

Witness

THE MODERN WRITER AS WITNESS



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Photo credit: Pamela Daum, "Henry House, Manassas Battlefield."

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Fiction

The Vine and the Branches

Nate Haken

Grilled croaker fish tasted good with beer—the sweetness, the charcoal, the carbonation in his throat. Barry broke a flake of meat off with his fingertips and put it in his mouth. He chewed. He swallowed. He broke off another piece, licking the pepper off his lips. He zoned, staring at the soccer game on the TV in the corner, occasionally focusing enough to catch the score, then going blank again. Mosquitoes buzzed around his ankles.

The electricity went off for a moment.

Oka sat down next to Barry in the dark. “Oyibo,” she said.

“When will you stop calling me that?” Barry said, even though he knew she didn’t mean it that way.

She put her hand on his arm. “How bodi?” she said. He didn’t answer her. “How you dey?” she pressed.

“Fine,” he said. “I’m fine.” He scratched his bearded cheek with his index finger.

Barry had been a missionary. Then he worked as a contractor for a mining company. Then he worked for a small NGO. But now he didn’t do any of those things. When his mother died of leukemia, back in Illinois, she left him \$72,000.89. After the funeral, he took that money and flew to West Africa with six pairs of pants, ten boxer shorts, three t-shirts, hired a small boat and moved out to the creeks. Upon arriving in Ismara, he laid a concrete foundation, put up four walls, a corrugated aluminum roof, and settled in. Eventually the money would probably run out. But as long as he didn’t go into town too much or get real sick, it would last a good, long while.

Abruptly, the power came back. Soukous music resumed on the radio. The TV flickered on and off. Then when it came on all the way, Barry saw a still-shot of himself on the television screen. “...the hell?” he said.

He remembered that picture, vaguely. It was taken at a fundraiser in Washington years before, sponsored by some multinational, where everybody got dolled up and mingled with politicians and celebrities under high ceilings and chandeliers. Barry was in the background of the picture, visibly tipsy with a glass of wine in his hand, eyeing a tray of canapés. In the foreground, Senator Rivkin shook hands with the famous West African rapper, Big Wahala. Big Wahala’s real name was Godfrey, and he was from the same local government area where Barry lived now. Godfrey had been a child soldier during the height of the insecurity, but escaped from the grips of the sociopathic warlord who terrorized the region, and made his way through the bush to a refugee camp across the border. There, he started writing down lyrics and performing for whoever would listen. After he was discovered by Shakira he instantly became an international sensation, hitting all the major cities—Cape Town, Milan, Buenos Aires.



The song that made him famous was about his escape from the bush: *This boat won't float and I'm trying to breathe air/just shiverin' in the river and I have blood in my hair/the guy with the eye in the sky just won't leave me alone/he knows what what's in my mind and I'm thinking about home*. Then Shakira came in on the chorus and the two of them strode across the stage harmonizing to a backdrop of marimba and bass guitar. When they sang about home, she rocked her pelvis slowly, one hand on her belly, the other behind her head.

Big Wahala was at this event in Washington to receive some humanitarian award.

The still-shot was only up for half a second. It was part of a montage of a whole bunch of pictures and short clips of white people talking earnestly about the plight of child soldiers in the region and the necessity of the global community to focus like a laser on bringing Sam Katinde, the warlord, to justice once and for all. There was a bunch of merchandise you could buy that would spread the message, bracelets, headbands, and yard signs. There was a YouTube video you could send to all your friends at once with a single click of a mouse. Already, over 100 million people had watched the video. It was on the front page of every newspaper. School children from Hartford, Connecticut to Santa Fe, New Mexico were all talking about it in their social studies classes. Apparently the whole world knew all about the town of Ismara now.

The soccer game came back on. "That was strange," said Oka.

"Strange all right," said Barry.

"Try not to think about it," Oka said. "Look, Arsenal is leading."

A roar went up among the villagers as Robey heel-kicked the ball to Nasser who chipped it across the center and Plymouth headed it clean into the top right corner for the goal. Chelsea's defense didn't have a chance.

Walking back to the house, Barry kicked at a small rock with the bottom of his flip-flop. Oka made a tisk noise in her cheek and reached for his hand. She held his fingers lightly. They walked past the water pump and Taylor George's plantation. A goat bleated sickly in the darkness. The smells of woodsmoke and vegetation were familiar and comforting. Clusters and constellations of stars dusted the sky between the dark silhouettes of canopy.

"Don't worry, my love," she said in a husky voice. "There's nothing to worry about."

Truth was, he wasn't that worried yet. It was weird, to be sure. But he wasn't that worried, really.

Barry was almost asleep, lying naked with Oka under the mosquito net, when his Otis Redding ringtone sang out. He grabbed his phone and punched the green button.

"Barry Lazarus? This is Marty Shepherd from the Post. Can I talk to you about Sam Katinde?"

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Barry asked. When you're in a video that 100 million people watch,



even for a half a second, people like Marty were bound to come calling from different time zones.

“Just a few questions,” said Marty Shepherd from the Post.

“Katinde? He’s an asshole with a gun,” said Barry and hung up the phone and turned it all the way off.

A couple assholes with a gun can cause a lot of grief. Back when he worked for the mining company, he was sitting under a tree with an Australian engineer named Kiwi and a Nigerian geologist named Fonyo. Sitting there—that’s all they were doing. Just having a drink. It was very much against company protocol for them to be out there, drinking in the village, but they didn’t like being cooped up behind the razor wire and the fifteen-foot walls. They didn’t like tennis. They didn’t want to go for another dip in the pool.

“One more calabash!” Kiwi yelled to the girl with one leg. She was pretty good on her crutches, balancing the calabash on her head as she brought it out. She put her crutches to the side, leaned against the table for support and lowered the calabash to the rickety table under the tree where Barry, Kiwi, and Fonyo sat, grinning ear to ear. Barry peered into the white viscous liquid. “Yep,” he said. “It’s ready to drink.” He picked out a dead bee and showed it to Fonyo.

“That is how you know,” Fonyo said, “Just as I said.” Barry put the bee back in the palm wine and dipped the metal cup and drank it down.

“You’re a palm wine gourmet, Fonyo,” Kiwi said.

“Yes I am. In fact I have my own plantation. Did you know? My wife, she says to me, cut those trees and put plantains, yams, or cassava. But I say, no, I am a palm wine gourmet. How can I deny my passion? When I explained like that, she agreed very heartily. She is very supportive of my passions.”

Barry crushed a bee between his teeth. It added a little bitterness to the flavor.

Kiwi pointed his handgun at a knobby looking soursop fruit the size of a football, hanging from a tree across the compound. “Do you cut down the tree and drain it completely or do you tap it while it is still living?” he said.

“If there is a marriage or a death celebration, I chop down many trees. Otherwise I let them drip and collect the palm wine in calabashes,” Fonyo replied.

It may have been an accident. But Kiwi squeezed the trigger and missed the soursop. The bullet crashed through the branches.

The girl’s mother came running out of the hut and yelled a lot of angry words in the local language, which they didn’t understand.



“I think she is enraged that you missed the soursop,” Fonyo said.

“Well for God’s sake, I had better try again,” said Kiwi.

“But that soursop is so far away,” said Fonyo. “If you miss one more time, she may come and smack our heads with a calabash. I’m already developing a headache as it is. Better not to try and shoot it again, I think.”

Kiwi apologized to the woman. “Sorry, ma’am. It was a bloomin’ accident, it was. Putting it away now, Sheila. Snapping the holster shut now, see?”

The lady spat her disgust and went back inside.

At another table, several men were laughing and giving them the thumbs-up: Sam Katinde’s boys. You could tell because of their age range and how they acted. Those guys were members of a local group with the intentionally scary name of Mokele Mbembe. They thought Barry, Kiwi, and Fonyo were great yuksters.

Guys like that were the reason Kiwi brought his gun in the first place. And he wanted them to know he had one—to establish a little parity, mutually assured destruction and all that, so everyone could drink their palm wine in peace.

In solidarity with Kiwi, one of the M&M boys pointed his weapon in the direction of the soursop fruit and let loose a volley of gunfire. Then they laughed very hard and gave more thumbs-ups.

Fonyo, Barry, and Kiwi looked at each other deadpanned. “Those guys have no discipline,” said Fonyo.

The elderly woman ran out again, waving her hands and this time berating the M&M guys.

“This is about to turn ugly,” Kiwi said.

Having as they did such a scary name, as well as money and guns, the Mokele Mbembe were granted certain perks and entitlements in this community, generally eating, drinking, and fucking for free. Sometimes they’d pay generously and everyone would be most thankful and relieved. But on occasion someone would be less than deferential and regret it a lot.

