

Creators of Justice Awards 2020

SHORT STORY

Honorable mentions

Howard Pearre (USA, NC): *September, 1957*

Christian Hoag (New Zealand): *Life Stories*

Ikechukwu Iwuagwu (Nigeria): *Five Shades of Victory*

Megan Hanson (USA, OH): *Girl Sick with Stories*

SEPTEMBER, 1957

By Howard Pearre

“My daddy said I don’t have to talk to ’em. Don’t have to sit with ’em. Just pretend they ain’t here. Go on about your business.” Billy Moss was my best friend, and we were back at Rousseau School for third grade, both of us assigned to Miss Adams’ class.

We watched them come up the walkway with a tall man who wore a suit, their daddy, I guessed. The boy was about my age, so he’d either be in Miss Adams’ class with Billy and me or in Mrs. Barnes’ class. The girl looked about six, so she’d be in first grade. The other children, waiting in bunches for the bell to signal them to file off to their assigned classrooms, stopped talking and stared.

“I don’t see no harm. They gotta go to school, too,” I replied, reflecting what my mother had said.

“Yeah, but they got their own school. Why do they have to go to our school?”

I saw Billy look at a large acorn stuck in the dirt. I could tell what he was thinking, but he kicked it instead of picking it up.

The man stared straight ahead as he walked toward the school door, the boy and girl at his sides each holding one of his big hands. The girl’s eyes shifted from the walkway to the door and back. The boy took shy hesitant glances at the groups of children. He looked up at the man’s face, but the man kept walking without looking down.

“They don’t belong here. Somebody needs to show ’em.”

“Why’re you being so mean, Billy? They ain’t done nothing to you. My mother said be nice to ’em since they’re new and don’t know their way around. She said if I had to go to a new school I’d want somebody to show me around.”

“Hogwash. They don’t belong here, and that’s the end.”

Jerry Rogers joined us.

“See that?” said Jerry. “Ain’t that something? I heard their daddy’s a preacher. They don’t belong here, that’s sure. My dad said they oughta all go back to where they came from. He said Brown don’t mean nothing.”

“Who’s Brown?” I asked.

“How should I know?”

The procession reached the front door of the building, and, as if on cue, Mrs. Simmons, the principal, opened it from inside. I couldn’t hear what she said, but she had a big smile, and she and the man shook

hands. Then, she knelt down, spoke to the boy, and shook his hand. She moved to the girl and did the same. Then, they all went in, and the door closed.

Billy found another acorn and kicked it.

“I know what I’m gonna do,” Jerry said. “I’m gonna find me a rock and when I get the chance, I’m gonna wind it up and let it go, right at . . .”

“No, you ain’t,” said Billy. “You’ll just get in trouble. Wait till recess outside. Joey can sneak up behind him and bend down, and me and you can walk along, kinda shoving each other like we’re playing, and, kaboom! Down he goes. If we get caught, ‘Sor-ry. It was an accident.’”

Billy and Jerry roared at the vision of the boy falling backwards over me.

“That’s just dumb,” I said. But their talk was starting to bother me.

The bell rang and the little groups merged toward the school’s front door. Billy and I went to Miss Adams’ classroom, and Jerry went to Mrs. Barnes’ room.

All morning while Miss Adams went over stuff about the third grade and passed out new books, I kept thinking about what Billy and Jerry said. I liked Jerry and wanted him to like me, too. Even though Billy was my best friend, he was also friends with Jerry and Jerry’s best friend Al Stansbury who everybody liked.

When lunch period came, Miss Adams’ class walked single-file to the cafeteria. Mrs. Barnes’ class was already there, so we got in the serving line after them. Billy and I usually sat together, but this time he sat at a table with Jerry and Al and some other boys, and there were no more chairs at their table.

I saw the new kid sitting by himself and thought about what my mother said about being kind. I swallowed hard, took my tray to his table, and sat down. I didn’t know what to say, so I just started eating. He must not have known what to say either, so he just ate, too. At least I was keeping him company, which was a little bit kind.

