The Witch

These days they call me by name: Hope. By "they," I mean the people in our small dusty town, Masaka, where everyone knows everyone. When I was a little girl living with my grandmother, all I wanted was to be known by my name, but no, they'd call me Little Girl. I'd be on my way from the borehole, where I often went several times a day for water, a heavy plastic jerrycan balanced on my head. The sun was so hot my eyes hurt from looking at it, the heat burned through my skin, and I'd hear them whisper, "Little Girl."

I walked by the women who sat on mats, their legs splayed out, peeling *matoke* and sweet potatoes, or pounding groundnuts as they caught up on the day's gossip. Men sat on low stools on their verandas drinking locally brewed alcohol through long yellow bamboo pipes dipped in clay pots. Children skipped ropes and played football. I walked along the winding brown dirt path in my short denim skirt and blue flip-flops with semi-circles in the rubber soles dug by my heels, which I continued to wear because they were the only thing that protected my feet from stones and thorns.

"There, Little Girl goes," they'd point as they whispered. Their whispers were loud enough for me to hear, and for their children to repeat when I tried to play with them. Whispers about my denim skirt which I wore every day, about my pantie visible beneath the skirt, whispers about grandmother.

I knew from the way they whispered that I didn't belong. This was no surprise. If you knew my story, you too would avoid my eyes that were always begging for help. My parents died when I was two. A car accident. I was left behind with my grandmother, who they said was a witch.

"Witch, witch," they'd shout when she ventured out of our

iron-roofed house to check on her cassava, sweet potatoes, beans, and banana garden, and the two cows which were left to meander during the day, and tied with ropes to the mango trees behind our house in the evenings.

Grandmother did the best she could for me under the circumstances. The circumstances being: She was eighty years old, her health was failing, and she was thought to be a witch. Our neighbors accused her of killing several people in the town. I say accused, because I never saw any evidence. Fine, I didn't ask for proof, but I never saw any of it, not the cowry shells, dry goat skins, drums, or a shrine. I never saw any of the things said to belong to witches.

"Look at her lion eyes," they'd whisper, "those eyes can't be human. Just look at her eyes, that's all you have to do."

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One case involved our neighbor, Namu. The fights with grandmother about their cows destroying each other's crops started the moment Namu married her husband. Namu, in her early twenties, had also had several miscarriages. The day she had her fourth miscarriage, she and grandmother had quarreled. Namu's cow had come into our compound and grandmother told me to tie it to one of the mango trees. When Namu came to collect the big milk-white beautiful cow with large kind eyes that watered when it was sad, grandmother chased her away.

"You devil incarnate. The devil lives in you, and sucks blood out of your babies. The devil kills them. This one too is going to die. You hear?" she shouted, her voice carrying throughout the town. Her eyes were bright orange. They got that way when she was very angry. She continued to murmur to herself as she spread ash around her homestead to keep the devil out.

It was a cold Saturday morning and a mist hung in the sky. A small crowd of people had gathered and silently watched. They

were like flies on a pile of bananas. Many of them draped blankets around themselves. The sun had taken longer than it normally did to come out. They were waiting for something to happen the way people in small towns wait for things to happen. Nothing transpired that morning. Namu left, but grandmother continued to curse and cast the devil out of our home.

“Grandma, is Namu possessed by a devil?” I asked as soon as she came back inside the house.

“What nonsense? Of course not!”

“But you said…”

“I know what I said child,” she chuckled. “There’s no devil. Just greedy, nasty people. Remember that. Now, I am tired and cold,” she said, and went back to bed.

That evening, Namu had another miscarriage. This time the clan elders decided to find the killer, and nothing would stop them. You see, in our town, no one died from natural causes. Someone was always responsible. If you were run over by a car, someone must have made the driver drive badly. If you fell from a tree and died, someone must have made you climb the tree. Accidents didn’t happen. There was always someone who willed them. The elders ruled over the village like gods. They were in charge of the traditional courts that resolved civil matters, land, and family disputes. They weren’t supposed to have anything to do with criminal cases, but they did, and their word was final.

News of the miscarriage travelled throughout the town like lightning. Within minutes, people had gathered outside in small groups with lamps to discuss the death, and speculate on who was responsible. The elders too. And so, it was that they turned up at our home.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” grandma said as soon as she opened the

door, leaning on the stick that she used to support herself and holding a lamp in the other.

“We shall find out soon enough,” said the elder with missing front teeth. The others nodded.

“What is there to find out?”

“We’re going to slaughter a rooster. If it dies in front of you, then you did kill the baby. If it doesn’t, we shall leave you in peace,” said Missing Front Teeth and the others continued to nod.

“You’ve come to kill me.”

“No one has come to kill anyone,” said the elder who made me think of the cunning gray monkeys with small white faces that descended on our town to steal bananas.

“Then what are you doing here?”

They looked at each other.

“God gives and takes life. Not you,” Grandma muttered to herself and laughed her contemptuous laughter.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. If you’ve done no wrong, you’ll be proven innocent,” said the third elder.

“Ayaaa…,” she scoffed. “Innocent? You’ve come to kill me. Why don’t you just do it now? You don’t need a rooster to pronounce me guilty,” she said, looking beyond the elders to the people who had gathered to watch. “And you,” she curled her lips towards them, “have come to witness a murder.”

It was a clear night. There was a full moon. The sky was a bed of stars. Everywhere you looked there were stars. It was like they’d woken up to witness. Missing Front Teeth slit the rooster’s throat and released it. It jumped frantically in front of our house spraying blood on the elders and the people

gathered. Everyone except grandma watched the rooster as it fought for its life. I held my breath, expectant, but the rooster jumped further and further away from grandma. The rooster grew weaker and weaker. The silence deepened. The moonlight became brighter, and the stars grew larger. You could hear the sound of the wind. People who had blankets pulled them tighter around their shoulders. All eyes were fixed on the rooster, its white feathers soaked in blood. They waited. The rooster finally lay lifeless in front of the elders.

Missing Front Teeth bent down, picked it, stood up and pointed his finger at grandma. “Its head is pointing in your direction,” he declared.

Grandma burst into laughter. “You murderers. You touch me and I’II come for you from my grave,” she threatened before she retreated into our house and locked the door. They didn’t touch her. I think the elders were afraid of her. After all, she had just made a rooster die in front of them. They must have speculated on what else she was capable of. I saw it all through a tiny opening in one of the wooden windows of our house.

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Six months after the rooster incident Grandma died. Her health had rapidly deteriorated after the rooster business. It was especially horrible at night when we were the only ones awake in the town. The pain kept her awake and I stayed up to rub water boiled in herbs all over her body like she used to rub mine when I had fever. She’d scream out in pain and I’d cover my ears. Her cries travelled throughout the village, but they didn’t come to help. Can you believe it? She screamed all night and no one even asked after her health. People had a limited supply of compassion. It didn’t extend to a witch.

She died on the day I received my primary school results. I

got straight As. I was elated and couldn’t wait to show her. I ran the twelve miles from school. I must have called and shaken her maybe a thousand times. She never woke up. She was dead.

Within a day, my relatives appeared from the neighboring towns. Everywhere I looked, in the house, outside, there were aunties and uncles, wanting to help me. Can you believe it? I couldn’t. And this wasn’t the end of it. They wanted the house grandma had left for me, but not me.

“What shall we do with her? We can’t leave her here by herself,” they whispered to one another.

“Marry her off. With her light skin, education and the grace of a giraffe, she will fetch a handsome dowry,” my eldest uncle decided. And until my marriage, they agreed that whoever took me would take the house. No one intervened. Not even the elders. I stayed in grandmother’s house until they found me a husband. I must say my uncle did well by me. He married me to the richest businessman in town, Tycoon.

Before the marriage, I was afraid of him, but my fear subsided the day I moved into his home as his wife and he took my hand, pulled me up from where I knelt to greet him, and said I shouldn’t worry, everything would be fine.

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My name became Mrs Tycoon and I adapted to life as Mrs Tycoon. I was sixteen, his youngest wife, and the cherished one. To be honest with you, I didn’t treasure the position of being the favored one. Believe me, when you’re the third wife of a husband who is hardly at home, getting along with your co-wives is more important than his favors. For a few weeks, my co-wives were nice to me. They felt we needed to stick together to make sure our husband didn’t get a fourth wife. When he married wife number one, our husband had promised not to get a second wife without her permission, but then he had

turned up with wife number two, and now me. Still, as soon as he left the house, they'd sit in the living room with bread and flasks full of tea and watch Nollywood movies as I cleaned the house.

I didn't mind. I was glad to have a roof over my head. As it was, I could have ended up on the streets like so many other orphans. So I scrubbed the tiled floors of the triple-storied house. This took a big part of the morning. Once the cleaning was done I'd wash clothes and cook. By the time it was evening I'd be so exhausted my entire body ached.

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A few months into the marriage, I got pregnant. Twins followed. Simon and Michael. Our husband was over the moon. He finally had the boys he had longed for. Boys he already saw taking over his business. Boys he himself would groom for this. He loved their orange eyes inherited from their grandmother. He brought bags and bags of toys and clothes for them.

"Don't buy too many clothes," I'd say to him.

"What's the money for?"

"But they're outgrowing everything so fast."

"We shall buy more."

What could I do? He wanted to spoil his boys. He'd play with them, bathe them. "My children," he said as he threw them up in the air and basked in their delightful giggles. He'd look at their toothless gums and declare them the most beautiful babies. This should have been fine; a father should be proud of his children. The problem was that he had three daughters, and he acted as though they didn't exist. He never showed any interest in them and insisted they go to boarding schools. True, children need to get an education; the problem was that

they were still so young; four, five and six years old. My co-wives' arguments to keep the children at home fell on deaf ears. He insisted that boarding schools offered the best education, but this wasn't true. I had gone to a day school and I had learned to speak English and could add up numbers in seconds.

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The twins elevated my status in the household. And something else happened. With the money I had gathered by saving bits here and there, I went to a salon and had my hair straightened with a hot comb. The hairdresser convinced me to buy pink lipstick. Our husband couldn't stop looking and smiling at me when he came home. Although it wasn't my night, he invited me to his bedroom. That night, he was a wild and yet tame lion.

He sent me to a driving school and bought me a RAV 4. I couldn't believe my eyes when he gave me the car keys. By this time I was managing the finances of our home. When my co-wives needed to buy household items they had to come to me. I was a fast learner and he started to involve me in his business, providing loan services to people in the town. I didn't ask for any of this. I didn't. And do you know what all this meant? More resentment from my co-wives. Frankly, this wasn't fair. Even if our husband had wanted to involve them in the business, they wouldn't have managed. They had never gone to school, couldn't read, write or count. As soon as he asked me to work for him, his business tripled. But this didn't matter; they declared war on me.

Their plan was to drive me out of our home. When you have lived the life I have, you either crumble or become thick-skinned. I got tough. When they ignored me, I ignored them. If they attacked me, I fought like a cat and wife number one got scars from my scratches. But this was nothing compared to what they both did to me. I will give you one example: A few months into the marriage, wife number two pushed me down the stairs

and laughed as I tumbled down like a sack of potatoes. It’s a miracle I didn’t break a single bone that day. I think my grandmother’s spirit was watching over me, but this isn’t what saved me from my co-wives. I will tell you what did the trick.

Whatever my co-wives refused to do, I did. I’d remove our husband’s shoes as soon as we got home and massage his feet, iron his shirts and trousers, made sure he had hot food even when he got back very late at night, and I sat with him as he ate. On the nights he was supposed to have sex with my co-wives, if they locked him out of their bedrooms, I welcomed him into mine. Do you know what happened? He invited me to move into his bedroom. Yes, he did.

Once I started spending more time with him he opened up and told me about his childhood. He was the youngest of thirty-one children. Can you imagine thirty-one children? His father had no money but married four women and had a lot of children. He believed children were wealth. Many of them ended up homeless on the streets of Kampala.

He told me about endless days and nights without food, the fear of going to bed hungry and hearing his little siblings cry till their voices were grasshopper whispers. Their thin cries of hunger would stop only after they were fed. On many days, they were too weak to cry. He could never say which was worse. He talked to me about the hopelessness in his mother’s eyes and the pact he made with himself to make a better life for them. When he was ten, he started to look for money, finding odd jobs here and there, but his passion was trade. At the age of fifteen he got his first stall, a tiny space given to him by one of his father’s acquaintances, to sell sweets.

Because he had to work before running to school, he missed tests and exams, but he persisted and finished high school. Armed with a certificate and the ability to read, write English, and add numbers, he didn’t see the use of further education. Besides, he was convinced that his knowledge of

street life was the essential ingredient for a successful business. By then, his tiny space had expanded into a big grocery shop and some of his siblings worked there. He tried several business ventures but his big break came when he became a loan shark.

It was during these nights that I realized we both came from poor families. I also learned that his heart was tender and kind. It didn’t stop there. He started to ask me about my life. One night, I told him how I longed to feel silk on my skin and the following day, he bought me the most beautiful silk gown, the color of the sun.

But the people of this town had no ounce of compassion left for me. Jealousy and hatred is all they had. My co-wives didn’t help matters. They spread rumors of what an awful person I was. Can you imagine? I, who couldn’t even harm a mosquito! All because I was now driving a car and working in an office. Do you know what I was doing in that office? Managing the list of people who owed Tycoon money. Some of them would call me to re-schedule payments. I could have bought them more time. To be honest, I didn’t mind my co-wives hating me. I was away all day and came home late in the evenings. But they started to say I and my sons were witches. Their evidence was that our husband was no longer thinking straight. Why else would he allow me to work, buy me a car, and neglect them?

This was dangerous. People had been stoned to death in this town because they were suspected of being witches. It reminded me of my grandmother. They had failed to prove she was a witch, and now they were after me. They stopped talking to me. My greetings were met with silence. “Why do you allow a witch into your shop?” the people of the town would ask the shopkeepers, shopkeepers who were interested in making money. “She’s a witch, a witch,” people I had never met would shout as I walked out with my groceries.

I wanted to remind them of when I was Little Girl, and when they didn't help with my grandmother and all of that. But I didn't do this. Instead, I let our husband send his goons to beat up people who owed him money. That's how he made sure he got paid. His bodyguards would either beat up the debtor until he produced cash or *visit* his family home. They'd turn up at the debtor's house at dinner time, join him at the dining table, and set down their pistols. They wouldn't say anything. They didn't have to. The debtor would send a brown envelope full of cash the following day. Our husband also took several properties of those who failed to pay him. In the small town where news travelled like waves, everyone knew what our husband was capable of. I did talk to him about making too many enemies, begged him not to send the goons to the police commissioner. Nothing good would come out of becoming enemies with the police commissioner even though he owed him a lot of money. Our husband simply said business wasn't for the thin-skinned.

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Sunday started as it always did. My co-wives prepared breakfast. They had fried eggs, made tilapia stew, rice, *matoke* and *chapattis*. I came down to make sure everything was as it should be for our husband. It was my job to make sure everything was perfect for him. His toast had to be brown and crisp. The pineapples, mangoes, and papaya cut neatly into small squares and placed in fruit bowls. The tea had to be mixed with a lot of milk, sugar, ginger and lemon grass, and brewed in the clay pot to give it an earthy scent. I wore a white dress and tied my hair with a cloth the color of tomatoes. We were going to church after breakfast.

Our husband came down as I paced around the dining table, adding a pinch of salt, sugar, cinnamon, coriander or red chili to the different dishes. I thought he was handsome in his white sparkling *kanzu* that looked like a dress, with his head full of white and black tiny curls. The *kanzu* fell on his

belly. The twins followed me around.

“My stomach hurts,” he said as he sat down, “and I’ve got a fever.”

I touched his forehead and noticed he was struggling to keep his eyes open. Just then, he vomited, struggled to breathe, and clutched his throat. His eyes bulged, and he fell off his chair.

“Oh oh oh oh no no no no no,” one of my co-wives cried. I fainted. When I opened my eyes, I lay on the floor in the dining room. His eyes stared at me from one of the portraits we had taken on our wedding day and I was told the words that I didn’t want to hear. After five years of marriage, he had left me. I cried until there were no tears left.

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As soon as he was deep in the soil, they started to look for his murderer. The elders and the police commissioner were in and out of our home. They talked to my co-wives and stopped talking as soon as they saw me. I was the suspect. Can you believe it? I couldn’t. I was going to be tried for killing the man who had saved me, the only person who had ever talked to me, who knew my name, the father of my children. Do you know what I was thinking as I sat before them? That I must have been cursed. First my parents, then grandma, my husband, and now this.

My trial was conducted by the same elders who had turned up at grandmother’s house. This time, they had a white goat with them, having dispensed with roosters. After grandmother, they had declared them unreliable. The sun woke up very early in the morning, initially soft and pleasant, growing in intensity by the hour, and now it was intolerable. There were people everywhere; under the muvule trees and in the branches, at the town primary school compound, on the roofs, and in the classrooms. They had left their jobs and farms to watch.

Frail Little Elder cleared his throat to signal the commencement of the trial. All the murmuring stopped, hands fell on laps or at their sides, conversations halted mid-way, eyes shifted away from whoever they had been talking to and focused on the three elders, dressed in long white robes, sitting on the only furniture, three wooden chairs, in front of the crowd. Frail Little Elder explained that the trial would take a few hours. Everyone who wanted to say something would be allowed to do so. He spoke very slowly and regularly paused to breathe and replenish his energy. The act of talking seemed to deplete his limited reserve of strength.

There were only six witnesses; my co-wives, the doctor, the police commissioner, and my children. It was supposed to be a straight-forward case. My husband had been poisoned. But the twins had told me they had seen the police commissioner give their father boiled maize that morning. With his large debt, the police commissioner had reason to want him dead.

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My co-wives avoided looking at me as they testified. They said I was the one who had spent the night with him and served him breakfast. They said he was a healthy man, never fell sick, not even a headache. In the wildest accusation, they accused me of not caring about his death. Do you know why they said this? I will tell you why. Because I went back to the office a week after his death.

“His body isn’t even cold and she’s already back in the office,” said wife number one.

“She wants to steal his business,” said wife number two.

I hope you’re thinking this is crazy. This is what I certainly thought. I mourned our husband, did nothing except cry and pray, and most nights I lay awake because I wanted to be alert when he came back to me. You see, I was still hoping it was all a bad dream; he had gone to Dubai to conduct business and

would return. But someone had to keep the business going and I was sure this is what he’d have wanted.

“She’s the only one who stood to gain from his death,” said wife number two.

“And her sons,” said wife number one.

