’ll talk later.”

“Best not be late,” Adam agreed.

They all knew how impatient Baas Jan was. Miss Cornelia would be as demanding, Sophia thought.

Chapter 2

The finest silks, linens, cottons and lace had been sent for from Europe. Adam worked tirelessly on Baas Jan’s special wedding suit. He worked so hard that the skin on his fingers bled with every detail he stitched into the garment.

When the suit was finally ready to present to Baas Jan, all the slaves on the farm buzzed with excitement. The possibility of Adam and his family’s freedom was a possibility for each one of them, they believed. Adam dressed a display mannequin in the wedding suit and set it up in the sitting room.

Baas Jan took his time inspecting the garment. He ran his fingers over every stitch and turned over every fold. It was indeed the finest suit anyone had ever seen and the pleasure was written all over Baas Jan’s face.

But his words told a different story.

“A fine suit indeed. But it lacks ... something.” He said, stroking his chin with his hand.

"I can make any adjustment, Baas. Just needs some fine-tuning perhaps, Baas?" Adam replied, falling over his words in desperation.

"It's just not exquisite enough. Looks like you don't want your freedom after all!"

"Please Baas, just give me three more weeks to perfect it. I promise it will be everything you asked for."

"Fine. Two more weeks," Baas Jan replied and walked out of the room.

Once again, Adam set to work.

One week before Adam's deadline, Sophia was sweeping the hallway when she overheard Baas Jan talking to Miss Cornelia and her parents in the sitting room.

"The suit is, of course, exquisite. I merely thought I'd give him an extra push; see what more I can get out of him."

"Oh, you are so, clever, Jan!" Miss Cornelia said in her cunning voice.

"Are you really going to set him free?" Miss Cornelia's father asked.

"Certainly not! I'm just having a bit of fun with him. Some motivation to bring out the best in his work but I will never set him free." Baas Jan said.

Sophia dropped her broom and raced to her father's workshop. Adam was out selling goods for Baas Jan at the market, but the wedding suit was laid out on his worktable. Layers of lace flowed like a soft river down the front collar and gold thread was embroidered all along the edges. It was perfect.

As she stared at the garment, Sophia thought about how her father had been lied to. Her eyes welled up with sadness and she began to cry. But as her tears rolled down her cheeks, they turned into the most beautiful glass beads.

Sara and Sophia waited anxiously for Adam to return to the farm.

"Papa, look!" Sophia rushed to her father as he entered the kitchen. "Look at what my eyes made!"

"Sophia, where did you get this from?" Adam was astonished. He sat down at the kitchen table captivated with the shimmering glass beads.

Sophia explained how the magic glass beads came to be. When Adam heard that Baas Jan had deceived him, he was heartbroken.

"All I've ever wanted was to earn our freedom." Adam sighed.

"Adam, don't lose hope." Sara said. She took one of the beads and placed it in the palm of Adam's hand.

"Our little Sophia has just given you the answer. Embroider the beads onto the suit. It will fill Baas Jan with such wonder, he won't be able to deny you."

Adam smiled. "You are right. We have to at least try."

Chapter 3

Baas Jan called his whole family into the sitting room to assess the quality of the garment Adam had created for him. As they entered, the glass beads released a shimmer that reached into every one of their hearts and overwhelmed them with a feeling of joy. Everyone began to smile.

"We have been touched by the heavens!" Baas Jan's elderly mother called out from her wheeled chair. The frail old woman could barely walk but she managed to pull herself up onto her wobbly legs and started clapping. Soon the whole room started laughing and cheering. Even Baas Jan could not hide his delight.

"Adam, I don't know how you did this but I have to thank you. I have never seen anything like it in my life."

Adam was stunned. "I think I might be the first slave to ever receive a thank you from the Baas." He thought to himself.

"Thank you, Baas," Adam smiled from ear to ear. "I am so happy you like it. We are so grateful for this gift. I could never have imagined that I would be able to earn our freedom."

“Oh no.” Baas Jan straightened himself out and his face turned cold. The whole room went quiet. “If I wear this garment, I will outshine my bride. An unwise way to start a marriage, I think.” He shook his head and stared into the distance. “If you want to earn your freedom, you will have to make her a wedding gown. The finest gown the world has ever seen.”

“But, Baas.” Adam gasped. “You said that if I ...”

“Insolence! How dare you speak back to me?” Baas Jan shouted. “You will make that gown. And what’s more, all who witnesses it should not only be filled with joy but also love. It is a wedding after all. Time is ticking. You have three weeks.”

“Yes, Baas.” Adam replied.

“Oh and tell Sophia we are ready for our afternoon tea.” Baas Jan commanded.

Adam walked into the kitchen where Sara and Sophia sat nervously waiting to hear the news.

“I failed you Sara, I failed our Sophia. I am a fool.” Adam said without looking them in the eye. “Sophia, they are ready for their afternoon tea.”

Before Sophia entered the sitting room with the tea tray, she glanced over her shoulder. Nobody was watching her. In her anger, she secretly spat into the tea before serving it to Baas Jan and his family.

Chapter 4

It was still dark outside when Sophia awoke to the morning rooster. It seemed to have crowed an idea into her head.

She ran to the chicken coop where she knew she would find Mr September. Mr September was always up before everyone else to tend to the animals.

“Good morning, Mr September.” Sophia greeted.

“Morning.” Mr September replied, nodding in her direction. There was a sadness about him that Sophia felt whenever she was around him.

“Are you well, Mr September?” Sophia asked.

“Hm,” Mr September grunted and continued to gather the chicken’s eggs from their boxes.

“Do you mind if I sit with you for a bit?” Sophia pressed.

“If you want.”

Mr September’s blunt answers made Sophia feel nervous. She sat uncomfortably on the floor of the coop and felt her thoughts being swallowed by the cackling of the hens.

“It’s a funny name you have – September.” Sophia tried to make conversation.

“What are you doing here?” Mr September’s sad eyes pierced Sophia.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry to disturb you,” she replied. “I’m trying to help my father with the wedding dress and ...”

“I heard what happened. You are all stupid to fall for Baas Jan’s tricks. Do you really think he will ever set any of us free?”

Mr September’s words sat thick in Sophia’s throat.

