



Creators of Justice 2022

Short Story

Honorable Mention

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AN ACTOR'S CHIMERA

by Grace Suge

Scene One

(The theater should be thronged.)

It is a motley cast. A girl in the male outfit is an embryo. Her parents do not away with it, the clothing, it displeases them. And her Grandpa, Babu, is a bit more discerning— it easily sits on him. He merely thinks she has the wrong choice of clothes; he laughs it away.

She grows up and becomes more and more withdrawn and the few times she interacts with anyone, it should be with Babu in whose compound they live. Her parents trust her with him in their absence. She loves him best, and he is over-fond of the delicate creature.

He is a well-knit frame, Babu; so tall a height, so straight a gait, yet sedate, but his dressing is sharp. The bespoke Kaunda suits; their stitches are of exceeding neatness, severely aligned.

“Imported from France you know. They took time to reach here,” he boasts and it is no wonder the coats, although well-cut, are of intimidating length. His Kaunda suits are concorded with his godfather hats and shoes of patent leather. Sometimes everything would be eyebrow-raising emerald green, as dashing as their wide glistening. Easeful rest is his life’s lot.

“I like your hat so well. May I wear it for a bit Babu?” the girlish voice begs.

He doesn’t raise his eyebrows. He picks her up tenderly and sits her on his lap.

“You may *toto*,” he consents with great ardor.

Babu proceeds to get the hat off his head and hats the girl. It is an umbrella on her head, the godfather, its wide brim shadows her shadow.

There is a warm gaze on his face as he admires the girl's look; an approval that spurs.

“It goes well with a necktie too, you know. Tie my tie, we go take a photo of you and you'll see what am saying.”

He takes her in hand. Excitement is big in her throat as they leave alone, them two, heading to the studio in town. She walks quickly, lightly, pulling Babu's fingers along. She sneaks away with a pair of her brother's clothes, and that, with Babu's godfather and necktie, they are an eclectic mix of ill-fitting clothes; singularly masculine. Arrayed before the camera, genders are blurred in a flash, she is suddenly a boy. It joys her; a different feeling from the one she has when Mama makes her wear very uninspiring girl dresses which she will discard as soon as they get home from church on Sundays— much to Mama's irritation.

Papa comes across the photo of her from the studio. Babu is an enabler of untoward behavior and a practicer of it for his own dressing was too much. She is barred from chatting with him. The strong eyes of Mama ensure it if her mouth didn't.

Scene Two

(The theatre should be hushed.)

I am in high school. I wrap my chest tight. That—the flat chest—complements my so many feet of stature; my Babu's frame, and the low-cut hair makes me seem masculine. Debra notices it and tweaks my arm when I pass by. She keeps looking at me longingly from her desk at the front

of our classroom. I see her watching me, her gaze holds me captive. The yearning over me whelms my head.

I get permission from the class teacher to head to the school clinic. The nurse prescribes paracetamol for my hypochondria and sends me to the dorm to convalesce. I hear footsteps behind me. I reach my decker bed, and turning, I see Debra—distinct—posing sensually by the bedstead opposite mine.

I have been hearing that she loves ‘bearded girls’ and her attraction to me becomes a little bit obvious now. My head is spinning like the ravisher’s skirt. I am impatient to leave but she takes hold of my arm. I want her to leave my arm. I need to go out to get myself together. She wouldn’t let me. I search her face, her ripe breasts, her salacious legs. They arrest my attention. She kisses me first.

The tremors in her skin, the thrill building in my loins; they seem shivered into splinters. I can not hold my composure anymore. I scoop her up, lay her down on the bed below mine, and smother her with my chest. Her nipples perk up, she opens her legs. I nuzzle her neck and place a rosary of kisses downwards. She arches her backbone; her breasts are mountains. She does not contain herself, her moans are wild.

In a breath, there is a hair-splitting scream. It uncentres the room, the scream, it knells. My bedmate, the owner of the bed we are on stares down at us.

Shortly, it is a hubbub. A whole body of spectators is crowded upon us. The acidity I see in them is a strange taking; its gravity is foreign to the script. I feel deeply intruded upon and Debra

pushes me away and straightens her skirt. She starts to cry off, false tears. I guess to redeem herself, she accuses me of putting her up to it.

“She did it?” pointing a finger at me. I stand mute, shock-frozen by this accusation.

“You lie!” I protest, faintly.

She lunges at me; her slap doesn’t shake my cold face. She flees guiltlessly.

I have my ears drawn up by the matron as we head to the headmaster’s office. I feel them, the ears, grow hot but resist the urge to wrench the matron’s hand away. Although fuming, I have to hold my manners and effectively deny the offense; terming it Debra’s figment. My story rings hollow with the headmaster but spreads like a contagion in the school. I am suspended from there.

Scene Three

(The audience should be engaged.)

I am gripped with a bad case of the vapors. My parents don't want me to come to a bad end and in their attempt to ‘right my ways’, they cheat themselves in the extremity by hurrying me towards a Legio maria shrine. An usher, waist girt with a sash, announces us. He admits us into the presence of a man serenely attired in a flowing Jesus-like beard. He is sitting on a raised platform, and many candles quiver on his altar. His flowing white robes are falling heavily on the ground. His head is turbaned high in white cloth and on his neck hangs a sparsely beaded rosary, a large cross forms its appendage. He is a prophet, I am told, not Jesus. The Bible is read and the usher gestures me to humble myself by kneeling thereafter. Baulking, I am not to be imposed

upon reverence. A cursory glance at my unwomanlike clothing, the prophet concludes that I have bad spirits within that need dispersion.

“Huyu mtoto ana mapepo mabaya.” He declares.

He picks up the huge wooden cross lying by the altar, and with it nudges me down till I end up not only kneeling but fully prone at his feet.

It galls when he rants with great vehemence, even demons deserve no such severe censure. The asperity of it all leads me to protest, but the Prophet thinks my protestations are the male demons themselves in character.