This was true if all you thought about was money. Our husband had a will that left everything he owned to us. I hadn’t known about the will until his death, but no one believed me. There was no doubt in my mind what they were up to; they wanted me out of the way so they could take all the money, the property, the business.

The doctor who conducted the post mortem confirmed that our husband had been poisoned. This corroborated what the twins had told me. The police commissioner said he knew the deceased and the accused. No, he didn’t know the cause of death. No, he couldn’t prove I had killed him. No, he wasn’t investigating, he knew I had something to do with it. Of course I did. You remember her grandmother. We all knew she was a witch. You all know how many people she killed. The Witch had started early. Imagine how many people she’ll kill by the time she’s done. People are already reporting how she’s transformed them into ghosts and made them weed her husband’s plantations at night. No, he hadn’t seen this, but so many people in the town had told him.

I stared at the police commissioner. If eyes could kill, mine would have killed him. I tried to speak out, to tell the truth, but the elders wouldn’t let me. Accused people had no right to speak. And now the police commissioner was sowing the seeds that’d lead to my death.

The twins were the last to testify. It was Monkey Face who asked them to state their names, hold the Bible, and swear to tell the truth. Monkey Face talked to them slowly and explained what was going on. He told them they needed to find

out who had killed their father. He asked them if there was anything they had seen or heard that could help to find his killer. Simon, the older twin, did the talking and his brother Michael, nodded in agreement. I knelt and held their hands.

“I can help,” Simon said. “I saw him,” he pointed at the police commissioner, “the morning father died. We were playing in the garden when he came by. Father joined him. They talked. He was eating boiled maize. He shared it with Taata.”

Silence fell upon the town as he talked. Nothing moved. Not the houseflies, the birds, or the wind. No one blinked. It was as though people were glued to the red soil. They held their breath. It was the kind of silence pregnant with anticipation. The twins sat on my lap. I was relieved. It had all come to an end. The silence was broken by a gust of wind that covered us all in dust.

As soon as the air cleared, the police commissioner was up in a flash. He licked his index finger, rubbed it on the soil and swore on the grave of his mother that he hadn’t seen our husband that day, the twins were lying. He raised both his hands up into the air and declared that God was his witness, he hadn’t killed anyone, and if he was lying, may lightning strike him.

“Yes you did,” I shouted.

“Why would I kill your husband?”

“You owed him money.”

“Slaughter the goat,” he demanded, “it’ll die in front of the killer.”

“What do the people say?” Missing Front Teeth shouted.

“The goat. Kill the goat. The goat must be slaughtered. The goat will be the judge,” the people shouted back. All eyes turned towards the goat that immediately stood up and started

going *baa baa baa*. It was untied from the *muvule* tree but it refused to move. Two men pulled the rope around its neck. The goat stood still until another group of men pushed it forward.

Our destiny had come down to this frightened goat that was fighting for its life. The men overpowered it, and held its head down. It must have known it was futile to fight, for it lay still. Our tear-fear filled eyes stared at each other. I wished it didn't have to die so I could live. Missing Front Teeth's cut was swift and clean. Blood gushed out. The goat squirmed and shook its whole body violently, fighting death as I willed it to die far away from me. They released it, and it ran around in small circles away from me, its head dangling from its neck. My eyes were glued to it as it gave up the will to live. I sat straight as it suddenly turned around and faced me. It collapsed and started to crawl towards me. It had changed its mind. A few minutes later the goat succumbed right in front of me. It did. Can you imagine my shock?

I was up on my feet immediately. "I didn't kill him," I shouted

"The goat has spoken," the people shouted.

Straightaway, the sky darkened, puffs of winds started, and rain poured out of the skies in buckets. The sound of thunder and lightning petrified us all and we scrambled away in different directions.

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Back at home, I moved into my children's room, locked it, pushed their bed against the door and waited for them to come for us. No one came. I spent the night calling my grandmother's spirit to protect us. In the morning, I told the twins to remain quiet and we huddled in a corner until there was a knock on the door. I jumped up, the twins screamed, and in a flash, I was back on the floor, my hands covering their mouths.

“Sh-sh-sh,” I put a finger on my mouth.

“It’s us,” wife number one said, “please open the door.”

“No,” I said. “Come in here and I will kill you.”

“Hope, please open the door. We need to talk to you,” wife number two said.

“Am not opening the door. Talk.”

“We just got news that the police commissioner and one of the elders died last night.”

“What? If you’re lying to me!”

“We’re not lying. It’s true. They found them dead, and no one can tell what caused their death,” wife number two said.

It had rained cats and dogs, trees fell and houses were swept away, and lightning struck people. The sky must have been angry and had decided to unleash its vengeance on the town.

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The people of this town now believe I am a witch. “Like grandmother, like granddaughter,” they mumble. They mumble because they don’t want me to hear, afraid I’ll not help them out when they come to borrow money. I do not blame them though. Lightning striking people like that and the mysterious deaths of the police commissioner and the elder; surely I must have some powers. Every time I hear their mutters, I smile, knowing we’re safe with our money and properties. They will never dream of touching us again.

Do you know what else happened? My co-wives have become our zealous defenders, telling anyone who cares to listen that we’re not witches. Can you believe it? Truth be told, they’re more frightened of being thrown out of the family home. Even though my fortunes have changed, I could never do such a

thing, however, I enjoy watching them cater to my needs when I return from work. But when I ponder the whole thing, I actually believe in this witchcraft business. Surely, someone must have made me the richest woman in the town, otherwise how do you explain that?

New Fiction from Rufi Thorpe: An Excerpt from 'The Knockout Queen'

The following excerpt of The Knockout Queen *by Rufi Thorpe is reprinted with permission by A.A. Knopf.*

When I was eleven years old, I moved in with my aunt after my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too. Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate.

Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting. You have seen them so often on TV that seeing an actual one is grotesque: the real live lawyers, all sweaty, their dark mouths venting coffee breath directly into your face, the judge who has a cold and keeps blowing his nose, the defendants who are crying or visibly shaking, whose moms are watching or whose kids are trying to sit still in the back. It's a lot to take in when you're eleven and even just a few months prior you were making an argument that not receiving a particular video game for your birthday would be "unfair."

The town to which my little sister and I were relocated after a brief stint in foster care was a suburban utopia a la Norman Rockwell, updated with a fancy coffee shop and yoga studio. We moved in just before the Fourth of July, and I remember being shooed into a town fair, where there were bounce houses and hot dogs being sold to benefit the Kiwanis club. What the fuck was the Kiwanis club? I was given a wristband and ten dollars and told to go play. A woman painted a soccer ball on my face. (All the boys got soccer balls, and all the girls got butterflies; those were the options.)

Bordered on the west by the sea, on the north by a massive airport, on the east by a freeway, and on the south by a sprawling, smoke-belching oil refinery, North Shore was a tiny rectangle. Originally built as a factory town for the oil refinery, it was a perfect simulacrum of a small town anywhere in America, with a main street and cute post office, a stately brick high school, a police department with predictably brutalist architecture; but instead of fading into rural sprawl at its edges, this fairy-tale town was wedged inside the greater body of Los Angeles.

My aunt's place was one of those small stucco houses that look immediately like a face, the door forming a kind of nose, and

the windows on either side two dark, square eyes. She had a cypress bush in the front that had turned yellow on one side, and many pinwheels planted on the border of her lawn, the bright colored plastic sun-bleached to a ghostly white as they spun in the wind. North Shore was a windy place with many hills, and I was shocked that people could live in such a wonderful climate without smiling all the time. The air pollution from the airport and oil refinery were pushed inland by the sea breezes. Even our trash cans did not smell, so clean was the air there. Sometimes I would stick my head into them and breathe deeply, just to reassure myself that trash was still trash.

On either side, my aunt's house was flanked by mansions, as was the case on almost every street of the town. Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

If there were people living in the mansion to the right of our house, I never saw them. Their trash cans did not go out, no cars parked in their drive, except a gardener who came like clockwork every Tuesday, who always gave me a nervous but friendly wave. In the mansion to the left of our house, there lived a girl and her father, a girl who, though I would never have guessed it from looking at her, so young and unsullied did she seem, was my own age, and with whom I would go to school for the next seven years. Her name was Bunny Lampert, and she was the princess of North Shore, and somehow, almost against my will, I became her friend.

One thing that Bunny and I had in common, besides being next-door neighbors, was an unusual lack of adult supervision.

North Shore being the paradisiacal bubble that it was, many children walked to school or rode their bikes. But I noticed that Bunny and I were never scooted out the door by parents who rushed to remind us of lunches or fetch lost backpacks, but instead climbed out of houses empty and untended, checking our belongings ourselves, distracted as adults about to set out on the morning’s commute. Perhaps it would have been natural for us to walk to school together, but this did not occur. I was invisible to Bunny, and so I came to know a great deal about her before she learned anything about me.

The first year I was in North Shore, we were in sixth grade, but even then Bunny was tall, the tallest girl in our year, but also taller than the tallest boy. I’m sure there are people who would tell you who the most beautiful girls in our school were, and Bunny would not have been found on any of their lists, and yet I loved to look at her. Not for any arrangement of features or gifts of figure, but because she was terribly alive. Like a rabbit or a fox. She was just right there. You could see her breathing, almost feel the blood prickling in her skin, her cells gobbling the sunlight.

I think, as we headed into middle school, it was this vital, translucent quality that kept boys her age from having crushes on her, crushes that required a more opaque surface that they could project onto, that evoked different things than life itself. They were interested in girls who reminded them of movies, or who seemed older, or who seemed innocent, or who seemed smart. Bunny didn’t seem. She didn’t remind me of anyone. I liked to walk behind her for the cute way she would pull a wedgie from her butt, the way she would sing to herself, always a little sharp, the way she ate an Eggo waffle from a paper towel as she went, careful to throw the paper towel away in a trash can when she got to school.

Her father, though I hardly ever saw him, I saw everywhere. It was his wolfish grin on almost every dangling for sale sign in the town, his arms crossed over his chest, his white teeth

showing in a friendly laugh. He was on for sale signs, but he was also on banners at our school, where he sponsored a seemingly endless number of fund-raising events. He was on the city council and so his name was further attached to every fair, carnival, rally, or Christmas parade. Ray Lampert was inescapable.

I had seen him at that first Fourth of July fair, a huge sign with his headshot on it at a booth where a pretty blond woman gave out picnic blankets with his company’s logo stitched on one side. Two Palms Realty. I was afraid to take one of the blankets, even though the pretty blond woman manning the booth told me they were free. In my child gut, I believed they were sewn with some kind of voodoo that would ensnare anyone who touched them.

I often passed by his office, which was on Main Street. He was never in there, though I grew used to seeing the blond woman I had met at the fair, wearing her headset, tapping keys on a space-age-looking computer with a monitor bigger than our TV at home.

Because our houses were next door to each other and on rather narrow plots, the bedroom windows were directly across from one another on the second story, and so I had a literal window into Bunny’s life, although I could not see her without being seen myself. When she was home, I kept my blinds carefully closed, but when she was not at home, I would look into her room and examine its contents. In fact, I looked in all the windows of their home, which was decorated with a lavish ’80s decadence: gilt dining chairs and a gleaming glass-topped table, white sofas and white rugs over dark, almost black, mahogany floors. The kitchen, which I had to enter their backyard in order to properly examine, was a Grecian temple of white marble, though they never seemed to cook and what was obviously supposed to be a fruit bowl was filled instead with junk, papers, and pens and keys.

They had no dogs or cats, no hamsters, not even plants. Nothing lived in that house except for Bunny, and presumably her father, though he was never at home. As to what had happened to Bunny's mother, I knew only that she had died and that there had been some air of tragedy about it, a suddenness, not a prolonged illness, and I was in high school before I learned that it was a car accident. I found this explanation disappointingly mundane. Why had a simple car accident been so whispered about, so difficult to confirm? My informant, a glossy, sleazy little imp named Ann Marie, the kind of girl who is incessantly eating a sucker or popsicle in hopes of being seen as sexual, giggled. "That wasn't the scandal," she said. "The scandal was that her mother was fucking a day-care worker at the Catholic preschool. Mr. Brandon. And he was only like twenty at the time." Where was Mr. Brandon now? He had moved, had left town, no more was known.

I often walked by that little preschool, attached to the Catholic church, which was a lovely white stucco building on a corner lot with a playground and red sandbox, and wondered about Bunny's mother and Mr. Brandon. No one could tell me what he looked like, but for my own reasons I pictured sad eyes, too-low jeans, ice-cream abs begging to be licked. Perhaps I imagined him so only as a foil to Bunny's father, whose salt-and-pepper chest hair exploded from the collar of his dress shirt in that ubiquitous head-shot. Everything else about Ray Lampert was clean, sterilized, the bleached teeth, the rehearsed smile, the expensive clothes, but that chest hair belonged to an animal.

The gossip about Bunny's father was that he drank too much, and specifically that he was a regular at the Blue Lagoon, a tiki bar tucked a few blocks off Main Street, though he was what was referred to as "a good drunk," beloved for his willingness to spring for pizza at two in the morning and listen to the tragic stories of other sad adult men. There was

further supposition that his incredible success as a real estate agent was due to his habit of frequenting drinking holes, making friends with anybody and everybody. Having spent many years observing their recycling bin, I can attest that such a justification would be a bit economical with the truth. Ray Lampert was turning his birthday into a lifestyle, to quote Drake. Each week there would be two or three large gin bottles, and then seven or eight wine bottles, all of the same make, a mid-shelf Cabernet. Perhaps he bought them in bulk. It was difficult to imagine him shopping, wheeling a cart filled with nothing but Cabernet and gin through the Costco. How did someone with such an obvious drinking problem go about keeping themselves supplied? Or rather, how did a rich person go about it?

In my experience, addiction was messy. A pastiche of what you bought on payday as a treat, and what you bought on other days, convinced you wouldn't buy anything, then suddenly finding yourself at the liquor store, smiling bravely, like it was all okay. What did the cashier at the 7-Eleven make of my own father? Did he note on what days my father bought two tall boys and on what days he bought the fifth of cheap bourbon as well, and did he keep a mental tally of whether he was getting better or worse, like I did? Or did everyone buy that kind of thing at 7-Eleven? Perhaps my father was so unremarkable in his predilections as to avoid detection at all. And what was happening to the children of all those other men? Buyers of beef jerky and vodka, peanuts and wine? What did a 7-Eleven even sell that wasn't designed to kill you one way or another?

Most scandalous to me, and yet so alluring, so seductive, was the possibility that Ray Lampert felt no shame at all. That a rich man could stroll through the Costco, his cart clinking with glass bottles, and greet the cashier smiling, because she would just assume he threw lavish parties, or that he was stocking his wine cellar, that these dark bottles were just like shirts for Gatsby, talismans of opulence, but whatever it

was, even if it was weird, because he was rich, it was fine.

The first time I met Bunny, or what I consider to be our first meeting, because we did encounter each other at school from time to time (in fact we had been in the same homeroom for all of seventh grade, and yet never had a single conversation), we were in tenth grade, and I was discovered in her side yard. I had taken to smoking cigarettes there, and I kept a small bottle of Febreze hidden behind a piece of plywood that was leaning against their fence. The side yard itself was sheltered from the street by a high plank gate, and then was gated again before it led to their back yard, and because it ran along the side of their garage, there were no windows, making it a perfect hiding place. Bunny and her father kept their bikes there, but neither of them seemed to ever ride, and I had been smoking in this part of their property for years now without having been detected, so I was startled when she opened the gate, already wearing her bike helmet, which was pink.

She was surprised to see me and she jumped, but did not yelp, and swiftly closed the gate behind her. She tipped her head, made comically large by the helmet, and looked at me. “What are you doing here?” she whispered.

“I smoke here,” I said, bringing my cigarette out from behind my back.

“Oh,” she said, looking around at the fence, and the side of her garage. “Can’t people see the smoke as it rises above the fence?” Her first concern seemed to be abetting me in my secret habit.

She was neither offended nor concerned that I had been breaking into their property and hiding in their side yard.

“So far as I know,” I said, “no one has. But usually I kind of crouch with the hope that it dissipates. And I always figured people would think it was you.”

“Your name is Michael,” she said with concentration, dragging my name up through the folds of her memory.

I nodded.

“My name is Bunny,” she said.

“I know.”

“I’m just getting my bike.” She started to walk toward her bike, which was just to my right.

“The tires are flat,” I told her, looking down at them. They had been flat for almost a year now, and I wondered what had possessed her today of all days to take a ride. There was a gust of wind then, and the fence groaned a bit, and we could hear, rather than feel, the wind rushing over the top of the fence, making a sound like scissors cutting through paper.

“Oh.”

“Where were you going to go?” I asked.

“To the beach.”

“By yourself?”

She nodded. “You know, I could put a chair out here for you. Like a camp chair.”

“That’s all right,” I said.

She put her hands on her hips then, and twisted her torso with such strength that I could hear every vertebrae in her spine crack. She was perhaps five inches taller than me. “Do you want to come in?” she asked.

“To your house?”

She took off her helmet. “No one’s home.” There was a babyish quality to Bunny’s voice, perhaps because it seemed too small

for the size of her body, and she spoke as though her nose was always a little stuffed. Of course, I wanted desperately to see inside her house up close, and so I put out my cigarette and hid it in the Altoids tin that I also kept behind the plywood, and she watched as I spritzed myself with Febreze, and then we let ourselves out the back gate and into her yard.

“This is our yard,” she said. “There’s a pool.”

I said, “Oh wow,” though I had swum in her pool several times when she and her father had been on vacation. I had climbed the fence from my aunt’s yard and dropped down into hers, which was dark, since no one was home and the outside lights seemed to be on a timer, and the pool, instead of being a lit rectangle of blue, was a black mass of reflected stars, and, shaking, I had taken off my clothes and slipped naked into the warm water and swum until I felt erased.

She opened one of the French doors that led onto the patio, and we entered the hushed cathedral of her living room. She closed the door behind us, as though it could never be left open. The outside, with its scent of grass and sway of water, its gauzy light and chafing winds, would destroy the interior, the careful, expensive furniture, a pretend world that had to be exactingly maintained.

She gave me a tour of the house, showing me her father’s office, with its many bookshelves filled with leather-bound books I doubted he had ever read, and the marble kitchen. She offered me a Pop-Tart, which I declined. She opened one of the crinkly metallic packages for herself, and then, to my horror, spread the two Pop-Tarts with butter and slicked them together as a sandwich. She led me upstairs, taking bites of her Pop-Tart sandwich along the way, and showed me the spare room, decorated in an Oriental style with a disturbing red satin bedspread embroidered with cranes, and the connected bathroom, which had a shiny black vanity and sink, a black toilet, and black floors. They were ready for Madame Butterfly to commit

suicide in there at any time. While the house was uncluttered, I noticed that it was also not exactly clean. Gray trails marked the highest traffic routes on the white carpet, and the sink in the all-black bathroom was spangled with little explosions of white toothpaste.