Sophia swallowed. “We’ll never know unless we try,” she said, trying to convince herself as much as the man standing across from her.

Mr September picked up the broom and started to sweep. “My name is not September,” he said.

“Really? Then why does everyone call you that?”

“They brought me here, stole me away from my home. Like a thing that can just be taken.” His sweeping became fiercer. Sophia felt the pain in his voice.

“Stole you? Who stole you Mr er ...” Sophia stopped herself from using the name that was not really Mr September’s name. “Did the Baas steal you?” She asked.

“The Baas, all of them – these fair-skinned men from a land they call Europe. This is not even their land. Did you know that? Everything here, they stole. The land, me, your father, your mother, you.”

“But I was born here, on the farm Mr ...” Sophia objected.

“Born a slave girl. In the land where I belong, I had my own home, my own family. I was a child just like you, but I was free! One day I was walking along the river collecting water, same as every other day. Two men snuck up on me and snatched me. They put me on a ship; a ship filled with terror! We sailed for a long time and when we landed here, they took my soul and turned it into nothing.”

“Your soul? I don’t understand, Mr September.”

“I told you, that’s not my name!” He shouted at her.

“S-sorry,” Sophia began to tremble with his emotion.

“No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t take it out on you.” He sighed. He put his broom away and sat down across from her. “When I arrived here, on this land, they took everything from me. They even took my name. They just called me the month I arrived here – September – like an animal. Every September my heart becomes heavier. The month I carry every day. The month I became nobody.”

“What is your real name?”

“I haven’t heard my real name in years. It hasn’t even left my own lips. I’m afraid that if I say it, it will break me.”

“Maybe if you say it, you can be yourself again? Your true self. It would be your secret, a secret from the Baas!”

He squinted his eyes at her unconvinced.

“Do you want to know the secret I keep from the Baas?” Sophia asked. “I spit in his tea.” She answered her own question with a cheeky smile.

“Sophia! I did not expect that from you!”

“I also hide his pipe away in unexpected places. It makes him go crazy. He walks around the house talking to himself like a madman while he looks for it.”

“I’ve seen him do that, I thought the Baas was possessed!” Mr September laughed so hard it sounded as if he was choking.

“What is your name?” Sophia asked him again when their laughter subsided.

“My name is ...” His voice quivered and his face turned sad once again. “My name ...” He started to cry. “My name is Ajit. It means, unconquered.” He allowed himself to release all the pain he had been holding inside and feel the comfort of his name on his lips. “Unconquered,” he said through his tears. “My name is Ajit.”

Sitting across from each other, Ajit and Sophia both let their heads fall into their hands and cried together. When Sophia finally looked up, she found in the palm of her hands, magic glass beads. They held in them, the joy of Ajit’s lips uttering his name and the love he had for Sophia for bringing it back to life.

“Thank you, Ajit.” Sophia said as she got up to leave.

“No, thank you, my girl.” Ajit smiled at her.

Chapter 5

Sophia found Adam frantically pinning fabric onto the mannequin in his workshop.

“Papa, what are you doing?” She asked.

“I’m trying to come up with a design for this wedding gown, Sophia. I don’t know how I’m going to do this; I used all of your beads on Baas Jan’s suit. Maybe I should just give up.”

“No Papa, look.” Sophia opened her hands and showed her father the beads.

Adam’s eyes grew wide. “How did you make this?” He asked. “It’s different from the others. There’s joy in it, but there’s also ...”

“Love!” Sophia smiled. “I can make more Papa, as many as you need. Just, please, don’t give up.”

Adam grabbed Sophia in his arms and gave her a big hug. “Thank you, my girl.” He whispered in her ear.

“I will never give up!”

Adam went back to his mannequin. Sophia went back to the house. They both had work to do.

Sophia found Miss Mary sitting in the small courtyard at the back of the house. She was watching two young male slaves pour buckets of freshly boiled water into her two wooden washing barrels.

“Surprise! Guess who’s your helper for the day? Me!” Sophia called out to Miss Mary.

Miss Mary was the oldest slave on the farm. Her back was bent and her hands deeply scarred.

“Oh good, you are just in time to help me with the laundry. I heard you visited September this morning too?” Miss Mary said with her eyebrows raised.

“Sophia laughed. “I just wanted to listen to a story about his life that’s all.”

“If you want a story, little girl, you should hear about my life.” Miss Mary offered. “Throw those dirty clothes into the water for me with some lye. It needs to soak for a while before we can start scrubbing.”

Sophia did as she was told. “I’d love to hear stories about your life on the farm Miss Mary.” She said, pushing the dirty clothes into the hot water with a laundry bat.

“On the farm?” Miss Mary retorted. “No, child! I had a whole other life before I came to this place. This prison made up of rows of grapes and farm animals.” She looked out into the distance.

“What kind of life?” Sophia asked. “I can’t imagine a world outside of this farm.”

“Ha! Let me tell you. Before I came to this farm, a doctor and his wife owned me. They treated their slaves with dignity, not like Baas Jan. I looked after their two children. Sophia, I loved those children like they were my own; I even slept on the floor in their room until they were teenagers. They even taught me to read!”

“Can you read, Miss Mary?” Sophia asked.

“A bit,” Miss Mary smiled. After a while, she continued: “There was a very handsome man at the doctor’s house, a slave too.” Miss Mary paused again. “I used to watch him chop wood outside. He had strong arms and he would sing in a smooth deep voice as he worked ... I fell in love with that man.”

“Oh, Miss Mary, did you marry him?”

"In our own way." Miss Mary winked. "You know the church doesn't allow we slaves to get married. Well, a year after we fell in love, I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, Helene. She was my entire world and our Baas treated her like she was one of his own children – she played with them, schooled with them, she didn't even know she was a slave. Poor thing."

"That sounds like a dream life." Sophia marvelled.

"It was wonderful, my girl."

Miss Mary got up slowly, put her hands into the boiling hot water without flinching and started scrubbing the dirty clothes on the washboard.

"What happened?" Sophia asked.