Then I heard Al say, “My dad said he’d like to see ’em all get on a bus and go somewhere else, anywhere. And look who’s sitting over there with him.”

I glanced at the table where Billy and Al and Jerry were sitting and saw they were looking at me and laughing.

“You know what I think? I think Joey might need to get on that bus, too,” Al continued.

Billy took a quick look at me. I could tell he wasn’t comfortable, but he started giggling a little. I felt embarrassed and angry. I couldn’t eat any more of my lunch, even the brownie. The boys at the other table kept talking and laughing and looking over at me.

When lunch ended, we all lined up to go back to the classrooms. I didn’t even try to get next to Billy in the line.

Miss Adams asked us to open to a page in the arithmetic book and do the problems. I tried to, but I couldn’t concentrate. I kept thinking about Billy and Jerry and Al and the new kid and what I’d done at lunch that made my friends hate me and laugh at me.

At afternoon recess we went to the school playground area. I saw Billy and Jerry and some other boys playing kickball. I would have joined them, but after what happened at lunch, I didn’t want to. If they hated me, I hated them more.

Then I saw him. He was sitting on a bench by himself, just watching. Billy was right. He didn’t belong here. He should go back where he belonged. I didn’t care what my mother said. He had his own school. Why did he have to come here and try to take over our school?

I looked down and saw a clod of dirt about the size of the ones Billy and me would throw at each other when we had our mud-clod battles. I reached down and pulled it from the ground.

I didn’t aim it. I just threw it hard. It hit him on his back and left an ugly dull red splotch with crumbs of dirt falling down. He turned and looked at me, shocked and with a puzzled frown that said, “I thought you were a nice one.”

My face grew hot. I glared at him, and the anger was so loud in my brain, I barely heard Miss Adams shout, “Joey Parsons!”

Howard Pearre attended public schools in Charlotte, NC. In 1972 he was a student teacher in a Charlotte public high school where he witnessed efforts to achieve racial desegregation through busing following the 1971 Supreme Court decision, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. A certified rehabilitation counselor with NC Vocational Rehabilitation and the Department of Veterans Affairs, he is retired and lives in Winston-Salem, NC.

LIFE STORIES

By Christina Hoag

“Whachoo got there, ol’ man?”

He raised his head and met the bloodshot eyes of the skinny guy on the neighboring cot who had just spoken. Another junkie. Or tweaker. Or crackhead. Same difference. Like all the young ones in the shelter. He looked back down at the tattered newspaper clippings he had spilled from an envelope onto the cot.

“Hey. Didnchoo hear me, ol’ man?”

He kept his head down this time and concentrated on sifting through the pieces of paper, brittle and jaundiced with age.

“Donchoo got no manners?”

He peered at the newsprint. The headlines and the masthead were easy to read: “The News, Paterson, N.J.” “Arson blaze kills three.” “Mayor faces corruption scandal.”

But the smaller font of the text was fuzzy. He strained to discern the byline that he knew was there, that was him before his hair and whiskers had turned into feathers of snow. No matter. He knew what it said anyway. Of course, he did. *By Mario O’ Grady*. Puckering his bristled brow, he reached into his memory for the who, what, when, where, how and why of the stories, but those details were far out of his grasp now. A hand suddenly dove into the pile of paper and closed long fingers around it like crab legs. He reached out to stop it but was too slow. The hand shot into the air, out of his reach. Needle tracks and bruises peppered the ropy forearm like fruit gone bad.

“Gotta learn some manners, ol’ man. Gotta learn it’s polite to speak when spoken to.” The junkie’s voice curdled the air.

“Give me that!” He lunged at the junkie’s fist, but his muscles were rusted, and the younger man edged away smartly. “Give them back!” The old man’s stomach turned to hamburger meat.

“Okay, ol’ man.” The junkie’s face cracked into a smile-less grin. “Heeere they coome!”

