

presented by The Writer's Den
paths present

cover art by Anna Richardson



The Writer's Den
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Made with love

poetry

A brief history of being ran through (by coffee)

I.

My first was nasty, brutish, short,
then syrupy,
then over, but oh, to be
ran through with white light, then soon after dark again,
a waiter who refilled my glass just enough
so I could drink and he'd get another chance.
That night I think I went insane:
muscles' hijacking lingering in the gaps,
cracks in Michelangelo marble into crevices
I became obsessed with lack
I steeled myself to live on always being this empty.

II.

Soon I felt a remove from those I once knew.
I used to be content with what I now know was
scant, almost sterile to save myself.
I thought I could lead a little life.
My childhood friends loved me then as I loved them,
when I lacked teeth to bare.

III.

Chock it up to interference, why I measured my tongue
by its capacity for impact, the way men,
weaned from the womb too soon
make discipline their boon.
The kiss had a nice fuzz, like feedback
on a radio with silent histories, but I was still unsure
of how to parse the feeling: the static, perhaps,
because the connection was too weak, or the radio itself
was a bit beat, someone who is
all texture and not that sweet, just a bit of cream
to get to the mechanics.

I can't remember his eyes,
but I still think about his stubble every so often.

IV.

Maybe I did enjoy the calluses of the callous
but, growing tolerant of mechanics
swung too far the opposite.
Placid, mostly milk, soft of a baby's bib
I might have seen in pictures my mom would send me
of myself. She found him refined,
and in her older age it fits her, but I found him
intellectual to the point of being disemboweled.
There was one time I spoke too bluntly, too loud in this cafe
and he could not even bear
to be embarrassed by me, just stared
with that face on his face, flush and blank.

So he has his life together. Sometimes
he'll send me pictures,
nothing more than postcards.
He was never enamored with travel though,
found my fascination with cowboys in bad taste.
He said we should be past that by now.

V.

I thought we'd be forever:
he was reliable with a richness, velvet sweet
with some tooth when I could get him
to show his teeth. We went many years
without a hitch, though maybe that was the problem.
There was something stirring in me which his sweetness
would not track, would melt away into silence.
He was the marriage type, and I would have loved
to stay with him. It would have been convenient:
we could have relied on history and silence
but my body was still alive. After some time
when he would bare his teeth he would chagrin,
as though they bungled his mouth.

One time he was eager to sell our house,
and quick to shelve
those anthologies of mine which might have agitated,

our pictures, the peat of the living for
something less presumptuous,
affected this palate for coffee table books which
I just couldn't understand.
Babe, I want to be normal too, but it's not going to happen.

VI.

So it hurt to let my last go that, once we parted
I was almost back to steeling empty.
But him—I knew him first when we were teens: he was
never without this one windbreaker, stood
like his bones rattled about him, wielded
a tongue that would have scared my mother. After all
these years, I met up with him
I asked about the boy I once knew,
like cleaved fruit he opened his palms, exposed the texture.

There's a smoothness to him now, which lets
the gravel of him hang in the balance,
the bristling boy beneath the cable-knit sweater,
the way friction and frisson become
indistinguishable. And in his car,
on a night drive home, it did come out
that curious part of him,
still somewhat attached to life as nasty, brutish, short:
the anger in him equal to the will to see it through
which makes him want to fight for me,
makes me want to fight for him too.

VII.

When I say groove, yes I mean rhythm
but I mean also the teeth of gears, turning in necessity,
maybe in earnest,
maybe in obeisance to the gyre within themselves.
Notice: the air in one's limbs which,
when cradled, makes the body a woodwind,
the succor of hitting gravel, the ribs' exhortation;
someplace difficult, to nestle.

On (re)awakening

take me back to autumn. the ground is damp with remembrance. O god,
i will awaken twenty and not quite godless.
for what is god but mother awakening
to sanskrit hymns and hand drawn emblems
stowed in my wallet. O god,

why does it feel strange to say O-my-god
if i know you aren't mine.
O god, are you my god.

O god, can i denounce something i never believed in.
do i believe. is seeing believing.
i don't see the inflections in my father's voice, beams
of light waiting for a wall, for
finitude. will i become that finitude. O god.
are you atomic and if so where
do you end. did you know i pretended i was you for a while:

immeasurable, inconceivable. did you know—i used
to wish for things i couldn't understand.
a chemical formula to summarize the before and after
of why you should exist.

before: thinking idols could come to life when i was eight,
thinking that you were here because my mother said so. that you were always
watching.

after: swallow the empty yet peripheral possibility
of denouncing you.

if i denounce you i denounce my grandmother,
my mother, my mother's mother, the roots of my hair,
my skin my eyes my tongue.
if i denounce you i become a faceless, tongueless nonbeing on the periphery of
morning hymns and evening meditations.
a moth's wing floating in rose water.