She gestured at a closed door and said, “That’s my dad’s room,” and then took me into her own bedroom, which was done up, as I already well knew, like a much younger girl’s bedroom, with a white canopy bed and a white dresser that had been plastered with My Little Pony stickers. There was a small white mirrored dressing table with a pink brocade bench. Where there should have been makeup and bottles of fancy perfume, Bunny had arranged her schoolbooks and papers. There was a bookshelf that contained not books but trophies and medals and ribbons, all so cheap and garish and crammed together that it looked more like installation art than a proper display. On one wall, there was a bulletin board that I had not been able to see before as it was on the same wall as the window. At first, it appeared to be a Hydra of female body parts, but as I looked closer I could see that they were all women playing volleyball, and then, as I looked yet closer, I could see that they were all the same woman playing volleyball, carefully trimmed from newspapers and magazines.

“That’s my Misty May-Treanor altar,” she said. “She’s a volleyball player.”

“Not creepy at all,” I said. I would have asked her why she had invited me in, or why she had shown me around with the thoroughness of a realtor, except that I already knew, for her loneliness was so palpable as to be a taste in the air. I had been many places in my life. Apartment buildings where babies free-ranged, waddling down the halls with dirty hair and diapers needing to be changed; houses like my aunt’s, where everything was stained and reaching between the couch cushions to find the remote left your fingers sticky. Bus stations, and prison waiting rooms, and foster-care homes, and men’s cars,

and men’s houses or apartments where there was sometimes only a mattress on the floor, and none of them had scared me quite as much as being in Bunny’s silent, beautiful house.

“I’ve never had a boy in my bedroom before,” she said, a little apologetically, and she sat on the bed, as though she expected that I would fuck her right there on her white eyelet duvet.

“I’m gay,” I said, my affect as flat and casual as I could manage. I had never spoken those words to anyone before, not in that way.

“Well, I’ve never had a gay boy in my bedroom either,” she said, and flopped backward, finishing the last of her Pop-Tart sandwich, licking the butter off her fingers. She contemplated the ceiling and I began to wonder if I could simply leave. I was fascinated by Bunny and I liked her, but I was beginning to realize I liked her more from a distance than I did close up. It was too much, being in her room, smelling her smells, hearing her breathe. “You probably think my room is stupid,” she said, still staring up at the ceiling, her legs, in their athletic shorts, agape on her bed in such a casual way that it was almost lewd, even though technically nothing was showing.

“It’s a room,” I said. “I’m not the room judge sent to adjudicate your decor or whatever.”

“It is stupid,” she said. “My dad keeps saying we should redo it. But I like it. I like it just like this.”

“Well, thank you for showing me around,” I said, trying to indicate that I would like to leave, when we both heard a door slam downstairs. Bunny sat upright on the bed, and I froze as we listened to the thumping of feet on the carpeted stairs. And then there he was, a man I had only ever seen in photographs, his giant head wedged between her door and the wall. “You’re home!” Ray Lampert cried, giddy. “And you have a friend! I thought we could get Chinese—do you feel like

Chinese?”

“Ugh, I’m starved,” Bunny said. I, who by fifteen was already a neurotic counter of calories, almost gasped at this statement, having witnessed the 700-calorie Pop-Tart sandwich.

“And you’ll join us, obviously,” Ray Lampert said, turning to me. He was substantially fatter than in his picture, and whilethere were dark puffy bags under his eyes, the rest of his skin tone was so peculiarly even that I could have sworn he was wearing makeup. His blue dress shirt was unbuttoned a scandalous three buttons, and he was wearing a ratty red baseball cap. It occurred to me that I had probably seen him dozens of times and had just never realized that it was the same man as in the photograph.

“This is Michael,” she said. “Were you thinking Bamboo Forest?”

“No, I want good, really good, egg drop soup. Bamboo Forest is so watery.” He turned to me. “Don’t you think it’s watery?”

What I thought was that I didn’t know anyone was such a connoisseur of egg drop soup. To me it just came, like napkins and forks. “I should probably get home,” I said.

“You don’t really have to go, do you?” Bunny said with sudden, cloying desperation. “Say you’ll come with us!”

Ray reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “He’s got nothing better to do, right, son? Don’t tell me you’re one of these overscheduled kids that’s got back-to-back tutoring and chess club right before you off yourself because you didn’t get into Harvard.” He had found me unattended in his daughter’s bedroom; I stank of cigarettes and was wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and eyeliner, and I had a septum piercing. My hair was loose and went halfway down my back. It was unclear to me if his remarks were meant ironically or if he was actually blind. “Let’s make it a party!” he said, slapped me on the back, and

headed downstairs, shouting that he would meet us at the car.

Bunny turned to me and said in a low voice, “My dad’s kind of weird, but I promise it will be fun.”

And I thought: If Ray Lampert was one of the men I met on Craigslist, I would be too scared to ever get in his car, because he was the kind who would lock you in a closet or put a gun in your mouth and then cry about his ex-wife. Bunny took my hand and twined her fingers through my own. And she looked at me with eyes so hopeful that I nodded.

Honestly, I probably would have let her take me anywhere.

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Thorpe, Rufi. *The Knockout Queen* (Knopf, April 2020).

Author photo by Nina Subin.

Fiction from Sara Nović: After the Attack

Well, nothing at first, not right after. In those initial moments panic is still optional.

At the grocery store, the one across from your building on Frederick Douglass, or farther up on Ft. Washington near your boyfriend’s place, depending—a shrill, unfamiliar tone piercing the Muzak. It startles awake a sudden bond between you and other shoppers, people with whom you’d so far avoided eye contact, mumbling a continuous apology for bumping into one another. Now there is camaraderie in the unison groping of pockets, the rifling for phones among purses and reusable

totes.

Across the river on Atlantic Avenue, in the urgent care waiting room, you and the receptionist both jump. The emergency alert system, this is not only a test.

Or on your couch at home, your phone dead from the night before, you receive no alert. You won’t see the special report ticker tape because you are watching Netflix. At the moment, it doesn’t much matter. At first, there are only unconfirmed reports.

It can, as it has before, happen at any time, and therein is the bulk of its power. But city mornings offer certain opportunities—more people on the street, on subways, concentrated in office buildings. People running late, or still bleary-eyed, unseeing, unsaying. See 9/11, 8:46 AM; see Oklahoma City, 9:02 AM.

The West Fourth Street station is bombed in the morning. In your Columbus Circle office tower, a splay of technological gadgets laid out before you on the conference table sound unanimous alarms. The first alert does not contain the word “attack”; it only says “explosion.” So you and your colleagues ignore it. Because the meeting is about to start.

Because New York is a big city, and old, and badly-kempt. Because, though you have watched your share of terror unfold live and on screens, it is still possible that this is not that. Possible is all you need, and in New York possibilities are myriad—gas line break, signal malfunction, flood, or trash fire. You’ve read the posters; the MTA boasts hundreds every year.

Nothing more will happen for a while. You get in line to pay for your groceries.

The receptionist will turn on the television just as you are ushered to the exam room, and you'll scroll through Twitter in your paper gown, seeking a hashtag.

Or you'll lie on your couch with your feet atop the armrest and let your eyes glaze hard against the electro-glow, allowing one episode to flow into the next. It is, after all, your day off.

When, that morning, about halfway through the meeting you remember it is a Tuesday, you pull your phone beneath the table and text your wife. She would've passed through West Fourth on her way to class. *U ok? Saw the alert,* you write, then put the phone back on the table, designating half an eye to the task of monitoring the indicator light that might signal her response. A moment later you see the graphic designer making a similar move. The meeting facilitator, who flew in from LA, does not notice.

The second alert changes things. It goes off mid-walk-up, echoing through the stairwell, and you abandon your grocery bags on the kitchen floor and turn on the television. There has been another explosion; cops are in pursuit of a suspect; there is speculation about his race and religion.

You shiver in your paper gown while your doctor, a Pakistani man from Jackson Heights, wishes for the attacker's whiteness, laments the hate crimes his neighborhood will be in for otherwise. Why, when there is an attack, must they always suffer twice? As he talks you reach for your phone to text your roommate.

Or you fall asleep there on the couch before the computer, waking only when Netflix stops its auto-play, seeking validation that you are, in fact, still here.

After the second alert, you step out of the meeting to call her. She doesn't answer. It doesn't even ring. Maybe, you think, she has made it to class and is mid-lecture. Maybe she

is stuck underground, train traffic bottled up beneath you. Maybe, you think, New York should get its shit together and get some goddamn phone service in the subway like every other city in the goddamn world. Some Russian oligarch is probably dragging his feet, trying to figure out how to wring more money from it first. Fuckers, you think, aware that in your glass skyscraper on the Circle, many have thought the same of you. You call her again—no dice. You see Adrian—your partner on the project—in the hallway. He is on the phone, and you nod at each other as you pass.

An inactive group text once made to plan a reunion dinner (failed due to irreconcilable schedules), is reanimated as friends check-in. Quickly, most everyone says they are fine—stay safe—and you wait for the stragglers to respond.

You ball up the paper gown and jab at your phone with one hand, pull your clothes on in brusque, awkward bursts with the other. You hop on one leg as you yank at the backs of your shoes. You hear from your roommate, or you still haven't heard from your roommate.

You finally plug in your phone and the missed calls from your mother, seven in total, are how you find out something is wrong. You try to piece together the story from her news jumble. No, you rarely go to the place where it happened, but this is cold comfort, and you do not attempt to detail the reality of city living for her. You wake up your computer while you listen to her relief set in. Of course you take the subway, everyone does, but you're home now. You remember a guy you'd had a crush on at your last job and wonder if he is okay, then if it is creepy to seek him out online and ask. You refresh Facebook to see if he surfaces.

The attacker's manifesto has surfaced, though what it says doesn't matter much. Whatever the angle it serves as fuel for someone else's vitriol. Already the feeds have been coopted by trolls of diverse hatreds, practically gleeful in how the dead

people are indisputable proof of their political stances, casualty numbers collected and laid out as evidence like a good hand of poker. As if in defiance, the body count fluctuates all afternoon. NBC volleys between 30 and 33 while CNN holds steady at “dozens.” A reporter reads snippets from the document, lines they have also turned into an infographic, to be shared and repeated in and out of context in the weeks to come.

Around the table, you and your colleagues are each engaged in your own ceaseless scroll, searching for a live newsfeed online. But the streams are jammed, or they are an erratic, pixelated froth—frozen in one moment, blurred and jerky the next, altogether unwatchable. Adrian drags a TV cart into the conference room, the kind the gym teacher used to pull out of the closet when it was time for the Sex Ed videos. Aptly, someone has drawn a penis in the dust on the screen. Once the TV is on you can no longer see it, but while the news flashes grainy Chopper 7 footage of fire belching up the subway stairwell, you still wish someone had wiped it off. You send another text as you watch the FDNY charge the flames. The hose water does not look like water; it looks solid, a length of rope lowered into the chasm, its impact on the flames inconsequential.

You want to go home, but with the subway down and traffic gridlocked, you are told to remain in a safe place as the police sweep the city for IEDs. Despite being forced to stay in the office, you are wholly unproductive. The guy from LA, trying to be kind, passes in and out of the room intermittently. At a borrowed desk he calls his home office, where the day is still new and unmarred.

The feeling when her message comes through: relief pushing up your chest with such force it is almost nauseating. Like eating something so sweet it burns your tongue, makes your stomach jump.

I’m good. stuck on train for a while. class canceled so headed home. love u.

You yelp when you read it, a weird, strangled sound, and you aren’t even embarrassed. “She’s okay,” you announce. And they are happy for you.

Politicians from all over the country call in to news shows to offer thoughts&prayers, having less to do with either endeavor than with being on record as having said the phrase.

You are out of the way and grateful to be so, way uptown in a place no one has yet thought to blow up.

You leave the doctor’s office and try to decipher the map of bus routes that might get you back to your place.

Or, when you hang up with your mother, you remember you were supposed to meet a date tonight. You text him to ask whether you are still on.

You cut out at 4:30, a rarity for you, but you weren’t getting anything done anyway, and you want to see your wife. You try to call, but it goes to voicemail. You’re grateful you had some contact, you feel lucky. On your way, you notice the receptionist has been crying, but you don’t stop to ask. Outside it is Sesame Street weather, such sharp contrast to the smoke screened footage of downtown, it feels as if it had all happened much farther away. Your phone rings but you don’t recognize the number, so you ignore it and contemplate the nerve of telemarketers these days. You walk home, thirty blocks, and think it really is a nice commute on foot, that you should do it more often.

The doorman greets you, searches your face and, finding no distress, looks reassured.

“Good to see you, sir.”

“You, too. All okay in your family?”

“Yes sir. And the missus?”

“She’s fine. She’s upstairs, actually.”

He gives you a look that suggests he is trying figure out what he might say next. You register the question in your arched eyebrows.

“It’s just—I’ve been here all day, sir. The other doorman couldn’t make it in, because of the trains.”

And you remember him bidding you goodbye early that morning. You excuse yourself and get in the lift and rush to your door, though you know before you open it—she isn’t there. You call and call on the landline but it goes straight to voicemail like the battery is dead. A while passes before you remember the unknown caller.

You never hear the whole message. You hang up as soon as you realize it is the police, call the number back. They are uncharacteristically polite as they cast you around the circuit board.

Finally, an officer says your name, your wife’s. Apologizes. Asks if you could come down to make an ID.

“There must be a mistake,” you say. “I heard from her after the attack. She said she was okay.”

“You spoke with her?”

“She texted.”

“Sir, we’d still appreciate if you came down.” He gives you directions to Washington Square Park as if you are an alien, and in that moment you feel like one.

You call your boyfriend and tell him to come over for dinner, you have been grocery shopping today and can make a nice stir fry; you can catch up on that show you’ve DVR’d.

You get a phone call from your roommate sounding groggy, saying yes, he is fine, but they're taking him to the hospital—somewhere nearby, maybe Brooklyn Heights. Or you hear nothing and lament your morning quarrel over toast crumbs, or hear nothing and invent grand schematics for his escape from peril—perhaps he is still deep underground, inching along the wall of the tunnel, making his way home.

Or you flat iron your hair and put on extra mascara and things go back to normal. You feel guilty about it or you don't. You take a cab in a wide arc around the affected blocks and look away when you see caution tape. You arrive at the restaurant right on time.

You take a cab, get out after ten minutes, feeling sick, remind yourself that nothing is for certain. You run twenty blocks buoyed by that hope, hail another cab. At the scene it is not yet night, the NYPD's neatly ordered mobile generator streetlamps muted by a fuchsia sunset so striking it makes you want to punch something. The police have cordoned off the park, one corner swathed with tarps where the EMTs swarm. You know this is where you are supposed to go before anyone tells you; the policeman at the gate who checks your ID confirms.

In the makeshift tent: ferric scent of blood and antiseptic-as-cologne. A policewoman leads you down the row to a stretcher tagged with your last name. On the ground beneath it is your wife's purse.

"I don't understand. She messaged," you say when the cop pulls back the sheet.

"It's possible the message was sent with a delay, after extraction," she says. "As they're brought above ground and reconnect to the grid—the phones—it's been causing some confusion."

You stare at the cop as if she is speaking another language. She expresses her condolences, tells you to take your time and

then return to the front table for the paperwork.

Beneath the sheet you take her hand, except she doesn’t feel like your wife anymore—fingers cool and taut—so you settle for stroking her hair, soot and shrapnel flecked through like glitter. You cry until you think your ribs might crack; you sign your forms and push your way out of the tent into the twilight. You stand there on the grass, holding your wife’s purse and wondering what the point of that goddamn arch is anyway, wondering what the hell you are supposed to do next. Once, when you were fourteen, you and your best friend skipped school and got high in this park, but you have never been as dazed as you are now, generator stars boring through your eyes and into your skull, no hope of an exit wound.

“After the Attack” originally appeared in BOMB, June 16, 2017.

New Poetry from Janaya Martin

More Than Twice

She said you better hush
before he comes back in here

like she knew who she was
talking to but didn’t

She was me and he was the
mistake you made more than twice

but he gave you a daughter who
gave you trouble, sometimes.

this is what women do, talk
nonsense and make trouble

all about the earth, but only
because no one lets them

keep things nice or clean
or quiet. let us just have

one damn thing.

Aretemisia Gentileschi, “Susanna and the Elders,” 1610.

First Wednesday Sirens

Working from home includes:
day-old coffee heated in the microwave,
snoring dogs and sometimes the desire
to add wine.

Yesterday, July 4, the incessant booming.
Today, Wednesday, the sirens.

Feels like a warning, a dry run, a war inside.
I feel like I should move the canned
goods to the basement, the bottled water too,
build a wall to keep all the crazy white men out.

Maybe I should have titled this poem,
Me + My Uterus = 4-ever.

Odilon Redon, “The Crying Spider,” 1881.

Spider

my head feels heavy
so i let it hang like

a knot in a thread
and i drag it around.

i remember when i was 10
a spider crawled up my leg

i let it, even though i was terrified.
you are that spider.

how do i tell you that you
are that spider?

how do i tell you that i can hear
the words you do not speak?

how do i tell you that sometimes
i sit in the basement and listen

to the house, to the way
each foot plays a different note
across the floor.

The Ghosts Will Not Save You

My mother taught me that no house
is a home. Instead, each room is an opportunity
to be a statistic.
Instead, this is where you hide the pipe,

this is where you keep the bottles
and here, daughter, is where you keep
the secrets. All of them.
Stacked against the door, not as an offering,

but as a precaution or a reminder that you
will not leave here. At least not the way
you came.

Memoir by Sari Fordham: "House Arrest in Thirteen Parts"

Part* I: *The House, circa 1977

The house in Uganda was red brick with a metal roof, a rusted water tank, and a screened-in verandah that had once been painted green. My mother spent most of her day on that verandah. She read Psalms to us there in the mornings, combed our hair afterwards, and then wrote letters to my father's family in the States or to her own in Finland. She was struck by how different the world was, how isolated each person was in their reality. *It's strange,* she wrote my grandfather, *that you're skiing and otherwise getting in shape. Here the weather is usually so exhausting that you cannot get enough exercise.*

The house sat at the top of a hill and was surrounded by jungle. Monkeys gathered in the trees, and such bright and peculiar birds flew through the clearing that my mother later

regretted that she hadn't started birding yet. The house had three bedrooms and a bath. With the exception of the verandah, it looked like an average American house, maybe a little older, maybe a little shabbier. By Ugandan standards, it was palatial. It wasn't just the space, more than a family of four needed, it was also the amenities: running water, electricity, a fridge, a stove, a washing machine, and cupboards filled with items you could no longer buy in Uganda.