In a deft move, the junkie ripped the papers and hurled the pieces into the air. The old man watched his life arc up and flutter down. For a moment, he was still, accepting the mock honor of the confetti, but as the pieces fell lower, it became urgent that he save them.

He moved as fast as his thick limbs allowed, swiping the air with wild scrapes. He caught a few pieces and as others plummeted, he whirled and snatched until his lungs burned. He grabbed them from the beds, the windowsill, the floor, so no one could get them and hold them beyond his reach again.

In the windowpane, he caught the reflection of the other men observing him, and he saw what they saw – an old man chasing his life like a kid catching snow. He shuffled back to his cot, stuffed the torn articles into the envelope and packed his rucksack.

Dusk was falling. Fatigue weighed his legs. The banshee wind flapped the corner of his woollen coat and coiled itself around his waist like a rope, compelling him toward a stretch of abandoned rowhouses ahead.

His feet crunched on glass shards as he poked a path through the knee-high weeds. He spotted a loose board on a back window and mustering some strength, pried it off. Rats scuttled. An unhinged plank protested. But no humans, no junkies.

His eyes adapted to the dark and he hunted around for trash to make a fire. When the flames unknotted his fingers, he foraged in his bag for the extra apple he had sneaked out from the shelter that morning when Mrs. Bruce had turned her back.

He had told her he wasn't returning. She wished him luck and went on to the next in line. He had wanted to tell her why, to give her an explanation. More than that, a justification. He hadn't justified his actions to anyone in years. But she didn't demand either and he swallowed the urge. He scuffed his way into the sunshine and shivered in its deceptive rays. He spent the rest of the day wandering about the streets, panhandling, invisible as always.

He rummaged in his bag again. His hand clamped onto the welcoming cold of a glass bottle - the Thunderbird he had bought that afternoon with panhandled change, enough for a pint. He raised the bottle to his mouth and gulped a good draught. The liquor raced through his veins, making him smooth and warm again. The wind yelped outside like a guard dog.

He took the manila envelope from his rucksack and shook out the torn stories of his life. By firelight, he tried to fit the pieces together like a jigsaw, managing only to join the bits of his byline by the size of the words. "Mario" with "O'Grady."

He had kept everything he wrote that bore his byline and over the years, the envelopes grew into stacks in a closet. He would stagger home after last call at the Shamrock & Shillelagh, open the closet and stare at them. They proved that he never let himself be defeated despite his drunken father's fists long ago. After he was booted by a new editor who didn't put up with fifths of bourbon stashed in desk drawers, the pile of envelopes diminished, lost in moves from place to place. Only this envelope remained. After all these years, all that it took to destroy it was a childish tantrum.

"Goddamn that sonofabitch!" he shouted. The wind showed its sympathy with a gust that buffeted the building. He shook a handful of torn pieces in the air to show the wind. It sighed in commiseration and fell silent as if it could find no more to say.

Crone's fingers of cold burrowed into his flesh. He shook the last drops of Thunderbird onto his tongue and chucked the bottle. It clattered onto the floorboards.

The fire ebbed. He nourished it with the rest of the rubbish he had collected. In a while, he would have to gather more. He leaned back, hoping to lose himself in the coziness of remembrance. But all he could see was the derision in the junkie's eyes and mouth, the baleful stares of the other men, and himself performing like a street corner clown.

"You took all I had. You robbed me!" The wind took up his refrain with a whistle that bent the walls.

He'd have to return to the rescue mission soon. It was too cold to sleep rough. But that junkie would be there. Or another one. The wind gusted. A door banged, but the old man didn't startle.

The flames ebbed to a smolder. He tried to shift his legs, but they had stiffened into leaden stilts. His eyes settled on his torn life in his lap.

He took a scrap of paper and fed it to the embers. The flame flared barely enough to warm his fingers. One by one, he burned the pieces, leaning over the fire to inhale the smell of charred paper. He saved the bits with his byline til last. When the final one had melted into a cinder, his eyelids slid shut.