O god, if i close my eyes and fold my palms will i catch you in between. will i

find you in the flames. was i meant to. i imagine you as entity. not nonbeing, but allbeing. O god. if allbeing knows no skin, no hair, no lineage, is allbeing the same as nonbeing. if i denounce you will i feel you. the weight in my stomach. the absence of memory between before and after. the death of a mother.

finally, spring.

At dawn, I held the shoreline

and thought of fisting faith \ today, i found god in a fishnet \ how the light hurts when touched \ salmon turned belly-up and brine peppered \ what i would give to swallow this moment \ broth conveyed from purple tongues \ moisture loves no pink skin \ harpooned to the whites of their eyes \ rotting devotion isn't devotion but i know better \ wringing \ belief somewhere out there in the gray \ in my hands unseen \ the waves know no impaled infinity \ forever agape \ why does awakening smell so much like flesh.

Peace in the Eye - How Storms Blow

I will find peace at the eye of the storm,

Surrounded by incomprehensible flow.

I will meditate on the fragility of the flower,

And the house that's blowing by.

I will dance with winds faster than I've driven,

And sing with gales that sweep me off my feet.

How funny that my mortal coil will out-spin this

Force of nature, one of us will perish here,

And it will not be me.

Your breath may blow a million times stronger,

Those cold fists may pummel skyscrapers

But my eyes will see a million sights beyond your wall.

My feet will walk far more miles in their time

Than any gale-force gust. My heart will out-beat

your raindrop staccato upon the sea. You will die my friend,

and they will know only the memory behind these Eyes

As my storm blows you by.

The Dance of Eternity

Fate marches on
Not like a soldier, bayonet to the heavens
Nor a band, blaring it's intent forward
No, while she follows time's straight arrow
She dances.

Along eternity's beam she steps in diagonals
Impossible jumps and spins as she steps forward
And while she moves onward, her knees come up
And her legs dart left and right
Moves which by chance, we associate.

She counts in eight, and so ties our strings of fate
Pointed knitting needles cut the cloth and weave
A song, and with it her reprieves.
So when she repeats a past step, do not feel strange
Instead, watch Fate dance and be amazed.

Unmailed, Unasked, Unanswered

In our hearts we write a thousand letters,
never to be mailed, lest we fear they be answered.

What would you ask that childhood friend you grew apart from?

Would you ask if they still have that doll or truck, would you ask what they are doing now?

And when they reciprocated: How would you guide them down the path that led from toys and candy to the adult today?

What would you ask your first crush or your first love or first ex?

Would you ask if they felt something? If they've ever missed or wished for you?

And when they've replied, how would you describe the barest hint of their lips in every kiss, or how you sometimes wonder...

How do you begin to pen a letter meant for the dead family you never got to have knew?

And when they've told their life stories, how would you tell yours? How do you describe dating apps to a person who never lived to see a washing machine?

I think there's a fear that these letters will find their way to the recipient, and that we will be known. There is a fear we will be seen and not rejected, but embraced as familiar companions. If some questions can be answered, we must also face those that never will be. The blocked contacts and the grave stones that remind us,

Of forlorn letters with no address

Flow

To live is to dance that thread of existence.

A puppet of golden strings and silky skin.

Feel the weight of those strings animate every step every grasp.

Reach for the sky, step like you sashay, and you will

Capture the emotional weight of the actor on stage and thread it through with the mundane.

Form still from earth's gritty iron and the weight of those strings.

Feel your body fully.

And never let that go, feel your frame wear out from under you but still pull those threads.

The soul runs deeper than bone and until it is cut you may live,

Should you learn to dance.

Wandering through the Garden

*Today I went wandering through the garden,
If you'd wish to join me, come along.*

That right there is the begonia,
A pink little flower, with leaves that
wander up into a bush.
Which stands for beginning.
Today at least.

There are many paths into the garden
The begonia by
but one of them with
Stepping stones leading in

One two three
Like hop scotch
On ancient rock
Follow me, don't mind the moss.