The Fordhams' house on the hill.

We lived a mile from campus, a mile from all those grievances. Our closest neighbors were unaffiliated with the school and lived in what we called "the village," even though the collection of mud huts belonged to a single Ugandan family: a patriarch, his wives, and their children. The wives and daughters collected water from our spigot every morning and carried it down to their communal kitchen. When my father was home, he would help hoist the pails onto their heads. One girl complained to my father that her neck hurt. "No wonder," my father later said. He could barely lift the pails.

My parents were missionaries at Bugema College, a Seventh-day Adventist institution. The campus was twenty-one miles from the capital, Kampala, but the trip could take over an hour, depending on the conditions of the road or the number of military checkpoints. The distance suited everyone on campus just fine. The school had a dairy and a poultry farm, and beans and bananas were still available in the countryside. Whenever one missionary family eventually drove into town, they set aside personal grievances and ran errands for all the other missionaries.

The wives and daughters saw our house every day and had their own relationship with it. They walked past the screened-in verandah, the glass panes on each window, the light on the

porch that turned on and off when the generator was working. They saw the external trappings of privilege and could only imagine what the interior held. We didn’t think we were privileged. My mother worried because she couldn’t buy toothbrushes in a store or children’s vitamins. To supplement our iron, she threw a nail in with the beans as they boiled.

My mother disliked the patriarch because he beat his wives, and she assumed he also disliked us and waseven spying on us for Idi Amin or someone high in the government. These were paranoid times. Bugema’s principal had been warned that “the American” was being watched, and my father was the only American on campus. When the patriarch asked my parents what they thought of Uganda, their answers were repetitive and chirpy: wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, *wonderful.* They were on edge with every interaction. Yet when we were under house arrest, the patriarch was not the person who accompanied the soldier.

Part II: The Missionaries

My parents, Gary and Kaarina, met in 1966 at an Adventist university in Michigan. My father, tall and skinny, had grown up surfing in Hawaii and had a fondness for practical jokes. To my mother, he seemed like the all-American boy. Later, she learned that my father and his siblings had spent their childhood bouncing around foster homes. During the last such interlude, an Adventist family took in the three children. My father and his siblings converted, and then his mother, who came for visits, did as well. My father found stability in the church and worked his way through Adventist boarding schools, eating only two meals a day because that’s all he could afford. When my mother met him, he was studying for his Master’s in Theology because he wanted to serve God and because he believed Jesus was coming soon.

My mother ostensibly came to the United States to study for a Master’s in English. Like my father, she’d grown up poor, but

hers had a different texture. She was born in Finland at the beginning of World War II and was raised during the harsh austerity that followed. Her father, a Bible teacher at an Adventist boarding school, gave his salary too freely to needy students and to missions, leaving little to support his five children, the eldest of whom was handicapped. My grandmother was so anxious about finances that she tried unsuccessfully to induce miscarriages during her last two pregnancies.

My mother lived with her family in a house without indoor plumbing or running water. As she later told us, an outhouse in winter was no joke. For washing dishes and clothes, she and her siblings carried up pails of water from the Baltic Sea. It was a decent walk even without the weight of water. My mother and her siblings were always busy with the task of subsistence. In the summers, they foraged for mushrooms and berries, which they either ate or sold. My grandmother, who had never been to the United States, wanted her children to aspire to a future outside of Finland, telling them that in American even the telephone poles were higher than anywhere else.

My mother was the daughter to leave. She received a scholarship to study abroad, but more to the point, she had no marriage prospects in Finland. Despite being raised among all those potential Adventist suitors, she was, when my father met her, a twenty-six-year-old spinster who looked sixteen. The eligible bachelors had dismissed her as the Bible teacher's bookish, less captivating daughter. In a black-and-white photograph taken before her departure, my mother stands beside all her worldly goods, three small suitcases and a bundle. Her hair is tied up, her eyes downcast. What seemed lost on everyone in Finland, especially herself, is that she's strikingly beautiful.

The Fordhams in Uganda (author Sari is on far right)

My father noticed immediately. He walked into the library looking for a date. Everyone knew that if you wanted to be hired as a minister, you had to be married. Earlier that day, he and his friends had planted books on each of the library’s study tables. The plan was to sit at the table with the most attractive woman, gesturing to the books. The hitch, for my father, was that my mother was a student librarian. Stripped of pretense, my father approached her directly and asked her out.

My parents got engaged four months after their first date, got married in Finland, honeymooned in Lapland, and settled in Indiana where my father pastored two churches and where my mother taught fourth grade, and where they rented their first house, a two-bedroom with wood panels and shag carpet. When Sonja was born, my mother quit teaching and spent her days photographing my sister and sending pictures to the beautiful baby contests advertised in the back of ladies’ magazines. My mother found America strange and lonely. People would say, “Come over any time,” but when my father drove her over, they looked confused, and she felt embarrassed in front of her new husband. She tried to get her driver’s license, but traffic frightened her, and she kept failing the exams. Church members critiqued her parenting. When I was born, my mother was ready to leave Indiana. She was tired of the winters, which she said were windier than those in Finland. She was tired of corn. When my father began talking about the mission field, she didn’t say no. In 1976, they moved to Uganda.

Part III: The Dictator

Idi Amin came to power in a 1971 military coup that was welcomed by most Ugandans. The deposed president Milton Obote had made himself unpopular by marginalizing Uganda’s largest tribe, banning oppositional parties, detaining dissidents, and declaring himself Life President.

The West supported the “regime change,” as coups we approved

of were called. Milton Obote was a socialist, and Idi Amin wasn't. Moreover, Idi Amin appeared malleable. Before Ugandan independence, he had served in the King's African Rifles and had ruthlessly fought with the British against the Mau Mau rebels in Kenya. He boxed and played rugby. He was charming. He had a wonderful laugh. Western leaders considered him not too bright, despite the four languages he spoke.

Idi Amin preached an Africa for Africans, and then, in 1972, he expelled the Asians who ran the economy. It was not a small thing. There were 40,000 Asians, as the expatriates of mostly Indian origin were called, living in the country. After business hours, so few ethnic Ugandans walked the streets of Kampala that the city could have been a suburb of Bombay. The Asians had ninety days to leave, each taking with them only two suitcases of personal items. Their houses, furniture, appliances, cars, livestock, shops, pharmacies, coffee plantations, cotton farms, and factories were given to Idi Amin's supporters.

Their bank acconnts were absorbed by the National Treasury. Uganda's robust economy, a model on the continent, crashed hard. By 1976, you couldn't buy oats in a store. Yet that one move helped mitigate Amin's legacy with his countrymen. There might be nothing to buy in Kampala, but at least that nothing belonged to Ugandans.

The West came to view Idi Amin as a buffoon, and in private meetings, world leaders questioned his sanity. A popular theory was that he had syphilis-induced psychosis. Amin was surely aware of his reputation and might have seen it as an advantage. In any event, he was a man who liked a joke, particularly one where the West was the punch line. You laugh at me; I laugh at you. His official title-read in full before radio addresses-was "His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE," with the CBE standing for Conqueror of the British Empire. My parents laughed at that. They also laughed at the outrageous telegrams

he sent world leaders. In a correspondence with Queen Elizabeth, he sympathized with England's economic woes and volunteered to send "a cargo ship full of bananas to thank you for the good days of the colonial administration." In Uganda, the killings began nearly as soon as Amin came to power. Concerned about a coup, he purged the army of soldiers from Acholi and Langi tribes, two ethnic groups allied with Milton Obote. He established the State Research Bureau, an intelligence agency infamous for torture. He killed those who threatened his power. He killed those who might threaten his power. He killed those who didn't threaten his power at all. Bodies were tossed into the lakes, and the crocodiles grew fat. After fleeing Uganda, one of Amin's former aides told *Time* magazine, "'You are walking, and any creature making a step on the dry grass behind you might be an Amin man. Whenever you hear a car speeding down the street, you think it might suddenly come to a stop – for you. I finally fled, not because I was in trouble or because of anything I did, but out of sheer fear. People disappear. When they disappear, it means they are dead."

Archives of New Zealand: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Idi Amin.

Humanitarian organizations were unsure how many Ugandans had been murdered. Some groups estimated that 80,000 had been killed. Other groups estimated that 300,000 had been killed.

Part IV: The Archbishop

On February 16, 1977, Janani Luwum – the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Boga Zaire – was murdered. The world had to notice.

Janani Luwum was a rare man, a warm individual – taking time to write letters to those he had met – and an innovative, effective leader. He encouraged theology students to take

classes in Developmental Studies, and he promoted a Christian practice that looked African, not European. He was the most influential religious leader on the continent, and the first Ugandan to hold his position.

If Luwum had lived long enough to have a full career, he likely would have changed the Church. Instead, he became linked irrevocably with Idi Amin. They both were Ugandan men shaped by colonialism, both dynamic leaders, both capable of dazzling the camera with their smiles. These two men initially had a cordial relationship, despite the fact that Luwum came from the Acholi tribe, an ethnic group with sympathetic ties to the deposed president. The Archbishop used their friendship to temper the dictator’s excesses. Parishioners came to him with names written on slips of paper, and he would carry those names with him, cajoling Idi Amin into releasing someone’s brother, someone’s husband.

At the beginning of 1977, Amin survived yet another coup attempt, or invented one. Observers weren’t sure. What’s certain is that in response, he ordered the slaughter of everyone in Obote’s hometown. An entire town murdered and the world looked away. In the same fit of spite or fear, Amin purged the army of the remaining Acholi and Langi soldiers. A witness described the carnage to *Time* magazine. “You would hear a short cry and then sudden silence. I think they were being strangled and then had their heads smashed. Next day the floors of rooms C and D – the elimination chambers – were littered with loose eyes and teeth.”

It was too much. The Archbishop wrote Idi Amin an open letter and sent copies to government officials. Seventeen bishops signed the letter and Archbishop Luwum personally delivered it to Idi Amin. With the candor of an Old Testament prophet, he wrote: *We have buried many who have died as a result of being shot and there are many more whose bodies have not been found. The gun which was meant to protect Uganda as a nation, the Uganda citizen and his property, is increasingly being used*

against the Ugandan to take away his life and property.

Few in Uganda were surprised when the Archbishop was arrested for “smuggling weapons,” fewer still when Radio Uganda reported that the Archbishop had died in a car accident on the way to the interrogation center. It was whispered that he had been shot. Some claimed that Idi Amin had pulled the trigger.

Part V: The Trip

After the Archbishop’s murder, even expatriates were anxious. The thing to do, the missionaries all said, was to be unobtrusive. Don’t make waves. It went without saying that you shouldn’t travel unless you had to. Any time you drove, you risked getting stopped by soldiers or by carjackers, soldiers being preferable of the two, but with the country on edge, who knew? It felt melodramatic to speak about getting killed. It felt presumptuous to clutch your passport and assume you were above it all.

For months, my father had been planning to drive into Kenya to attend church meetings. My mother had always intended to stay with us on the hill because it was safer and because she had little patience for the border crossings. She had created a shopping list for my father that might as well have said: *buy all the things.* Now this.

“No one expects you to still go,” my mother said. “No one.”

“I’m not that kind of missionary,” my father said. It was his favorite line.

My mother could feel the tug of their old argument. She sometimes veered away, setting her mouth and saying nothing further. More often, she railed. *Why can’t you just once put your family before the church?*

On the morning my father left, she was cheerful. My mother might shout during a fight, but she didn’t stew. As my father

dashed through the house – “Where’s my Bible? Where’s my passport? Have you seen my glasses?” – she pointed him toward the items he needed, and when he was ready to leave she handed him a stack of aerogrammes that had accumulated on our table. For the past week, missionaries had been dropping off letters for my father to post in Kenya. Mail sent from Uganda was opened and read by someone, we all knew.

My father said goodbye to us in the yard. I sat in my mother’s arms and watched him go. It was a familiar sight. He left, and then he returned, often with presents. The best were matchbox cars. Sonja and I loved them because we loved him. At night, he would get on the floor with us and push cars around the legs of the dining room table.

“You better get going,” my mother said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

She didn’t have to say that we’d be fine. Of course, we’d be fine. If you didn’t count snakes and malaria, life on the hill was uneventful.

Part VI: The Press Conference-February 23, 1977

My father was in Kenya when Jimmy Carter held the second press conference of his presidency. Reporters wanted to know how Carter’s campaign promises were holding up to the realities of office. No one anticipated that Uganda would be mentioned or that the press conference would have international consequences.

Halfway through, a reporter asked Carter: “What if anything, do you plan to try to do to help victims of political repression in these countries?” The countries in question were Iran and the Philippines, and the reporter noted that despite human rights abuses by both regimes, the United States was aiding their governments. Carter spoke vaguely about changes his administration was making and then pivoted to Uganda. Uganda was a small, politically inconsequential country, one

the United States was not supporting either covertly or overtly; still, the Archbishop’s murder was shocking.

“Obviously, there are deprivations of human rights, even more brutal than the ones on which we’ve commented up till now,” Carter said. “In Uganda, the actions there have disgusted the entire civilized world, and, as you know, we have no diplomatic relationships with Uganda. But here is an instance where both Ambassador Andrew Young and I have expressed great concern about what is there. The British are now considering asking the United Nations to go into Uganda to assess the horrible murders that apparently are taking place in that country, the persecution of those who have aroused the ire of Mr. Amin.”

It was a throwaway line. The press conference, broadcast live on television and radio, continued for fourteen more questions, none of them about Idi Amin. Jimmy Carter didn’t mention Uganda again.

The next day, Idi Amin announced that Americans couldn’t leave Uganda and were to report themselves to Kampala on February 28 for a personal meeting. No one was quite sure what this meant. It could mean nothing. It could mean we’d be deported. It could mean we’d be imprisoned or held in Kampala. There were only 240 Americans in Uganda. Most were missionaries like us, who had ignored the State Department’s travel warnings. There were also a handful of airline employees, oil workers, and technicians. Sonja and I were some of the youngest Americans. With our father in Kenya, we were likely the only American children without an American guardian in the country.

“Goddammit. Why couldn’t our first crisis have been a more dignified one?” a White House adviser reportedly said.

Part VII: Singing in the Dining Room

News of the house arrest, as the missionaries called it, moved swiftly through campus. There was news, and then there was

*news.*What were the Fordhams going to do now? Would they be deported or worse? What was Carter thinking? The other missionaries were relieved that the leaders of their respective nations — Australia, Canada, and the Philippines — -had sense enough not to irritate Amin, and it was fortunate, they all said, providential even, that Gary was in Kenya. They knew my mother was Finnish, and they speculated on whether or not Sonja and I were dual citizens. We weren't. That my mother was the last to hear the news said more about living on the hill than anything.

"Please, can we have some peace and quiet?" my mother said. "We're trying to talk here." Her voice was sharp, and I began weeping. "Oh, for goodness sakes," our mother said. After the midday rain, a missionary hustled up to tell us. She called out "*Hodi,*" and my mother's heart lurched. "Gary's fine," the missionary said, as she sat on the couch. In the dining room, Sonja and I were building a puzzle. We began singing because we liked to sing and because we finally had an audience, even if she was only a missionary. The women spoke as if we weren't there, and so we responded in the only way we could: we raised the volume. "God is so good. God is so GOOD. God is SO GOOD. HE'S SO GOOD TO ME."

To the missionary she asked, "What does this mean? What's he thinking?"

After we went to bed, my mother turned on the radio. She confirmed the date and time we were to present ourselves in Kampala and wondered whether or not she should take us. Who would even drive us? Surely the Ugandan government wouldn't seek out two children. Did anyone even know we were here? Who kept track of these things?

Termites flew against the glass with steady pings. A few had gotten into the house, where they fluttered on the floor, lattice wings propelling thick bodies. They were a delicacy. When they came flying out of the ground, children would leave

whatever they were doing and run out into the fields to gather them. The termites were roasted and eaten. My mother carried the mugs into the kitchen and set them in the sink. She stood in the green darkness, water running through her hands, and cried.

Part VIII: The Letter

My father sat down to write his mother and stepfather. Despite attending meetings all day, he must have felt like he was on vacation. No teaching, grading, or lessons planning. And the food! In Uganda, we only spoke of such meals: toast with marmite, potatoes and green beans, spaghetti and peas, cake.

My father dated his letter February 24, the day after Jimmy Carter's press conference. Either he hadn't heard the news or the detention hadn't yet been announced.

Dear Mother and Gordon,

Wanted to let you know all is well with us. There is trouble in the land, but we have not been bothered.

He filled the front page of the aerogramme with the minutia of our daily lives: mail in Uganda was censored, the dairy farm was down to six cows, wages for Ugandans were only fifteen cents an hour, fellow missionaries were requesting transfers.

Four days later, my father, fully aware of the events in Uganda, returned to the letter. He had left the back flap empty and so he turned to it and wrote in the date. February 28. So much could happen in four days.

I am still in Kenya (Union Session finished yesterday) and Americans are detained in Uganda. We are not sure what to do because Kaarina, on a Finnish passport, can leave more easily if I'm not there. We expected to get an indication today, but now the meeting [with Idi Amin] is postponed until Wednesday. I may go in tomorrow to be there for the appointment with the

president and I may wait.

I wish I could contact Kaarina, but the phones are cut at the border. We know the Lord will watch over us, but feel it may be wiser to see what's going to happen before complicating matters. The Lord Bless you. Love, Gary

My father was a phlegmatic man who liked to say, "Don't make a mountain out of a mole hill." After hearing we were under house arrest, he had continued attending meetings. He was a delegate, after all. Let the world burn around him, Gary Fordham would fulfill his duty. The letter to my grandmother, however, suggested that my father had identified a mountain as a mountain. Over and over, he used the pronoun *we,* as if he and my mother were in consultation. *We are not sure. We expect. We know. We feel.* Unable to contact my mother, he was conversing with her in his head.

Two decades later, after my mother died of cancer, he returned to this unconscious habit. *We think. We hope. We feel.*

"Who is this 'we'?" I finally asked. "You and mom?"

"Yeah," he said, and smiled. He never used *we* in the same way again.