“Leave go of her now!” he yells, “She is a girl, not a boy. Get out in Jesus’ name!”

The further I protest, the louder his overzealous attempts at casting every demon who spoke through me. He pushes me down when I try to get up, and holds a candle to the devil. Weary of the militant prophet, I bear up to let him think he got a good of me.

“I have smoked them away,” he declares finally. “Her well-being has been restored.”

I am declared saved, yet from what I don’t know; but the demons, I know them blameless. My parents bob their heads in affirmation, smiling, they are content. My profanatory clothes are put out of sight by an usher who robes me in white, and I leave the shrine a consecrated Legio Marian, for to them, that was what I was to come to.

The day has worn late, with this grand adornment, I should be invisible to the spirits. My legs are poking the hems of the costume as I cut through the darkness like a person clean and full of light. They humor me.

Scene Four

(The audience should be excited.)

A space of three weeks is ended, and I am now returned. There is a laugh against me; it churns up, the students' laughter, then trails off on my approach. Scarcely a week did I last there before I suffer another suspension for wearing short pants instead of a bloomer at the P.E. session. My sin—coming to school with home clothes— boys' wear.

The Bible is of little consequence to me, my vexed parents vow by witchcraft. I am taken to a witch doctor's shrine. There is a poster stamped on his door, '*Daktari Ali. Mg'ang'a hodari kutoka Tanzania. Anatibu magonjwa mengi kama vile; Kifafa, Kisonono, Kukosa kipenzi, Kukosa pesa na mengineo.*' It reads. I have heard of these sorts of Daktari Alis' and all their iniquities. They are a lot of character, but their singular bent for quid is none of the best; they never give their services gratis. We enter with our backs and turn forward at his word, which only comes after Mama puts out her hand and drops his quota into a humongous terra cotta pot by the entrance. This Daktari Ali is a witch doctor enough; clad in a long-tailed Columbus monkey's skin and as many odd ways. A tussock of chicken feathers crests his head— girt along the temple by a band of hide. Animal teeth are hung on his neck and bells along cruel garters around his feet. This strange creature concludes that I have been bewitched using voodoo magic; allegedly carried out by someone living close by us. What nerve! What verve!

“You tell us who he or she is!” Papa demands from Daktari Ali.

“You know him or her well.” He responds in a wide sense.

Libation of a black cock's blood will help unearth the charms, he says. Mama buys it in the market and offers him. The cock is slain in front of our eyes, its congealed blood I am enjoined to swallow. This Daktari Ali commences to utter incantations, stomps his feet, raps out beats on his drum—the bells jingle furiously. A strip of the intestine is wound around a small stick, they invest it to me as a charm portion to release me from the evil power of black magic. I am to place it below my mattress. The other meats, he cheats us, will quench the ancestors. We bend our steps homeward, he gnaws at them; does not even scruple about it. I found it good entertainment. My Babu, long on experience, is bending in his old growth. This Babu-mine is slighter than me now. His Kaunda suit, although close-buttoned to the chin, stands out longer. It is drooping to the floor. But his godfather's brim is a little altered; it shadows my shadow. All the same, my parents fancy his gay person as the wizard, so we move out of his compound and rent a flat in town. We, I and Babu, are longly parted; there is no recourse for me.

The charm works for a while, I am haler but inwardly affected. In due time, it decays as it is disposed to; gives me the liberty to throw it out and exhale.

Scene Five

(The theatre verges on applause.)

But the curtains stay drawn. The producer assembles the cast behind the stage. The actress to play the adult main role has bowed out for fear of being branded queer. I seek it—her substitute—but the producer thwarts my bid,

“You, a person of sixteen, you are too young to play an adult role. Besides, you've starred in three scenes already. This shouldn't be a life-long calling, should it?”

He dismisses us. The rehearsal is postponed. Others vacate, but a group of actors remains, suspiciously, in the gallery. Little do I know...Disappointed, I withdraw to an empty dressing chamber. That stage's 'they/them' play is a freer space. The undressing from my male clothing encumbers my existence but no sooner had I started than my conscious draws me to a subtle entrance. All at once, I feel panic as the intruder locks the door behind him. By instinct, I cover my groin with my hands,

"There is nothing there!" the lanky creature spews, pointing his fingers at my groin. He comes forward asking "How was the kiss?"

"Whaa...wha...what kiss?" I tumble as I ascend my hand to cover my indistinct breasts.

"Mmmm..stop the pretense, my dear. Why did you think I gave you the starring role?"

"I know not what you are talking about Sir."

"You loved it, didn't you?" He insists, rather soppily. "You found her sumptuous eeei."

"I was in character sir."

"I know you want to play the adult scene too. Desperately." He mouths whilst approaching nearer, myself encountering a wall. I feel a rock-hard press against my skin. I find it sickening, thrust him back. "A chance to live your reality I guess."

"No...no no no."

"There are some things you can't hide. They are like gonorrhoea's itch—very sweet and mannerless." Using the back of his hand, he caresses my cheek. He talks away. "See, I will

satisfy your wish if you be good to me. I may perhaps make the gift of nature, that “Debra” girl, play the adult role too. You like... pant for her, don’t you?”

Then, without warning, his thickly veined hand unzips his trousers and his swelled-up phallus tumbles out. He forcefully takes my resisting hand, and cups it. I don't know what he wants of me. He gets angry,

“You are gripping it wrong, stroke it like this,” he shouts.

He tries to acquaint me with it but he fails. He roughly draws away my innerwear, pushes forcefully and the ground raises to meet me. Locked in struggle, I try to tear myself free from his chock hold. He ventures to penetrate me and succeeds. A slither of pain, so acute, so confounding as to put me asunder, assails me. I squirm beneath him, struggling to breathe until I give out eventually. He thrusts violently, goes on— and on— and on. I am in the throes, beyond my endurance.

He fills the doorway as he passes from the chamber, thunderous applause rings through the gallery. Curling, the shadow of the wretch is left stagnant, yet grown—walled-in in that pallid chamber, for, there is sound and fury in the streets too and the government, they are not Babu, they are her parents. They ban the rumored, unfinished, unplayed play. ‘Morally destructive to the fabric of society,’ they proclaim it.