These guys did not actually conceive of themselves as predators. Rather, they resented the traditional leadership, which they believed had been co-opted by the mining company to sell out the interests of the community. So they were pushing for the installation of a different paramount chief that they thought was more representative. In the meantime, the chieftaincy struggle led to a breakdown in governance. And now these Mokele Mbembe took it upon themselves to enforce law and order and collect taxes for doing so. The Mokele Mbembe resented the mining company for corrupting their traditional leadership. That tension



between the youth militia and the mining company was the main reason they weren't allowed to mingle in town for fear that they'd stir up trouble by doing so.

"That's Captain Butt Naked," Fonyo said, nodding at the man with the gun. He had army boots on his feet and cornrows in his hair.

"Goddamnit," Barry said. He'd heard stories about Captain Butt Naked.

"That old woman is fed up," said Kiwi. "She doesn't give a fuck."

The old woman was yelling at the Mokele Mbembe. The one-legged girl shuffled out on her crutches as fast as she could, calling to her mother, her voice shrill.

Fonyo heaved a big sigh, stood up, and walked over to where things were about to turn ugly. The M&M crew had each one of them turned to face the old lady, leering. Captain Butt Naked had his hand on his gun, waiting to see what Fonyo would do. The girl was pulling on her mother's skirt, trying to get her to come back inside the house.

Before anybody could do anything, though, Fonyo strode up to the woman and slapped her hard and hauled her back to the house by her elbow. On the way, she kicked him in the shin. Out of sight, the sound of a scuffle reached Barry and Kiwi. The M&M boys laughed so hard they wiped tears from their eyes.

Fonyo came back out front. He gave the goons a big-assed thumbs up and went back to his table and sat down.

Kiwi said, "Told you it was gonna turn ugly."

"Could have been uglier," Barry said.

"Almost was," said Fonyo. "Her husband came at me with a machete. I had to clear the air very fast. Hey, let's go to the palm wine plantation and see how it compares with mine." The M&M guys felt that they had bonded over the abuse of the woman so they accompanied them to the edge of the village, everybody walking along swinging their arms and acting tough.

"See those trees?" said Fonyo. "See how they cut a groove in the trunk so that the sap can drip? You can drink palm wine all day. In the morning it is sweet. Then by afternoon it has begun to ferment. Finally, at night it is very strong. Palm wine is the perfect beverage."

The M&M crew was scouring the trees for calabashes full of wine cinched tight against the trunks. Whenever one of them found one he shouted a great shout of jubilation and the others came running. For lack of anything better to do, Fonyo, Kiwi, and Barry joined in the hunt for booze. As the hours passed, Fonyo kept saying, "See how the wine gets stronger? This one was very strong." Pretty soon they were firing their



weapons into the trees.

“It’s a good skill to develop,” Kiwi said. “Shooting while drunk.”

“I can see how that would be,” Barry said. “Eighty-six percent of all gun battles occur while intoxicated. Best be prepared.”

“Safety first, that’s my motto,” Kiwi said and shot over Barry’s head into the trees. “Remember what I told you,” Kiwi said. “Left hand supports the weapon.” He was sitting flat on the ground with his legs outstretched, his head sort of lolling to one side.

“Did I ever tell you what a great mentor you are?” Barry asked him. “When we get back to the capital I’m going to have to tell everyone how truly wonderful you are. Really spot on, as you people say.”

“Thanks,” Kiwi said. “That means a lot.”

This was years ago, when the conflict was still winding up. Everybody acted crazy in those days. Even so, that behavior was beyond the pale as far as headquarters was concerned. When they got back, Barry blew the whistle on himself and his two friends and they all lost their jobs. Barry went to work for a small NGO.

Eventually the Mokele Mbembe got their choice of Paramount Chief, who, as it turned out, lived just down the road from Barry. So when the NGO he worked for was contracted to do “key informant interviews” of all the major stakeholders in the community, he went over to the palace to meet with him. These interviews were required as data for an assessment of the main conflict drivers in the region. The research was to inform the program design of a large peace building intervention, funded by USAID. Barry walked over to his compound early in the afternoon. He waited his turn in the front room. The front door was flanked with elephant tusks. Animal skins hung on the wall, next to the chief’s university diploma. There was a photograph of the chief shaking the president’s hand. People wandered in and out with their various concerns: land conflicts, chieftaincy tussles, domestic disputes. Others came in to pay their respects. Others came to ask for various blessings and endorsements. Barry had to wait a long time because there was an ambassador from across the river. The chief and the ambassador were huddled in the office for over an hour. Barry waited. He had nothing better to do than wait. He stood up and went outside to smoke a cigarette. Fruit bats boomeranged in the palm trees. The sun was going down.

As he ground his cigarette butt in the dirt with the heel of his flip-flop, the ambassador walked down the front steps, and rode off on his motorcycle, fishtailing in the dirt. The chief’s assistant called out and Barry went into the chief’s office where he stood, apparently seething.

“You want to interview key stakeholders?” the chief said, finally. “You should interview my cousin, Sam Katinde. I’ll arrange it.”

About a week later, Otis Redding sang out on Barry’s phone. And a week after that, Barry was sitting in a



canoe with an outboard motor, escorted by a teenager with a distended belly and an AK-47. Monkeys chattered in the mangrove roots. Long-tailed birds darted in the green.

Barry tried to learn what he could about Sam Katinde. He yelled over the sound of the outboard motor: “Hey! How long have you worked for Sam Katinde?” The man busied himself navigating to the edge of the river to avoid a small whirlpool.

“Watch your head,” the man said, pointing to a branch hanging low over the river. Barry ducked as the leaves scraped over them.

Still Barry pressed. “Tell me about Sam Katinde,” he said.

Low thunder rumbled, lingering. The air felt suddenly cool.

“Eyes in the sky,” the man said, and refused to acknowledge another word that came out of Barry’s mouth, whether comic, directive, affirmative, or inquisitive. After a while, Barry gave up and settled into an anxious, brooding silence.

They took a branch in the river, then another, and another. No way Barry could find his way back by himself. At last they ran aground. The man jumped out and tied off to a tree, cinching the slipknot tight. There was a whistle dangling from his neck. He put it in his mouth and blew two short bursts and one long.

Two youths appeared, one with a handgun and the other with a bow and arrow. They smiled big, welcoming smiles. Barry clung to those smiles, pitifully, as they all walked up the trail together, just four people walking on a trail. They passed by mounds of rock where artisanal miners dug with pickaxes and shovels. The miners looked up as they passed. “Oyibo,” a little boy shouted out and followed them down the trail. When they arrived at the camp, there was a whole parade of children and men and women laughing and waving and talking to one another. The man from the boat knocked on the door of a hut, and everyone hushed.

The door opened. The man from the boat ushered Barry inside and shut the door behind him. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dark. A citronella candle burned in the corner. After the spots in his eyes cleared, he could make out the form of a slender man standing there with his hand outstretched. Barry shook it.

“Thank you for coming,” said Sam Katinde. “I’m sure you must be apprehensive.”

Katinde had delicate features, fine cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes.

Katinde smiled sadly. “I know,” he said. “It’s strange to see the face of a monster, isn’t it?” He talked quietly, hardly moving his lips when he spoke.

“I’ve heard the stories,” said Barry.



“So many terrible things,” said Katinde. “Have a seat.” He gestured towards a low, wooden stool. Barry sat. Katinde himself sat on his haunches, adjusting his holster so he could squat comfortably. “We don’t often receive guests here,” he said by way of explanation or apology.

The door opened, sending a wedge of sun shooting across the floor. It closed again. A young woman came in with a tray. She knelt, setting down the tray. She poured palm wine from a calabash into a metal cup. She handed the cup to Barry. Her hands were steady, sure. She had small, ivory earrings, cowry shells braided into her hair. Smelled faintly of flowers.

“Thank you, Oka,” said Katinde.

“Yes, sir,” she said, looking into Barry’s face for a second. Then she stood and walked towards the door, opened it, and left.

“You’re not drinking?” Barry said.

“I don’t take alcohol,” said Katinde. “The toxins make me feel lightheaded.”

Barry felt a little lightheaded, himself, from the citronella, from the situation. He was starting to feel paranoid about Katinde’s eyes in the sky.

Katinde fell quiet while Barry drank. After Barry put down his empty cup, Katinde said, “So you want to build peace. To do that you want to know why we are fighting.”

Barry nodded. This interview was not going according to plan. He had a feeling it would continue not going according to plan. Katinde talked quietly, hardly moving his lips, his hand cradling his face as he sat on his haunches on the floor. There were long pauses between sentences, in the middle of sentences. The pitch of his voice went up and down, but always soft, almost gentle. Now that Barry’s eyes were fully adjusted, he could see details. There were intricate patterns scarred into Katinde’s face. Tribal markings were common in this country. But Barry had never seen such complex patterns of deep and shallow scars in a man’s face before. Fractal, concentric swirls and angles, almost symmetrical, but not quite.