"Disease." Miss Mary answered as she worked. "The Baas and his wife both got this terrible sickness. Everyone was dying of it and because the Baas was the doctor, he caught it too. When he died, things changed. His son, who I raised, who I loved, turned into a cruel man. He got it into his head that we brought the disease into their home, because we are brown. He started to see us as dirty."

Miss Mary shook her head and raised her hands from the water. "My hands? Dirty? The same brown hands that fed him and rocked him to sleep at night." She stopped scrubbing and sat back down. Her breath deepened, as the weight of her words sat on her chest.

"As the man of the house he worked us to the bone and made a sloppy hut for us outside to sleep in so that we could be out of his sight." She continued. "Helene got it the worst. He was like a brother to her and suddenly he treated her like she was nothing. He forbade her to read or write. He gave her the hardest jobs in the house and if she dared speak back to him, he would starve her. When his mother died, he sold us all at the slave market. Each separately on different days to make sure that we didn't end up together."

As Sophia listened, the glass beads rolled endlessly from the corners of her eyes and spilled all over the soil. Every grain of sand the beads touched, started to twinkle. The beads held the love Miss Mary held in her heart for her daughter.

Sophia and Miss Mary sat quietly together for a while. Then Miss Mary began to pick up the glass beads from the soil and gently put them into Sophia's bowl.

"I can't believe the miracle of your magic tears are true." Miss Mary finally broke the silence. "Everyone's been talking about it."

Sophia smiled, but she was still thinking about Mary's story. "Do you know where they are now?" She asked. "Helene and your man?"

"My handsome man? He is on a farm further out in the country. I heard that he works with horses now. And my daughter ... well, I have no idea. But when I scrub the washing, I think of her. I imagine her in a white dress and respectable hat, teaching children to read." Miss Mary smiled broadly at the thought of it.

"Thank you for that story Miss Mary," Sophia wrapped her arms around the old lady and gave her a slight squeeze.

"Thank you for listening, little girl. Nobody has time for an old lady's stories these days. It's good to remember when I was young and these hands of mine were not so stiff and bent."

Chapter 6

Sophia spent the rest of the day scrubbing the floors and thinking about Miss Mary and her family. Thinking about how Miss Mary's husband worked with horses reminded Sophia of Mr Ysak, who worked in the farm stables. Mr Ysak loved telling stories, so as soon as she had a chance, Sophia went to pay him a visit.

She found him brushing and grooming the horses, whispering sweetly into their ears.

"Mr Ysak, you are so crazy." Sophia giggled, hanging over the wooden stable doors.

"Sophia, it's my lucky day! I know exactly why you are here."

"You do?"

Of course! All of us know what you are up to. It's so exciting. I am even prepared. I've been thinking about a story for you all day. If you didn't come to me, I would have been very upset."

"Wonderful!" Sophia jumped over the doors and grabbed a brush. "Can I join you?"

"Come, let me show you how." Mr Ysak replied. He placed her hand with the brush gently at the neck of the stallion and slowly guided it down the horse's back. As they brushed, he started telling her his story.

"I was born a slave here in the Cape, just like you. Before the Baas bought me, I lived with my mother on another homestead. That Baas had a son my age, Pieter. We used to play together. Sophia, I'm telling you, that Kleinbaas was extremely fat. That child could eat, no lie!"

Sophia chuckled as Mr Ysak expanded his arms around his body to show Pieter's size.

"Pieter and I loved horses, but his father didn't allow slaves to ride them so unfortunately for me, I could only look at the horses. Unfortunately for Pieter, his father said he was too fat to get onto a horse."

"One day Pieter asked me to join him on a secret mission. We snuck into the stables and stole the horse closest to the entrance. The horse was not very happy with us and we were not exactly experienced when it came to handling horses! It pushed and pulled us all over the place as we tried to lead it to a hidden path along the river where Pieter could ride it in secret."

"I tried to help Pieter onto the horse but his bottom was just too big. We had to lead the horse to a tree stump that Pieter could climb and then lift his leg up onto the horse from there. I'm telling you Sophia, as soon as that boy sat down the horse went crazy!

"Turns out, we chose the strangest of all the horses. It didn't like walking on hard surfaces; it was uncomfortable for the hooves you see, so it only liked to walk on soft grass or soil. With Pieter's big heavy bottom sitting on it, the hard path was even more uncomfortable. The horse ran off of the path and onto the soft, grassy sides next to where the trees grew. The more Pieter tried to steer it back to the path, the closer the horse walked to the trees. Branches started shooting out, hitting poor Pieter in the face.

"I tried my best to help pull the horse back onto the path, but I tugged too hard at its reigns. The poor horse jumped so high it threw Pieter off into the river and ran off! I think the whole river washed up on

the riverbank because of the giant splash his enormous bottom made. What a disaster! Pieter blamed the whole thing on me. I was punished terribly and was never allowed to play with him again. It was very sad for me because Pieter was actually my best friend.”

Sophia looked at Mr Ysak and burst out laughing.

“Why are you laughing at my story? I lost my best friend!” Mr Ysak protested, but that only made Sophia laugh even more. Finally, Mr Ysak gave in and joined her.

“Well, that story might not have given me magic glass beads, but at least it made me laugh.” Sophia smiled.

“I tried my best,” Mr Ysak shrugged.

Chapter 7

Over the next few days, Sophia was surprised to find that the slaves on the farm were lining up to have her listen to their stories. They all wanted to help her father earn his family’s freedom. But mostly, they wanted to tell their story.

Sophia heard about Clara, who fell deeply in love with her Baas’ son. His family did not approve of their relationship, so he promised to run away with her. On the night they had planned to leave, Clara waited for him in the stables but he never came. The next morning, she discovered that he had gotten engaged to someone else. Her Baas made her serve her love and his new wife at their wedding, and sold her off the very next day.

She heard about Sambo, who started as a Company slave, building the streets of the Cape. He lived in the Slave Lodge, in a dark dungeon-like room with many others. They barely got any food and were worked to exhaustion. One day he took ill but was not allowed to rest. He nearly died laying stone to the ground. As his life flashed before his eyes, he saw a vision of his mother: she wrapped her arms around him until his fever broke and he woke up in the dungeon healed.

Story after story, Sophia listened and cried until her bucket of magic glass beads was overflowing.