Biography

Grace Suge hails from Kosirai, Nandi County. A career banker and writer whose works have gone on to be published by the International Human Rights Art Festival and in *Octo-Emanations*, the eighth volume of the critically acclaimed *Emanations* literary anthology series, the *Wise Owl* literary magazine amongst others. Her short story, ‘Laibon’s prophesy’ was awarded the second prize in the Creators of Justice Awards 2020 and ‘The Moon’s kraal’ awarded an honorable mention in 2021 by the International Human Rights Art Festival. She is the recipient of the 2022 IHRAF international Fellowship. Currently, she is working on a novel that she purposes to publish by December 2022. She enjoys reading and listening to humorous stories.

A MOMENT OF STILLNESS

by Eleen Raja

The body is made of clay,

The sounds that emerge are of substance; airy.

Know you, O learned one,

What dies when a man does die?

(From “Bhau Much Bharra Vadda Tol” in “Hymns of Guru Nanak”, translated by Khushwant Singh)

Settled on the bottom shelf of a master bathroom were four bloated bottles of Biji’s Jojoba oil. Each plump with muddy water and a colony of a dozen tadpoles. This man-made anomaly belonged to the 9 year-old and *self-acclaimed scientist*, Surat Walia. Currently perched upon the height of a plastic stool, his amber gaze corners the bathroom ecosystem. Third-grade science books made him a witness to the metamorphic miracles of the mighty *Waheguru*. Hence, *His* slithering marvels accompanied Ama’s tie-dye projects and Bhappa’s toilet seat broadcasts of the day’s headliners. Each future croaker had a name that changed thrice within a week; Roman Reigns would turn to Bruce Lee who was replaced by Neymar and eventually back to Roman. Our scientist’s test subjects would often range from jars of wingless moths to the desiccated husks of carpet beetles. Each cherished with curiosity until worn down to a chalky debris. His fascination started at the ripe age of six when Bhaapa’s distant “cousin” had brought him a National Geographic almanac. An airline distraction handed to him on an eight hour flight from Bradford. The slightly worn out copy had Entomology as the week’s feature and our toddler was

smitten by the rainbows of patterned beetles. Apart from oil bottles, emptied jam jars and tin ghee cans would gleam on his bed-room shelves in case of any future captures.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

Outside, summer skylines begin emerging on the horizon with a nod from July. Lahore sweltered with a cotton-mouth aftermath and a reverence for the Chinar's refuge. Nonetheless, scathing cups of Chai continued to pour with the same zeal and extra cardamom. Sidewalk Marigolds swell into embers, flickering amidst the sun's echoes. Streams of the Devil's Ivy climbed over dusty verandhas. Melted ice candies itched a toddler's nimble fingers with a want for more. Soon, monotony embodied an heirloom tucked behind a glass display. Ambitions curdled into survival as blistering pavements failed to lag the average sweat-stained pedestrian. Even then there seemed to be some who challenged their heritage of monotony like our young scientist.

Plop. Plop. Plop.

As hour three of shelf-watching resumed, aching elbows now rested on the sink's basin. Each ripple was pursued by an eager pupil. Surat peered through a Lakers T-shirt that had been torn into a makeshift canopy. Another ingenious creation to ward off any midnight snacking geckos. His right index grazed the surface ever so lightly. Mild taps would unfurl into gentle stirs and the high-strung younglings would stagger back like the leaves of a Lajwanti. Ample time would be given to each bottled habitat with the utmost concentration until homework. A task he would avoid until Ama's fingers pinched his right earlobe as the first warning. Soon Isha at 8:30 would dreadfully announce his end of the day. Fortunately, Bhaapa's gramophone snores aided past-curfew sneak-ins to his shrine for science. The fear that he'd be late to see their unraveling

nagged him consistently. It loomed over him to a point of skipping dinner for extra time with his future croakers. At times he'd even spend more than half of the day toppling the basin with a half-shut gaze.

Plop. Plop.

To Surat Walia, cricket curve-balls, hurricane breaths to Dandelions or the cheesy craters of the moon had an appeal of the average toaster. Zeenat Walia on the other hand felt concerned about her son's alien antics. His budding smile would greet eight eyes cascading down a cobwebbed shelf. The scampering arachnid itself did not make her as anxious as his bliss. Bhappa however knew that adolescence was simply a helpless age. An age where things had to be within the reach of a bathroom shelf and a muddy pond near the park. For the juvenile, science had crystal wings and webbed feet. It crawled behind framed paintings and left murky trails on the verandah tables. There was no fault.

“Youth is all about wanting the surreal, Zeeni.” claimed our Bhaapa, Guneet Walia. “

“Soon enough, Tadpole corpses will be the rouser he needs from this childish silliness.”

His fingers reached for a folded edge a copy of Puran Singh's, *“The Thundering Dawn”* nestled on the pleats of his lap. To Guneet, the Jojob-ian aquariums were nothing more than a viable ode to innocence. An ode harmless to none with the exception of sore elbows and the sacrifice of a favorite Laker's shirt. He knew how innocence squirmed within the terrarium of age. Quite alike the escaping tremors of his son's test subjects. There was no fault.

“Soon after that, if he asks for either the responsibility of a Fishbowl or chooses to bore himself out of this commitment, we will know.”

Zeeni sighed with a question, “Know what exactly?”

“If cold blood can teach him better than warm.”

Plop.

Our adolescent now stood at a six street distance from the Walia’s apartment complex. The two hundred year-old Mominpura graveyard harbored a quarter of the area’s underworld. However, to our 9 year-old it was where third-grade science experiments brimmed within the topsoil.