“We have mutilated. We have raped. We have forced children to do terrible things to their own mothers, their own siblings.”

“I have heard the stories,” said Barry. His mouth was dry.

“My God, the world is a terrible place. You want to understand all of this so that you can stop it from happening.”

Barry wondered how badly he wanted to stop it from happening. It seemed kind of presumptuous, when



Katinde put it that way. He wanted it to stop happening, no doubt about that. But to be personally responsible for stopping it? He wondered if Katinde was making fun of him.

Katinde closed his eyes and fell into a long silence, the longest yet. Barry stared at the dust particles hanging in a shaft of light by the shuttered window.

Finally, Katinde looked up. He opened his palm and said, “Barry, you already know all the reasons. We both know very well the contents of your report. You will write about the exploitation and cooptation of the people by foreigners and companies and governments. About how the federal, state, and local governments are unknown to us except as foreign entities that occasionally act upon the people, sometimes for good, sometimes for evil. About the crisis of leadership up and down the hierarchy of traditional systems of governance. About how the youth have been betrayed by the traditional system and neglected by the modern one. About how all this all takes place in a context of group-based fear and hatred between ethnic groups. Surely you will also write about the drive for survival in a place where livelihoods have been destroyed by foreign companies who pull our soul out of the ground and sell it abroad so that people can communicate with one another on their mobile phones, sending SMS, twitter messages, YouTube videos, Facebook status updates. They pull our soul from the ground and then it is mixed with the soul of the world. These are all things that you already know. And you have come here for some good quotations so as to lend your report some heft and credibility.”

Katinde shifted his weight and reached for the calabash. He poured another cup for Barry. Then he took a small reddish cola nut from a saucer and broke it. He handed one segment to Barry. “Don’t worry. I’ll give you your quotations,” Katinde said. He put the other segment in his own mouth. Barry chewed. It was very bitter. As he chewed and swallowed, the edges and contours of things were sharpened.

“To be clear,” Katinde said, “in the same way that people treat culture as if it is a thing with a boundary and an essence, most people also reify the so-called individual. They believe that consciousness emanates from a central point in a man’s mind. So they are horrified that I, Sam Katinde, raped and mutilated and killed so many innocent people. What they do not choose to understand is that when I cut the lips off a child, they too are also cutting off those lips. And it horrifies me perhaps even more than it horrifies you.

“Let me explain. Isn’t it obvious, for example, that there is no single point at which a fetus becomes a person, distinct from his mother’s body? Not at conception. Not at the second trimester. Not at birth. Not on his eighth birthday. Not even at the point when his mother dies. There are vigorous debates on this subject, but in our hearts we all know the answer. It is obvious. The fetus, the child, the man is always a part of his mother’s body, a part of her soul. We are a single organism in constant flux. The distance between what I call me and what you call you is merely a question of degree and vector. Taking it from another angle: even within what I call myself there is a system of impulses and drives, both intersecting and parallel. If you separate my left brain hemisphere from my right brain hemisphere and both are functioning independent of each other, which one of them is me? Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I am the vine and you are the branches.’ This was not an imperative. This was a statement of fact. God is not a person, just as I am not a person. When I rape and kill, you rape and kill. God also rapes and kills. And it horrifies us all.” A bead of sweat rolled



down Katinde's scarred face. He looked at Barry. His eyes were bloodshot, thin, red veins spider-webbed across the whites of his eyes.

Abruptly, he stood up. He walked to the window and threw open the shutters. "Oka," he said. "Come." He shut the window. Then he paced back and forth. Barry did not move.

The door opened. Oka stood in the doorway surrounded by a halo of light.

"You have been a good wife to me," said Katinde. "Now you will go with this man."

They rode in the canoe together. The young man with the distended stomach steered the canoe through the mangrove jungle, turning this way and that, one river branched into another branch into another, like the pattern scarred into Katinde's face. Barry didn't know what to say. He sure didn't know what to write down in his report. They wanted it verbatim. But Heavens to Murgatroid, did they really want to read that shit? The man was fucking crazy. He leaned over and trailed his fingers in the water. He stared at his refracted fingers splitting the water the entire rest of the way home to Ismara.

The canoe rocked from side to side as he stepped out into the knee-deep water. He held the canoe steady while Oka stepped out, too.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked her.

She didn't say anything.

"Where's your family?"

She still didn't say anything.

"I guess I should take you to the chief's compound," he said.

"I'll go with you."

"To the chief's compound then."

"No. With you."

"Okay."

Years passed. Eventually the rebellion died down. All but a few core fighters and conscripts came out of the bush. People who had been displaced returned to their ancestral lands. There was still the occasional skirmish or abduction, but life began to return to a kind of normalcy. Roads were built. Houses sprung up. When people began to believe that the security might hold, businesses began to return. Barry watched all this from



his small hut on the outskirts of town. He sat in his wicker chair, smoking cigarettes, watching other people moving forward with their lives. Oka stayed with him.

That old hackneyed White Man's Burden narrative sure had a sick appeal. That was how Barry started out. But after failing as a missionary, failing in the private sector, and then failing as a development worker, that protagonist role didn't pan out. So he tried out another trope: Africa as backdrop for a white guy's self-discovery. Well, shit. What's wrong with discovery? Except for that it didn't amount to much at the end of the day. Sitting on his wicker chair under the mango tree. Chewing on palm nuts. Chewing on cola nuts. Chewing on ground nuts. He sat there wondering about God. If consciousness as linked to identity was illusion, then God must not know Barry. Maybe God was not a person, and maybe Barry was not known by God. Maybe Barry was not a person to be known. Big orange-headed lizards with black bodies and orange tails bobbed their heads up and down in the sun. It was nice, though, watching other people moving forward with their lives. It was nice that Oka chose not to move on with hers.

Then he saw himself on TV and the whole miserable appletart was upset, just like that.

Reporters started calling. Katinde's face was splashed on every channel. Geraldo Rivera and Rush Limbaugh talked and talked about Katinde, expressing loud opinions with all due righteous bombast. The CNN effect had its effect. Christiane Amanpour reported that a team of U.S. Special Forces was deployed in support of an African Union mission to smoke him out dead or alive.

The Paramount Chief came to visit Barry one afternoon. Barry was sitting, as usual, under the mango tree.

"You're looking agitated, chief," said Barry. Barry opened a small plastic cooler next to him and reached in the ice water for a bottle of beer. "Here, have a beer," he said, and tossed it to the chief. The chief sat down on a chair and took a long drink from his beer. Then he took a deep breath.

"I am the Paramount Chief in this region, correct?"

"That is correct, sir," said Barry. "You have the hat and the stick."

"I do have the hat. Look, it is on my own head."

"And the stick. It sits across your lap, even now."

"Ah, so it does."

"Yep."

"So I must be the Paramount Chief."

"You must and you are."



They sat for a time, drinking their beer. When the chief had finished his, he reached into the cooler for another.

People all over the world were talking about Ismara. The President of the United States and the United Nations Secretary General had mentioned this little town by name. Journalists and celebrities, even the Pope had expressed his thoughts on what should be done about this community. But had anyone contacted the chief to ask his opinion? No, the chief had not appeared in the YouTube video. Nobody thought to ask him what he thought about the military operation, apparently now imminent. Had anyone thought about the fact that the Mokele Mbembe would almost certainly rouse themselves and take every possible measure to diligently kill, rape, mutilate, and abduct women and children in reprisal attacks, once the operation began? Sure, Katinde might be dead at the end of it, but for God's sake, Ismara was finally getting back on her feet. For God's sake. The least they could do was talk to the chief himself, so he could express his concerns. And after listening, if they did not hear his concerns, then he could take whatever miserable precautions he could to prepare the community—send out the town crier to announce village meetings, tell everyone to stockpile water, cultivate land closer to the villages, set up an early warning system using SMS messaging. Maybe the African Union would provide support in these precautions. Maybe they would provide supplies and water so that the women would not have to walk down the trail to the river, so that the men would not have to go out to their farms. But nobody talked to him, probably because he was Katinde's cousin and had been installed as chief in no small part because of the actions of the Mokele Mbembe.

“Chief, do you have a passport?” Barry asked and handed him another beer.

One day the town of Ismara awoke to the sound of trucks and helicopters. Large, muscle-bound men in sunglasses and camouflage were walking around talking into their radios, pounding and twisting and pushing on lots of heavy things. They set up an array of tents with antennae and satellite dishes. The villagers peeked at all the activity from behind their closed doors. The children were the first to come out. Soon everybody was standing and staring at the strange men and all the strange vehicles and all the strange activity.