Part IX: The Soldier

The soldier came in the morning. We were on the verandah when we heard the crunch of tires on a road that led to us and nowhere else. The rumble was a back and forth sound, a jostling of vehicle against washed out road, against mud, against potholes. My mother set down her Bible and the three of us watched the Land Rover jut out of the jungle, roll across the yard, and stop beside the frangipani tree. A soldier, dressed in green, sleeves rolled past elbows, climbed out, and there, from the passenger's side, emerged Joseph, my father's student.

“Good morning, madam,” the soldier said.

“Good morning, *bwana,”* my mother said. “Morning, Joseph.” The soldier was tall, or so he seemed to us, and dashing. His eyes followed our chickens, Rebecca and Sarah, as they snatched termites in the yard. “Can I help you?” my mother said. “If you came to see my husband, he’s not here.”

“Can we come in?” the soldier said.

My mother led them up the cement steps and through the verandah. She removed her shoes at the door and asked them to do the same. “All the mud,” she said. She motioned toward the couch and as the men sat, she asked Joseph how he was enjoying his classes. He answered that he was liking them very much.

Sonja and I scooted behind her. A soldier was sitting next to Joseph on our couch. Any other day, Joseph would have been the occasion. I would have climbed into his lap and demanded a story, but Joseph was not the point. There was a soldier in our house. He was wearing a beret and there were holes in his socks.

In the kitchen, our mother made cherry Kool-Aid out of water she had boiled the night before. We hadn’t had Kool-Aid in months, or as my mother liked to say, not in the memory of man. Sonja and I hoped the visitors wouldn’t drink it all. My mother hummed as she moved, reaching for our tall cups, then opening a Tupperware of dried finger bananas. She carried the Kool-Aid out first, giving a cup to both Joseph and the soldier. Then she brought out the dried finger bananas and held them out, and they each took one or two. Bananas were, well, bananas, but the Kool-Aid had made an impression.

“These are my girls,” my mother said. “Sonja and Sari.” We ducked and smiled. “What do you say?” she said.

Sonja stepped up to the soldier and said, “Hello.” The soldier took her hand and shook it. “You are welcome,” he said. I

pressed my face into my mother's waist, and they laughed.

"Okay," my mother said. "You can go outside and play. Take the cat. Stay near the house, and for goodness sakes, don't get too muddy." And so we went, the reluctant Kissa looped through Sonja's arms.

PartX: Inventory

Our mother frowned as we left, feeling what exactly, I shouldn't know, but I've heard this story so often I can't separate my memories from hers, my feelings from hers, and so I see her standing in our house, irritated. She was irritated at the excitement of her daughters, irritated at their father for being gone, irritated at Jimmy Carter for opening his big mouth, irritated at Joseph for accompanying the soldier, irritated at herself for not smiling more pleasantly, irritated that she had to smile. Underneath all her peevishness was fear. Quite absent was the triumph she later had while telling this story.

She sat in the La-Z-Boy we had brought from the States. It had come in a great shipment of things that had taken a year to be released from customs and only then, after my father had overcome his scruples and bribed the custom official. Opening those crates had been like a bad Christmas. So much bounty, so little practicality. Better to have brought more soap, more children's cereal, more watches for bribes. Instead, there sat our La-Z-Boy.

My mother now looked at the soldier with as much pleasantness as she could muster. Even if she could remember where my father kept the watches, she didn't dare bribe an official. It might be exactly the wrong thing. She wasn't going to give Idi Amin any reason to throw her in jail. "If there's even a speck of mud outside, my girls will find it," my mother said. "So today, forget it. Mark my words, they'll be filthy when they come back in. Do you have children?" When the soldier nodded,

she rattled off her Questions For Soldiers With Kids: *How many do you have? How old are they? What are their names? Are they attending school? Do you like being a father?* If we had been at a roadblock, she would have concluded the conversation with a small present for the children (a pencil or a nub of soap), but today she was too anxious.

“Where is your husband?” the soldier asked. “Where is Gary Fordham?”

“Joseph didn’t tell you? He’s in Kenya.” It was not lost on her that the soldier knew my father’s first name. She was certain she hadn’t told him. “He’s attending the East African Union meetings.”

My mother hadn’t expected this visit, but now that the soldier sat across from her, his visit seemed inevitable. Of course, he was here. But what about Joseph? Why had he come?

The soldier explained that he had been sent with orders from Idi Amin Dada himself. All Americans were to appear before Idi Amin on Monday and couldn’t leave the country before then. He was here because the Ugandan government wanted a list of our family’s valuables. There was nothing menacing in the solder’s voice. It was the message itself that was menacing. Soon we would be separated from all that we owned. If we were lucky, we would only be kicked out of the country like the Asians. If we were unlucky, well, no one wanted to consider it.

“This is a misunderstanding,” my mother said. “I’m European, not American.” She excused herself and returned with her Finnish passport, which she handed to the soldier.

He flipped through it, giving the pages a cursory glance. “Gary Fordham, he is American? Your babies, they are American? Madam, why is your husband gone now? Why are you all alone?”

My mother smiled blandly.

“Thank you,” the soldier said, handing her the empty cup and the passport. He was polite. She was polite. “I must inventory your belongings now,” he said. He had brought a clipboard with him into the house.

“The furniture doesn’t belong to us,” my mother said. “It belongs to the school. A fine Ugandan school, as you saw driving in.That couch isn’t ours. The table and chairs aren’t ours. The refrigerator isn’t ours. If you take them, you’ll only be hurting the school.” She shot a look at Joseph.

“This one is Ugandan?” the soldier asked, nudging the La-Z-Boy.

“Oh, goodness,” my mother said. “Of course, you’re right. That’s ours. Actually, it’s mine, and I’m not an American citizen. It’s not an American belonging.”

The solder looked at her, pointedly, though he didn’t write anything down. He walked into the kitchen.

“The stove is the school’s,” my mother said, “But the pots and pans and dishes are mine. The Tupperware is mine.”

The soldier began to pull open drawers. “Does the silverware belong to the school?” he asked.

“No, it belongs to me,” my mother said. She claimed everything in the kitchen. She claimed the rice cooker my grandmother had sent from the States and the transformer that allowed it to work here. She claimed the cheese slicer, cutting board, and ceramic bowls (which actually were from Finland), and the can opener, dishtowels, and colander (which weren’t). In the back room, she claimed the washing machine. She smiled and nodded. Mine. Mine. Mine. They went through the bedrooms, attempting to separate the property of the school from the property of the Fordhams. The beds belonged to the school, as did the mosquito nets, the dressers, and the bookcases. The sheets and blankets and books were ours. The

typewriter was ours, as Joseph pointed out. So were the matchbox cars, the Fisher Price toys, our Sabbath dresses, my father's ties, a Swiss Army knife, an old perfume bottle, the radio, our hens, the dog. My mother claimed them all.

The car, our most valuable possession, was in Kenya, but Joseph suggested that the bicycle should be here. "Pastor Fordham bikes to campus every day," Joseph said.

"Yes, Joseph," my mother said. "He needs the bike to get to campus." She wanted to hiss in his ear-Whose side are you on anyway, brother Joseph? "It's in the garage," she said to the soldier. Bicycles were impossible to buy in Uganda. Everything was hard to come by. Even our pots and pans would be snatched up on the black market. But the bicycle? Well, people had been killed for less. "I can show it to you if you think it's necessary." The soldier nodded. "But I think you should know, it belongs to me."

"Your husband's bicycle?" the soldier said. His incredulity sat between them.

"Yes," my mother said. "I bought it, and I'm European." Let them prove she didn't own that bicycle.

"Madam, what is your husband's? What belongs to him, eh?"

My mother said nothing.

Part XI: The Misunderstanding

Jimmy Carter set up a command center to monitor the crisis in Uganda and redirected a nuclear aircraft carrier to the coast of Kenya, along with five naval vessels. The ships, which had been cruising the Indian Ocean on routine missions, were not prepared to rescue us. *Time* later reported that between all of them, there were fewer than 200 Marines. Still, the message was delivered. "The President will take whatever steps he thinks are necessary and proper to protect American lives,"

the White House Press Secretary announced. So much promised effort, so few endangered lives. Of course, every life is precious to its owner.

Idi Amin must have felt conflicted. When a British professor had insulted Idi Amin in 1975, Queen Elizabeth had apologized personally, and England's Foreign Secretary had come to Uganda to secure the professor's release. After a much more public criticism, President Carter was offering nothing but a show of force. Moreover, if Amin had seen the inventories taken by his soldiers, he must have been happily considering the political support he could secure with all those washing machines and cars.

But Idi Amin had learned what even a small country might do for its citizens. A year earlier, Palestinians had landed a hijacked plane at the Entebbe Airport and held Jewish passengers hostage. Idi Amin had played host to both terrorists and hostages. He was a Big Man, courted daily by Israeli negotiators. And then the raid happened. Israeli commandos freed most of the hostages, killed the terrorists and the Ugandan soldiers on duty, destroyed the Ugandan air force, and left Idi Amin looking weak and inept. He might not survive another such fiasco.

Idi Amin sent Carter a telegram stating that "the Americans in Uganda are happy and scattered all over the country" and that "Uganda has the strength to crush invaders." He postponed meeting the Americans and then a few days later, canceled it. The fun was over. Idi Amin assured us we could leave the country if we wished. But why would we? Uganda was a beautiful country, and he had just wanted to thank us for our service.

My father was in the Finnish embassy when the final announcement wasmade. The clerks were creating counterfeit Finnish passports for Sonja and me, which they planned to smuggle into Uganda through a diplomatic pouch. It was as James Bond as anything we would be associated with. On hearing

the news, my father thanked the clerks. Now for his errands. Of course, the Fordham family would stay in Uganda. The crisis was over. Why make a mountain out of a molehill?

My father walked to the nearest *duka* and bought two matchbox cars.

Part XII: The Foreign Government Dances

For years, the only accounts I had of the house arrest were my own memories and my parents' stories. I looked for confirmation in Ugandan histories, but amidst the atrocities of the Amin years, the event was too small to matter. Then one day, I stumbled upon *Time's* archives and discovered articles written in the midst of the crisis. Once I found one piece of coverage, I found more and more. I listened to Carter's press conference and watched an ABC news report that was broadcast during the crisis. Experts called Idi Amin a "butcher" and said that while Amin didn't usually kill foreigners, nobody knew what to expect. My American grandmother likely saw the news story weeks before my father's letter arrived.

For most of my life, I considered this my mother's story. My mother stood in the living room and made a rash decision. She hadn't known, until she claimed that first item, what she would do. She was angry and that was part of it. A soldier was informing her we might lose everything we owned. She had grown up poor, and possessions mattered to her, never mind that she was a missionary. She was also anxious about us, her American daughters. When we were born, she hadn't wanted us to be dual citizens or even to learn the Finnish language. She wanted us to be fully American, unable to return to the land she had left and still missed terribly. Our US passports were to be talismans, offering protections and opportunities that we, as Americans, would never fully appreciate. As she stood across from Joseph and the soldier and claimed everything we owned, she felt utterly alone, and so she did what she did. She was courageous. I think this, still.

My mother stood across from a soldier who carried his own stories and fears. He held all the power in their interaction, and yet, he must have known that he was far more likely to be killed by Idi Amin than she was. Surely, there had been whispers about what had happened to the soldiers at the Mugire prison. They weren't just killed, they were killed with sledgehammers because bullets were too costly. If Idi Amin stayed in power, this soldier might join the disappeared, and if Amin was overthrown, he might be killed as retribution.

Standing beside the soldier, inexplicably, was Joseph. Joseph had no obvious reason to be at our house or so helpful. My father was a popular teacher who often ate breakfast in the cafeteria with his students. He was a hard grader to be sure, but he was also funny and kind. I don't think Joseph came because he was angry at my father. His anger – if it was that – was probably broader. Why should expatriates have so much and Ugandans so little? Upon graduation, Joseph would likely be hired by the Adventist church and assigned a district that covered hundreds of miles and included multiple churches. He would work more than forty hours a week, but he wouldn't be able to afford a car, and if he owned even a bicycle, it would be through charity. A rural church in Ohio or North Carolina might send money for one as their "mission project." They would expect a thank you note and photographs. Where was the dignity for the Ugandan? Where were the opportunities?

My Finnish grandmother knew that some people were more valued than others. The church might teach that God loved everyone equally, but in this world, citizenship determined worth. My grandmother had tended cows as a child, and as she stood in the dung, warming her bare feet, she decided that if she had children, she would urge them to move away and to matter. In Uganda, an entire town was murdered and my parents didn't hear about it. How many residents lived in that town? There were surely more than 240 people, but they had no advocates. Even today, the only record of their existence is their

annihilation.

After the detention of the Americans, *Time* put Idi Amin on the cover, titling their piece “The Wild Man of Africa.” One of their sources, a Ugandan who bad self-exiled to Tanzania, described Idi Amin’s foreign policy: “He always acts the same way. He threatens a group of foreigners, and then he says everything is okay. Then he threatens them again, and then he says everything is okay. The foreign government dances back and forth-and everyone forgets about the thousands of Ugandans who are dying.”

Part XIII: The Matchbox Car

We were the foreigners, or some of them. We weren’t thinking about political dances or how Idi Amin might be using our presence in Uganda. Officially, my parents were thinking about God. In addition, my father was thinking about teaching, and my mother was usually wondering whether there would be any letters in the mail. We were all thinking about food. And with my father gone, I was thinking about matchbox cars.

Believing my father would be home soon, my mother used the last of the whole-wheat flour to make *piirakka*. It is a Finnish pastry, and for months, Sonja and I had been begging her to make it. She had waved us off, saying it was too hot here or that we didn’t have enough powdered milk or that *piirakka* wouldn’t taste right without rye flour. She stood over the stove, stirring the rice, stirring the rice. If she let it burn, she would feel even more foolish than she already did. “We’ll see,” she told us. Who makes *piirakka* in Uganda? Well, she was making it now, and we would see.

My father had originally planned to return that day and my mother expected that he still would. “He has class tomorrow. He’ll be back,” she said. Sonja and I spent the morning arguing about who would tell him about the soldier. We sat for a while on the patio steps, giving each other shoves.

“I’m telling.”

“No, me.”

Our mother poked her head out the door. “Daddy’s probably sitting at the border right now, just wishing he could hear you two fight. Oh, boy. He doesn’t know what he’s missing.” And then, “As long as you’re out there, keep the monkeys off the tomatoes.”

By the afternoon, Sonja was building a puzzle and I was pushing my matchbox cars around the kitchen floor. “Daddy’s bringing me a car,” I told my mother. “Maybe orange.”

“Don’t count on it. We’ll be lucky if he brings flour. And, good grief, if I step on one more car, I’m taking them away.”

By supper, my father still hadn’t come. My mother set the table. “Never mind, he still might come. Or he might stay the night in Kampala and come in the morning. We can wait another day, right, girls?”

She put the *piiraka* and some finger bananas on the table and told us that it was probably the first time they had been served together in the history of mankind, making us feel very important indeed. The *piiraka* had a salty, creamy bite, and though my mother had been complaining about their looks, she smiled after trying one. “This is a nice change of pace.”

We were almost done eating when we heard a car. We ran for the door. My mother was out of the house first, bare feet even, but once she got outside, she slowed to a walk. She kissed my father and asked how the border went. Sonja and I were jumping and shouting, *soldier, soldier, soldier,* and also, *Kool-Aid.*

“What’s this about a soldier?” my father asked. “Did you have any problems? Did you get to meet Idi Amin?”

“Nothing like that,” my mother said, “Someone came to the house to find out how rich we are. The girls are dying to tell

you. But," and she lowered her voice, "you'll never guess who came with the soldier. It wasn't Idi Amin, I'll tell you that." She turned to us."Okay, girls, let's go inside and you can take turns telling. Let's not talk out here."

My father picked me up, and I whispered in his ear, "Did you bring me something?"

"Do you mean oil?" he said.

"No," I said. "A present."

"A present? Like a matchbox car?"

I nodded.

"Oh, man! I just knew there was something I was forgetting. I was driving all day today, trying to remember what I had forgotten. At least, I think I forgot it."

Each time he came back from Nairobi, he did this. Sometimes, he said he forgot to buy matchbox cars and other times that he forgot to pack them. When he finally found them in some obscure corner of his luggage, I would be near tears or full out crying. "Gary," my mother would say.

"This is just terrible," my father said now and smiled at me.

I looked into his eyes and believed him. I was sure that it was the worst thing in the world.

That night, we sat at the dining room table, the four of us. Sonja and I were still damp from our bath, and my mother was still cheery from my father's arrival, though he had already confessed that he had been unable to bring back flour or oil or any of the other staples on her list. Never mind, that was tomorrow's problem. Sonja described the Kool-Aid and how the soldier had drunk it, glass after glass. I nodded my head, as if it all meant something grownup and important and that I had noticed it, too. In my lap, I held an orange matchbox car. I

ran my thumb over the silver chrome. My father asked what flavor the Kool-Aid was and if there was any still in the fridge. It was past our bedtime and soon our mother would send us to bed. She would tell us that our father had to teach tomorrow and that we would see him at breakfast. He would carry us to our rooms, one by one, and have prayer with us. Then, we would lie in bed and listen to our parents talking, to the hushed turn of their voices.

The house in Uganda was red brick with a metal roof, a rusted water tank, and a screened-in verandah that had once been painted green. At night, I would pretend that we lived in a boat. The jungle was the ocean and the thrumming frogs were the waves and we were far away from everyone else in the world. I would close my eyes and listen for the water, and I would imagine that we were completely safe.

Sari Fordham on a return trip to Uganda.

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New Poetry from JD Duff

Night Flash

You've been having nightmares again.
The cruel shaking of a body
resisting slumber.
Hands twitching,

chest jerking to beats
of unknown song,
playing over and over
like memories you sold at a tag sale,
buried on the Tuscarora trail,
dumped in a white room
at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Jules Tavernier, Heart of a Volcano Under the Full Moon, 1888.

I awake to the moon beaming
unto a lonely bed,
find you out back where dreams
smear on a blurry canvas of recollection,
and ghosts rise from wooded corners of truth.

I climb under the poncho liner
that covered you through
countless peaks of ice
and frost, Persian sandstorms,
fighting holes where you used
the cloth to shield you from walls
of claylike dirt.
The June breeze dries the sweat
around your lips. I lift a rifle
from your chest, place it beyond
the reach of ready palms.
A single leaf rests
on your cheek.
Cicadas cry for their lost
as I hush your silence with a kiss.