Waheguru’s magical critters were scattered all around, an observation he made while attending a family burial. His low tolerance for stillness and a wandering gaze detected a moss-green caterpillar; the pioneer of *His* graveyard miracles. Ever since, Saturdays were reserved for science. 9:00 am’s and his favorite rubber boots became a tradition that taught him of devotion. Bhaapa’s hefty spade and a few scrapes would soon uncover a new cosmos within the filth of another. Surat had assumed this to be the sole purpose of such an establishment. However, the land which now seeped from beneath his tiny fingernails was for another one of Waheguru’s miracles.

After much contemplation, the young scientist had finally chosen to scourge the anthills behind an Oak tree. The sturdy yet leafless tree appeared to be recovering from autumn. While probing the earth for his “pseudo extraterrestrials”, he noticed a congregation near or what he assumed to be a group of mourners. Nothing that was peculiar to the site he chose. He counted a visible estimate of twenty men drenched in July’s rage as they stood in an odd semi-circular assembly. Something felt strange about the way they chose to grieve, it seemed almost euphoric. Elbows were crammed into neighboring ribcages. Prayers commonly carried in palmed hands oozed

through balled fists. Tongues were dangled with slander. The mass clung together like locusts wreaking havoc within a second of their arrival. Every now and then a few liabilities sidlined with hesitant steps and anxious gulps.

From behind the oaky fortress Surat continued to observe the unorthodox arrangement. He had never witnessed such an affair of grief. His breath wavered on a tightrope while he tried to camouflage himself with the oaky barrier. A few minutes in and our espionage settled on the dirt but kept his eyes on the hasty lot. Soon enough a lanky figure with disheveled hair stepped forward. Sweat doused his aged beard with sags for eyes. He looked to be the one leading them with one hand behind his back and the other raised for order. Movement halted in a matter of seconds and the crowd sobered up. With a steady glare and some flimsy gestures he directed them to spread out for more room while he remained at the forefront. He then lowered his gaze to something shrouded by the millipede legs of the crowd. Straining his neck for a better angle, Surat almost fell face-first into a scrap of grass. In a fit, he brushed himself back up and resumed his disguise. A minute later, much to his fortune, the unidentified object was kicked to the feet of the aged ringleader. It was a man. Surat didn't believe the others knew that. At the receiving end of the chieftain's scowl knelt a figure with a maroon skull-capped forehead. Our adolescent might haven't figured that it wasn't originally such a rich shade of red. A raggedy Kurta adorned his feeble body, the sleeves of which were torn to shreds. As estranged as the tattered young man was, he was also the only to model Surat's interpretation of mourning. His hands were palmed together tightly, shifting towards each grinning individual in scheduled turns. Lips cowered into futile pleadings as he was met with evading eyes. He kept asking for God. No one dared to say where he could find him until the aged front man grabbed him by the chin and gnarled the words;

“God has left you.”

A quick shove towards the façade of mourners turned the situation gruesome. Surat never talked about what he saw that day. He could never learn the words for it. The gathered vigilantes bared the man of any mercy. His skullcap was trampled underneath hoards of sandaled feet. Hands devoid of civility thrashed him crimson. A shade that now matched his ruined skull-cap. Each leg pierced his chest while he searched for God in-between his wails. The front man only watched. Maybe he was God.

Soon maimed under the weight of forcing a breath, his blood turned cold. Before his sun had set, he raised the index of his left hand ever so high. With a mangled throat, he manages a soft murmur only July could testify.

Ya Ali madad!

(Oh Ali, help us!)

The Romans disperse from where the martyred messiah lay.

Flesh bruises into a mimicry of Algae flaked headstones.

An alarmed pair of umber eyes go unnoticed.

A heap of crushed twigs and a crumpled skullcap were to become Bhaapa’s next headline.

Hospitality resumed for the departed within a six-foot depth. Condolences roamed on the carts of bouquet selling vendors right outside the barbed wire gate. Hidden by the mighty Oak, Surat remains still. From where he stood, the martyr already claimed his six feet on God’s acre. His

boots now cloaked in mud felt the Earth teetering on their toecaps. The world continued with the impartial, surviving through a silence that would ruin the other. Witnesses were severed in half; one tethered to an Oak tree and the other to roam in reminders. Surat felt almost numb from where he stood, still under the naked Oak's branched shadows. Surat didn't know then but this was his last graveyard conquest. Allowed only a heaving chest as the day's capture and a new shade of red, he rushes home. The cloudy halos of July follow his steps and the sun remains aloof.

The streets bustled as shuffled footsteps led him home. On his way up the complex, he passed by a neighbor's half-open doorway. The portion belonged to an old woman with a hearing problem who had her television on at a volume to prove it. A reporter was in the middle of reviewing a protest in the city of lights. He heard a tongue click as Karachi's Zaibunnisa was manhandled by a sea of supposed revolutionaries. Each carrying out a metamorphosis of their own, none yielding change. They were apparently marching for someone named God too. A man called the Prophet was mentioned in their mantras, he wasn't there himself. Vandalized cars and burning tires were made mausoleums for the day's protest. Children were hoisted on the backs of fatherly heretics while the lionesses stayed home. After a few incoherent howls and noises of static, the television was shut off.

Upon entering his own doorway, Zeeni asks of his early return. He evades the interaction and heads straight for his bathroom sanctuary. Quivering elbows once again topple the basin as he removes the T-shirt canopy. His breath hitched when met with a stench more foul than usual.

Ama had come after the now hunched figure with his eyes locked in a dazed trance. Worried of his abruptness and the putrid odor, she followed only to hold a rattled gaze herself.

Afloat in stillness and silence, the tadpoles were dead.

Biography

Eleen Raja is a writer based in Lahore, Pakistan. She adores the Science fiction portion of both contemporary and classical Literature while dabbling in both prose and poetry.

SOME PEOPLE

by Dawn Lo

Cars thin out by the MTR train station and night hawks amble by throwing long, ghoulish shadows in the amber streetlight. Above, Lei Man-Kin looks down from his apartment. The dry winter draft is seeping quietly in. The day just past had been sunny and mild; in the evening, he only needed his windbreaker. It'll be far colder in Canada, he ought to go check that their new down jackets have been packed into their carry-ons. Yet he stays. He pushes the window panes out till they groan and, with the Hong Kong air against his face, smelling of salt from the sea and a familiar staleness, he feels steady again.