Adam created the grandest wedding gown Sophia had ever seen. Ivory silk ruffled out like blooming flowers over the big-hooped petticoat. He used the magic glass beads to create an opulent bodice. The pattern grew from the centre of the bust down into the borders of the skirt and then scattered itself all around so that the whole dress shimmered when it moved. Sophia could not imagine anything being more beautiful.

Baas Jan, Miss Cornelia and her parents waited in the sitting room for Adam to arrive with the dress.

As the dress entered the room, everything lit up and started to dazzle around them. Joy filled every corner of the space and the love that Sophia poured into collecting the magic glass beads filled the hearts of every person in the room.

“Oh how exquisite!” Miss Cornelia exclaimed. She grabbed the dress, held it to her chest and danced around the room with it. As she giggled, everyone in the room cheered her on. There was no denying it. The dress was a success.

“You, boy,” She turned to Adam, who was old enough to be her father. “When I am married, I look forward to have you make me many more such beautiful garments. I will be the most envied lady in the Cape...”

Adam looked over to Baas Jan nervously. “Baas, is the Missus aware of our ... agreement?” He asked.

“Oh don’t be silly, boy.” Miss Cornelia said casually. “Do you really think I would allow such talent to simply walk out of my life? You will not be free. Neither will the cook and neither will the girl. When we are married, I will be in need of you all.”

Adam looked to Baas Jan who simply laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

Adam left the room and returned to his workshop. Off-cut fabric and thread littered the room. They were all that remained of his dreams of freedom.

Chapter 8

The big day had finally arrived. While the wedding ceremony took place in the big church in the city, it was with heavy hearts that Sophia, Adam, Sara and the rest of the slaves prepared the great hall on the farm for the reception.

As the guests started streaming into the hall, all the talk was about Baas Jan and Cornelia's outfits. Sophia moved quietly between them, serving refreshments and listening to their comments.

"I just can't explain the feeling I had inside of me when Cornelia walked into that church!"

"It was like magic!"

"I cannot wait to see that gown and that suit again, just looking at it made me feel alive!"

Every comment was a reminder of their family's betrayal.

When the bride and groom finally entered the room, all guests rose to their feet and cheered. The magic glass beads on Baas Jan's suit and Miss Cornelia's gown released shining rays of love and happiness that lit up the entire room. The musicians started playing a joyous tune, everyone gathered around the couple and started to dance.

But as Baas Jan and Cornelia spun around to the music, the glass beads began to change. First they changed colour. From a clear and sparkly blue, they deepened into a murky dark purple. And then they started to speak.

"Every September my heart becomes heavier. The month I carry every day. The month I became nobody." Said the voice of Ajit.

"My hands? Dirty? The same brown hands that fed him and rocked him to sleep at night." Cried the voice of Mary.

"I still love him, even though I will never be good enough to be loved in return." They heard Clara say.

"I saw a vision of my mother, she wrapped her arms around me until my fever broke." Whispered the voice of Sambo.

Every story Sophia collected in those magic glass beads filled the ears of the guests at the wedding. At first it was a soft buzzing sound that moved between them. Then it grew louder and louder. It grew so loud that the sadness the slaves felt when they shared their stories dug deep inside of Baas Jan, Miss Cornelia, and their guests.

They tried to shut their ears, but the voices only grew louder. They tried to run away but the voices ran with them. Baas Jan and Miss Cornelia started pulling the beads off of their clothes and smashing it onto the floor, but every time they broke a bead the sadness of the story it held became more overwhelming.

“Make it stop!” Miss Cornelia called out.

Pained by the voices, Baas Jan had curled himself up into a ball on the floor. Adam wrapped his arms around him and lifted him onto a chair.

“Are you alright Baas, what’s wrong?” Baas Jan heard Adam’s voice say. He looked around the room and saw all of his slaves scattered across the ballroom, trying to help the guests. He knew in that moment, that only he had the power to put an end to the voices.

“Adam,” he said, reaching for his slave’s hand. “Go, you are free. Tell all the others. I will sign everyone’s papers. You are all free. Please, just go.”

Adam was stunned. All he could manage to say was, “Yes, Baas.”

It was the last time Adam would ever have to say those two words.

Sophia, Adam, Sara and all the other slaves, gathered their few belonging and left the farm for good. Life after that was not always easy, but for the remainder of their lives, they lived happily as free people.

A Selection of Work

Buhle Ngaba

When the water runs out, blood runs thicker

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of discovery, it was the age of foolishness, it was the era of disbelief, it was the epoch of doubt, it was the season of enlightenment, it was the season of Darkness, Cape Town had run out of water...”

Ha.

The irony of the heavens choosing to withhold water from a city flanked by a vast blue sea is not lost. Trust. For some (read: the affluent AF), Cape Town is “one of Lonely Planet’s Top 10 Cities in The World for 2017.” For those of darker hues of skin, it is understood that some accolades are best reserved and served as wooing tactics in inflight magazines. We do not exactly have time to create prizes for gastronomy when our people are still hungry for food, education, sanitation and more.

My maternal family is from the North West. It is a place where the weight of the sun clings to your back as you cross the street. It is also the sort of one-robot “no kak plek” that makes any other place look like an oasis. I suppose that’s what the idea of Cape Town had become to my extended family: a Mecca overlooked by a gigantic mountain we could not fathom.

We came to the City by the Sea with its post-apartheid trophy-wife glow-up. We came with the hope that, in Cape Town, an endless spring of resources, opportunities and abundance would quench us all. Years later, we have learnt of an ugly but simple geographic hierarchy implemented during apartheid, governed by a mountain and determined by the biology of blood that pushes “us” to the very edges of the city. Coffee shops built on the backbones of our foremothers, the ebb and flow of a navel gazing “it” crowd, crooked tongues bending into “yes YT lady” contortions, non-priority queues, rented land, contested space, breath.

For the majority, being parched is long-lived consequence of history. The distance between mokhukhu and a single tap used by a community, the amount of water a teenager is able to carry home on her back versus the woman who fills up her 4x4 with 5-litre bottles.

Water is fast becoming currency, and those who have always had less - who have been structurally excluded from the wells - are already accustomed to a vaskom and a one-litre bath. Such is the irony of history.