The chief's office was full of people: Barry, Oka, the chief, the AU commanding officer, and his deputy were all there.

“Tell me again what you just said,” the general said to Oka.

“He's dead, sir,” she repeated. She told about how, when she had been his wife, she had come into his room one night and found him lying dead, bleeding on his sheets from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. His lieutenants had burned his body to ashes and scattered those ashes into the river so that they would spread across the branches of the delta and trickle into the sea.

The general chewed on his lip. He paced around the small office, staring closely at Oka, Barry, and the chief in turn. He clinked and rustled when he moved. His deputy said something about a polygraph. The general stared at Oka, appraising her affect. Then he shook his head.



That evening, Barry called up Marty Shepherd from the Post. “You want a scoop?” he said. He told him. “Yep, eye witnesses confirmed it,” he said.

By now Sam Katinde would be in Saudi Arabia, probably standing in his backyard, philosophizing with his neighbor across the fence. Probably swatting a sandfly on his neck and talking about how none of us are individual people with minds and consciousness, that we are all part of a terrible and beautiful system of electromagnetic waves and pulsing energy. That’s probably what Sam Katinde was doing now. If he was ever ID’d, Oka was going to jail for sure. For that matter, Barry and the chief would likely be going to jail, too. Pissing in a bucket in the corner of a concrete cell. This was more likely than not, now that he thought about it.

That night, Barry lay with Oka naked under the mosquito net. He told her about how he wasn’t a person and how God wasn’t a person, that consciousness was illusion because it never emanated from a single mind, that collective consciousness was just as unitary as so-called individual consciousness. He went on and on for a long time, ending up with the conclusion that God did not know him, which was the thing that bothered him the most.

She lay flat on top of him and clasped his head between her hands. “Oh, my dear,” she said. “Sam done get inside your head.” She flicked his forehead with her fingernail. “Feel me.” She flicked him again. “Feel me.” Her ivory earrings glowed faintly in the moonlight. “I don’t deny that we overlap. How can I deny that? But there is something that makes me me, and I am conscious. I dey. You dey. We dey, no? And if this complex system of chemicals, impulses, and conflicting drives, comes together to produce my consciousness, why should that be reason to despair? If I am conscious in this way, surely the Creative Force that we call God must be even more so. And I know you, stupid Oyibo.” She leaned down and bit his ear, hard.



Everybody Doing Pretty Here

Emily Elbom

In 1955, when the Air Force started building on the far outskirts of town what the local paper called an Aerospace Defense Command Center, the town was excited. To quote the local paper, which the town often did, this would surely show those no-good Soviets exactly what they were dealing with. Their town would be ready. Uncle Sam, in all his bounty, had chosen their town. Their little stretch of prairie. Fortunate stroke of luck, they all said. Nothing terrible will ever happen here now.

But when the Air Force came that fall, the men came. When the men came, so did the women. The women who came were sometimes wives and sometimes not, which precisely started the trouble. The women of the town, the women and wives who had been there long before the Air Force, recognized this problem right away. Certainly they hadn't foreseen such a problem. Shocking. Upsetting. They all agreed: these poor boys, they protect our country, we must protect their honor. But how? Their husbands mostly shrugged. A few insensitive ones said things like: how do you think I passed the time during my Pacific tour? Or, too bad these girls aren't French, oh la la, the French girls I met during the war!

The practical husbands suggested their wives turn a sensible blind eye. After all, the entire town was doing more and more business since the Air Force came, and wouldn't more business be good? Wouldn't it possibly mean that summer vacation for them? That fur they'd been eying? New shoes for the kids? A deluxe electric stove? Money to send to their mother for her operation? A way to pay off the mortgage?

When Willa asked her husband he just shrugged and said that he felt sorry for *those* women, not the Air Force boys. When she asked him just what exactly he meant by that, he only shrugged. When she said, wait just a *darn* minute, he had the audacity to go mow the lawn. Both the front and the back, and then, to add insult to injury, he washed the car. When he finally came back in for supper he wouldn't say another word on the subject.

And so the women talked amongst themselves. Over clotheslines. While waiting to collect their children at school. At bridge parties. Morning coffee. Afternoon cake. Church socials. In front yards, and backyards. Between grocery store aisles. Slowly, they made plans, organized, enlisted the help of their friends, typed pamphlets and letters, and armed themselves for battle. They would, in effect, drive the vice out of their town. If they didn't have their men behind them, they at least had most of the priests and ministers.

They worked all winter. To do her part, Willa typed most of the letters, ones to Air Force generals, Air Force wives, senators, the president, the first lady, the governor, the pope, the bishop, the mayor, not to mention letters to the editor. When her husband told her that he was glad to see she was putting that typing course to good use, she asked him if he really thought so. He went to shovel snow off the front walk. The women who were not involved in letter typing, or ladies league speeches, those *other* women, took up residence above Pistol Pete's Saloon, a place that Willa heard described as an establishment that had been going downhill for years. Those *other* women wore fur coats to ward off the snow, the bitterly cold weather. Those *other* women were careful, but conspicuous. And, as the town women complained, they often were seen buying new



stockings, stocking up, with the same ease as every other female on cans of soup and Spam at the Red Owl Grocery, even frequenting the movie theater on what was presumably a slow afternoon. No, they said, it must not be tolerated. But nothing happened, the months passed, seasons passed, and the Air Force, the town, and all of its various women continued: writing letters, buying stockings, talking over clotheslines, and comparing the prices of canned goods. Willa found this rather curious.

Nothing happened, she said to her husband over dinner one night. Typed my fingers raw, not even a response from the mayor.

The damaging nature of typing then should make you happy to be a housewife rather than a secretary, her husband said.

She could see he was smiling, and since he was in the middle of eating Swedish meatballs, she took this as encouragement that he'd have to sit through and hear her out. She gave their baby another bite of mashed carrot before continuing. She could hear the television on in the other room where their other children sat watching, ready for bed in their pajamas, having eaten before their father came home from work.

But surely it's illegal, she said.

What's illegal? How much time secretaries spend typing?

He was still smiling, but no longer eating. She watched him push meatballs and egg noodles around on his plate. He had turned his head, perhaps to listen to the children in the other room, or perhaps to the television.

Those women, she said. I see them around town, the children see them around town. Just the other day, at the park, no less, one was walking a little dog, a Chihuahua, right in plain sight. And the children actually asked me if they could go pet her dog.

Nothing illegal about walking a dog, her husband said.

Of course I told the children no, she said. What else could I say? But they wanted to know why not.

He picked up his plate and carried it over to the sink. The television went silent, probably accidentally turned off, and one of the children started to cry. He smiled at her again and told her he'd better go see what the heavens was going on in the living room. She turned and spooned more carrots into the waiting baby's mouth.

It was true, she had seen the woman at the park, walking her little dog, and the children had asked a lot of questions. But that was only because the woman with the little dog had sat down on the bench next to her. Willa had been sitting with the baby stroller parked next to her, while the children went down the slide, pushed each other on swings, and filled their shoes with sand. Although it was a nice fall day, sunny and fairly warm, no one else was in the park. Perhaps, she had thought, because it was after school hours, late



afternoon, when most children were at home, or eating early suppers, or doing schoolwork before their fathers returned home from work.

She saw the woman walking toward her, hips swaying, the dog pulling on the leash, pulling both of them forward. The woman was wearing a cream dress with a light pink fur coat. The dog was also wearing a pink fur coat, a miniature version of its owner's. Willa's heart started beating fast. She considered calling the children, leaving the park. But to leave they would have to walk by the woman and the dog anyway. So she sat, and the children kept swinging and laughing, and the baby stayed asleep, and Willa kept her eyes on the woman. The woman had nice red hair, but it clashed with the pink coat. Willa thought she was probably older than her, and somehow this had surprised her. She watched the dog stop and pee, and the woman bend down and carefully check to make sure it hadn't damaged its miniature fur coat. She watched the woman walk straight towards her, the dog pulling the leash taut so it could sniff at the baby stroller, sniff at Willa's feet. The woman sat down.

Or, as Willa thought about it now in her kitchen, spooning carrots to the baby, it was to her horror that the woman had sat down next to her. The woman had sat down, smoothed her coat, her dress, and then bent, calling the little dog over, and smoothed its coat.

It's a nice day, the woman said. She snapped her fingers at the dog and it jumped onto her lap. This is Eddy, she said. Upon hearing his name, Eddy wagged his tail.

Willa nodded and then turned to shift the baby carriage out of the afternoon sun.

You're one of those town ladies, the woman said. I've seen you with them passing out those pamphlets. And once, maybe just last spring, you and some other lady pointed at me at the Red Owl Grocery. You were wearing a navy blue coat.