In the belly of the empty living room, his wife is trying to pack sun-dried mandarin peels and the bottle of Remy Martin they were given this evening. Their friends had thrown them a dinner party, cooking steamed seabass, braised mushrooms with *fat choy*, and other celebratory dishes. The adults drank champagne, and all the children were allowed some Coca-Cola out of plastic cups with faded daisies. They laughed raucously, but there were tears. His seven-year-old daughter was inconsolable when it came time to leave and, so, is sleeping over. He imagines his wife is sad, too, but as sad as him? She speaks without looking up.

“Why do we have so many things?” The packets of mandarin peels crinkle on the floor. “Where are these going to go?”

“The carry-ons?”

“Full.”

“There must be space somewhere.”

“Throw them out?”

He stares at her, unsure if she is serious.

“Not bring them,” he says.

“Well?”

“Not bring these gifts?”

“Fine, I’ll sort it out.”

Kin helps heave and spread the stack of suitcases out. Their plastic lids boom onto the floor. He leaves her to go into the bedroom, wandering past the corridor with star and planet stickers and a world map. Does he look like a hungry ghost, he wonders, milling aimlessly about? In the bedroom, there is only a mattress, no frame, and his backpack next to it. In it are their tickets and passport. The image inside his passport stares back jarringly bright-eyed. It doesn’t look like him anymore but, no matter, he will soon apply for another. He stares at the greying walls and thinks about how they will soon weep in the spring from humidity. Outside, bamboo scaffolding obscures a view he knows by heart of colourful neon store signs that dangle precariously over the sidewalk and, above that, a panorama of high-rises that will always sport a few lights no matter the time of night. Soon, the sun will rise over them. He will miss this, he decides. He gives himself permission to.

For as long as they have lived in this unit, street noises have fluttered in. About a year ago, car honks and distant chatter were replaced by chanting as streams of people marched on the streets. They were calling for true democracy in the governance of Hong Kong, not the same rigged

pageantry time after time. Kin wanted this too. He took his family and they marched in the early protest days.

But when peaceful marching amounted to nothing, the young people became restless. Kin saw how they disdained these karaoke demonstrations, all hot air, and didn't they have a point?

Which iron grip has ever loosened to cajoling? The youth wore black from head to toe, yellow helmets and gas masks slinging off their reckless bodies. "Look," his daughter had whispered, pointing at a group of them under an overpass. They were winding cling wrap around their arms to protect against pepper spray.

"How creative. But," his wife said, "for what?"

Still, Kin marvelled at their teamwork and ingenuity. Their brazen spirit. For a period, shots of tear gas punctuated their weekends, day and night, but he hadn't felt afraid.

Kin returns to the living room where, at least, his wife makes noises of the living. He pushes his head out the window again, leans out as far as he can.

There has been no chanting for months. With the new security law in place, who knows what passing comment can be misconstrued as dissent and get you arrested? Not so long ago, he had stood with his daughter by this very window. She had clung to his arm, apprehensive. "Listen," he said and then bellowed out the window a phrase that they could no longer say. They pricked their ears and – there! – a distant voice but clear and sharp as an arrow. Four little words out of the many in their colourful tongue that in their alchemy, so decreed, could topple institutions. More voices chimed in, each coming from a little square of light dotting the high-rises. Some were hopeful, others raw and manic. He nodded at his girl, nudging her forward. She stepped up

to the window and squeaked, “Add oil! We can do it! Add oil! Add oil!” until her voice was hoarse, and he laughed at the wonder of youth. Kin tries to hold onto this memory now and onto the bustling street noises before. Instead, he hears pressing silence. This sound of resignation, it is worse than guns.

“Not too cold tonight,” he says loudly.

“Good thing, too. We only have our jackets.” Finally, his wife has put everything in order. “Ma will have to get here by seven if she wants to see us off to the airport,” she tells him.

“She’ll make it.”

“That cough of hers has... You gave her the *peipa* syrup?”

He said he had.

“Well. She really should see a doctor again.”

Kin wheels the suitcases to the front door. He doesn’t say any more about his mother, afraid that if he opens his mouth, he might tell his wife too much, and he doesn’t want that. On top of the suitcases, he stacks backpacks and red-white-blue nylon carry-ons. The light begins to flicker, splicing the room into two distinct frames, black then light. It occurs to him that this disorienting existence could go on forever and he turns the light off. Darkness floods the room. Dull light from outside follows, his wife’s silhouette imprinted against the window. He wants to stay in this image forever. He goes to her in silence and folds her into his chest.

*

Kin's mother never meant to become a mother. She reminded him of this as a child, as she bounced him on her lap and hustled in mah-jong dens run illicitly out of people's homes. He would fuss and whine because of the clanging tiles and cigarette smoke but she would mutter at him to quit it, to be grateful that she swam to Hong Kong pregnant with him and managed to keep him alive. She was a skilled gambler. It also helped that she was young, lithe, and beautiful. Women were intimidated by her, and men flocked to her even though she had a young son, a piercing voice, and swore like a construction worker squatting by a ditch.

Her maternal instincts did not kick in even as he grew. She never read him stories or told him he was smart or handsome or brave. But late some nights, sitting at the foot of the bed they shared, pulling lazy drags from a cigarette between her thin, manicured fingers, she told him about her childhood.

She was the youngest daughter of villagers in Guangzhou where girls amounted to less than dogs. As soon as she could, she worked, first in the house, then in the fields. When she grew up a little, and her parents saw that she was pretty enough, they sent her to waitress at the hostel teahouse. She never told her mother and father what happened or who did it when she came home one evening crying, her clothes torn, her hands and knees scraped bloody. Her parents did not ask questions. The villagers made themselves small to go on existing. It was the only way.