Transient Found Dead, The News, Paterson, N.J., page B14.

A homeless man was found yesterday frozen to death in an abandoned rowhouse in Paterson, police said. The man, in his late 60s, died approximately 10 days ago. Police request anyone with information that may lead to his identification to come forward.

Christina Hoag, a former journalist and Latin America foreign correspondent, is the author of novels "Girl on the Brink," and "Skin of Tattoos", and co-authored "Peace in the Hood: Working with Gang Members to End the Violence." Her short stories and essays have been widely published in literary reviews. For more information, see www.christinahoag.com.

FIVE SHADES OF VICTORY

By Ikechukwu Iwuagwu

"Mummy I am ready!"

These words crawled rather slowly out of Victoria's mouth like a millipede emerging from a hole. It was a Monday morning, bright and blissful as the sun shone gracefully. Although being a pupil in Basic one at the Golden child primary school, she had celebrated her fifth birthday a month ago, she was good with spelling that she could spell almost every word ranging specially from monosyllabic, double-syllabic and few tri-syllabic words. In addition to that, she had represented her school at the All Primary School National Spelling Bee Competition and was the only Basic one student amongst other pupils whose classes ranged from basic three to four selected to represent their school. Although emerging as first runners up, it was indeed a feat which marveled any ear that learnt about Victoria's age as they couldn't help but wonder how great she would grow to be in future. Her smartness knew no bounds as she already made her intention of becoming a pilot multiple times to her mother Eucharia who lost her husband four years ago to a ghastly motor accident.

"I will stay alive and give my best to Victoria and see her fly an airplane someday," she muttered to herself "I will make sure her father is proud of her wherever he may be, and..."

These words barely left Eucharia's lips before she was startled by Victoria's presence

No, she hasn't been standing there all these while has she? She thought.

"Mummy, are you crying?" said Victoria innocently.

It took Eucharia a few seconds to recollect herself and quickly wipe the desperate tears rolling down her cheeks. "No sweetheart, I was laughing at a joke I remembered and it made me shed tears, you know we adults have very funny jokes that make us cry. Mummy is alright, come on let me drop you off," she said as they ran down the stairs into her quite rickety Toyota saloon car exchanging pleasantries with neighbours living in other flats who were getting ready to embark on their daily endeavours.

"Our future pilot go well okay?"

One of the neighbors, Nancy, flattered her, looking up to the sky, wondering when she would conceive, even if it was just one like Victoria after almost ten years of childless marriage. Nancy was the nosy or curious type of neighbour, the type that one could trust to get a firsthand detailed testament of any occurrence that must have happened while one was away, she would be there to supply you with the full gist as she called it, with her usual manner of throwing her hair back and clapping her hands at intervals. Eleven years ago, Johnny her heart throb had popped the question of a marriage proposal during her N.Y.S.C passing out parade, she had said yes, hoping for a smooth marriage, but here she was, ten years down the line with no child to show for it. What kept her sane was the fact that her husband stood with her through it all as there are similar cases where ladies in such situation were branded witches by their In-laws and eventually thrown out of their husbands' house but this wasn't the case with her own marriage and she thanked God for it. Her love for Victoria usually had outsiders think she was her mother, she would purchase candies and biscuits for her while coming back from work, she had made up her mind to open her heart and treat any child she comes across with love, hoping that hers would arrive someday. The cloud wore a vile look as the Sun hung weakly up there in the sky trying desperately to hide behind the fluffy clouds in retirement like a job seeker famished from the days job hunt, it was three O'clock

when Eucharia left her shop located at Ovim market where she sold mattresses of various sizes under the retail chain, this has been the only source of livelihood for Victoria and herself since the death of her husband Uche, her husband's kinsmen had cut her chances of inheriting any of his property in the village since she only had a daughter for him and not even a son, all because she was married to an only son of his father. She had been summoned before her late husband's kinsmen a week after the burial

"You know my daughter, it is the tradition that once a man dies his son takes over but in the case of our son Uche your late husband, we didn't see any son, you didn't give him one, aru!"