There sits the bullfrog frog.
Careful now,
He'll stop you if you stare.
At his home beneath the lilies

Many of the marsh's denizens
Prefer anonymity
But he will take privacy
By croak and hop.

Let us be on our way,
The cattails are wagging in the wind.
Give them a pat as we pass.
And pluck at leisure.

Many of the children come here
To fight amongst the reeds
for treasures

Like the cattails or coveted lily flowers.

Ah, see how beneath that grass there is
a pink
Lily. She sings to us, same as the frog,
If only you have ears like the children
Gaze upon the Lily, and drink in her
subtle song.

Oh, the waist-high reeds are whispering,
These gentle grasses blow us on our
way.
"The green snake, she comes.."
And will be displeased we steal the song
of her Lily.

This way...

Two Suns

White Sun (keeps her secrets)

White Sun reads over my shoulder, she says, *You don't usually write when I can see.*
Early bird succumbs to freefall, White Sun keeps her secrets.

A girl across the street repeats, *This spot on the sidewalk reminds me I am young,*
As he turns in and the lights in the house go off
And she rides home by streetlights and lampposts.
I am young, I am young, this spot on the sidewalk—

I stood by the road and saw it happening, I watched, took note of, witnessed how
There was a naivety in the cracks of the sidewalk they sat on,
A naivety that remained from where I had moved on
From when the cracks and the curb served as a reminder that
There would be time.

White Sun, you told me the morning makes the day but I think you were wrong.
Early Bird succumbs to freefall, White Sun, you keep your secrets.

I cry out a plea to beauty in worn yarn, in painted flowers on ceramic,
In long grass growing on the hillside, in a shadow dancing in the treetop,
In the braids in his hair, in the interplay of yellow and green in her eyes,
A request to the romanticized existence of it all to let me feel again,
Let me relish in that which goes unnoticed, the daisies growing low nearby,
All in the daylight and she repeats,
I am young, I am young.

And, White Sun, what do you hide?
You ask for a reckoning where we both know your guilt over mine and you sit with
Wind-deprived air and a sky with no clouds to be in need of pushing.
White Sun, you ask me questions I'd just as quickly turn against you.
So, White Sun, what do you hide?

White Sun lives in a time that I do not, for Early Bird's wings are clipped.
I succumb to freefall and White Sun keeps her secrets.

(I imagine you while watching) Pink Sun

You taught me to imagine to the tune of / I'll imagine you standing there, / twenty feet in front of me / amongst the whispering wheat / at the top of this hill / with the hush of a valley far down, / twenty feet in front of me, / with your back to the west and your front facing the rising sun / as I sit on this bench / with arms and legs heavy / I think I'd sink in a pool

Pink Sun, you paint the sky / as a helium balloon / pulling buckets filled / with liquid dyes in the warmest shades / Pink Sun, I chew on my hand / as you finally decide to join us / Pink Lady, apple of the sky / mine stands twenty feet in front of me / as I sit on this bench / I would sink into a pool of dyes even with the lightest shades trying to keep me afloat

Smiling, I stand from the bench / before sinking down again and / making my way back / into the valley where I live / while you follow Pink Sun and / I imagine you sitting together, / talking into oblivion

And I wonder if my gait makes it so obvious / that there's music in my head and / joy in my life / and I wonder what the passersby think, / I imagine my smile says *Good morning*

I who dedicate my life to love

Outside the rain is shaking the earth
But my heart stays steady in its bony cage;

I picked the petals of the flower of death
And lost myself to a time afraid.

Devoted to a search for love
I wandered across the Milky Way;
I got lost towards joy and found emptiness,
Stayed begging the sun to cross my face.

And in the heart of darkness, You—
A veil of steel with a wounded train—

You, of fire, of centaurs, of stone,
You of the daylight, the stars, the mage—

I saw you there in my soul's great dawn
Of returning to earth from outer space;

I saw you in puddles, in shadows, in trees,
'Til at last in return you met my gaze.

And there!—the glance of two eyes enough
To fire the gun of the endless race—

To gallop, to stir, to set forth a flash
That swallowed the forest within its flames.

At first only aching came forth to greet me:
Hollows of memory, bellows of pain;

Then you of your fingers, you of great smiles,
You of November, of March and of May;

And myself the horizon, just past the sunset
Myself of the sunshine, with heart on display—

I bear myself to you in the kingdom of wits
And carry your spirit when I walk away.

Now I see you in April, in the ticking of time,
In the winners of every joyous game—

I see you in windows, in mirrors, my love,
In the place where sorrow once had reigned.