Not Kin's mother. She took time to heal and then one summer night, she plunged into the dark waters that separated her impoverished motherland from the lit skyline of Hong Kong. She held onto an inflatable ring and kicked and kicked against the waves until the early morning leaked liquid purple into the sky and coast guards picked her up in a boat that flew the Union Jack. She

waitressed and gambled, found herself surrounded by men who were keen to help, for a price. She sent some money to her parents, but never went back. Always, she had decided, she would live for herself. With so much overcome, it was no wonder she thought herself invincible.

The cough lingered for more than a year and she only went to the hospital when Kin insisted. By then, he and his wife had their eye on an apartment outside Toronto in some place called Scarborough. He had liked the British sound of it. Like all good things, though, it wasn't cheap. Money would be tight. In the doctor's office, while his mother waited in the reception hall, Kin sifted his memory for a time where she had made him feel safe or cared for but came up with nothing. The doctor explained her prognosis and the costly treatment with a decent chance of success. He told the doctor they would not pursue this option.

To his mother, he said it was an infection that would soon go away.

*

At 7am, Kin's mother is at their door. They hire two taxis, one to take his wife to pick up their daughter, the other to ferry Kin, the suitcases, and his mother directly to the airport.

The taxi driver plays the morning radio and Kin's mother says nothing at first. When they round smoothly onto the highway, Kin's eyes soak in the skyline: on one side, factories and ashen buildings pockmarked by AC units; on the other, the docks against the water.

"So, everything packed?" Her voice crackles. She brings a tissue to her mouth and clears her throat.

"Yes, Ma. All set."

"And you'll get some breakfast at the airport?"

“Yes.”

“OK. Good. What a big adventure.”

Silence pervades. Everything in the early morning blooms grey and jade-green like the Coca-Cola bottles he used to get at diners. And it reminds him of a quiet, happy moment with his mother. He had already started primary school. She worked nights at Tsim Sha Tsui’s nightclubs, went straight to bed when she returned at dawn. But one morning, before an important exam, she roused him from sleep and took him out for breakfast. She told him to order anything and fanned out a stack of crumpled paper bills. He ate condensed milk on a buttered bun and macaroni soup with cabbage and ham, washed it all down with a Coke. She smiled wryly, sitting across with a cigarette tucked into the corner of her lip. Eat up, she told him, eat up so you become a big, strong boy nobody can bully.

Their taxi speeds over Tsing Ma bridge and they see nothing but the blue of sky and the blue of sea. His mother grips the door until her knuckles are white. She doesn’t like the look of water. He wants to make her feel better, this frail being beside him who used to loom so big, but doesn’t know how. He wants to say something like sorry.

He clears his throat. “Ma,” he says.

“When you get over there, don’t let anyone push you around.”

“I won’t.” He sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Save your spit.”

“What?”

“Heavens. There’s no need.”

“Ma, just listen.”

“Ah Kin, don’t explain yourself. I don’t want to hear it. Besides, how much life is left in me to save?”

So, she knows. Kin feels a full, dark grief sink into him.

“There’s plenty left.”

“Dog shit.” She snorts but it turns into a cough.

Eyes trained front, he reaches for her hand. Grips it. “I’ll send for you when we’re settled,” he says. “Wah, the flats there are so big there, you won’t believe it. Your room will be bigger than your entire place here.”

His mother clicks her tongue. “Ah Kin, stop joking.”

“You want your own mah-jong parlour? Done.”

“I don’t have the eyes anymore.”

“We’ll get you better glasses. There’ll be gardens all around for your morning walk, clean air to breathe. You don’t have to believe me now, but you’ll see when you get there.”

A dreamy look comes over her face. “What would I do with all that space?”

“Anything you want.”

Pulling into the airport, the taxi driver cuts the engine. He steps out to remove the luggage. Kin is alone with his mother in the quiet.

“Will you come in?”

“No. I’m too tired now.”

“We’ll call when we get there. As soon as we can.”

“OK.”

“In no time at all, we will send for you.”

“OK.”

“Good-bye.” Kin opens the door but turns back. “I’m sorry to go.”

She holds then lets go of his hand one last time. “Son,” she says, “some people travel oceans to find their home.”

Kin steps out quickly and pays the driver double to take his mother home. Trolley in hand, he makes his way towards the entrance of the departure hall. His wife and child will be arriving soon.

Through the double doors, everything dazzles bright, white, and clean. A polite floral fragrance greets him. He sees outlines of people out of focus and the tumbling letters on a notice board, promising escape. His trolley wants to hurtle down the long ramp to the lobby. He steadies it. He knows when he leaves her sight, she will haggle the driver for the second half of the fee and take the bus home. She will stop at the market to get vegetables and a cheap cut of meat, before heading up the old, rumbling elevator of her public housing estate. At her door, she will struggle with the heavy metal grate, heave it open slowly, fumble again with the key and lock. Inside, the walls hold a single bed, a square Formica table, a tattered sofa, a TV cabinet. The kitchen and bathroom are the size of closets. She will sit for a while, cook herself a simple meal, have loud

conversations through the grate with her neighbours, watch programming that will increasingly flash red with yellow stars. Kin knows this is where she'll die.

He doesn't look back. He pushes on, picks up the pace. The wheels of his trolley grind faster. He breaks into a run, his trainers slapping against the inclined tile. Down he goes until he slams on the handlebar brakes of the trolley and comes to a halt. At the bottom of the ramp, on the even ground between his mother outside and the airport beyond, he gives himself permission to cry.

Biography

Dawn Lo is a Hong Kong-born Canadian writer with an MA in Creative Writing from Goldsmiths. Her work has appeared in *The Offing*, a special project by *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Best Asian Short Stories Anthology 2022* and elsewhere. She has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize.

PRISON OF PERSPECTIVES

by Manasvini Ranganathan

Inside a dark cell

I look down at the white and black stripes I don and try to jog my memories for when I wore different colors. My recollection fails. I resign myself to pacing to and fro in my cell. The dark moldy walls have vermin crawling in its crevices. And a putrid smell persists, as I rue the lack of ventilation. Water intermittently drips on my head, making me shiver and try to shake it off. I sift through my mind hoping for something to distract me from the discomfort of my dwelling. The cheerful banter of the caretakers disrupts my thoughts. I hear them discuss going home for the festive season. I want to go home too!