Chief Ogu said in his usual paranoid manner pointing at Eucharia, he had been known all over the community as one who visited widows usually the childless ones and slept with them, with promises of convincing the elders in council to be lenient on them by leaving some properties of their late husbands' for them, he usually succeeded in doing this, as he always had his ways with words but Eucharia had sworn to never stoop so low by plunging into infidelity. As for her, she wasn't ready to mingle with any man. She understood the meaning of what the kinsmen's spokesperson meant as it simply implied that she kept her distance. Thus, she held onto the only properties that her late husband had in the city such as the shop at Ovim main market where he sold mattresses and his rickety car since worst of all he left no will before his untimely demise.

Eucharia had to rush to Victoria's school to take her home, satisfied with the sales she made for the day but then it struck her at that moment that Sam her co-tenant, a young man in his mid thirties who taught basic six in Victoria's school would bring her home as usual, but then she wondered what brought about the sudden change in Sam's character and person. Sam until few weeks ago cared less about others and would always pick a quarrel with any of the neighbours at the slightest provocation no matter how insignificant the issue might be and in some cases threaten to beat them up. Wearing a wry smile always, his disproportionate figure of bulk body standing on two rather slim legs gave people a unique perception of his personality, which of course wasn't in the least on the pleasant side. His cynical smile always made noticeable, a scar atop his right eyelid, a constant reminder of when he almost lost his right eye during a machete fight many years ago during his teenage years while at Ajegunle Lagos

"I get strong head wen I dey grow, no try me o, I use bottle scatter person head for surulere-Lagos"

He would brag whenever provoked by any of the co-tenants, he enjoyed using pidgin to yell at people but will switch to the use of proper English while communicating during formal situations, perhaps one could agree with the saying that not all that glitters was gold.

Eucharia wondered what could have led to the sudden change in his behavior for the past few weeks as Sam now visited the same co-tenants he once clashed with to preach love and purchased candies for Victoria, helping her occasionally with her school work, This made her like him, as co-tenants marveled at the sudden change, she soon decided to relax her curiosity and brush all sentiments initially attached to Sam under the carpet. After all, Victoria was at a stage in her life when a father figure was needed so if Sam could fill the vacuum, then it was okay by her. Eucharia got into her car and drove off, she never received any call from Sam telling her that he had brought Victoria back from school as he usually did, this made her panic as she drove to her school, there had been several cases of missing children, on one occasion the remains of a little girl who went missing during school period was discovered behind the school building when the stench became unbearable for some teachers whose staff room was divided by a fence opposite the bush where the remains of the little girl was dumped with some organs missing, the police had promised to bring the perpetrators of the heinous act to book but were yet to live up to their words, some parents had quickly withdrawn their wards while the school immediately took advanced security measures to ensure adequate security for the remaining pupils whose parents still had faith in their management. On getting to the school, her heart missed a beat as she was told by the security man that Victoria had gone with Sam as usual, but then she wondered why he skipped the usual ritual of informing her through a phone call just for surety,

"Oh lord I hope my daughter is safe"

She anxiously soliloquized

"Wetin be the matter Madam?"

Asked the security man showing concern

"Never mind, but are you sure she left with him?" She responded, panicking

"Yes madam I see am as him carry her dey go house before time wey school dey take close, he talk say she get fever"

With this she got into her car and drove off

"Perhaps he had a flat battery, ran out of airtime or maybe he just forgot, oh lord I hope nothing is wrong with my daughter"

She soliloquized loudly as she drove home, relaxing uneasily as each syllable left her mouth amidst elongated slow gasps

"I'll take it easy rather than make something out of nothing"

She said once more speeding up.

On getting home, she alighted from her car and as usual expected Victoria to see her and run into her arms or at least greet her from the balcony, but the whole compound seemed deserted

"Where is Victoria?"