The Homecoming

It rained for a week

after our mailman’s son
died in a roadside bomb
attack near Al Karmah.
The sky wept
as half-mast flags
blew gently
on the prairie’s haze.
Signs of well wishes
bowed in store windows,
bellowed from alters of diverse
domes of prayer,
rested in alms of flowers
and fried dough.
A Corps led procession,
thick with mourners,
crowded the lot
of the pearly
mountain church.
Bagpipes sang
for a Lance Corporal
draped in dress blues,
mother betrayed
by dark dismissals
of nightly pleas,
father wilting
to soft hymns
for his broken boy.
The lone sibling
stared at the casket,
wondered why he survived
the trashings of war
while his brother
lay in a box,
waiting for rifles
to speak his praise,
a dark tomb to welcome
another lost Marine.

Seal of God

Foxholes and submarines led you to farm life
where you graze the vast splendor of still land.
Crickets speak to the quiet hush of night
as an elusive sky captures secrets,
spits sins in large chunks of hail,
disrupting the tranquil flight of time.

Faith's armor shoves you in church
where peace is offered between pews
and sounds of crossfire muffle
the graceful hum of atonement.

William Holman Hunt, Cornfield at Ewell, 1849.

You sneak home through cornfields;
stalks reek with bruised dents
of blistering flesh.
Wounded frogs leap past
thick tridents of reticent thought,
darkness dismantled by the crippled promise
of a swelling cherry dawn.

The euphonies of children
replace cancors of slivered screams
as the wind blows you
toward our kitchen, where we break bread
with an Amish farmer
and wait for God to heal us.

New Poetry by Sherrie Fernandez-Williams

she be like, damn

she be all tired.
she be like a flattened house shoe
she be full of compunction
she be remembering what was said.
she be told what she deserves.
she be believing everybody.
she be weepin’ in the bathtub
she be like her momma,
she be lying.
she be saying it’s the arthritis
she be talking like it ain’t her head
she be actin’ like hurt don’t bother her.
she be actin’ like she foolin’ somebody.
she be foolin’ no damn body.
she be scattered.
she be slidin’ across marbles.
she be grabbin’ onto nothin
she be almost breakin’ her wrists.
she be lying on the floor
she be holdin’ her stomach
she be trying not to vomit soggy cake
she be wishin’ she ate almonds instead.
she be losin’.
she be wantin’ rest.
she be told she ain’t gettin’ shit she want
and she be still wantin’ shit.

Annibale Caracci, circa 1580s.

juanita

juanita put on her tap shoes and danced in her kitchen,
in her living room, she composed. and into her gilded bathroom mirror, she gave monologues before powering on
her home recorder that, in those days, weighed a sailor's duffel bag.
debuted films at thanksgiving, after feeding a houseful. she, in a
form-fitting black dress made of sturdy garbage bags.

"i am more than wife, mother of ten, church organist."
then, she started with captain and tennille, followed by neil diamond.
nieces, nephews elated. her children feigned embarrassment,
but devotees, nonetheless.

a woman from disbanded and reshuffled peoples. owned by a
garden variety, bearing traces of many countries,
the dominant, the birthplace of black magic.
what might have been if they hadn't
made us afraid of our gods? she could have
been another brooklyn starlet, sing stormy
weather like lena horne in the movies. what *if* we harnessed
the power of our goddesses?

you favor her. nearsighted. prone to excessive
pounds in mid-life, obsessed with communing
with the dead. her grandfather, angel, the cuban cigar maker,
joined in the chorus of *guantanamera*, and when she strummed
like memphis minnie, nada, rocked back and forth

the way grandmothers do when they are stirred.
all principle and heart—that one. sung *time*

in a bottle with sam, her second husband.
sam on guitar, juanita at piano. time was
a real question for those graying lovers.
never enough time for a woman
whose first husband tried to reduce her
like soup stock. being mad took more time
than she could give. so she produced.

wrote about an urgency for peace,
though we were not the ones who begged for war
but in 1984 she scribbled in “jesse.” argued
about the virtues of speaking one’s mind
to punks who called it a wasted vote.

you hold onto the ways that you might be like
juanita, though you know you are dot’s child.
in a family large enough populate three small towns. you
were never one to be known in these townships. not like aunty,
who mailed everyone copies of her latest records,
performed at all family gatherings, taught whosoever will how to play.

when there are so many, there are so many to lose.
juanita weeped the longest over all bodies—ah, yes,
another way you are like her. your spirit, too, is made
of blown glass. at the last burial before her own,
she warned those within the sound of her voice that she was tired.
you were young but old enough to know the weight of words.

juanita is a starlet. it is time for another moment under glaring lights.
it is quiet on the set, a recreation of 1943. she is small-wasted again,
and in high heels. she looks directly into the camera, then up,
when studio rain hits her face.

hot tea

precious one, emancipate your feet. stretch
your soles from here to far from here,
across acres of african moons.
young dignitary, miles of highway
know the impression of your shoe
by heart. it is tender at your core.
the injured hum their names in
your ear like seraphim. faces soaked
up by the cortex for sight cannot
be unseen like the ground where
they last stood cannot not absorb
a life poured out. this agony, you
haul with all subtle movements
and speak at movements of
national proportions. in squares,
your voice expands beyond
itself and crescendos into a whispers.
hot chamomile with lemon and honey
will help. i have prepared this for you.
sit as we remember our future. rest
until you are well again. and you
will be well again to move us further.

tony

this father's son is loved not only by this father
but by the holy angels too, and by a few demons
who step to him on the street to give him what-up
jabs on the shoulder. i do not mean to compare
this father's son to the son of the father, but that is
what this father's son had been to sisters.

one came to him at night spooked by utterances

in her own head. one saved for him her best jokes.
another came when broken by a boy. the last placed her
report cards on the table just before he sat down to eat.
all waited for his perfect response, better than imagined.

to sisters, this father's son was close to the son of the father
when this father/a daddy departed. not to be with the father,
but to be with a woman he met in night school.

to sisters, the one who gabs with the unseen, the formerly broken,
now zealot, the first to die, a comedian and especially, the last,
the critic of religious patriarchy, who loved showing off
her report card, this father's son, a shepherd. for that moment
in time, sisters, not yet knowing what else they could be,
were lamb.

inflammation

1.
something almost remembered
then, pushed away for a later date
only to finds its way into the body, dawdle there
and hope to be recognized, assessed, sifted through
for what good it carries, then separated from its waste.

if left alone for too long it splinters
into the convolution gray matter
latching onto cells weakening them

sometimes it arrives as a simple question
while listening to gossip radio, while not
wanting to be bothered by anything too
onerous like separating sewage from my

cells while driving home from a hard-day’s work

the words link together and i remove them
like a chain from the bottom of my belly,
straight out of my mouth—

“what do i do with the men?”

2.

i know what the question means.
you get rid of them. i said “rid” motherfucker, rid of you.
 praise be to—
well, not all of them, of course.
i love daddy. he was forty when I was born.
when i turned forty i was the adult daughter.
tenacious. never falling apart for too long, anyway
since enacting my three day rule
three days to be dumbfounded, three
days to panic, three days to flounder
full recovery occurs on the fourth day.
too goddamn much to do to flounder four whole days.

so by the fourth day I am fortified,
and so daddy shares with
one part regret, one part pride
in his accomplishments of bedding women
sometimes a handful in one weekend. some
served with him on neighborhood watch. most
were the mothers of the pta, he was president, and
a poor man with classical tones resounding from his
long,, thick cords; like blues from a cello
and, women moved to the sound of him.
bed became a verb that broke my mother.
but she’s dead now, so what does it matter. daddy’s nearly ninety.
growing older provides perspective. distance
dilutes notions about what to do with the men.

3.

the question is absurd.

4.

there were four of us girls. i was the baby.
the others had me my by eight, ten, and eleven
years so i benefitted from my sisters' skill in hair braiding
and designing clothes. my favorite was the red jumpsuit with
shoulder ruffles. i looked like a five year old disco queen
the day i wore it for my birthday. one sister picked my hair
out.

i do not blame any of them for their lack of warning
about life in a girl's body; the ownership some feel they
have.
to take without permission. they never spoke of rape by the
neighbor or by nana's boyfriend. "it's just the way it was,"
one sister
told me. "it was our job to be okay."

I do not want to answer. I'm done being a traitor
It is difficult to defend this place where I enter the story.
I am middle aged, not a helpless girl.

real women grow up and care for the most devastated among us
and I already decided a long time ago that I would be the
giver
not the taker of care. not the interminably wounded
and, I love a woman so what does any of this matter to an old
dyke like me?
feminine discomfort is an act of treason.

5.

I know the forces against my man-child—

6.

the one long gone was the easiest of all.
a stack of papers, a hearing or two, the crack of a gavel
and it was done.   i did not wish a brother dead.
and every day, i am reminded, i forgive him and
every day i am reminded, i am the one who is sorry.

7.

i have chosen the path of the giver.

Shh…i will only say this once. do not repeat this to anyone. the leading cause of death for
young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner
violence*. Four times greater for black than it is for white. The consequences for*
perpetrators of intimate violence is less when the victim is black than when she is white.
shh… i will only say this twice. the leading cause of death for young black women between
the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is intimate partner violence. one last time, i will say, the
leading cause of death for young black women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five is
intimate—

Brie Golec trans woman of color stabbed by her father,
Yazmin Vash Payne trans woman of color stabbed by her boyfriend,
Ty Underwood trans woman of color shot by her boyfriend
within days of each other—
debbie and i once made soup out of dirt and rain.
as teens, she had ramell. i had an on again,
off again, thing with jesus. between debbie and ramell,
were ramell's hands that behaved any which way they pleased
especially when clenched into spherical solids.
my hands secured notes in white envelopes.
"god loves you," my hands told the pen to tell the paper

to tell debbie. no wonder debbie cut her eyes at me
whispered loud enough for me to hear her talk about my
whack old lady clothes to the other girls. ramell and i both lost
the battle against our powerless hands. i was outcasted.
ramell and debbie made a baby.
when debbie's little brother became a teen his hand held heavy
steel to the face of his pretty boo across the street. when the steel
exploded with one motion of a rogue finger little brother's hand
brought the steel to his own face. however, that time the rogue finger
refused. it triggered the same dumb ass question.

long before any documents were filed, i recognized
the man i married had hands like ramell,

but the righteous knows what's up.
race matters. gender belongs to somebody else.
i know men who want to reclaim their innocence.
deemed guilty without due process. I will speak their cause,
but speaking mine would perhaps pose a conflict of interest as
the earth collapses between us.

8.

the body becomes inflamed in the protection
of itself swelling occurs while the question is held in the nerves.
i sit on the floor of my bedroom and in four square breathing
i release the question back out into the air to revisit at a later date
man-child barely knocks. i struggle to my feet. open the door.
taller than me, he lowers his head to my shoulder. "goodnight mom,"

he says. n four counts, i release the question and hold him.
i hold him as the question finds its way back into my body.

demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be answered demands to be—shhh…. do not repeat this to anyone.

New Fiction by Helen Benedict: WOLF SEASON

STORM

The wolves are restless this morning. Pacing the woods, huffing and murmuring. It's not that they're hungry; Rin fed them each four squirrels. No, it's a clenching in the sky like a gathering fist. The wet heat pushing in on her temples.

Juney feels it, too, her head swaying, fingers splayed. She is sitting on the wooden floor of their kitchen, face raised, rocking and rocking in that way she has. Hair pale as a midday moon, eyes wide and white-blue.

"It smells sticky outside, Mommy. It smells wrong," she says in her clear, direct voice, no hint of a whine. Soldiers don't whine. And Juney is the daughter of soldiers.

"Nothing's wrong, little bean. Maybe we'll get a summer storm, that's all. Come, eat."

Juney is nine years old, the age of curiosity and delight before self-doubt clouds the soul. Fine hair in a braid to her waist. Bright face, wide at the temples, tapering to a nip of a chin. Delicate limbs, skinny but strong.

She lifts herself off the floor and wafts over to the kitchen table, a polished wooden plank the size of a door, where she feels for her usual chair and settles into it with the grace of a drifting leaf. Starting up one of her hums, she dips her spoon into the granola Rin made for her—sesame seeds, raisins, oats, and nuts, every grain chemical-free.

“More milk, please.”

Sometimes, when Rin is not hauling feed, chopping wood, weeding, or fixing some corner of their raggedy old farmhouse, she stands and watches Juney with wonder, her miracle daughter, and this is what she does after pouring the milk; she leans against the kitchen counter, still for a moment, just to absorb her. Juney moves like a sea anemone, fingers undulating. She can feel light and sun, shadow and night, and all the myriad shades between.

“I want to go weed,” she says when her bowl is empty, sitting back to stretch, her spindly arms straight above her, twiggy fingers waving. The scrim of clouds parts for a moment, just enough to allow a slice of sun to filter through the windows, sending dust motes spinning and sparking into the corners of the kitchen. She rocks on her chair inside a sunbeam, hair aglow, fingers caressing the air. She can hear their cats, Purr, Patch, and Hiccup, stretching out on the floor. Smell their fur heating up, their fishy breath slowing into sleep.

“Me, too,” Rin says. “Let’s go.”

Juney was born in the upstairs bedroom, amid Rin’s outraged yells and the grunts of a stoic midwife; she knows her way around their ramshackle house and land as well as she knows her own body. Rin only helps by keeping unexpected objects out of the way, as even the dogs and cats have learned to do. No tables with sharp corners; no stray chairs, bones, mouse corpses, or drinking bowls. The house itself might be a mishmash of added rooms and patchwork repairs, windows that

won’t open and trapdoors that will, but everything inside has its place.

Out in the backyard, Juney stops to sniff the thickening heat—the clouds have closed over again, gunmetal gray and weightier than ever. “Itchy air,” she declares, and makes her way to the vegetable garden. Ducking under the mesh Rin erected to keep out plundering deer and rabbits, she squats at the first row of tomatoes. Weeding is Juney’s specialty. Her fingers climb nimbly up the vines, plucking off the brittle spheres of snails, the squishy specks of aphids. Her palms caress the earth, seeking the prick of dandelion leaves and thistles, the stubs of grapevine and pokeweed, and out they come, no mercy for them.

Her father loved planting. Jordan Drummond was his name, Jay to all who loved him. Jay, flaxen-haired like Juney, face white as a Swede’s, eyes set wide and seaglass blue. Tall and rangy, with enormous feet, and so agile he might have been made of rubber. He, too, was born and bred on this property, back in the time when it was a real farm. Helped his parents raise cows and corn all his life, until the farm failed and drove him into the army. When his platoon razed the date groves around Basra, acres of waving palm trees, their fronds a deep and ancient green, their fruit glistening with syrups—when they ploughed those magnificent trees into the desert just because they could, he wept as if for the death of a friend.

Now Rin arranges her days around forgetting, pushes through a list of tasks tough enough to occupy her mind as well as her muscles. Juney comes first, of course, but her wolves take concentration, as do her chickens and goats and vegetables. She has staked out her ground here with all her companions. If anyone wants to find her, they have to negotiate half a mile of potholed unpaved driveway, barbed wire, electric wire, a gate, and her four dogs, who are not kind to strangers. Not to mention her army-trained marksmanship.

Juney feels her way around the spinach and carrots, pulling and plucking. “Mommy, what are we doing today?”

“Going to town. The clinic. Not till we finish the chores, though. Come on, let’s feed the critters.”

“Which clinic?”

“Yours.”

She hesitates. “Have I got time to do the birds first?”

Juney’s favorite job is tending the bird feeder. Rin wanted to throw it out after that mama bear knocked it off its squirrelproof stand, plunked herself on the ground and dumped the seeds down her throat like a drunk—Rin watched the whole thing from the kitchen window, describing the bear’s every move to Juney. But the feeder means too much to Juney to relinquish. She judges how empty it is by feeling its weight in her palms, plants it between her feet to hold it firm, fills it to the brim from the seed sack, and deftly hangs it back up. Then she sits beneath it, head lifted while she listens and listens. “Shh,” she says this morning. “There’s a nest of baby catbirds over there.” A faint rustle, the quietest of hingelike squeaks. “Three of them. They want their breakfast.”

Leaving her to sit and listen, Rin kicks the sleepy cats outside to make their way through the day and eases her car out of the barn. The barn sits to the side of her house, on the edge of a flat field that used to hold corn. Beyond that, a hardscrabble patch of rocks and thistles meanders up a hill to scrubby hay fields and a view of the Catskill Mountains to the south. Otherwise, aside from her yard, the ancient apple orchard in the back, and the vegetable patch, she is surrounded by woods as far as the eye can roam.

Ten acres of those woods she penned off for her three wolves, leaving them plenty of room to lurk. Wolves need to lurk. They

are normally napping at this time of morning, but the seething heat has them agitated and grumbling. Rin can sense their long-legged bodies moving in and out of the shadows, scarcely more solid than shadows themselves. Even her absurdly hyperactive mutts are feeling the unwholesome weight of the day, but instead of expressing it with restiveness like their cousins, they drop where they stand, panting heavily into sleep.

Frederic Remington. *Moonlight, Wolf,* 1909.

The entire compound is preternaturally still. The yard, the woods, the porch cluttered with gnarled geraniums and fraying furniture; the rickety red barn with its animal pens clinging to its side for dear life; the piles of lumber and rusting machinery—all are as somnolent as the snore of a summer bee.

Rin looks at her watch. “Time!”

Juney straightens up from under the bird feeder, wipes her earthy hands on her jeans, and walks toward her mother along the little path planted with lilac bushes, a path she memorized as an infant. She puts her head on Rin’s chest, reaching the exact level of her heart.

She smells her mother’s fear even before she hears it in her voice. The sweat breaking out slimy and oyster-cold.

Juney was conceived in the back of a two-ton, Camp Scania, Iraq, under a moon as bright and hard as a cop’s flashlight. A grapple of gasp and desire, uniforms half off, bra up around Rin’s neck, boots and camo pants flung over the spare tire. Jay’s mouth on her nipples, running down her slick, sandflea-bitten belly, down to the wet openness of her, the salt and

the sand of her, the wanting of her, his tongue making her moan, his fingers opening her, his voice and hers breathing now and now and now.

Wartime love in a covered truck, that desert moon spotlighting down. His chest gleaming silver in its glare, eyes glittering, the scent of him sharp and needing her, the voice of him a low growl of yes like her wolves.

But even through the slickness, even through the wanting and wanting, she felt the desert grinding deep into her blood. Toxic moondust and the soot of corpses.