I'm sorry, I don't remember, Willa said.

I was buying some steak for Eddy. But don't feel bad, it's the same welcome in every other place I've been.

Just then the children spotted Eddy. They pointed and yelled about the dog in such a loud voice that the baby woke up and started crying, and by the time the children reached the bench, the dog had jumped off the woman's lap and started barking.

Can we pet that dog? they both said.

No, it's time to go home.

She stood up, and even though the baby was still screaming, she started pushing the stroller towards the path, her two children running behind her.



I want a dog, her son said.

I want red hair, her daughter said.

Let's not mention this to Dad, Willa said.

But why not? her son said.

I want a pink coat, her daughter said, and turned to point at the woman.

And Willa turned to look back at the bench, and saw that the woman was still sitting, and Eddy was still barking.

And so she had gone home and made dinner for the children and gotten them ready for bed and told them that, as a treat, they could watch television. She hoped, although she felt guilty, that this would keep them from mentioning the park to their father. She cooked for her husband and mashed carrots for the baby, thinking of the woman in the park. The pink coat. The dog. The dog's pink coat. And as she sat feeding the baby, she wondered, since it was now dark, if the woman had gone to work. She imagined crowds of Air Force boys on leave for the night laughing and drinking at Pistol Pete's. She wondered if pink fur coats were expensive.

The next day, after walking the children to school, Willa talked to her neighbor over the clothesline. They shared a clothesline and they were both hanging up tiny shirts, little pairs of pants, small dresses, even smaller socks. Overhead, Air Force jets left white contrails in the sky. Sometimes the jets were so loud that the women had to raise their voices.

In the park, did you just say? the neighbor said.

In front of my children, Willa said.

And your baby not even a year old, the neighbor said, and shook her head.

Surely the baby won't remember, Willa said.

But children are so impressionable at that age, the neighbor said.

Something has to be done, Willa said.

What did your husband say?

I was too ashamed to tell him, Willa said.



And you talked to her? A grown woman wearing such a pink coat.

They stopped the conversation in time for lunch, but it was resumed over afternoon coffee, then carried over to the next day's bridge party, and then the Ladies Aid got word, and the Junior League, and the PTA, and soon every woman in town was sure that this time something must really be done. It's one thing for them to live above Pistol Pete's, but quite another to take over the parks. What's next, they said, our husbands? Our homes? Yes. Those women must be run out of town.

A march was planned, a parade that would wind through town and end in a protest with signs and singing across the way from Pistol Pete's. And they could, if need be, repeat this process, make it a daily vigil, see what *those* women thought about *that*. They would save the town. They would save the boys. Victory over vice. A date was set, a day that would take place in a month, a date that left enough time to properly plan, to rouse their fellow women through calling trees, and coffee dates, and fliers. Someone would type a flier, someone else volunteered to pay for copies from a printing press. More letters needed typing.

But every time Willa sat down to her typewriter, she saw the woman on the bench. At first she thought it was the distractions at home. The baby always crying, the dishes, the coupons to be cut, her husband underfoot, the other children screaming, and when she mentioned this to her neighbor over the clothesline, her neighbor offered to babysit. Anything, she said, for the cause. But when the house was quiet it was worse. She saw the woman on the bench and the dog. And instead of typing, she walked to the park, sat on the bench, and waited. Sometimes, on days when she had the car for shopping, she went to the Red Owl and lingered at the meat counter. But the woman never came.

A week passed, and soon someone called for a copy of the flier and the letters. The fliers needed to be passed out, circulated, spread around town, but of course, they must get printed first.

I'm not quite done, Willa said.

But surely, just one flier doesn't take a whole week. And there was very few letters this time.

The baby had a cold, the children, school projects. You understand, Willa said.

The woman said that she did, but she'd be back the next day.

The next day Willa didn't wait for the woman. She typed the flier, put it in a document envelope, and taped it to her front door with a note: My excuses, something came up. Flier enclosed. Letters posted. She signed the note with blue ballpoint pen.

She bundled up the baby, walked her children to school, then walked to the park. It was a cold day, and the wind, although sporadic, was bitter, and she could feel it chapping her cheeks and lips. She pulled a little pink knitted blanket around the baby's face, but she didn't turn for home. In a bit, she told the baby, we'll go home in a bit.



An old woman was sitting on the park bench throwing bits of bread to a few pigeons. Willa had seen her there before, sometimes asleep, sometimes reading a dime store paperback, but mostly, she sat and fed whatever birds happened to be around. The playground was empty, but when the wind blew, the swings moved back and forth. Willa pushed the stroller over, scattering the birds, and sat down next to the old woman. The old woman took her gloves and pointed at the baby.

Not good weather for a day at the park, she said.

Do you sit here often? Willa said.

The old woman scratched her head, nodded, and put her gloves back on. She said she went to the park, oh, almost every day. Fed the birds. Got some air, stretched her legs. Husband had died, children grew up, had to keep busy, pass the time.

Have you ever seen a woman here wearing a pink fur coat? She has a little dog, and the dog wears a pink fur coat too.

One of the pigeons returned, and the woman threw another bit of bread. The wind blew, and Willa rearranged the baby's pink blanket and waited for her to respond.

Her with a pink fur coat, she said. Yes, just the other day. Sat down on the bench with me. She was crying.

Did she have the little dog?

The dog, that was the trouble, the old woman said. Said someone ran it over.

Was it an accident?

I might be old, the old woman said, squinting her eyes, but I know she's one of *those* women. I know. I've been around. Wasn't no accident.

As she raised her voice, the pigeon took to the air, and the wind blew, and the swings moved back and forth, and Willa told the old woman that she had better get the baby out of the chilly weather, and left the park. The old woman yelled after her as she left, her voice carrying with the wind.

I know what you women are up to, she yelled. I know.

The next time Willa saw her neighbor over the clothesline, she tried to tell her about the old woman, about the dead little dog. She tried to describe the exact way the swings moved back and forth, the exact way the pigeon cocked its head, eating the bread, listening. But she couldn't. The jets flew overhead, just like always, leaving contrails, and she had such a headache.



You're sure it wasn't an accident? her neighbor said.

I'm not feeling very well, Willa said.

Maybe an angry client, the neighbor said.

The old woman said to leave her alone.

But if we leave them alone, there's no telling what the world will come to.

The jets are so loud today, Willa said.

The institution of marriage, the neighbor said.

I need an aspirin.

Setting a moral example for our children.

I need a nap, Willa said.

Public decency, her neighbor said.

She turned to leave, and the neighbor had to yell because a jet, another jet, flew overhead. She yelled: If they don't leave, something terrible will happen.

Over the next few days the fliers circulated. They were hanging on street poles, on the bulletin board in the Red Owl, and someone (Willa suspected it was the newspaper editor's wife) had stuffed one in every Sunday paper between the funnies and the sports section. Willa's husband asked if she was the one who had typed it, the Sunday paper spread before him as he ate breakfast.

So what if I did? she said.

I don't want you to go, he said.

I'm setting a moral example for the children, she said.

I'm not saying it's right, he said.

Standing up for the institution of marriage, Willa said.

We should leave those women alone, he said.



What about public decency? she said.

I have a headache, he said as he folded up the paper.

Somewhere in the house one of the children started to cry.

Willa said: If they stay, something terrible will happen.

But the next day, Monday morning, Willa really didn't think that if those women stayed, anything really terrible would happen. They've been here this long, she thought. Mondays were always her grocery and shopping days, which meant she had the car for the whole day. After she took the children to school and dropped the baby with a sitter, she drove her husband to work and explained to him that really, most likely the ladies in town just needed something to do, a new cause, a crusade. That nothing terrible would happen. Those women didn't seem likely to leave any time soon. And the Air Force didn't seem likely to leave. Nothing would happen. Probably nothing would happen at all. And he didn't say anything, so she kept talking.

You remember two years ago, she said, when we all raised money for the tuberculosis society, and the year before when we rallied for that widow falsely charged with mail fraud?

But this is different, her husband said.

He sat with his briefcase on his legs, his sack lunch balanced on top of the briefcase. A light changed to red and, caught unaware, she slammed on the brakes. His lunch slid off the briefcase, landing on the floor.

I hope I didn't smash your sandwich, she said.

Never mind the sandwich, he said. I thought you liked staying at home.

The light turned green and she hit the accelerator fast. His lunch bag tumbled again. She wanted to tell him about that woman's pink coat.

Instead all she said was: It's a peanut butter sandwich. But I'll get more of that ham you like from the Red Owl today. It's on sale.