She asked Oluchi, the six year old daughter of their caretaker walking out of the house

"Yes Aunt, Uncle Sam brought her back, my mummy went inside with other people, they said it is for adults"

She said, innocently pointing towards the entrance of the main house, looking steadily into Eucharia's face ruffled by her growing worry, on other days it wasn't this way in the house as almost everyone would be involved in chores such as washing their children's school uniforms in preparation for the following day but where are they all? What could have happened? These thoughts peirced her mind endlessly with growing curiosity. Just at that moment, she heard someone bark orders in an authoritative manner as she quickly sprang into activeness dashing into the house entrance.

Upon climbing the stairs, she saw a good number of her co-tenants standing alongside the passage leading to her door which was ajar, goose pimples erupted all over her smooth skin like an amature volcanic eruption and immediately she was sighted by Nancy her next door neighbour, a soldier dressed in his military regalia was alerted

"This is her mother"

She said pointing at Eucharia

"Madam do you know this man?"

Asked the military officer wielding a whip whose facial expressions wore all the seriousness in the world. Eucharia slowly strolled into her sitting room and was shocked to her marrows seeing Sam stark naked with his face swollen like an amature boxer who just had a one round debut bout with Anthony Joshua, his back was reddish with whip marks adorning it like the aerial view of water channels spiraling in between deltas. What could he be doing naked in my sitting room? She thought to herself with all notes of surprise written over her face

"Yes I know him, he teaches at my daughter's school"

She responded, her desperation grew as she was yet to see her daughter. Upon perceiving how cold everyone appeared and acted towards her, she screamed

"Where is my daughter!?"

Her thunderous voice jolted everyone from their gloomy thoughts back to reality

"I said where is my daughter!?"

She screamed louder this time, the military officer turned and pointed at what seemed like a board covered with a tarpaulin material right behind him, he went towards it raising the covering and under it lay Victoria with blood all over her thighs directly in between her vagina dripping downwards as it kissed the tiled floor in innocent protest

"I believe this is your daughter" said the soldier,

"Your neighbour Nancy according to her statement noticed that your daughter returned from school earlier than before with this man here who said that she wasn't feeling well but he told her he was going to give her a first aid, then he took her up into the house, after which she noticed that she was crying so much, with occasional muffled screams, she peeped through the door lock and saw this man in the act of raping your daughter, she quietly called the attention of the neighbours around who broke down the door and caught him right in the act, they must have beaten him up before my attention was called from where I sat across the road. The policemen are on their way."

He said wearing a stern look on his face.

Eucharia looked into his eyes as though he spoke a strange language which she couldn't decipher, she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders, reminiscing all she had tolerated, borne and been through both before and after the death of her husband all for the sake of her daughter. In a flash, she grabbed the kitchen knife lying on the shelf in front of her and charged like a wounded lioness towards Sam, it took two male co-tenants and the military officer to restrain her before she could slice whatever it was dangling between his legs,

"Stupid man! ekwensu! Crazy man!"

She screamed desperately in between heavy panting as they restrained her

"It.. it is the work of the de.. de.. devil Ma..dam, I am so.. so.. Sorry"

Sam said rather slowly, releasing each syllable with forced perfection as he battled with the swollen mounds implanted on his cheeks by the angered co-tenants. With that, Eucharia surrendered the knife after much pleading, and then dropped on the floor in tears and wailing. She rained abuses on Sam up till his tenth generation.

"Where is my Victoria!? Where is my pilot!?"

She exclaimed as tears flowed endlessly from her eyes down her cheeks

"She said she wanted to be a pilot! Why me?!"

She lamented as neighbours continued to console her while paying close attention to her body language just in case she decided to charge at Sam again.

It wasn't long before a group of police officers came and whisked Sam away in their van. Other tenants who returned to the news of what happened would either shudder or hiss at such evil act before going in to sympathize with Eucharia as helplessly sat on the floor looking rather demented than sad, perhaps this current psychological state in which she found herself made her absent during most of the hearings in court as ordered by the psychiatrist in charge of her treatment as she could lose it or go gaga while in court if she continuously saw the man whose stupid sexual urge cost her the life of her precious daughter.