But for those who are well-adjusted to water-scarcity crisis, as the water runs out on a provincial scale, the blood just thickens.

A teenage girl's head is found in a long drop without water. A trans womxn is stabbed on her way to the toilet. A street is lined with the blood of a couple who dared to hold hands. These streets are a funeral procession for womxn.

Such is the tragedy of irony. Such is a Blood Labyrinth.

P2 - GRAPHIC SHORT

I walk down Adderley and feel the familiar contract and tug of my uterus. The source is far below. From the place that is only mine. I recall the gnawing I have been carrying behind my eyes as I glance at the street. First - from top to bottom to check for cars - then to identify the stacked HE shadows flanking the street. "Hey baby! Show me something nice!"

I'm dust-born as opposed to mountain-bred, so I never felt welcomed by this city. With a red cooler-box for company I arrived in the Colony early one winter morning off the Intercape bus, anointed in the smells of my grandmother's stringy chicken, a loaf of bread. Post sardine-squash with the other 35 papaliens (people aliens).

All the way from the Steers bus stop at home. Past the windmills after Zeerust.

Turn right, past the court, and my innards drop further towards my private parts and I smell the iron at the open. Scent of the magenta coming from in-between my legs. My blood maroon.

He stares at me and beckons to all of his friends. I mourn my body before he performs the act in his mind.

Softening the violence for daughters to come.

I remember the Americanesque twangs and snorts of sermons delivered by rolling black African men in the movies on the bus. Gospels accented with sin, reassurances of marriage and not a single girl character asking about sex ... "AMEN" for that ... right?

The metal smell quickly mutates and spreads itself from nostril to tongue. I taste the fear and for a second, I consider running but I know there would be no point.

All the streets in this city are a funeral procession for womxn.

BLOOD LABYRINTH

- A GRAPHIC SHORT -

I WALK DOWN ADDERLEY AND FEEL THE FAMILIAR CONTRACT AND TUG OF MY UTERUS. SOURCE IS FAR BELOW, FROM THE PLACE THAT IS ONLY MINE.

I RECALL THE gnawing I have been carrying behind my eyes as I glance at the

STREET.

FIRST FROM TOP TO BOTTOM TO CHECK FOR CARS, THEN TO IDENTIFY THE STACKED HE SHADOWS FLANKING THE STREET.

HEY BABY!

SHOW ME SOMETHING NICE.

I'M DUST BORN as opposed to mountain bred so

I NEVER FELT WELCOMED BY THE CITY

RED COOLER BOX

FOR COMPANY I LANDED IN THE COLONY EARLY

ANOINTED IN THE SMELLS OF MY GRANDMOTHERS STRINGY CHICKEN AND A LOAF OF BREAD.

POST SARDINE SQUASH WITH THE OTHER

35 PAPALIENS*

ONE WINTER MORNING OFF THE INTERCAPE BUS.

From the Steers bus stop at home PAST THE WINDMILLS.

TURN RIGHT, AND MY INNARDS DROP FURTHER TOWARDS MY PRIVATE PARTS. O SMELL THE IRON AT THE OPEN. SCENT OF THE MAGENTA COMING FROM IN BETWEEN MY LEGS. HE STARES AT ME AND BECKONS TO ALL OF HIS FRIENDS. I MOURN MY BODY BEFORE HE PERFORMS THE ACT IN HIS MIND.

I REMEMBER THE AMERICAN-ESQUE TWANGS AND SNORTS OF SERMONS BY ROLLING BLACK AFRICAN MEN IN THE MOVIES ON THAT BUS.

GOSPELS ACCENTED WITH SIN, REASSURANCES OF MARRIAGE AND NOT A SINGLE GIRL CHARACTER ASKING ABOUT SEX.

"AMEN" FOR THAT...RIGHT?

THE METAL SMELL QUICKLY MUTATES. SPREADS ITSELF FROM NOSTRIL TO TONGUE. I CONSIDER RUNNING BUT I KNOW THERE WOULD BE NO POINT.

ALL STREETS IN THIS CITY ARE A FUNERAL PROCESSION FOR WOMEN



WRITTEN & DESIGNED: BUIHE NGABA PHOTOGRAPHY: NEO BAERI ILLUSTRATION: THOZANNA MPUTA DESIGN: RYAN HAYNES



Genesis

I come from a small town suspended in eras passed and blood long spilt. A place where seasons shift but the architecture of the physical and spiritual foundations of the area still speak of skeletons buried hundreds of years ago. Histories consequence trails the street as a beggar, lone and searching. Snatches of hope are caught in the groves of our aunts' faces and the callouses on our grandmothers' hands. Ancient pains are passed on from generation to generation and only ghosts who managed to skip the "queue for burdens" roam the streets at night.

In my family, time is caught in whispers amongst the women and clasped fiercely in palm. To me, Vryburg or "Free Borough" is the final resting place of my maternal lineage, an umbilical cord that gives life to memory and oxygen to imagination. Heritage is passed down by the ones who carry: the women.

I can't remember when it was exactly that I started visiting my grandparents' farm, only that my holidays with them were in the farmlands of town as opposed to within its centre. That came later. On the 2 December each year, I would start itching for my mother to give me the exact date of my departure from Cape Town. We had come to the city by the sea seduced by the idea of a Mecca overlooked by a gigantic mountain. That said, I was always clear about where "home" was and who I was.

I would go to school with an accompanying tale for each day till the term ended, drawing on memories from previous festive seasons. Six obese tales from legaye lakha.

One of my favourites was of how my grandfather milked cows. I always started the story by declaring how I had been going to bed earlier and earlier each evening because "keeping a farm schedule is tough!" Before anyone could derail my story, I would launch into telling my gaggle of primary school friends about how next week ko gaye (tr: at home), I would have to be up as early as my grandmother! She stirred with the first glimmers of sunrise and would have pots of pap ready for all by days break and tea for my grandfather. By the time the sun had started to gather its weight to settle on us at 6:15am, we

would have eaten and started heading out. Me scrambling to keep up with my grandfather, a little lion in training amongst men.