Cold gruel is poured into a plate and slid across the cell floor towards me. This action of the Caretaker gives me a momentary glimpse of the sunlight outside. I become nostalgic about my hometown: of its dew-laden grass and petrichor. I dream of the saltiness of the coast as it stung my eyes and yet reminded me that I was indeed alive and well. I recall scouting the water for fish with my siblings and chasing rabbits—both with equally dismal success. I reminisce of the warm embrace of my mother as she fiercely doted over us. She tried to shield us from the cruelty of the world, of which I was blissfully unaware of as a young one.

I quickly force myself back to reality. Much of my hometown no longer exists. Even if it did exist, I could no longer go back. I am destined to play a cruel waiting game with the Grim Reaper in this walled darkness.

Although I crave meat, I swallow the cold gruel. The person in the white coat told the caretakers that I must not eat meat due to my ill health. In my defense, there's a limit to the amount of exercise I can get in a four-by-four-foot cell. I could have gotten some training if they had let me back into the grounds. But the last time that happened, things went wrong. I fatally wounded a person who provoked me. It wasn't one of my proudest moments when I let the beast in me surface and take over my finer graces.

When I came to my senses, the person's head was almost severed; their limbs had been mangled from trying to resist my violent blows. My body was covered by their blood in patches of red, looking even more grotesque against the somber colors on me. The incident sealed my fate and, I was sentenced to solitary confinement. I am now, indeed, a prisoner not only of the body but also of my thoughts. I should no longer find any reason to exist in my current predicament. But today I have an appointment and an important one at that. I am thankful for the reprieve that will rescue me from this monotony.

A frail figure walks in. The Caretaker looks at them with curiosity before realizing that it is time for their favorite sitcom and bolts out of the door. Nevertheless, the Caretaker does not forget to caution the Frail Figure about signaling for help. This precaution is necessary if I attempt to break the glass partition that separates me from them.

The Frail Figure sits quietly and observes my movements before scribbling something in their note. They touch the glass partition: their eyes are a mixture of amazement at my deplorable living conditions and pity for the same. Then the Frail Figure turns their back and leaves the

room. The glass partition is then made opaque once again, obscuring my vision. It returns me to complete darkness and my abysmal thoughts.

Outside the Establishment

The Establishment has neatly manicured lawns and colorful walls. It sprawls across a few hundred acres and is thickly wooded. But many rays of sunlight are found peeking between the gaps of the dense foliage. This scenery is a sharp contrast to the Prisoner's living conditions.

I stand outside the Establishment protesting the Prisoner's confinement. In the past, many passionate youths supported me. We held huge placards and our sonorous voices resonated even a few blocks away. But only I remain now. The placards I carry have also grown worn out: the writing has been smudged, the ends have grown frayed. I still attract a few passersby. They linger but don't stay.

A stream of weary ragpickers traverses the road to pursue water and food. I share with them the last of my supplies. They settle down under the shade of the Establishment's flashy advertisement and partake in their rare meal. I can't help but think that the heartless have begotten many homeless.

The sun is now at the pinnacle of its ascent. A frail figure exits the Establishment and makes a beeline towards me. They begin to look at the paraphernalia as I nurse my aching voice with a swig of cool sherbet. By the time the Frail Figure has appeared, I have petitioned about a hundred people who exited the Establishment, which regularly receives countless footfalls. The sweat collects on my brow, and I sit resigned and disinterested in the Frail Figure who peruses the placards and pamphlets.

Then the Frail Figure softly whispers, "What would you give to have the Prisoner released?"

My ears perk up, and I instantly straighten up, scrutinizing them. They unflinchingly stand their ground, smiling enigmatically, as I tower over them. They barely come up to my chest and are dressed in drab, threadbare clothes, which seem like they could unravel any moment. Their spectacles glisten as the beads of perspiration settle on the bridge of their nose, but they seem unperturbed by it. Contrary to their frailness, their countenance is striking. The energy that radiates from them makes me wary and uncomfortable. I feel defeated upon being unable to break their tough exterior.

After a few seconds, I resumed my seat stretching my legs. The Frail Figure brushes down their outfit and sits gracefully opposite me, their stare sharp and focused.

"What's in it for you?" I ask, fidgeting with the placards, still skeptical that they belong to the faction supporting the Establishment and the people behind it. I wonder if the Establishment had sent the Frail Figure to persuade me to leave.

"I just met the Prisoner. Don't you want to know how they are doing?" the Frail Figure states with a smirk plastered on their face. I squirm, mentally cursing the Frail Figure who was getting on my nerves by just their presence. I calm my inner turmoil by remembering my primary purpose for all this struggle and effort.

I first encountered the Prisoner in all their magnificence. My mind went to the lines, "Tyger, Tyger burning bright, in the forest of the night," ([Blake, 1789](#)) and I couldn't help but want to see the Prisoner go back to the forest where they belong, not languish in the rotten, sequestered

dungeon that they are forced to live out their days. This trapeze down memory lane makes me steel my resolve to confront this obtrusive person.

I lean forward, facing the Frail Figure, and tighten my posture. I fixate my eyes on the Frail Figure and ask them, "Have you read Kipling?" "Why, of course," they snort, rather offended at such a fundamental question, "although I don't understand how that answers my question." "I don't mean the first book, which is for children," I growl. "I mean the second one."

They looked at me as if I was delirious. I continue ignoring the Frail Figure's impertinence. "The human reigns supreme over all other creatures, and that is the law of the jungle. But the tiger shall have their 'one night' (Kipling, 2005) when they shall trump over humans and let them feel the fiery roar that made Asia tremble", I summarize one of Kipling's lines from the lesser-known book.