Mackenzie Van Valkenburgh

short stories

Sacrifices.

I look in the mirror as I process what day it is, my 18th birthday. I studied my features: my cocoa brown hair, my pointed nose, my pale skin, and the way it looks like I have aged several years over this last one. I was forced to grow up quickly. Living in Tagaytay in the Philippines, there was not much I was able to experience or know. I have always been trapped in this little town in a way, stuck in this cycle of poverty that took over my generation, my parents' generation, and several of the generations before them.

I remember the birthdays growing up. My two older brothers and I never really received any presents. We celebrated the majority of our birthdays by spending time with our family, just our parents and us, and occasionally our grandparents. One birthday I remember so vividly was my 10th birthday. I was getting ready for school. I walked into the living room with my bookbag and noticed something on the kitchen counter that caught my eye: a glass of milk. My eyes widened in disbelief, not long before they welled with tears. My father sat behind the glass of milk, smiling widely as he presented the thoughtful gift to me.

"I got this for you," he said, smiling widely from ear to ear. I couldn't bring myself to say anything, I just ran up to him and jumped in his lap, giving him a big hug as I cried, exclaiming my thank you's. "I know we can't afford it that often, but I wanted to make today special. Happy birthday, my daughter," he spoke sweetly. My father was always known to be cold and harsh, someone to discipline us and make us act right, but that day I got to see a fatherly side of him that I appreciated more than he would ever know. I turned around in his lap to try the crisp, cold, fresh milk that laid on the table. As I felt the cold liquid touch my lips, I took in the flavor, more tears falling down my face as a result of the overwhelming moment. I had never tasted anything like it and I took one big gulp before setting it down to savor it. I turned over my shoulder to try and offer my father a sip, but he turned it down. My brothers came into the kitchen not long after, and I offered them a sip as well. I knew I wanted to share it with my family and let them enjoy the moment with me. They each took their own sip, and watching their faces as they did made the moment all the worthwhile. My mother came out as well, and also refused to take a sip to let the kids enjoy it. I will never forget that day.

Being born into poverty was all I knew, and as I looked in the mirror, I knew that it was time to make a change. I was finishing high school soon, barely. This year was especially rough for my family. My mother had found out about my father's infidelity and she stormed into his work to cause a scene. Due to this, my father lost his job, leaving us hungry more than usual. My mother simply wasn't able to support herself and us if she chose to leave. So life moved on, just more difficult than before. When food on the table became scarce, I stopped attending school, which was sometime earlier this year. But my counselors had called, trying to understand the situation and I was informed that my teachers had agreed to let me graduate if I just came back and finished up the rest of the school year, so I did. I got a job at a local grocery store this year to help out with the bills, my brothers doing the same in order to make ends meet. We all worked together and it was comforting working in the same space as my family. They were the only constants in my life, the only ones who had to stick around when things got tough.

I applied for a Filipino agency a few months ago, and I get to hear back tomorrow about whether or not I got the opportunity. Filipino agencies are meant to provide young adults to get a work visa and find opportunities in other countries, to dig our way out of our poverty-ridden fates in the Philippines. My family has no idea about me applying for this position, and I know they will be shattered if I get it. But, I also have to think for myself and the life I want to build for myself.

I start getting ready for school, patting my hair down as best as I can, trying not to let the baby hairs bother me too much. I go to my closet and grab the new blouse that I had been saving for this special day. I was shocked when two of my best friends approached me with presents. As I knew their families were also struggling with the same fate, they put so much effort into getting me a present for my 18th birthday and it made me feel so grateful for them. Soon enough, I was able to go home and spend the rest of the day with my family. We turned on the television and connected our karaoke set to it. It was one of our favorite things to do together without having to spend any money. At the end of the evening, my family sang their happy birthdays to me, showered me in kisses, and we all went to bed.

The next morning, I woke up and checked my email. I had slept awfully last night, anxious to hear back from the agency today. If I get accepted, I start the week after I graduate, and I would be leaving my friends and family behind. I refreshed my email, watching the rotating circle move around as my emails came filtering in. I scrolled for a moment, finding the email from the agency. I closed my eyes and slowly exhaled, preparing myself for any outcome that could occur. I opened my eyes, clicked on the email, and my hand slammed to my face to cover my mouth. Tears welled in my eyes and I fell to my knees. I got it. I am excited to make new beginnings for myself. My first thought after all the happiness was that I had no idea how I was going to explain this to my family. I knew it was going to be a hard conversation, but it was an issue I wasn't willing to deal with today. I emailed the agency back, confirming my spot in the program, and pushed all other thoughts about it outside of my mind for now.