First, I would watch him, and my uncles let all of the cattle into the pen next to the milking stalls. Shades of mottled Nguni. Black with blotches of burnt toffee, coppers with patches of white across an eye, hues of caramel. A liquorice all sorts of cattle. Once the cows were all in and lined up, they would open the other gate where the calves were waiting anxiously. The babies would all clip clop onto the other side of the gate in a hurry, bumping and tripping over each other, eager to get to get to what we were also there for, mashi (milk). Mothers and babies united, they would then pick a few pairs to be milked that day.

The nominees would then be led towards stalls gently then left alone for a significant amount of time allowing the calf to drink first. This gentle motion lulled the mother to a state of calm which resulted in her willingness to give us more milk.

My grandfather would turn to me and remind me “ ‘Kgotshwanetsi gore obuwe lekgomo’ (tr: you must speak to the cow). Speak to her gently and reassuringly. Implore her to give you some milk by showing her respect first. Look her in the eye as you walk into her stall, this is her world and you are just a beggar in it. After she has acknowledged your presence with a soft glance, wipe her down as you would a newborn baby, with letsila la mashi (tr: cheese cloth). Be sympathetic to her needs, her chaffed skin from the impatient pulls of her calf, rub aqueous cream on those aches to soothe her.” Then he would pull up his wooden foot stool, sit on it and tie her legs back with tewu (tr: rope to hold the cow’s feet) and gently begin to pull on the cow’s teats. She would stand there as though quietly contemplating the day ahead as the first jet of milk hit the kgamele (tr: the enamel bucket used to collect cow’s milk).

I would close my two-week long pastoral saga just before the last assembly on the final day of the school term. A strategic move on my part! Suspending my stories till the very final moments of school’s close ensured that I could close the narrative with a visual evidence of the protagonists of my stories-- my grandparents in the front row at assembly. They never missed an opportunity to watch us walk across a stage to receive a gold star or trophy, or even just to flit across a stage minus a prize, but just for the fun

of it. I knew that at the end of each second and fourth term, my grandparents would make the trek from the North West to Cape Town to fetch me so we could make the long journey back altogether by train. When you are loved with such fierce dedication, it is no wonder that you can become more than what you dreamt you could be.

I would dash right out after we had closed the last note of the school song so I could race to the front door of the school. I was accustomed to seeing them in the entrance halls of buildings. Back home after a Sunday service, they would stand at the back, framed by the wide Methodist church door and greet everyone on their way home. At my school, I would slide my hand into my granny's and watch them do exactly what they did there, at my school; smile and shake the hand of every teacher, pupil and parent who walked out. Those were the sorts of people my grandparents were, the kind who commanded respect not through demand, but through the acknowledgement of all people.

1999 was the best trip home yet. When the morning of our departure finally arrived, I willed the day away with my eye on my suitcase. By the time we reached 3:30pm, I was already standing at full attention at the boot of the car, as the train was scheduled to leave at 7pm.

We always arrived at the station two hours early (in the event it was on time) while simultaneously accepting in advance that it could also be up to four hours delayed. Being in constant negotiation with timetables and public transport is the circumstance I believe to have given rise to the term "African time." It is our way of developing a low threshold for the consistent public service neglect we endure. It allows us to practice bending time so that we carve out memories that refuse to be hampered by structures developed in a white tower.

This determination is also identified in the value we place on Tupperware. We understand even at six years old on a playground that it is the most precious thing, not in of itself, but dependent on the skafitini's (tr: Tupperware) contents! We've seen busses break down between stops and waited at train stations during over 15-hour delays. Tedium at that point can only be broken with a Rama or ice cream container that has been repurposed to hold golden vetkoeks to be shared as gems amongst you and your

hungry cousins, or a full chicken and ledombolo (tr: steamed bread), balanced on the platform by a 5 litre tub.

When the journey started, I would seat myself carefully between my grandparents. I had absolutely no intention of spending the 17 hour and 35 min long journey to Kimberly station there, but I knew them well enough to offer the gesture. It wouldn't be long before they had met everyone on the carriage and asked them all to please keep an eye on me. None the wiser, I would race down the halls of carriages relishing "freedom." At two-hour intervals, I would open a window in the hallway and stick my head out of the window with my mouth wide open, trying to swallow it all.

Those windows informed my innocent observations of the nooks and crannies of South Africa. How the land seemed to undulate the further north you went, or if you stared at the stars in Worcester for long enough, they would start to pour their light into your pupils.

It wasn't until much later in my life that I discovered my route home by train had been dreamt initially by an imperialist with a big dream that stopped in Cairo. Vryburg is halfway between Kimberley and Mahikeng; the town forms part of the Cecil Rhodes northern railroad through Kimberley, beyond Victoria Falls and connects the Gauteng Province with Namibia. Rhodes' dream was to create a Cape to Cairo railway as part of his "god given" task to expand the British Empire. We would get off at a station not too far from the Big Hole. In the very town where it is said Cecil shared his vision of "I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are present inhabited by the most despicable specimen of human being, what an altercation there would be in them if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence ... if there be a God, I think what he would like me to do is paint as much of the map of Africa British Red as possible..."

CONTRIBUTORS

MENTEES



Ivania COX (playwriting, fiction; **Argentina**) is an actor whose writing grapples with immigration, gender roles, feminism, the relationship with otherness, and art as a mechanism of change.



Priya HEIN (fiction, nonfiction, poetry; **Mauritius**) is the author of several popular children's books published in English, French, Mauritian Creole and German. She has been published in anthologies, literary journals and magazines, and has been featured on programs for Mauritian radio and tv. She has also been shortlisted for the Outstanding Young Person's Award and Mauritian Achievers' Award, and was nominated by the National Library of Mauritius for the

Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. *The Last Sacrifice* is an excerpt from her debut novel *Drifting*.



Firdous HENDRICKS (fiction; **South Africa**) is an artist, writer, educator, and activist focused on youth development through the arts. She has exhibited at Cape Town's Fugard Theatre in collaboration with musician Amy Larter, and at Greatmore Studios in collaboration with the poet Toni Stuart.



Djarah KAN is an Italo-Ghanaian writer based in **Italy**. She began writing as a blogger, with a focus on stories, poetry and reportage about everyday life of the white and black communities in Castel Volturno, a town known for its racial tensions, poverty, and environmental problems related to the Mafia. Her stories take the form of a direct dialogue, aiming to immerse the reader in a magic-realist space between Italy and Africa.