The prosecuting attorney representing Eucharia had promised to fight for little Victoria's innocent self up till the Supreme court if it were to get to that level. During one of the hearings she expressed her bitterness and annoyance to the journalists over the incessant rise in paedophile related cases in the society

"I have taken it upon myself to make sure that these animals in human form whose urges cannot be controlled are locked up in jail. We must make our society and all within it favourable and conducive for the upcoming generations with special focus on the girl child, we must put these scoundrels where they belong!"

She thundered.

Barr Jane Igwe was the type of legal practitioner who lived up to whatever she said to the letters, she had won over forty cases since her foray into the legal circle over two decades ago. This for sure etched her out from thousands of other lawyers, thus giving her say a special place in the society adding to the fact that she became the most sought after lawyer in the country but this didn't deter her from focusing on the clarion call. Her love for the g

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them victory in return, seeing smiles on their faces was so much of a relief and payment to her, better still, the popular assertion of the judiciary being the last hope of the common man wasn't defeated, not for her. At least, this was some sort of relief to Eucharica as she wouldn't have been able to afford the legal luminary's services on a normal day, although the damage was done but she would be happy to see justice prevail to pacify the soul of her late daughter whose dreams were cut short in the saddest of ways.

It wasn't until two months after series of adjournment of the case that the Judge in charge of the case gave his final judgement in which Sam was sentenced to sixty years in prison without parole on three count charges of statutory rape, child abuse and murder which he was found to be guilty of. Eucharica was quite elated after the judgement as tears of victory rolled down her cheeks, she was hugged by Barrister Igwe but what has happened has happened, she thought, a vacuum had been created, her daughter was gone and would never return, she had to move on, the absence of one person doesn't stop the market from buying, life must continue.

Iwuagwu Ikechukwu is an African poet who has a degree in English and Literary studies. His poems won the Poetry Nook weekly contest and got an honourable mention respectively now in the fifth volume paperback edition of the Poetry Nook anthology, available on amazon. His works have been published in The Shallow Tales Review, Black Boy Review (Nigeria), About Place Journal (USA), Flora Fiction (USA), Dissonance Magazine (UK) and Orange Blush Zine (Malaysia).

GIRL, SICK WITH STORIES

By Megan Hanson

Oklahoma, 1838

"She doesn't speak," I hear the guard say. He's not talking about me. He speaks of Galilahi. At one time, when we were a proud people, we laughed. We talked. We sang. We told stories around a fire, around a circle. Now, there is no one who listens and we have been starved silent anyway. The stories are forever lost in the steam of our summer memories. A medicine man once told me that there will be a girl who, many years from now, will be very sick with stories. He said that her body will seize up and turn in on itself. He said that she will be blessed with long black hair and eyes the color of onyx, but it won't matter because her misery will surpass her beauty. Her tears will fall.

"She will be Ani-Yun'wiya," he said.

I look through the bars at Galilahi who is across the hall. She sits still and stares at me. She is not in the world anymore. She lives in her own mind until I make eye contact. Then she is brought into my mind as well. We have shared this gift since we were children. She'd sing about it, but now, she doesn't even open her mouth to eat. She may starve before the white men are allowed to kill us.

I sit and wait and talk to the walls in my language. I mumble it over and over again, "Ani-Yun'wiya." We were the Principle People.

"Look at that crazy Cherokee over there," the guard says.

“Which one?” asks the officer and they laugh.

I look into Galilahi’s eyes. *Do you remember the summer we got stung by the bumblebees?* She stares, her face expressionless, but she remembers. I hear her laugh and she says, *Yes, I remember.* She hums the song about the girl who fell out of the tree and we’re thirteen again and giggling about her old friend making a fool out of himself at the *puskita*. I can’t remember his name now, but she reminds me that she was supposed to marry him and continues singing. The story lives on.