As Rin drives her rackety maroon station wagon along the rural roads that take her to town and the clinic, Juney hums again beside her, rocking in her seat, her warbly tune following some private daydream. The windows are open because the AC refuses to work and the sweat is rolling down Rin’s arms, soaking the back of her old gray T-shirt, the waistband of her bagged-out work pants. She glances down at herself. She is covered with dirt from the yard. Probably has burrs in her hair. Once she was slim with just enough curve and wiggle to make Jay smile. Long hair thick as a paintbrush till she cut it for war. These days, squared-out by childbirth and comfort food, she looks and moves more like a lumberjack. Still, she should have had the decency to shower.

Juney is mouthing words now, rocking harder than ever to her inner rhythm. Rin should teach her not to do that—it makes people think she’s retarded—but she doesn’t have the heart. Juney rocks when she’s happy

“Tweetle tweetle sang the bird,” she croons in some sort of a hillbilly tune.

“Twootle twootle sang the cat.

You can’t get me, sang the bird.

I don’t want to, sang the cat.

Tweetle and twootle, tweetle and—”

“Juney?” Rin is not exactly irritated but needs her to quit. “You’re going to be okay at the clinic, right? No screaming like last time?”

Juney stops singing long enough to snort. “I was a baby then. And they stuck me with that long needle.” She takes up her song once more, then stops again. “Are they going to stick me this time?”

“Soldiers don’t mind needles. It’s just a little prick, like you get every day in the yard from thistles.”

“Yeah. Who cares about needles?”

“It’s just an annual checkup to see how much you’ve grown. Nothing to worry about. They’ll probably tell you to eat more, skin-and-bones you.”

“That’s ’cause you won’t let me have candy. I’m going to tell the doctor to order you to give me candy.”

This is an old battle, Rin’s strictness about food. She is strict about a lot of matters. No TV, no cell phones. No radio, either, not even in the car. Yet there are limits to how much even she can cushion her daughter. Thanks to the law, she is obliged to send her to school, and there, as if by osmosis, Juney has absorbed the need for the detritus that fills American lives. Despite all Rin’s efforts, Juney has caught the disease of Want.

Rin wonders if Juney’s daddy would approve of how she’s raising her: Jay, the only man she’s ever wanted, ever will want. Jay, gone for as long as Juney has been alive. And look what he left behind. A broken soldier. A fatherless daughter. The wolves who patrol the woods like souls freed from the dead, their thick-furred bodies bold and wild—the ones who

won't be tamed, won't be polluted, won't be used.

It was Jay's idea to raise wolves. His plan was to do it together once they were done soldiering—he had always wanted to save them from extinction, the cruelty of zoos and those who wish to crush them into submission. "They need us, Rin," he said to her once, his big hand resting tenderly on her cheek. "And we need them." So when she found herself alone and pregnant, she decided to carry out the plan anyway. She tracked down a shady breeder over by Oneonta and rescued two newborn pups, blue-eyed and snub-nosed, blind, deaf and helpless, their fur as soft as goose down, before he could sell them to some tattooed sadist who would chain them up in his yard. One was female, the other male, so she hoped they would breed one day. As they did. "Never try to break wolves," Jay told her. "They've got loyalty. They might even love you, who knows? But we must never tame them. They're wild animals and that's how it should stay."

Her guardian angels. Or devils. She hasn't decided which.

"We're here!" Juney sings out. She knows the town of Huntsville even when it's midmorning quiet and raining: the asphalt steaming, the wet-dust funk of newly soaked concrete.

Rin drives down the main drag, a wide, lonely street with half its windows boarded up and not a soul to be seen. A Subway on the left, a Dunkin' Donuts on the right, its sign missing so many letters it reads, duk do. The CVS and three banks that knocked out all the local diners and dime stores. A Styrofoam cup skitters along the gutter, chipped and muddied by rain.

Pulling up the hill into an asphalt parking lot, Rin chooses a spot as far away from the other cars as she can get, her stomach balling into a leathery knot. She hates this town. She hates this clinic. She hates doctors and nurses. She hates people.

Pause, swallow, command the knot to release. It won't. She

sweeps her eyes over the macadam, down the hill to the clinic, over to the creek bubbling along behind it. Back and forth, back and forth.

“Mommy, we’re in America.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” One breath, two. “Okay. I’m ready.”

If Rin could walk with her wolves flanking her, she would. Instead, she imagines them here. Ebony takes the front guard, his coat the black of boot polish, eyes green as a summer pond, the ivory curve of his fangs bared. Silver brings up the rear, her fur as white as morning frost, her wasp-yellow eyes scanning for the enemy, a warning growl in her throat. And the big stately one—the alpha male, the one Rin named Gray, his body a streak of muscle, his coat marked in sweeps of black and charcoal—walks beside her with Juney’s fingers nestled into the thick fur of his back, his jaw open and slavering, ready to tear off the head of anyone who so much as looks at her.

With her invisible wolves around her and her daughter gripping her hand, Rin plows through the now-strafing rain to the clapboard box of a clinic and up to its plate-glass front, on which, painted in jaunty gold lettering, are the words *Captain Thomas C. Brittall Federal Health Care Center’s Pediatrics/U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs*.

“Department of Vaporized Adolescents,” she mutters, pushing open the cold glass door and its cold metal handle. They step inside.

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Naema Jassim is standing in the white starkness of that same clinic, suspended in one of the few moments of tranquillity she will be granted all day. Her hands, long-fingered and painfully dry from constant washing, press down on the windowsill as she gazes into the hot wetness beyond. The sky

has turned an uneasy green, tight with electricity and tension. Even from inside her clinic office, the air smells of singed hair and rust.

“Doctor?” Wendy Fitch, the nurse, pokes her head into the room. “Your nine a.m.’s here. We have four more before we close. TV says the hurricane’s due around two.”

“Yes, the rain, it has already come.” Naema turns from the window, so slight she is almost lost inside her voluminous white coat, her black hair gathered in a loose knot at her neck. Face long and narrow, eyes the gold of a cat’s. A star-shaped scar splashes across her otherwise smooth right cheek.

Behind her, a sudden wind catches the weeping willow outside, sending its branches into a paroxysm of lashing and groaning. But the tightly closed windows and turbine roar of the clinic’s air-conditioning, set chillingly low to counteract the bacteria of the sick, render the premature storm as silent as dust.

Naema slides her clipboard under her arm and moves to the door.

Outside, the trees bend double and spring back up like whips. The clouds convulse. A new deluge drives into the ground, sharp as javelins.

A mile uphill, the wind seizes a tall white pine, shaking it until its ninety-year-old trunk, riddled with blister rust, splits diagonally across with a shriek. It drops onto the Huntsville Dam, already thin, already old, knocking out chunks of concrete along its crest until it resembles a row of chipped teeth.

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Rin grips Juney’s hand while they sit in the waiting room, her palms sweating as she scans every inch of the place: walls too

white, lights too bright, posters too cheerful, a television screen as big as a door blasting a cooking show. But she refuses to look at the other women. Their calculating eyes. Their judgments. Their treachery.

The monologue starts up in her head, as it always insists on doing at the VA, even though she is only in an affiliated pediatrics clinic, not a full-fledged hospital full of mangled soldiers and melted faces. She fights it as best she can, trying to focus on Juney, on her wolves growling in their hot fur by her feet, but it marches on anyhow, oblivious to her resistance: *Where were you ladies when I needed you, huh? I saw you fresh from your showers; I saw you listening. Scattered, every one of you, like bedbugs under a lamp. Where were you when, where were you. . . .*

“Stop.” Juney pulls Rin’s hand to her chest. “Mommy, stop.”

Rin looks for her wolves. They are crouched around her still, tongues lolling, their musky fur and meat-breath reassuring. She should have brought Betty, her service dog. She keeps telling herself she doesn’t need Betty. But she does.

Juney lifts her nose and Rin can tell she is smelling the medicinal stinks of the clinic. All scents are colors to Juney, an imagined rainbow Rin will never see. The disinfectant in the wall dispensers, sickly sweet and alcohol sharp—this is her yellow. The detergent of the nurses’ uniforms, soapy and stringent, she calls bright orange. The chemical-lemon odor of the floor polish: purple. The pink of freshly mown grass, magenta of oatmeal, green-bright breath of their cats, black of their dogs panting. The glaring white of her mother’s alarm.

Rin sends her mind to her hand, still clasped against Juney’s narrow chest. Juney’s heartbeat reminds Rin of the chipmunk she once held in her palm, soft and weightless, alive and warm—a tiny bundle of pulsating fluff.

Another soldier mother is squeezed into the far corner, holding a feverish infant to her breast. A second sits by the wall with her child, its back in a brace. A third walks in with her toddler daughter, whose right hand is wrapped in a bandage. The beams of the women's eyes burn across the room, avoiding one another yet crossing like headlights, smoldering with their collective sense of betrayal.

Time inchworms by.

Finally, a hefty nurse with frizzled blond hair steps through the inner door, the name fitch pinned loudly to her bosom. She runs her eyes over Rin and Juney and all the other mothers and children suspended in this stark, white room. "Rin Drummond," she calls.

Rin cannot speak.

"Mommy?" Juney lifts Rin's hand off her chipmunk heart and jumps down from her chair. "We're ready," she tells the nurse and pulls her mother's arm. She and Rin follow the nurse's broad back down the corridor and into an examining room.

"Just strip to your undies, honeypie, and hop up here," the nurse tells Juney. "Doctor Jassim will be here in a jiffy."

"Thank you. I know what to do. I'm nine years old and my name is June Drummond."

"Of course it is," the nurse says, unruffled.

"Did you say 'Jassim'?" Rin asks, finding her voice at last. "Who's he?"

"Doctor Jassim is a woman. She's been a resident with us for half a year now. She's very good, don't worry."

"Where the fuck is she from?" Rin's hands curl up tight and white.

“Mrs. Drummond, relax, okay? She’s the best physician we have here. You’re lucky to get her.” The nurse leaves, closing the door with a snap that sounds more as though she is locking them in than giving them privacy.

Juney peels off her T-shirt and shorts and kicks away her flip-flops. Both she and Rin are dressed for the heat of the August day, not for the clinic’s hypothermic AC, so her skin is covered in goose bumps. Rin finds a baby blue hospital robe hanging on the back of the door and wraps Juney’s shivery body in it before lifting her onto the plank of the examining table, its paper crackling beneath her. She is so fragile, her Juney, a wisp of rib cage and shoulder blade, legs pin-thin as a robin’s. Rin holds her tight, not sure who is comforting whom.

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The wind rampages through woods and parking lots, streets and gardens, seizing sumacs, maples, and willows and shaking them until their boughs drop like shot geese. Up the hill, the rain-bloated creek presses its new weight against the crumbling dam, pushing and pounding until, with a great roar, it bursts through, leaps its banks and rushes headlong down the slope toward the clinic; a foaming wall of red mud, branches, and rocks flattening every shrub and tree in its path.

Inside, the air-conditioning hums. Voices murmur. Babies whimper.

Wendy Fitch hovers by the door of the examining room, checking her watch. Dr. Jassim might be great with her patients but the woman has zero sense of time. Whether this has something to do with her culture or is only an individual quirk, Wendy doesn’t know, but the doctor needs to finish up here and fetch her son from his friend’s house, the boys’ summer baseball camp having sensibly closed against the impending storm. The rain is

beating on the windows now and Wendy can feel the patients' parents growing more restless by the minute, as eager as she is to get back to their canned food and bottled water, their batteries and candles. Her pulse quickens. As a lowly nurse, she has to bear the brunt of the parents' ire, and these are no ordinary parents, either. They are all military veterans, half of them ramped up or angry. Like that pit bull of a woman, Rin Drummond.

"We better hurry, storm's coming on quick," Wendy says when Naema emerges at last from the first examining room. "Watch out for this one," she adds in a whisper, touching her temple. "Room three."

Naema nods with a resigned smile and walks toward the door.

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Rin can't believe they gave Juney an Arab for a doctor. Typical of the VA to hire the second-rate. The woman probably bought her certificate online, did her training on YouTube. Probably blew up some sucker of a soldier or two on her way here, as well.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

Rin takes a breath. And another. "It's okay. It's just this place." She strokes her daughter's hair and pulls her close once more, feeling her frail body shiver.

A knock on the door. Gentle, yet it sends a spasm through Rin's every nerve.

The door opens and in walks a woman in a white coat, as if she's a real doctor. No head scarf, at least, but there's that familiar olive-brown skin and blue-black hair. She's carrying a clipboard file, which she reads before even saying hello, which Rin considers damned rude. Then she looks up.

A splattered white scar on her right cheekbone. Most likely a

shrapnel wound. Rin would know, having some fifteen herself.

“Good morning,” the doctor says to Juney, voice snake-oil smooth, accent not much more than a lilt but oh so recognizable. “You are June, right?”

But Juney isn’t listening. Her head’s up, cocked at the angle that means her mind is elsewhere. “Mommy?”

Rin is shaking. The face. The scar. Her breath is coming short and airless.

“Mommy?” Juney’s voice is more urgent now. “I hear something.”

“There is no need to be frightened, dear,” the doctor says, and Rin can’t tell whether she’s talking to Juney or her.

“Mommy!” Juney jumps down from the examining table, her robe falling off, leaving her in nothing but white cotton underpants, skin and bone. “Something bad’s happening!”

“Get out of here!” Rin yells at the doctor.

“What is the matter?” The doctor looks confused.

“No, not her!” Juney cries. “Run!” And she hurls herself into the dangerous air, unable to see the metal table covered with glass bottles and needles, the jutting chair legs on the floor.

Rin reaches out and catches her, but she wriggles free in true terror. “Let us out!” she screams, and the doctor turns around, bewildered, saying something Rin can’t hear because at that moment the window bursts open and a torrent of red water crashes through, smashing them against the wall, knocking them over, pounding them with a whorl of mud and branches and shattered glass. . . .

Rin’s soldier training, her war-wolf heart, these are not in her blood for nothing. She struggles to her feet, seizes Juney

around the waist and forces the door open, kicking away the flailing doctor tangled in her white coat, her long hair, her scar, and her legacy.

Rin slams her face down in the water and steps on her, using her body to lever her daughter through the door and out of the water to safety.

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An Interview with Helen Benedict, Author of WOLF SEASON

Helen Benedict is the author of seven novels, five books of nonfiction, and a play. Her most recent novel, WOLF SEASON, is this month's fiction selection on The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

WOLF SEASON "follows the war home," as a starred review in *Library Journal* puts it, examining war's reverberations on the lives of three women and their families. There is an Iraq war veteran named Rin, who keeps three wolves from a pack she started on her land with her late husband; she is raising a daughter who was born blind, perhaps from lingering effects of Rin's service. There's Naema, a widowed Iraqi doctor who has come to the U.S. with her son. And there is Beth, a Marine wife raising a troubled son, who awaits her husband's return from Afghanistan even as she fears it.

Helen was generous enough to take the time to speak to me about WOLF SEASON, war, writing, the strengths of fiction vs. nonfiction to speak to specific themes, Charlottesville, and more.

The Wrath-Bearing Tree (Andria Williams): Helen, you've said that your newest novel, WOLF SEASON, is about "the long reach of war." Can you tell me a little more about that?

Helen Benedict: The Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have affected all of us in America, whether we know it or not. Our morality, our politics, our pocketbooks – all have been profoundly changed. But, of course, the most affected are those who have either served or suffered in those wars, and those who love them. Of the women in WOLF SEASON, Rin is a veteran of the Iraq War, Naema is an Iraqi refugee, and Beth is married to a marine deployed to Afghanistan. All three women are raising their children alone because of the fallout of war. Of the men in the novel, Louis is also a veteran, Todd the marine, and they, too, are profoundly affected by their experiences of war. The characters in WOLF SEASON personify the ways that war has permeated the little town of Huntsville, NY, the people who live there, and, in a sense, us all.

But I don't want to characterize WOLF SEASON as purely a war book, for it is just as much about tenderness, love, and hope. It is also about the way human beings can rise above through horror and trauma to find and help one another, even when the odds are against them.

WBT: To which character in WOLF SEASON do you hope readers will feel most attached?

HB: I hope that all my characters are compelling in their own ways, but I suspect the answer to this has more to do with who a reader is than anything else. Already, I have heard a full range of reactions to the characters in WOLF SEASON: some readers like the women best, others the children, while yet

others especially love the wolves, and some relate most to the men. One of the aspects of writing I love the most is seeing how varied the reactions of readers are, and how everyone brings their own interpretations to a book that can be quite independent from mine.

WBT: Helen, I've read that you grew up living all over the world, on islands in the Indian Ocean; in Berkeley, CA; and in England. You've said that during your years of island living you did not attend school and were allowed to "run wild," and I was instantly reminded of Margaret Atwood's youth, and her wild-and-free summers in remote camp sites with her entomologist father, her mom, and her brother.

Do you think the period of free time you experienced had an effect on your imagination, or somehow helped foster a writerly way of thinking?

HB: Yes! Largely because of these travels, I spent a lot of time alone as a child, so learned to read early and took comfort in books. I was an addicted reader by the age of six or seven, so much so that I'd be heartbroken when a book ended. Then I discovered I could continue the magic by writing myself.

I also learned about poverty and suffering by living on those islands, which were poor and disease-ridden at the time. Even at the age of three, I was profoundly saddened by seeing starving children and people living in shacks. Children understand these things much more deeply than we adults realize.

WBT: With such an international childhood and youth, how did the issues facing women in the American military first come onto your radar? Your nonfiction book, THE LONELY SOLDIER, was the first book I read by an academic discussing female service

members; if it was not the first, then at least it was the first one I heard of, with the largest impact and starting the most national discussion. Most academics I know, at least in my experience, rarely think about the military at all. What brought you to this topic, and with such conviction that you've continued to address it across at least three books?

HB: I am not really an academic, but a journalist and a novelist who happens to teach. The research I did for THE LONELY SOLDIER, which was indeed the first book to look at women who served in the post-9/11 wars, was essential not only for my journalistic work, but for my related novels, SAND QUEEN and WOLF SEASON. Over a stretch of more than three years, I interviewed some 40 women veterans of the Iraq War, and then later I also interviewed Iraqi refugees. These interviews, along with other research, informed my imagination, allowing me to plunge deep into the interior lives of refugees and soldiers to create my fictional characters; something I would never have dared do had I not spent so long listening to real people.

As for why I came to this topic, I'll start by saying that all my work, whether fiction or nonfiction, has looked at the powerless and the outsider, and much of it has especially focused on women. When I saw the U.S. invade Iraq for no reason and learned of the destruction and death we caused there as a result; and then also learned about the epidemic of sexual assault in the military and the moral injury that the war was causing to women and men, I had to write about it. I care passionately about justice, and the right of the oppressed to be heard.