I carried on for the next two months without saying anything but eventually it was time to tell them. I had collected my brothers and my parents to the dining table, which was a sight we were certainly used to, but never in this context. This was a moment that was going to change our lives forever. Honestly, I was unsure exactly how I would get my words out without sobbing, but I knew with leaving in a month that I couldn't leave my family in the dark any longer. I had to use this time to spend with them and make sure I had enough memories with them before I went. We all gathered around and very quickly I could tell they sensed the tension coming from me. It took me minutes to muster up the courage to make my announcement. I spoke in my native language of Tagalog, telling my brothers and my parents that I have accepted to work for an agency that would have me leaving for America in one month. I spoke the words quickly and concisely, trying not to sit on the topic for any longer than I needed to. After I finished my confession, it remained quiet for some time. I am not sure if seconds or minutes passed, because each second that passed seemed to suck all the air out of my room. By the time anyone spoke, I was too anxious to look anyone in the eyes. My brothers were the first to speak, and they were

only able to mutter that they were proud of me, also keeping their eyes on the table. I could hear the hurt in their short words, and it broke me. It broke me even more that my mother was unable to speak at all, she eventually just stood up and left the room, and we all left her alone to process the news. My father had the most to say, just saying that he would miss me and that I will be his daughter no matter what. This speech, while short and sweet, was what did it for me. It made me cry, and he gave me a big hug, sending me to my room so that we could all rest. I spent the rest of the night sobbing, almost regretting my decision to be away from my family for my adulthood, but I knew this place just had nothing for me.

—1 month later—

The time had finally come where I was getting ready to leave. My parents had started up the car and my father had hardly spoken a word all morning. My father and brothers were getting my bags in the car, not letting my mother or I move a finger in all of this. My mother, on the other hand, had not been as silent as my father, making sure I knew she was upset with me for leaving them behind. I knew she was just going to miss me, which was making this harder for both of us, so I just ignored most of her comments.

The drive to the agency location felt too short, as I tried my best to savor every single moment with my family before we arrived. I could feel everyone in the car doing the same, even my father drove slower than usual today. From there, my father and brothers once again helped me bring my bags in, as they looked around the nice office, along with the other young women who were giving up their lives here in order to find greater opportunities. They were surrounded by their own luggages and there was a mixture of excitement and anxiety filling the air. My parents soon made their way out, covering my forehead, cheeks, and hair in kisses and squeezing me with tight hugs before their farewell. It left me a sobbing mess, but nothing out of the sort from what many of the other girls who came in experienced as well. When all of the girls arrived, we boarded up the plane provided by the agency.

We didn't get to know the location until we arrived, to which we found out we were being stationed in California. It was always a dream of mine to see California, and I would've never guessed I would ever be able to live here. But here I was. I was far from my family, but this moment made me realize what I was here for. They showed us to our condo and gave us our keys to our individual units. I clutched onto my key like my life depended on it, not believing how my life truly had changed overnight. I walked into my condo, dropping to my knees as I saw the view in front of me. My life has always been cluttered and small, but today I got to step into my own condo and it was a very emotional moment. I had checked the time on my phone, realizing it was an inconvenient time to call my family and show them, due to the time difference, though I wanted to so bad. I got settled into my new place, starting to unpack and place things as I knew I would be here for at least a few months.

I quickly found myself comfortable with the jobs the agency set up for me, working in hotels and airports and other miscellaneous tasks they had for me. My family was slowly warming up to the idea of me being away upon seeing my living quarters. While showing them, I could feel myself longing for the opportunity to bring them here, wanting them to experience

these things with me. Every paycheck I received, I sent at least half of it to my family, knowing that it was giving them the opportunity to eat more meals and celebrate birthdays just a little bit nicer. Even with half going to my family back home, I was still making enough to support myself, and I felt good about my decision to move here.