She did go to the Red Owl. And she did go to the deli counter to buy the ham, but there was a long line and she had to wait. She looked around and thought she saw a pink fur coat disappear down an aisle. She told the lady waiting in line behind her to jump ahead, that she had forgotten something. But when she reached the aisle, it was empty, so she took off at a run, her heels clacking on the Red Owl tile, towards the front of the store.



A crowd had gathered, staring out the big glass store windows. Bag boys. Checkers. Shoppers. The man who stocked the fruits and vegetables. Willa pushed her way to the front. Out the window she saw the woman in the pink coat yelling.

Who's that woman yelling at? a checker said.

Some man, the baker said.

I think it's the one getting into that blue sedan.

The crowd pushed closer to the store windows.

What's she doing now? someone said. The blue sedan sped away.

Let me through, Willa said, and pushed her way through to the doors.

Once outside the store, she walked towards the woman in the pink coat slowly. She wasn't sure why. The woman in the pink coat didn't seem to hear her coming, didn't seem to hear the shoes slapping the concrete, and as Willa walked towards her, the woman bent down and started unbuckling her shoes.

I hate these shoes, the woman said.

Who was that in the blue sedan? Willa said.

Willa was sure that the crowd from inside of the store had followed her outside, but she didn't want to turn around to look.

What's it to you? the woman said as she stood up, a shoe in each hand.

We met once, at the park. I was there with my children and you sat down with your dog.

She didn't know what else to say. She should just walk to her car, drive home. Forget the whole thing before something terrible happened. But instead of taking out her keys, or going back in for the ham, forgetting the whole thing, minding her own business, Willa found herself telling the woman that she was sorry about the dog. Such a small dog and oh, the matching pink coat.

The woman in the pink coat turned and said that fine, if Willa cared so damn much, she could give her a ride. She needed a ride somewhere, anywhere.

Oh, Willa said, well, yes, I suppose.

She pointed at her car, and the woman shrugged, and together they started walking towards it. For a moment,



Willa remembered the ham, and on sale even, but then someone from the crowd yelled, and she decided it was just too late for that now.

When they got into the car Willa asked the woman if she wanted to be dropped at Pistol Pete's. But the woman, who was now taking off her torn stockings, said no, not Pistol Pete's, not ever again. And so Willa took her home, despite a nagging worry about what her neighbors might think.

Because, Willa said, I don't know where else to take you.

My name's Laura, the woman said.

Willa wasn't sure what to do about Laura, so she told her she still had a few hours before she had to pick up her children from school and the baby from the sitter's.

I'll make us some coffee, Willa said as she motioned for Laura to sit down at the kitchen table. Can I take your coat?

Laura set her shoes down on the table, took her pink fur coat off, and handed it to Willa. The coat was soft and heavy. Maybe dyed fox fur. Willa carried it to the hall coat closet and looked at the label. Jean Eclipse, Hollywood. The label was embroidered in gold thread. She hung up Laura's coat and her own navy wool one. She'd never had a fur coat. The neighbor did, but not her.

She went back to the kitchen and started measuring the coffee. Laura had shut the drapes and turned on the kitchen light, and she was sitting, playing with one of the baby's spoons that must have accidentally been left lying about after that morning's breakfast. Her shoes were still on the table, and next to them her torn stockings and pocketbook, but Willa decided not to say anything just now.

I hope you like your coffee without sugar because I'm out. I was going to buy more today, but I suppose it'll wait until tomorrow.

I don't mean to intrude like this, Laura said.

I was also going to buy some ham, it was on sale, you know. I suppose I'll just tell my husband I had a headache, a splitting headache, and couldn't finish the shopping.

I've been all over, but I've always had Eddy.

Made him peanut butter and jam today, just like I gave the children. I suppose he'll have to put up with one more day of peanut butter and jam.

It wasn't an accident. That man in the blue sedan. His wife.



I don't mean to intrude, Willa said as she put the coffee cups on the table.

She wanted to get me back. And she did, Laura said.

I'm out of sugar but I have milk, Willa said.

I had a husband once, Laura said.

Does he know? Willa said as she pushed the milk bottle towards Laura.

No, Laura said, he died a long time ago.

Over coffee they decided what to do. The whole time Willa thought how strange it all was, but she didn't say this. Instead, she told Laura if she wanted to leave town that she should. The town certainly wouldn't stop her. That she'd give her the grocery money she hadn't spent and she'd drop her at the train station between picking up her children and getting her husband from work. Laura agreed and told her she'd take a train back home, to California, she had a sister there, or she used to anyways. She'd repay her once she was there, borrow it from her sister, or find a job. Send her the money in the mail. Willa said, sure, why sure, and decided it wasn't polite to ask her exactly what kind of job she meant, and suddenly she had an idea.

How about this instead? Willa said. I'll trade you my grocery money, plus a new pair of my stockings for your pink coat.

Laura smiled and said fine, that it was too warm to wear in California anyway, and Willa wondered what had happened to Eddy's pink coat after he died, and she thought about the label: Jean Eclipse, Hollywood.

I'm sorry, Laura said, but could I ask one more favor? Could I freshen up before it's time to go?

She left Laura at the table and went to her bedroom. She had two new pairs of stockings, still in their wrapping, and she took them to the bathroom and left them on the counter with a set of clean towels and a new bar of soap. She went back to the kitchen and told Laura to take a bath if she wanted, that she had to say she looked a mess, that there was still two hours before she had to get her children. Was she really sure she didn't want to stop and get her things from Pistol Pete's?

Willa waited until she heard the water running, then went to the hall closet and tried on the pink coat. She felt sad, she wasn't sure why, but she knew she could never wear the coat anywhere. It fit her perfectly, and boy, was it soft. She left it on and went to the kitchen and put the grocery money in an envelope for Laura. Laura's shoes and pocketbook were still on the table.

Maybe it was because she had on Laura's coat, or maybe because she realized that she hadn't heard any jets today, or maybe because the drapes were closed and she could hear the water still running, that she decided to go through Laura's pocketbook.



It was a small pocketbook, not as well made or expensive as the coat, this much Willa could tell. Inside she found a key, one she assumed opened a room at Pistol Pete's, a dollar bill, a tube of pink lipstick, a brass dog tag that read Eddy, a coupon for the Red Owl, a postcard folded in half, and a small picture of a man, its corners worn and creased.

She unfolded the postcard. The front said Greetings from Chicago and had a purple sketch of a sky scraper and a lake. She turned it over and read the very small, neat handwriting:

Hello, my Sylvie-poo, how are you? Everybody doing pretty here. Weather just grand. Went to the movies last night to see the new Gable. It was so-so but we had fun anyways. Carl went fishing this morning and caught three. One weighed 2, one 6½, and the other 7½. These are the first he caught this spring. Say, Carl wanted to know if Ma's birthday was in May. Well, he's a bright one, it's February 9. He forgets things but I suppose I love him anyways.

With lots of love, and best wishes for all.

Laura

It was dated, Willa noticed, April 3, 1940. The address was for someone in California. Maybe the sister, Willa thought, but the postcard had never been sent, and it had no stamp, no postmark. She looked at the tiny picture of the man. He was wearing an army uniform, and he wasn't bad looking, although she thought he looked very young, maybe just 18. The back of the picture had his name, Carl, and a set of dates, 1922-1943.

She put everything back, the key, the lipstick, everything, except for the postcard. She went and got her typewriter and set it up at the kitchen table. She could still hear the water running in the bathroom, and she thought she heard Laura humming. She put in a sheet of paper and typed.

Everybody doing pretty here, she typed. Weather just grand. By the time she heard the water turn off, she had finished, put the postcard, the pink coat, and the typewriter back, and folded up the sheet of paper into a very tiny square which she put in her own pocketbook. By the time she had picked up her children and dropped Laura off at the train station, there were jets and contrails once again in the sky. She picked her husband up from his office but didn't say anything about Laura. She was sure he somehow knew.

Later that night, after all the children were asleep, he told her that someone had called his office to tell him she had been acting strangely at the grocery store. She told him it was true. She'd had a terrible headache, she said, and she'd had to leave. She'd lost the grocery money too. No ham tomorrow, she said.

Promise me you'll leave this whole thing alone, he said.

Everybody doing pretty here, she said.

The next time she did laundry, the neighbor was waiting. She'd heard all about what happened at the Red Owl from her sister. Her sister's girl worked in the Red Owl bakery and watched the whole scene. And



someone else had told her, she couldn't remember who, maybe that busybody down the street, that Willa had been seen dropping that woman off at the train station. Was it true? Had she really gotten one of those women to leave town?

But Willa just said her head hurt, and went back into her house, where she made herself coffee and calculated how many hours it took to take a train to California. And later that week she didn't go to the march, despite the women in town calling her, begging her, they'd heard all about the Red Owl. It was just what they needed, a role model, a real leader. Imagine, they said, Willa had succeeded where everyone else had failed.