Mandisa MABUTHOE (poetry, fiction, drama; **Botswana**) is a narrative consultant, teacher, and cultural activist. She co-directs Gilbert's House, Ltd, which runs reading & creative writing clubs for children and youth, children's leadership programs, cultural events, and cultural exchange activities. She writes for *Woman to Woman Magazine*. Her poetry audio collection/EP "I Used to Be a Dragonfly" is available on SoundCloud. Her work can also be found in the journals *Badilisha Poetry Xchange* and *Prairie Schooner*.



Ghada E. MARTÍNEZ CABALLERO (fiction; **Mexico**) is a short story writer who studied Creative Writing and Literature at the Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana. She was selected to participate in the Ellipsis' 2018 Anthology, a bilingual collection published by the British Council in collaboration with the Hay Festival Querétaro. She has also published short stories, reviews and essays in magazines such as *Este País*, *Sin Embargo* and *Tierra Adentro*.



Buhle NGABA (fiction, theatre, poetry; **South Africa**) is an award-winning writer, actor, playwright and speaker. In 2016, she authored an online fairy tale sensation, *The Girl Without a Sound*, which has been published in all 11 official South African languages. After receiving the Brett Goldin Bursary, with the opportunity to expand her knowledge of Shakespeare and her acting ability at The Royal Shakespeare Company in the UK, she wrote her first play *Swan Song*. The award-winning production will tour the world in 2020/21. She recently localised *The New Girl Code*, a book aimed at girls and young women to highlight the potential of working in tech. A screenplay is in the process.



Suban Nur COOLEY is a Somali nonfiction writer and poet living in the midwestern United States; in autumn of 2020, she will be an Assistant Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at Ball State University. Her current research is focused on women of the Somali diaspora and how cultural memory and continuity, identity, and space are affected by memory, migration, and displacement. Her essays have been published in *Scarf*, *Enculturation*, and in the collection *Growing Up African In Australia*.



Sarah OCHWADA (fiction; **Kenya**) is the first African woman to hold an LLM in International Sports Law. She is the Sports & Entertainment Law lecturer at Strathmore Law School, and a founding Partner of Kikao Law - a boutique firm based in Nairobi specializing in Intellectual Property, Sports Law, Media Law and Entertainment Law. She has worked as a lawyer at the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) based in Switzerland, and is Legal Counsel for the National Olympic Committee of Kenya. Sarah was also appointed as an Arbitrator at Athletics Kenya and as a panel member for the Cricket Kenya Independent Committee. She is a Director at the Centre for Sports Law (CSL), and prides herself on being a retired runway model and a novice archer.



Yijhan RENTERÍA (fiction, poetry; **Colombia**) has had stories and poems published in anthologies and literary magazines in Colombia and the United States. Currently, she is writing her first novel. She has had fellowships from Caro y Cuervo Institute, and the National University of Colombia. Yijhan is a researcher and professor of Spanish language at Technological University of Chocó; she is also a member of the organizing team of the Chocó Reading and Writing Fest.



Jimena REPETTO (fiction, poetry, drama; **Argentina**) has published four books of poetry and prose. She has been part of the Colombia Lab and the Raymundo Gleyzer Contest. Her script *No te dejes ir*, also won an award at the FLICC (México). Her play *Cautivos* [Captives] won an Honorable Mention from the Germán Rozenmacher Drama Award, and an award from the Argentine Society of Authors. The National Fund of the Arts has awarded her a Creation Grant to

develop her script *Te prometo una larga amistad*; the National Film Institute supported the film version. She teaches at several universities in Argentina.



Paula SILVA (fiction; **Colombia**) graduated cum laude from the Literature program at Universidad de Los Andes in 2003 and in 2004 went on to earn an MA in Visual Culture at Goldsmiths College (University of London). Since 2008, she has managed the arts program for the British Council in Colombia, and is a curator and critic of contemporary art. She has twice been a finalist for the National Art Criticism Award and is currently finishing her memoir. She lives in Bogotá with her son and her partner.



Mmakgosi Anita TAU (poetry, screenwriting; **Botswana**) holds a BA degree in Motion Picture Medium and is the creator/director of *Mmakgosi Live*, a show/campaign devoted to mental health awareness and activism in Botswana. She recently wrote and directed *Section 82*, a short film about gender-based violence and modern-day slavery. A recipient of the 2019 British Council/Prince Claus Mobility Fund, Mmakgosi is a 2020 Yaddo Fellow in New York, and a 2020 Headlands Center for the Arts AIR Fellow in California.



Haddiyyah TEGALLY (fiction; **Mauritius**) is the author of several short stories. Passionate about languages and cultures, she largely derives her inspiration from francophone literature. In 2019, she received a Special Mention from the jury of the Prix Jean Fanchette. She is currently working on her debut novel, with the support of her mentor, Shenaz Patel. Haddiyyah holds a BA in Mass Communication, and works as a copywriter at an advertising agency.



Lupita VEGA (fiction, essay; **México**) studied Creative Writing and Literature at Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana. For her project *L. Iluminada's erotic ritual: Analysis of Lumpérica by Diamela Eltit*, she won a Santander-UCSJ research scholarship. Her work has been published by the Mexican magazines *Sin Embargo, MX* and *Este país*. Currently, she works as an editor at the electronic magazine *Tierra Adentro*.



Stephanie WANGA (fiction; **Kenya**) is a writer and an academic, currently teaching at the Global Challenges degree programme of the African Leadership University, drawing on her passion for and deep interest in African politics, philosophies and cultures. She has previously been longlisted for the Writivism and Black Letter Media Short Story Prizes and is working on her first novel. She is committed to lifelong learning, dreaming, and disruption.