“It’s time to get ready,” the guard yells at Galilahi. She doesn’t move until he opens the cage door and kicks her in the face. She never makes a sound. She just turns her black eyes on me, staring. A bruise forms another eye on her cheek from the guard’s brown boot. She reminds me of a spider as she stares at me with her new eye. The guard drags her down the hall. I stare back and hum the song about the girl who fell out of the tree. Galilahi disappears around the corner, but it doesn’t matter where I am or she is. She is still staring, still seeing—from the corner of the ceiling, from a raindrop on the window, from inside a coffin. She’s thin as a twig, but still beautiful. Her skin glistens. She’s the dew on the grass in the morning as I walk through it. She’s watching from her web. She can’t speak, but it doesn’t matter. The sun reflects the sparkling dew in my eyes and blinds me. She knows how to get my attention.

I lie back on the cot and picture her as a girl. She had long, flowing black hair. We all did. When the rain fell, our hair stayed wet for hours. When we ran through the wet cornfields at dawn, our hair turned the sky black. It grew in thick sheets, each strand holding a piece of our story. It was alive. For me, it still is. I bit the woman who held the scissors. She was supposed to cut my hair, but she thought I was rabid and refused to come near me. I was locked in one of these cages, away from everyone for three days. When they were sure I wasn’t foaming at the mouth, they took me to a school where a Christian missionary beat me with a stick until I said my new name.

“Nancy,” the woman said. I didn’t understand. She hit me, and pointed to me.

“You—Nancy,” she said, smacking my hand. It stung.

“You—Nanyi’hi,” I said, pointing at myself. She smacked my hand again and it started bleeding.

“Me—Nancy,” she said, grabbing my other hand and making me point at myself. I couldn’t say it, so she hit my bleeding hand once more.

“Me—Nanyi’hi,” I said. The name left a bruise on my tongue. The woman sighed, using the stick to make a cross on me. She crossed herself and left.

“Hey. Here’s a letter for you,” the guard says. He is a tall, pale man. His eyes are bloodshot with drink. They are my father’s eyes in the camp. He was once a chief. The guard was once an officer. I overheard talk about him. They don’t know I speak English.

“Le-tters,” the guard spits. I look at the hand and he turns into a ghost. I don’t want the letters. My mother died, my father is killing himself. My brother married a white girl. There is no more pride and no room for shame. I don’t know the person who writes. He is some white boy at the school training to be a guard. He’s been trying to convince the courts to sell me to him.

The guard still stands in front of me and I blink.

“Ani-Yun’wiya,” I say.

He laughs and I kick the letters under my cot. The other guard comes back with Galilahi.

“It’s time,” he says. I reach behind my back and yank out a piece of my hair. It floats to the floor. I pick it up, kiss it full of stories, and gently place it on a shelf in a corner of the cage. The guard laughs and shakes his head. He does not understand.

The door opens and the guard grips my arm with one hand, Galilahi with the other. I know where we’re going. Galilahi does too. She stares at me, makes a small whimpering noise, trips over her and the guard’s feet. We walk forever, down hallway after hallway. We don’t cry. We’re brave like our ancestors. It becomes colder as we step outside. It is a beautiful morning. The dew glimmers on the grass and the sky is like autumn leaves.

Death comes easily. There are two horses. Two trees. Two ropes. Silence. They cut my hair and throw it away. Galilahi goes first. There's a snap, but she just keeps staring. I gaze into the sun for the first time in my life, unafraid of blindness. It burns. I choke and gag for a while. I kick a few times, struggling, and then it's over.

There is a new Cherokee girl in my cage. She finds the letter and reads it. I listen to her from the corner. A spider beside me stares at her.

The letter is from the white boy, claiming that if I can stall the guards, he will break us out tonight. No matter. We will wait.

The spider turns her shiny black eyes to me, smiles, and says, "Asasga, we are Ani-Yun'wiya." We sing about the girl who fell out of the tree, waiting to be resurrected like Jesus, waiting for a woman who is sick with story.

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