She stayed home and oiled her typewriter. A headache, she said. And the march came and went, and nothing terrible happened. Nothing happened at all. The jets flew back and forth. Ham went on sale. Husbands went to work. Children went to school. The baby cried. The pink fur coat sat in her hall closet, untouched. There was coffee and church and laundry. And for a while, a year or so more, those women stayed. And then one day Willa heard over coffee, while hanging laundry, she could never really remember—these things gave her such a headache—that finally something terrible had happened.

One of the Air Force boys, drunk, tired, the stress of the Cold War perhaps, had snapped and killed one of those women, and the woman was found naked and dead outside of town. Or maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe it was one of those women—tired, overworked, underappreciated, the stress, the loneliness, all of that—who had killed one of the Air Force boys. Stabbed him in the chest in front of Pistol Pete's. Left him to die as she drove away in his car, only to be found by the cops two days later, hiding two towns away. Or perhaps the murderer was a person from town, a woman fed up with the laundry, a man tired of God knows what, Willa didn't know, couldn't remember the details, but she was sure this was what she heard. It was in the papers, but she didn't read them, gave her such a headache. And anyway, she thought, the details didn't matter. Everybody doing pretty here. Weather just grand.



She Wasn't Their Mother

Risa Mickenberg

The parents were in the kitchen with the hostess, drinking wine from plastic cups, eating hummus, talking about the drought. The aunt stood in the living room, a safe distance away, running her hand through her niece's hair, which was flecked with sparkles and bits of grated cheese.

A boy with purple lips stared.

"Are you her grandmother?" he asked.

He was wearing a fake coonskin cap and eating a popsicle.

"No," she said. "Are you?"

He laughed, then sang, in a whisper, "*Barney stole my SUV so I stuck a shotgun up his nose.*"

He marched past the parents, out the kitchen door.

"Come outside," said her niece, pulling her hand.

She followed them.

The parents didn't seem to notice.

Outside was dry grass and dirty plastic toys fenced into a yard. They followed the boy through a slack swing set and a rotting picnic table into a thicket of saplings at the back of the lot.

In a clearing, three little girls sucked popsicles by a plank of wood leaned against a high fence like a ramp.

The littlest girl clutched a naked, snarled-haired Barbie wrapped in a washcloth. "I'm not scared," the littlest girl was saying. "I just think it's dangerous and I don't want to do it."

One of the bigger girls said to the aunt, "She says she's going to tell the parents we're climbing the fence."

The boy ran up the plank. It bowed and rattled.

"Don't!" the littlest girl said, and looked at the aunt.

The aunt had no idea if what they were doing was dangerous or not. She decided she didn't feel like telling



them what to do; she wasn't their mother.

The boy looked over the fence.

"What's there?" said one of the girls.

"Prisoners," he said, dropping his popsicle stick onto the other side.

He turned and jumped down, falling on his knees. His coonskin cap fell off. The aunt considered picking it up for him, then decided not to.

He stood, brushing off his knees, looked at her, then picked it up himself.

"Wanna see our secret fort?" he asked.

"Absotively," she said. "Posilutely," she said to herself, following the boy through a rut behind the skinny trees, brown leaves clinging to their trunks all from one direction. There must have been a flood before the drought. The other girls walked behind them, the littlest one last.

They came to a circle of rocks: the fort. The boy stood on the largest rock.

The aunt sat. The littlest girl handed her the Barbie and asked, "Can you make her a braid?"

The Barbie's hair was snarled and stiff. It took a few tries to get the braid right. The aunt re-wrapped the washcloth around the Barbie's body until it made a good dress.

She handed the Barbie back to the girl who smoothed the braid and admired the dress.

Through a gap in the slats of the fence, the aunt could see a parking lot and the apartment complex where the prisoners lived.

The boy got up and stuck a finger through the slats like a gun.

"I could shoot a water pistol through here," he said.

"I like your thinking," the aunt said.

The boy picked up a stick. "Where are your children?"

"I don't have any," the aunt said. "Do you?"

"I want a rat." He whipped a tree with the stick. "But they won't let me. Stupid," he said.



She nodded. She agreed.

The older girls were climbing into the crotch of a thicker tree.

“Help us spy on the grown-ups,” the boy said to the aunt.

She said, “What do you want me to find out?”

“Find out...” the boy kicked clumped-up leaves. “Find out...”

“These popsicles are magic,” one of the older girls said to the aunt, from the tree.

“How are they magic?” the aunt asked.

“When you eat them, they make you happy.”

“I want one of those,” the aunt said.

“But you’re already happy,” said the boy.

Sadness settled in her like cement.

“I guess they work when you watch people eat them too,” she said.

She picked up an old pie plate that had a butterfly wing stuck to it.

“That’s where we keep our treasures,” the boy said.

“Hold my popsicle,” her niece said, handing her the popsicle and climbing the tree. Skinny limbs on skinny limbs.

“There’s no room,” said one of the other girls to her niece.

The aunt didn’t interfere. She sucked the popsicle.

“Don’t!” her niece said to her.

“It jumped into my mouth. I’m trying to get it out.” She pretended to try to pull the popsicle out of her mouth.

The kids laughed. They were an easy audience and the deadness inside her pretended it wasn’t there.



The sound of crunching on the leaves came from the thicket.

“Uh-oh,” said the boy.

The hostess climbed through the trees and looked at the aunt, sitting on the rock, popsicle in her mouth, holding the pie plate.

“Let’s not play back here,” the hostess said, talking to the boy, smiling in a tight way. “Let’s come back to the party.”

The aunt stood and brushed leaves from her butt.

The girls jumped down from the tree. Her niece took the popsicle back.

As they followed the hostess through the trees, the aunt whispered to the boy, “What should I find out from the grown-ups?”

“Find out...” he said. He whacked a stick against a tree. “Find out...”

But he didn’t say.

The girls ran ahead across the yard to the parents at the picnic table.

Her niece climbed onto the bench, grabbed a handful of grated cheese from a plastic bowl and put it in her mouth.

The aunt didn’t say anything. She wasn’t her mother. She sat at the table and was given a paper plate of spaghetti and a plastic fork.

The boy stood on the picnic bench. “*Barney stole my SUV,*” he sang, “*So I stuck a shotgun up his nose.*”

“What did we say about singing that song?” his mother, the hostess, said in a firm, soft, annoying voice. “Look at me.”

The boy looked at her, chin raised.

“What did we say about that?” his mother asked.

“Sit down at the table,” said the man who must have been the boy’s father.

The boy sat and put a handful of spaghetti in his mouth.



“We don’t use our hands,” his mother said, in her tone.

“She did.” He pointed at the niece.

The boy’s parents looked at each other.

The aunt poured herself a cup of wine.

She could still taste the popsicle.

The parents talked about Jazzfest and litigation, schools and bicycles, triathalons and raised garden beds. Drones. The drought.

The kids went into the house.

The aunt drank more wine. A mosquito swirled in her cup. The spaghetti stuck to itself. A nut fell off a tree onto the table.

Barney stole my SUV so I stuck a shotgun up his nose repeated in her head.

Her niece was back, whispering in her ear, smelling like mint and dirt, “Come into the house.”

The aunt climbed off the picnic bench without excusing herself to the parents and followed her niece into the house, through the scuffed, cluttered hall, into the boy’s bedroom, where the kids were standing next to the littlest girl who was wearing a mask they’d made from a paper plate, tied to the back of her head with a string.

The mask she was wearing was a boy, with brown magic marker eyes, red eyelashes, pink smile.

“This is your son, Matthew,” her niece said, pushing the little girl in the mask toward her. “He was late to the party.”

The little girl in the Matthew mask ran her fingers over her smiling paper plate face.

“Hello, Matthew,” the aunt said to the plate face.

“Tell the grown-ups Matthew wants a popsicle,” said the boy.

“Okay,” said the aunt.

“Grape,” he said.



“Okay,” she said.

From the kitchen came a screened door bang and the sound of parents talking.

The boy led the aunt out, with her “son,” Matthew. The other kids followed.

“What did you find out from the grown-ups?” the boy asked, holding her arm.

“Nothing,” the aunt said. “They didn’t say anything interesting,” she said.

He nodded.

They went into the kitchen where the parents were helping the hostess clean up.

The aunt held her arm around “Matthew’s” shoulders. Matthew adjusted his paper face with its fixed pink smile.

“This is my son,” the aunt said to the hostess. “Matthew. He’s sorry he was late and he wondered if he could have a popsicle.”

The adults stopped talking and kept helping.

“Grape,” said the boy.

The hostesses’ eyes flickered over the aunt.