As for why I turned from journalism to fiction – from THE LONELY SOLDIER to my novels, SAND QUEEN and WOLF SEASON – that is because I wanted to get to what war does to our interior lives, our hearts, our morals, our souls, our minds. That is the territory of fiction.

WBT: I first read THE LONELY SOLDIER as a relatively new officer's-wife, and to be quite honest, felt like I went through several stages of grief while reading. It was difficult to reconcile my husband's recent, major life decision, and his well-intentioned enthusiasm for it, with the book's description of the military as based on a model of predation, and occupied by, in essence, various levels of predators very graphically rendered (recruiters who force teenage girls, for example, to give them head in parked cars). It was also difficult to consider our family's new path from the perspective of my conviction that I was a feminist, with a deep concern for other women. How had I not known this was happening to female service members? I remember the striking detail that the women profiled in the book asked to use their real names, as a way of "fighting back." THE LONELY SOLDIER was the first step in a long and rather painful exposure of, what may not necessarily be my experience with the military, but what is the truth for many women.

I guess my question here is one that's bothered me to some degree for more than thirteen years: Do you feel that a person whose life work is spent within an institution like the U.S. military has chosen, in effect, to side with an oppressive regime? Is it possible to still be an ally to others, those often ignored or hurt by war and by institutionalized racism, sexism, and violence?

HB: I think this is a brave question, and in a way, my answer lies in WOLF SEASON, as well as my other related books, because my veteran characters are all struggling with questions like yours, especially how to push back against injustice and wrongdoing within the military, and how to feel like a good person when you have come to feel you were used to do wrong.

My veteran characters have been distorted by war and its

inherent injustices, yes, but they also want to love, mend, and amend. This is the essential struggle in the aftermath of war for us all – how, having done a great wrong, we can grope our way back to doing some right.

Another path, and I do see veterans doing this, is to help the real victims of our wars: the innocent Iraqi citizens whose lives we have destroyed. This, too, is a theme in WOLF SEASON.

But going back to the earlier part of your question, yes, I do think that joining the military is to give yourself to an institution that usually causes more harm than good. But that said, I also think it's important to fight wrongdoing from the inside. Part of our duty as citizens of a democracy is to hold governmental institutions accountable when they go wrong, and to expose and fight and correct that wrong wherever we can. I know how much courage it takes the military from within, but I've seen active duty service members and veterans do it, and I admire them deeply.

WBT: You were in Charlottesville, VA, during the horrifying neo-Nazi rally this past August. How did you end up there at that time, and what did you observe, on the ground? What, for you, did that event say about America circa 2017-18?

HB: I have written about that terrible day in Charlottesville before, so all I'll say here is that I was at an artist's residency nearby, so went to bear witness and counter-protest. The main point I made in this essay is that, as a writer and reader, I know that using one's imagination to put oneself in the shoes of others is the key to empathy and compassion. The racists, Islamophobes and anti-Semites who attended the rally that day refused to use their imaginations to do any such thing, thus freeing themselves to dehumanize the people they wished to hate. It was a sickening sight to behold, the screaming red faces of those who relish hatred; the opposite of what writers and artists stand for.

WBT: You've addressed themes of systemic violence through both fiction and nonfiction. How do you feel these genres are uniquely suited to addressing political issues?

HB: Nonfiction explains it, fiction explores it. In WOLF SEASON, as in any novel, I was able to plunge into a character's heart to show how it really feels to be the victim or the perpetrator or violence, and what that does to the human soul. The field of fiction is the human interior – our hearts, our minds, our morals. I love that. That's why I read novels, and that's why I write them.

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WOLF SEASON is available from Bellevue Literary Press or wherever books are sold. A reading group guide is available for download here. You can find out more about Helen Benedict's writing on her web site.

Blood Money: C.E. Morgan's 'The Sport of Kings'

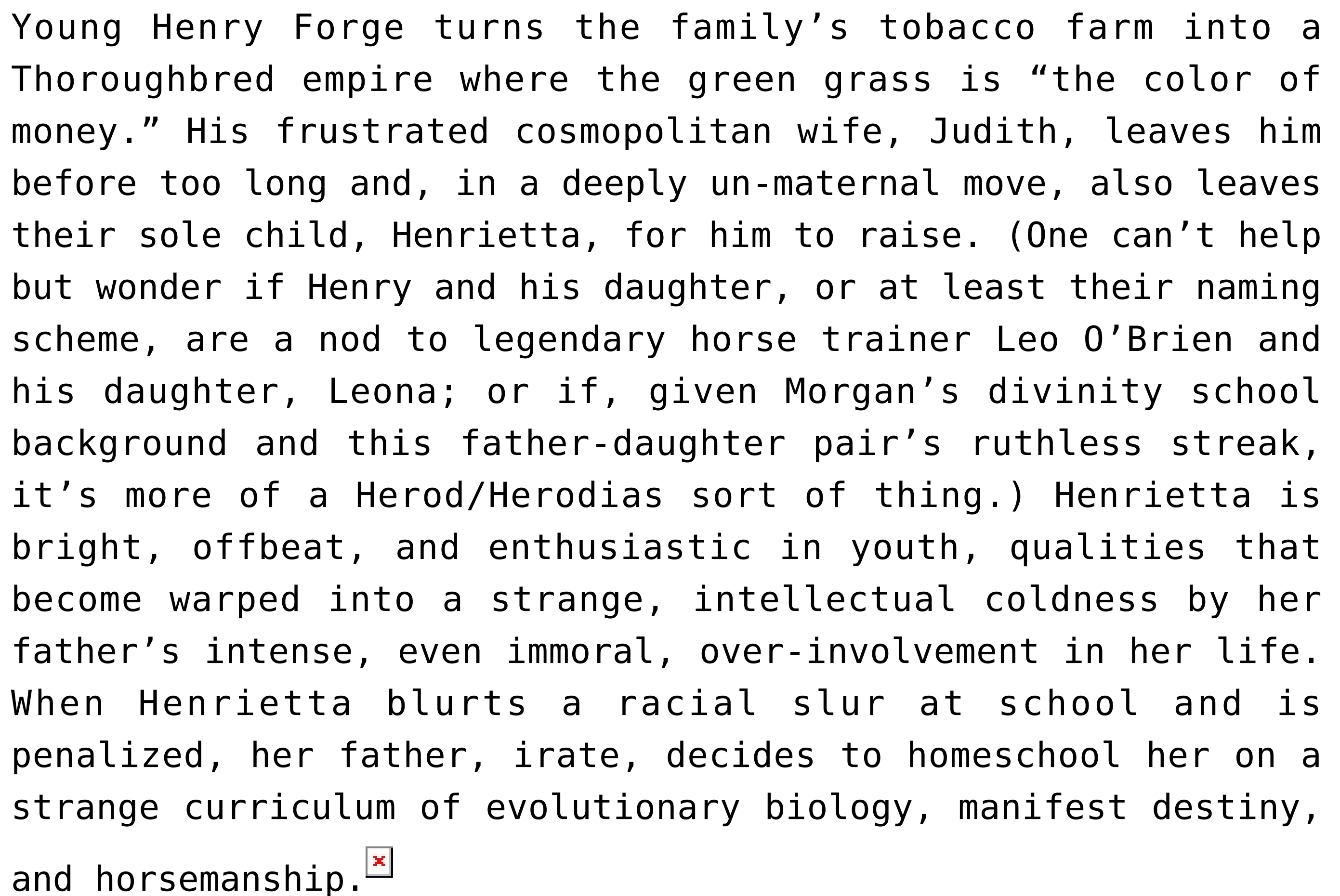
On May 17, 1875, under blue skies and wearing the flapping green-and-orange silks of his legendary employer J.P. McGrath, a diminutive, tough, whip-thin African-American jockey named Oliver Lewis, weighing little more than a hundred pounds, careened to the first Kentucky Derby victory on a chestnut Thoroughbred with a white blaze and two white socks named Aristides. Thirteen of the fifteen jockeys surrounding him as they thundered down the home stretch were also African-American. In fact, black jockeys would dominate the sport in the south for another thirty years, winning 15 of the first 28 Derbies.

Aristides' trainer, Ansel Williamson, had been born a slave in rural Virginia. Purchased by a wealthy horse breeder, he learned the art and science of groomsmanship, and was eventually hired by J.P. McGrath, of the famed green-and-orange silks, who'd been born dirt-poor but, after winning $105,000 in a single night in a New York gambling house, started a Thoroughbred farm that went on to become one of the most famous of its time.

1887. Eadweard Muybridge. Wellcome Gallery, London.

That a former-slave-turned-Hall-of-Famer trained Aristides—whose statue now stands at Churchill Downs—and an African-American jockey the size of a young girl rode the pounding horse to victory, hints at the intrigue, breathtaking chance, and monumental toil involved in the sport of horse racing. It also, for novelist C.E. Morgan—with her sharp comprehension of history and a penchant for literary gambles of her own—sparked the genesis of a brilliant, winding epic novel of a racially and economically fraught America: *The Sport of Kings*.

Spanning over 200 years as it moves back and forth through time, *The Sport of Kings* opens in the mid-1950s. Henry Forge, a restless, ambitious teenager schooled from birth in the racial politics of the south, sets in motion a shocking crime against his father's black groom, Filip. The event is one of several sharp seismic blips in the bedrock inequity of Forge Run Farm, initially founded by Henry's great-great-great-great-grandfather, Samuel Forge, who came on foot from Virginia to Paris, Kentucky in 1783, accompanied by one slave. On such an act of claim and hubris the farm was built; and, as author Morgan levels her steady eye at the parallels of human history, a nation.

Young Henry Forge turns the family's tobacco farm into a Thoroughbred empire where the green grass is "the color of money." His frustrated cosmopolitan wife, Judith, leaves him before too long and, in a deeply un-maternal move, also leaves their sole child, Henrietta, for him to raise. (One can't help but wonder if Henry and his daughter, or at least their naming scheme, are a nod to legendary horse trainer Leo O'Brien and his daughter, Leona; or if, given Morgan's divinity school background and this father-daughter pair's ruthless streak, it's more of a Herod/Herodias sort of thing.) Henrietta is bright, offbeat, and enthusiastic in youth, qualities that become warped into a strange, intellectual coldness by her father's intense, even immoral, over-involvement in her life. When Henrietta blurts a racial slur at school and is penalized, her father, irate, decides to homeschool her on a strange curriculum of evolutionary biology, manifest destiny, and horsemanship.

Henry Forge is, to put it mildly, obsessed with genetics. He's especially intrigued by the strategy of linebreeding: the idea that doubling down on a certain lineage can perfect and purify it, yielding—if the circumstances are just right—the ideal specimen. (Even today, the odd, invisible world of dominance, alleles, and zygotes is a hallmark preoccupation of the sport, so much so that even the casual gambler can combine mares and stallions on fantasy web sites such as TrueNicks.com to produce virtual "nicks," foals with an edge on wins. The site's slogan could have come from Henry Forge himself: "Do more than just hope for the best.")

The cloistered universe of Forge Run Farm is rendered in such careful and specific detail by Morgan that its sheer particularity could become claustrophobic—even her other characters realize how deeply weird the Forges are and try to get away from them, like the salt-of-the-earth veterinarian, Lou, who skitters to her truck to escape "these crazy people"—if it's not for the sea change the author delivers

halfway through the book, when Allmon Shaughnessy arrives on the farm.

Allmon is a 24-year-old fresh off a seven-year prison sentence, schooled in the Groom Program at Blackburn, and an undeniable talent with horses. He's the only child of a wandering, handsome, alcoholic father, Mike Shaughnessy ("known in high school as that Irish fucking fuck") and a caring but overburdened African-American mother, Marie. At fifteen, Allmon is noticed for his athletic promise and brought into a pre-NFL program, the Academy for Physical Education, where the coaches' focus on phenotype is not so different from the horse breeders' whom Allmon will encounter later ("'How big was your dad?" "Six-two." "Good….I want you big, fast, and I want you mean").

But Marie's chronic health problems, revealed to be lupus, are sinking the household. As with Erica Garner—the daughter of Eric Garner who was killed by police violence in 2014 for selling cigarettes without tax stamps, herself dead at 27 from a heart attack after childbirth—a legacy of racism and poverty live in Marie's body, the "gendered necropolitics" of anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence, the sequelae. "Make me an animal," Marie begs, in a heartbreaking prayer, "so I won't know anything. Make me a man, so I won't give a damn about anyone."

Her son Allmon does give a damn, but he is orphaned too young to know what to do with his anger and his aching heart. He is led into crime by older boys on the street; tried as an adult for possession of narcotics, an illegal firearm and a stolen car, he is sentenced to seven years, some of which is described in horrifying detail as he learns to defend himself.

The introduction of Allmon to the farm—their first ever black groom, hired by Henrietta without the blessing or even

knowledge of her father—will change the course of the Forge family forever. Most likely not in the way you, avid reader, are thinking, because Morgan will not give the reader what he or she expects. But—and there's that wink at history again—change is coming, and change is, as Lyell and Darwin would agree, nature—and therefore man's—most unstoppable force.

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C.E. Morgan was born and raised in rural Kentucky. She attended Berea College, a tuition-free institution founded as an abolitionist school in 1855, and later, Harvard Divinity School. And like Allmon's mother, Marie, she is no stranger to chronic pain, as indicated by this interview with *Commonweal Magazine*:

> *Anyone who lives with poor health or chronic pain, or who has endured poverty—real poverty—knows what it is to live with lack and a resulting fear so incessant that it becomes thoroughly normalized, invisible in its ubiquity. If you're lucky enough to have that fear begin to ease, which it has for me only in the past year, it's an odd experience. A stranglehold eases off your entire body.*

An essay Morgan wrote for the Oxford American, "My Friend, Nothing is in Vain," suggests that her own brand of chronic pain may, like Marie's, be auto-immune in nature, like lupus.

But it's important to keep in mind that a novelist need not have experienced firsthand that which they write into their work, and Morgan's first preoccupation is with the way she renders her subjects. "Evil's breeding ground is a lack of empathy," she explains. "Evil acts reduce the other to an object, a being to its component parts, and obliterate subjectivity….So I locate moral beauty in an other-regarding ethic."

She’s also concerned with the notion of “attunement”: “Humans struggle to remain attuned to one another—they want to turn away because of fear, or ambition, or boredom, or some lure of the ego. It’s difficult. It requires radical vulnerability, radical risk.”

Writing so boldly outside one’s historical period, race, and gender also puts the novelist in a position of “radical vulnerability,” and the whole thing can only work if it is a radical risk: the author wholly invested, putting her emotions and reputation on the line, tapping into voices that are not her own. It’s a gamble with a nearly paralyzing moral and ethical obligation, and that’s before you even get to the whole issue of “craft.” But if the stakes were not so high, how else could Morgan have propelled herself to create a character as stunning in thought, action, and voice as “The Reverend,” Allmon’s restless, glittering-eyed, charismatic preacher of a grandfather? (Morgan is excellent at writing convincing, multi-dimensional characters of faith, and their sermons; her first novel, *All the Living*, a quietly gorgeous, small-scope book taking place over only three months and focusing on just three characters, features pastor Bell Johnson, whose words read much like Morgan’s prescription for novel writing itself, her “other-regarding ethic”: “My heart was like a shirt wore wrong side out, brothers and sisters, that’s how it was when God turned me, so that my innermost heart was all exposed.”) But The Reverend is a different kind of preacher. An urgent, assertive, slightly wild and dogmatic man with an Old Testament streak, he has chosen a life of urban poverty and service. He harshly judges his own daughter, Marie, for her decisions, and is easier on his flock than his own family, much like John Ames’s grandfather in *Gilead.* He also speaks many of my favorite lines in the book:

> *“Y’all act like Jesus is dead! Well, let me ask you this: Is*

Jesus dead in the ground? 'Cause I heard a rumor Jesus done rose up from the grave!"

A woman cried out, "He rose!"

"And how come he rose up out of that dark and nasty grave?"

"Tell me!"

"How come he said, 'Eat my body and remember me?'….Because my Jesus, my Jesus is the original Negro, and he said, only I can pay the bill…"

…Now the Reverend stopped suddenly, plucked a pink handkerchief out of his suit pocket, and mopped his streaming face, and when he spoke again his voice was conversational: "Now eventually somebody's gonna tell you Jesus ain't had no brown skin. And you know what you're gonna say when they tell you that? You're gonna say: If Jesus wasn't born no Negro, he died a Negro. What part the cross you don't understand?"

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The Sport of Kings is by no means a "perfect" book: its arc treads a little too close to Philipp Meyer's *The Son* to feel wholly new, and at one key section, delving back into the early days of slavery on Forge Run Farm, the novel takes a sudden dive so immoderately Faulknerian—all dark and lushly incestuous and overwrought—that it threatens, like kudzu, to choke up the whole book.

But *The Sport of Kings* possesses a certain perfection of spirit, a reckless authorial gamble. Something special happens when a novelist combines that gamble with a terrific intellect and a heart for human suffering. We end up with a book that's one in a million, a Secretariat, a Hellsmouth, pounding for the finish.

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And what of those African-American jockeys who dominated the sport of horse racing in its early decades? The athletes like Isaac Burns Murphy, whose 44% win rate has never been surpassed, and whose earnings would have made him a millionaire if he lived today; or Jimmy Winkfield, who won 220 races in 1901 alone, every one of them a threat to life and limb?

Sadly, Jim Crow racism, and sometimes direct sabotage, thinned their ranks. The Irish jockeys of the northern states were not, on the whole, kind. Isaac Burns Murphy was once discovered, apparently drunk, on the back of a horse prior to a race; it was later proven he'd been drugged by an opponent. Winkfield escaped segregation in the United States with a successful second career in Russia, winning the Russian Oaks five times and the Russian Derby four; but when he was invited back to the States for a *Sports Illustrated* gala in 1961, he was told he could not enter through the front door.

No African-American jockey has won the Kentucky Derby since 1902, though Winkfield placed second the following year.

The sport is now dominated by riders from Latin American countries, immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, rural gauchos of small stature and true grit. (Leona O'Brien, that daughter of famous horse trainer Leo O'Brien, whom I mentioned earlier? She went on to marry her father's jockey, the Puerto Rican-born John Velazquez, now the highest-paid in his sport; they have two children). Morgan gives these newer jockeys a brief nod in *The Sport of Kings*, and a reader can't help but think that fifty years from now, there will be a novel in their story, too.