Every week was the same, every month was the same, and I didn't hate it one bit. I was able to explore California on my days off, enjoy a different culture, enjoy eating out, all while knowing my family was being taken care of as well. Things changed one day though, when I was working at one of the hotels. I was cleaning when a man working on cables at the hotel befriended me. While we were both indirectly working there, we found that we had a lot in common. He made it clear that he was interested in me, and I was intrigued by the idea of starting a relationship with him. Eventually, he asked me on a date. We went to dinner and ice cream, and I always favored chocolate ice cream. He ended up getting the same flavor, and we sat in the ice cream parlor and laughed for hours. At one point, I had laughed and he pointed at my face, laughing as I had chocolate all in my teeth. I covered my mouth to clean it, but as he laughed at me, I noticed he suffered the same fate, and I pointed at him, laughing as well. It was a lighthearted and memorable moment, two young adults giggling at each other for having chocolate ice cream in their teeth. I think that was when I knew he was the one, because even though I get extremely anxious on dates, it was a stress-free moment that allowed me to be myself without overthinking every single detail.

I was able to stay in California in my same city and condo for 4 more years, not realizing I could choose to stay after the few months were up. Well, not everyone got to choose where they went, but I had been working so hard and my leadership noticed, granting me the option to stay where I was already stationed. It would have been hard for me to leave, considering I had a budding relationship here, one that I figured would not survive if I left the area. My job had become more comfortable throughout the years and my pay was getting higher due to my hard work. I was sending my family more than I had been before, while still being able to provide for myself. Even on days where I ate out, my now-husband would pay for meals, leaving me thankful for this new life I had built for myself. I still had the condo provided by the company but we were recently finding the groove of living with each other. We got married recently, after 4 years of being together and exploring the idea of a life together. Much of his family was able to attend, but I didn't have the money for my family to make their way over. It made me sad, but I was able to show them pictures and they were so happy for me. They had met my husband numerous times over video calls and they adore him.

Soon enough, I started feeling sick every morning and I had an educated guess on what it could be. I took a pregnancy test and sure enough, it was positive. We had our first child on the way, and I couldn't be more excited. I tell my husband the exciting news and he embraces me tightly, as we make the decision to call our families to tell them the exciting news. I get my brothers and my parents on the phone and hold up the positive test. The look of surprise on everyone's faces was a moment that will be ingrained in my brain forever. I had many of these moments after: when I video called them the day I gave birth to my son, when I told them I was

pregnant again five years later with my daughter, and the day I gave birth to her too. I was blessed to have easy children to take care of, as childbirth was difficult for me, leaving me unsure about wanting more after my son. But the family dynamics were missing a daughter, and we were lucky to receive one after our son.

When I gave birth, I had stopped working to take care of the kids, and I had been in and out of work while raising them. I used the extra money from my job to send back to my family, even though my husband has been supportive about sending money with his salary as well. He is also from the Philippines and understands the struggles regarding life back home. By the time my daughter was three, I decided I wanted to do more with my life. I sat my husband down and presented the idea of me pursuing my bachelor's degree through an online university while I was a stay-at-home-mom. He absolutely loved the idea, and was willing to help fund my education. By the evening, my husband helped me enroll into an online university with a major in mathematics. I was always good at it in school, and we figured it would be a good place to start. We chose a university that could be completed at my own pace so that I could go as quick or as slow as I wanted. With raising the kids, I had to make sure I could take breaks when needed.

Before I knew it, I was accepted into the college and was on my way to getting my bachelor's in mathematics. I was flying through classes, doing them mostly at night when the kids were asleep or the weekends when my husband was home to help me with the kids. I had hit my worst standstill when I got the worst news of my life. My mother had been sick for a few months, and I knew even with the money I was sending over, it wasn't enough to get them a solid medical situation in the Philippines.

After she had been fighting her sickness for a year, I got a phone call that changed my life. My mother had passed. I didn't know what to do with myself. All I could do for months was cry and do nothing. I took care of the kids, I still cooked and cleaned for them, took them to school, etc. But, school was the last thing on my mind for a little bit. I hadn't touched any of my work for around 8 months when I went to dinner with an old friend and colleague from the agency. We caught up for hours and she opened my eyes to how I was letting this opportunity go to waste. I had time to grieve and process, but my family would be so proud to see my life move forward and receive the degree I had been working toward. I took her words to heart, and that night, I went home and started back up on my schoolwork. I still took summers off to work full time with the agency, and I managed to achieve my bachelor's degree, something I never thought I could say before.

Soon enough, I was able to fully cut ties with my agency, as I had received a job offer from a local university, UCLA, to work as a mathematician for the school. I would be earning at least 3 times the amount I was earning at the agency, and while they treated me well for the time being, I didn't need it anymore. I was able to start working part time, as my children got older and I was in the best financial place I had ever been in my life. After working for UCLA for a few months, I received my US citizenship.