“I’m sorry, Matthew,” the hostess said, banging spaghetti into the garbage can. “We’re done with the popsicles for tonight.”

“Matthew was at the zoo,” one of the girls said.

The children laughed.

The aunt said, “He meant to come earlier, but he was detained at the reptile house.”

The children laughed again.

The hostess said, more sharply, “I’m sorry, Matthew. We’re not having popsicles now.”

The parents were wrapping things in plastic and throwing things away. None of them were talking, and none



of them looked at her.

The aunt bent and held her son's shoulders. She looked into his paper plate face.

"I'm sorry, Matthew," she said. "You came too late."



Poetry
NO DISASTER #113

Gillian Hamel

wouldn't you like to grasp the stigma of this. men made
of tissue, the flesh of plants, the unliving. who comes
to the top and dares you to reach. the beat of the dead
upon us—our lines aren't read. we sang together
before we sang together, whoever told us so. who told us
to sing at the outset, to shove aloft—push me aloft so I
can pull down the stem, the stamen, the toxic real
in whose hands tears the flesh, the skin goes liquid,
our form immaterial and our sight gone plastic



NO DISASTER #354

Gillian Hamel

blood at my back and blood in my hair. I bite
red & black. the shore
is liquid until it becomes solid—
no movement, no retreat. the blood mixes with sand,
tracks ice. liquid stains advances, miles
and red miles to send forth. the stained hand sweeping
clears our numbers and the water clears my sight.
who ground to ash. who tears the rift
and what he comes for us—is already here.



NO DISASTER #083

Gillian Hamel

at night board the windows, bring in the dogs
the dead come for nothing left to eat. don't look out
what none see in. the living are outside of time.
when day comes the shore is all currents. come to
the sand, it's all directions. bring your limbs
to the shore where no side of time can devour you,
only water



The witch doctor told me

Ely Shipley

first, you must cut out your heart.
You can only imagine.
It was not a flower
and I'd forgotten to ask

what to do with the heavy wad
of pulp and puss

torn, as if by talons
of a bird not strong enough

to lift it away



Like a Bird Which Alights Nowhere

Ely Shipley

The robin lies as if
waiting for wind

to tear from its breast its sun
burst feathers. Head and neck wrenched

sideways, still lifelike, one eye
glints a speck of sun, sun
in the center of that black
eyelid stitched white. To touch, I

bring my hand close. The wing
lifts. From a burrow in its guts
a funnel of tiny winged bodies

spirals out. Growing sounds
raise the body. Waves of nausea

break over me.
Guardian wasps

feast in the hollow.

Word

Maxine Chermoff

You are offered a window or widow, a Coptic stance, a bed of lightning, angels scarred by conclusions. All that escapes is matter seeking matter seeking redemption.

Under the cover of lawns is summer, a hum of parasols from the pointillist past when the world was picnic and soft intention.

You are left to marshal the parade, to transcribe the waves when they encounter a body or driftwood resembling her face.

A trance envelops the flagpole, a layer of mist sinks under the headlights as they race toward a desert where a filament of reason perhaps lives under a stone.

Don't breathe a name under cover of winter stars. Don't witness the opening of grace as it descends on the two who sit calmly by the lake.

You are not yourself as a stone is itself, as a match has potential, as an idiosyncrasy contains the necessary crease in the story.

The story exists for you alone. It is not your raft or transparency, carpet, or dome. In a place you once stood, water finds its level and trails off into a sentence.

Traced
Maxine Chernoff

Love's tender mercies clear the air,
unhinging the gate to practiced longing.
Tied to life, you spill into water, deeper
than any atmosphere. Pastoral nature
has no plastic flowers, no tragic exits,
no barges of machinery headed
for Kuala Lumpur. You are in it and
of it, fleck of star, lip of tulip, smallest cleft
on the face of stone. Altering time
with your longing, you are erased
and redrawn with new eyes.



[I keep my thrive alive by youth and joy]

Claudia Keelan

- Translated from Beatritz de Dia's Occitan poem "[Ab joi et ab joven m'apais]"

I keep my thrive alive by youth and joy,
and youth and joy drive me,
since my boy puts the bliss in bliss
I play and play and live to kiss;
and since I'm real;
he must be too;
I can't see love that strays and wanders—
that's a road my heart can't ponder.

Yes, I am so happy, for my man
when he loves the love is oh so fine.
That other boy who helped us meet—
send good things to light his world.
And if you don't think I tell the truth:
you can bind a broom,
and with the broom be swept away.

Any girl who knows what's up,
puts her affection in her confection,
in a dude who won't go for mass defection,
and as soon as he proves to fill her cup,
she lets go risk and meets him face-to-face;
any guy worth any time at all,
speaks true of her who shed grace
to trade and profit in their give and take.

I've picked a posh and entitled guy
whose skill is fruit and makes things ripe—
he gives, doesn't lie, or wonder why—
he has brains and sees through hype.
If he will just believe in me
and ignore lies from spies who say
I would dare to make another move
unless he left me not to live, but be.

Baby, your value
is seen by all who see,



& so I'm asking please,
stay and take care of me.



[I sing of lies better left unsaid]

Claudia Keelan

- Translated from Beatritz de Dia's Occitan poem "[A chanter m'er de so qu'ieu non volria]"

I sing of lies better left unsaid
and cage the rage I feel for him
who I've wanted more than anything.
All my pity and good girl deeds died,
and so my body, soul, and my brain,
since I've been played the total fool
like I was some old, useless tool.

Here's truth that makes good return:
not even once did I try to burn
him who was Romeo to my Juliet.
So I guess in this I'll win,
since I love better than any men.
Here you are, so cold to me,
and to others, so warm and free.

I knew how I'd live on dead,
the day you grew blind to me.
You let her get inside your head,
and gave to her what was mine instead.
Remember how we loved at the start!
Don't make me be the one
who breaks us, as you broke my heart.

I know there is something secret in you
better than your money, better than sex;
there are always whores, few and many,
who smell money in their grip on you.
But, honey, you above all have the sense,
to see that I am worth more than all the rest;
who makes poems better than we do?

My place in your life should carry some weight,
just so my look, and above all, my thoughts;
so I send you, there in your faraway state
this song as messenger and delegate.
I need to know, you cruelly fine friend,



why I deserve such a brutal fate.
It is either pride or spite that I offend.

But above all, bring these words as the sound
of excess pride knocking him down.



[I've been thrown into hell]

Claudia Keelan

- Translated from Beatritz de Dia's Occitan poem "[Estat ai en greu cossirier]"

I've been thrown into hell
because of a man I once called mine,
and this is true now and for all time
since I love him beyond my skill to tell;
so it turns out it was a test
his quest for sex night and day;
and now I can't stop thinking
yes, all I had to say was yes.

Oh, just once had I stroked him,
he'd never ever rise for anyone else;
I'd pull him close and closer and he'd rest,
leaning his head against my breast.
It's true I was happier with him
than any romance you'll recall;
I'll bet this heart for him, I'll bet it all,
my mind, my eyes, my life.

Beautiful boy, so totally cool and kind,
when will you bow to my power?
If I could lie beside you for just one hour,
you'd never be free from our body.
There's nothing I wouldn't give
to have you in my husband's place,
but only if you swear you will always act
with me in mind, no matter what the case.



[True love carries its share of joy]

Claudia Keelan

- Translated from Beatritz de Dia's Occitan original

True love carries its share of joy,
so these words sing too of joy,
and I don't worry or fret,
or let my spirits get down,
though the gossips aim to hurt us.
Their trash talk doesn't scare me—
I laugh and laugh at the crap they say,
since it urges me to act twice as gay.

Those foul-mouths earn zero trust from me,
and you who want an open life,
won't believe their lies in honesty.
They are clouds that spread, spread,
and open across the sky,
until the sun is blotted out;
they don't deserve
to be talked about.

And you, my whining spouse,
I've seen the way to leave.
I lean towards joy and new life,
away from grief that named me wife.



[All Glass Used To Be Green]

Adam Strauss

All glass used to be green glass—green seas not just sea—glass

Summer beer sea wracks away Appalachia

Used to be green in the future now when we

Hold up a glass and look we'll see class.

Cole would have it that if I cry then I'm frameless

As tears as air bubbles in windows or angels are

And what's my carriage if not an anchoring of what's seen thus mountains

Are taken down doesn't account for 1,000 people lining the underground

Walkway to government offices. If only more people would sing sweet song

“Making it up as we go along”: there's nowhere to get to than now so let's

Take time to experiment.



[To Earth We]

Adam Strauss

To earth we

Shall return though now
We're of none:

The mountains not ours
To save

Only parks put us off the scent
Of silted water — smoke overcoming

Mineral keenness in the breath —

“Appalachian tang”:

A yellow one swims circumference.