MENTORS

Ubah Cristina ALI FARAH (fiction writer, poet, playwright, translator; **Italy**) was born in Verona, Italy, of a Somali father and an Italian mother. She grew up in Mogadishu but fled the civil war there at the age of eighteen. A poet, novelist, playwright, and oral performer, she has published stories and poems in anthologies, winning in 2006 the Lingua Madre National Literary Prize. Her first novel, *Madre piccola* (2007), won the Vittorini Prize, and has been translated into Dutch and English (2011); *Il comandante del fiume* appeared in 2014. She holds a Ph.D. in African Studies from the University of Naples- L'Orientale, and has presented academic work in Africa, the US, and Europe. She is affiliated with the Center for Somali Studies at Roma Tre university and with The Australasian Centre for Italian Studies. In 2017 she participated in the International Writing Program residency; in 2018 she had a Maison des Écrivains Étrangers et des Traducteurs de Saint-Nazaire residency.

Maxine CASE (fiction, journalism; **South Africa**) is a senior writer for the non-profit Cape Town Partnership. She contributes to a number of newspapers and magazines, including *Real Simple*, *Reader's Digest* and *O Magazine*. Her short story "Homing Pigeons" was included in *African Compass: New Writing from Southern Africa 2005*. In 2007, her debut novel *All We Have Left Unsaid* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book in Africa, and, jointly, the Herman Charles Bosman Award.

Maria Sonia CRISTOFF (novelist, nonfiction writer; **Argentina**) is the author of the non-fiction narratives *Falsa Calma* (2005), which appeared in 2018 as *False Calm* in Katherine Silver's translation, and *Desubicados* (2006), and of three novels: *Bajo influencia* (2010), *Inclúyanme afuera* (2014), and *Mal de época* (2017). Her work explores fiction and non-fiction intermingling in literary pieces. She is also the editor of three collections that have close links to her own narrative: *Patagonia* (2005), *Idea crónica* (2006) and *Pasaje a Oriente* (2009). Her literary pieces and criticism have been published in newspapers and magazines such as *La Nación*, *Clarín*, *Página 12*, *Perfil*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Noticias, Siwa*, *Anfibia* and *Letras Libres*. An alumna of the 2011 IWP fall residency, Cristoff teaches creative writing at Universidad Nacional de las Artes (UNA) and Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero (Untref). Her work has been translated into English, French, German, Italian, Arabic and Swedish.

Tjawangwa (TJ) DEMA (poet, **Botswana**) is a Motswana poet, teaching artist and arts administrator. Her poetry collection *Mandible* was published in 2014 under the auspices of the African Poetry Book Fund; *The Careless Seamstress* won the 2018 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets and is forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press in 2019. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Lancaster University (UK), where she mentored the all-female national champions for the British Council's Power in the Voice initiative. A past chairperson of the Writers Association of Botswana, Dema has coordinated workshops and cultural exchanges, and produced recordings of Botswana poets, and given readings and workshops in Africa, Asia, the UK, and Europe. In 2012 she participated in the IWP fall residency; in 2016 she was Artist-in-Residence at Northwestern University's Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities. She is a 2016 Mail and Guardian/GabzFM Editor's Choice award recipient,

a 2014 St. Louis Top 40 under 40 Catalyst, and has received grants from the Vermont Studio Centre and Denmark's DIVA fellowship.

Yvonne Adhiambo OWUOR (novelist, essayist, **Kenya**) is an author, lecturer, and arts curator. In 2003, she won the Caine Prize for African Writing for her story "Weight of Whispers," also the title of a 2003 volume. Her first novel, *Dust*, was published by Knopf in 2014, made the Folio Award shortlist, and won the 2015 TBC Jomo Kenyatta Literature Award; her second novel, *The Dragonfly Sea*, also from Knopf, appeared in 2019. Owuor was an IWP Fall Resident in 2005, and returned in 2017 as the Residency's first Grinnell Fellow.

Shenaz PATEL (fiction writer, playwright; **Mauritius**) has written many novels, plays, and short stories in both French and Mauritian Créole: best known is her 2005 novel *Le silence des Chagos*, forthcoming in an English translation in 2019 as *The Silence of the Chagos*. As a journalist, she writes about social and cultural issues; much of her writing seeks to unearth the unsaid and untold. In 2016, she was an International Writers Program resident; in 2018, she had a fellowship with the Hutchins Centre-W.E.B du Bois Institute at Harvard University.

Pilar QUINTANA (novelist, fiction writer; **Colombia**) has published four novels, *Cosquillas en la lengua* (2003), *Coleccionistas de polvos raros* (2007), *Conspiración iguana* (2009) and *La perra* (2017; winner of Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana, shortlisted for Premio Nacional de Novela) as well as the short story collection *Caperucita se come al lobo* (2012). In 2007 she was selected by Hay Festival as one of Latin America's "39 under 39" young writers. In 2010 she received Spain's Premio de Novela La Mar de Letras for *Coleccionistas de polvos raros*; in 2016 she received a grant from the Ministry of Culture for *La isla cuenta*, a series of writing workshops in the Island of Old Providence. *La perra* won the 2018 Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana and was shortlisted for Premio Nacional de Novela. Her screenplay *Lavaperros* (with A. García Ángel), won grants from Fondo para el Desarrollo Cinematográfico and Proimágenes, and was produced in 2018. Her stories have been published in Latin America, Spain, Italy, Germany, the US and China. She is an alumna of the IWP (2011), and of the International Writers' Workshop of the Baptist University of Hong Kong (2012).

Karen VILLEDA (poet, translator, fiction writer; **Mexico**) has published two children's books, *Pelambres* (2016) and *Cuadrado de Cabeza. El mejor detective del mundo o eso cree él* (2015); four collections of poetry: *Dodo* (2013), *Constantinopla* (2013), *Babia* (2011) and *Tesouro* (2010), and a book of essays *Tres* (2016). Villeda has had grants from the Open Society Foundations, Ragdale Foundation and Young Creators Program of the National Fund for Culture and Arts (FONCA); among her many awards are the Fine Arts Prize for Literary Essay 2017, "Clemencia Isaura" National Award of Poetry in 2016, Youth Prize of Mexico City 2014, and Fine Arts Prize for Children's Fiction 2014. Villeda explores poetry and multimedia on her website www.poetronica.net; her digital work can also be found in MIT's *Electronic Literature Collection*. Her poems have been translated into Arabic, French, English and Portuguese, and published widely in the Americas; she has translated English-language poetry into Spanish. Her next book, *Visegrado*, will be published by the National Institute of Fine Arts.