For 3 years, I saved up. I saved money religiously to look forward to this day. Today, I get to call my brothers and my father, and tell them they're moving to America.

The Train is Always Late.

James Rowley

The train is always late. Today, the train is still late.

“When will the train come?” Paul asked. He stood fiddling with a golden badge pinned to his chest, a black eagle emblazoned on it.

“I’m not sure,” George said, sitting down on a bench. “The train is always late, and never late at a consistent time.”

“Who the hell is driving it? Can’t they follow a schedule?”

“I’d say not.”

“Then whoever’s in charge better fire ‘em!”

“I suppose so. But no one here ever really cares to complain.”

“Then *I’ll* complain to them myself! Where are they, George?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?” Paul fumed. “You’ve been living in this town for *how* many years and you’re not sure?”

“That’s right. I’m not even sure if they exist.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I don’t know who runs the trains. I doubt anyone else here does either.”

“Nonsense!” Paul yelled. The other people in the station looked at Paul, who turned his attention from George to them. “Does anyone here know who runs this station?”

The station was quiet.

Paul reached into his coat pocket and held his wallet aloft. “A hundred dollars for anyone that can tell me!”

The people looked at each other, deliberating in low murmurs. But alas, none walked forward, none spoke up. A few people shrugged their shoulders and returned to their normal business.

Shocked and ignored, Paul returned the wallet to his coat pocket and plopped down onto the bench. “There must be some way of knowing, George. *Someone* must know.”

“Perhaps not, my friend.” He patted Paul on the back.

“I’ve got it!” Paul stood up, a fire in his eyes. “The conductor! The conductor *must* know who hired him!”

The earth rumbled. Wheels turned and turned, a great mass chugging and chugging and chugging and chugging along the tracks until metal screamed against metal. Sparks flew and the screams turned to yells, then discussions, then whispers, until they subsided. The whistle sounded, and the doors opened.

Paul ran for the doors, with George following close behind. Paul nearly overran the ticket taker, blasting past him into the carriage. George apologized, and handed over their tickets. The two men ran toward the beginning of the train, through cars of people beginning to depart. George hadn’t the time for apologies. Eventually, Paul and George reached the conductor. He was a thin man with a small mustache.

“Mr. Conductor?” Paul asked, exasperated.

“Jesus,” The Conductor said. “Are you all right? Catch your breath, sir.”

“Who...” Paul gasped for air. “Who do you... work for...?”

“Hm...” The Conductor scratched his nose in deep thought. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know. Whyever do you ask?”

Bandits in the Forest

By Vineeta Tyagi

(Based on a true story)

The yellow kothi dominated the vast landscape of acres of farmland without another house in sight. The servant huts were its only neighbors. Until this morning. Chatter of the dark and unknown roused the huts, and soon enough, bad news travelled to the kothi as well. One of the servants, Matadeen, took it upon himself to warn the head of the household of the danger lurking in the woods. He prayed his boss, Jagdish, would heed his warning for once.

Matadeen announced his presence with a light knock on the door and his boss's booming voice welcomed him inside.

“Sahaab, don't venture into the woods for a while and keep your doors bolted at night.”

“Why?” his boss asked with a careless shrug.

“Word is...bandits are hiding out in the forest.”

“Bandits,” he asked with troubling curiosity.

“Sahaab, please!”

His boss raised his hands in surrender, promising to steer clear to the jungle. Matadeen wasn't so sure. He simply took his solace in having done his duty and hoped for the best. But alas, the servant's anxiety wasn't misplaced. It didn't take long before curiosity got the better of Jagdish. He found his gaze turning to the woods all day. Thinking. Imagining. Wondering.

Bandits, huh? He had never seen bandits up close. The country was ripe with stories of a fearsome bandit queen ravaging Chambal one dacoity at a time. Was reality worse or the news a fear-mongering exaggeration? He didn't know. And as a scientist, his curious mind couldn't stand not knowing. That's what led him to the forest with such urgency that he didn't even bother putting on a shirt. His dogs tagged along. They were concerned for their master's safety. Well, someone had to be. For Jagdish practically jogged through the forest, chest barreling in misplaced bravery and reckless abandon.

The realization that this might be a bad idea hit him only when he heard the chatter of a large group of people camping deep in the woods. Well, he had already come quite far. The bandits were almost within reach.

Inhaling a sharp breath, he emerged into the clearing.

The chatter came to an abrupt halt as every face in the clearing turned to face him. Hmm. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't poor underfed women reduced to skin and bone and children dressed in rags. It took him a while to even notice the men brandishing knives and kattas (poorly fashioned firearms produced by the illegal and still booming local cottage industry). It didn't scare him. All he felt was pity. What was the point of dragging

families into a life of crime, if the children still remained unfed, uneducated, and clothed in scraps?

“Who are you?” asked the one posturing as their leader.

“I’m the research officer in charge of this land,” Jagdish replied.

“Oh,” he replied, signaling his men to sheath their guns and knives. “We want no trouble. Rest assured. We aren’t here to rob you. We simply need a place to lay low for a while. I suppose... we could come to a mutually beneficial understanding?”

Jagdish raised a brow. Neither broke the tense silence. Then, with an exasperated sigh, the leader of the bandits, pulled out a small sack and dropped it at Jagdish’s feet. He could guess what lay inside it by the jingling sound it made. The dogs sniffed at it. Jagdish picked it up to confirm his suspicion. The bandits relaxed.

Gold. The sack was full of gold. The sight of it, worked him up to a fury, not for the disrespectful gesture or the assumption that he was just another corrupt government officer come here to collect his bribe, but for the wasted potential of this gold. He tossed the sack back to the leader.

“What?” he asked, suddenly panicked. “That’s the usual rate and we can’t afford any more.”

“I don’t want your bribe,” Jagdish grumbled. “Don’t worry. I won’t report you to the authorities, and you may stay here for as long as you wish, if you do not intend to stir any trouble. All I ask in return is that you invest this money in these children’s education so they may have a better future than this godforsaken life.”

“Sahaab, I’ve never seen a man of your stature show concern for our children. Thank you.” The bandit joined his hands in a namaste and the gratitude in his eyes seemed genuine enough for Jagdish to hope he would do the right thing.

Winter Wonderland

The end of the world belonged on a Christmas card. Snow was crumbling from the sky like powdered sugar. The houses on the street were encased in glistening icing. May stood at the window, spinning the bottle cap back and forth and forth and back until her breath blurred out the scene.

“This is the last one.”

May started, dropping the bottle. She turned to see her younger sister, Eliza, standing behind her clutching a can of beans. May pried Eliza’s fingers off the can and brought it to the small pile of preserved foods on the counter.

“It’s all right.” May placed the can beside a limp bag of freeze-dried fruits. “We’re going scavenging tomorrow. We’ll find more food then.” She glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was time to check on Anna.

Eliza trailed after her into the living room. “We won’t,” she said, “I know we won’t. There’s no more, we’ve been to every, every house that, and —”

They stopped in the doorway. Their youngest sister, Anna, was curled up on the mattress they all slept on for warmth. The blanket was still, no rise or fall, no rattling breath. Closing her eyes, May wrapped Eliza into her arms, and waited for the sobs to subside.

“We need to start now,” May said. “The sun’s almost set.”

It was taking too long to bury her. The shovel kept slipping from May’s grip. Anna had seemed to be improving. Her gloves scratched her skin. Why hadn’t she noticed? What if something could’ve been done? The snow was too bright; it was scalding. She couldn’t let this happen to Eliza. She needed to protect her, but how could she if—

“May. May, we have to go inside.” Eliza blinked. Her eyebrows scrunched up. “It’s getting cold.”

May breathed in. She glanced at Eliza. “It’s always cold.”

They trudged back to the house, the sky dimming behind them, that lost sun slowly melting away. Snow was already filling the small grave outside.

While Eliza began layering jackets for nighttime, May removed Anna’s pillow, stowing it away beside their parents’. Eliza was still too skinny, even with all those layers. She thought of another grave, next to Anna’s. Collapsing onto the mattress, May wondered if Eliza would be strong enough to bury her body. What would she do without her? Survive, hopefully. She looked at her own face, reflected in the TV’s dead stare. She thought of the empty pill bottle lying on the kitchen tiles. The last of her medicine. The end of the world.

When it first started getting colder, their family would gather here to watch the daily weather report. “Mom,” May had asked, on one of those nights. “Is it the end of the world?” Outside, the sun had cracked, crayon-yellow yolk spilling warm across the evening sky.

“It’s just winter,” she’d said, baby Anna asleep in her lap. Both of them were bathed in a soft, shifting light, the television glow mixing with the setting sun. “Don’t worry, May. It’s almost Christmas.”