Today as humans, we imprison the Prisoner for our amusement or justify the same by stating the possibility of extinction. But a day shall come when the Prisoner shall have their revenge. That is the law of Nature. Nature always finds a way to repay tenfold the destruction caused by humans.

"The pitch blackness of the Prisoner's quarters is justified under the feeble excuse of them being nocturnal. The Establishment sprawls over a staggering fifty acres. Yet the Prisoner is entrapped in a room where one can't even swing a cat, leave alone one of the most majestic ones. "I vehemently added. Recovering my composure, I picked up my water pitcher and doused myself in water to quell the heat.

"Doesn't the Establishment have a better environment for them; they are safe from poaching. They have good breeding programs to increase their numbers" the Frail Figure takes advantage of the pause in my monologue to interject.

My mind traces a vision of a majestic figure in white and black stripes crouching languidly with feline grace by the watering hole. I hear a gunshot echo the valley and see the Prisoner gasping for air." I shudder, my mind returning to the present.

"Are zoos safer, or are we just comforting ourselves that many like the Prisoners are not out in the open where they can lose their lives to poachers and become doormats for the opulent to spill their wine on?" Who is the glass partition for: Is it for the beast within or the monsters that put him there? They are watching from the other side of the glass, free and amused by the Prisoner's desperation.

The Frail Figure interjects my long monologue, "But the truth is, we have no way of knowing what the Prisoner wants. We cannot speak their language. So what gives you and me the right to decide on their behalf" questioned the Frail Figure.

These words of the Frail Figure shook my core. I began to doubt and rethink my conviction. Can we genuinely decide on behalf of the pets in our home and the animals in our zoo? Can we decide and be responsible for the Prisoner, at the cost of the safety of those they encounter?

And then, it dawned on me. What gives me the right to pen the supposed feelings and wretchedness of a tiger in the zoo: Isn't the Prisoner's narrative but my groundless presumption on how tigers might feel about zoos and the enclosures they inhabit? If the veil of ignorance

[\(Rawls,1999\)](#) is lifted and I find myself in that dark moldy cell without sunlight, will I regret not having persisted in my fight to free the Prisoner?

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Biography

The author is an LLM graduate from Azim Premji University and currently works in Law & Policy Research. Her interests include gender rights, environmental rights, and Law & Literature. Her writing can be found in the *Leaflet*, *Rising Phoenix Review*, *Indian Periodicals*, *Dime Show Review*, etc. She hails from a small city surrounded by hills called Salem located in Tamil Nadu, India.

STILL HERE

by Joanna Cockerline

I didn't hold you when you died. No one did.

I'd seen you that morning, at the Shell station. It was just before morning rush hour and you came across the sidewalk in a cami and cutoffs, flip flops smacking the already warming pavement. Your hair was pulled into a messy ponytail and your eyeliner was worn, sparkles from last night's makeup barely left of your shadow.

You looked tired, not unlike many people that time of day. You could have been one of the summertime tourists, hours into the trip. A mom striding from her minivan to the gas station, beelining for a washroom, a minute's peace, and a bag of chips to bribe truces in the back seat – you had something of a fatigued battle-weariness to you. You could have been anyone.

I'd brought what you wanted. It was all in a bag in the trunk of my car. What you wanted, and then some.

There was the dress we'd talked about, fitted but a muted blue, not too dowdy but not too flashy, either.

Certainly nothing to collect suspicious looks. I'd brought a second one, too, a bit longer in case that sore on your leg was flaring up again. No need for questions. I'd brought two bras, two different sizes because you kept getting smaller these days.

You didn't have to ask if I'd brought it. You reached for the hanger I held out, along with the weekend bag: a donation, but nice. Our town has some wealthy people and was good for things like that.

When I'd packed the bag last night, I'd tried to think of everything. Shampoo, conditioner, body lotion, deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste. Two perfumes, those tiny sample sizes, so you could choose which one you liked. Hairbrush and comb, bobby pins held together by a hair elastic. Black eyeliner and then one that would match your eyes. Shadow, which you already had, but just in case you didn't have any with you at the time. Mascara and two shades of lipstick, both tactfully muted in different ways. Foundation, powder, cover-up – those were essential. There was no way to fully hide the sores, but makeup could make them less noticeable from a distance. Up close, they could be mosquito bites, someone gone camping unprepared.

“I'm so nervous,” you said, quiet, glancing towards the highway. Summer tourist traffic had already started to clog.

“You've got this.”

“I've got to.”

When you peeked inside the bag, I saw your nail polish was fresh, different than from the night before. Your hands were almost clean. Sometimes you binned in garbage cans for recycling, and had grime in the swirls of your callouses, but you had clearly scrubbed hard.

“She's been texting me all morning,” you told me as you thumbed through the bag. There was the card I hadn't mentioned, but when you saw it, from the way your shoulders changed just slightly, you seemed glad it was there. It was a bright explosion of colours, sparkly stars and a CONGRATULATIONS bursting across the front. Inside was blank. I'd brought a pen, too, so

you could write her a message while on the bus. Five hours was a long stretch but you were determined to do this.

“She keeps asking when my bus will arrive.”

“Four thirty. And they’ll meet you there?”

“That’s what she said.” When you wiped your hands on your cut-offs they left damp smears.

You sucked in sharply.

“She’ll be so happy to see you.”

“I just can’t mess this up. This... she’s the first from our family to graduate, you know.”

“That’s awesome.”

“She’s getting an award. Two, actually. One for math and one for music.” You laughed, not happily. “If it weren’t for the stretch marks to prove it, I wouldn’t believe we were related.”

Your hair was catching in the wind, gold where the sun shone through it. It was warm already, sunny, ready to be a lovely day.

“Mmkay, I better go. D’s gonna give me a ride to the bus station.”

I glanced towards my car.

“It’s okay. Just gotta do a couple things before I go.”

“Everything you need’s in there,” I said, wanting you to look through it, to see that everything was there to make this special, to make this possible. I wanted you to look through it so you knew you could do this.

Along with the bras and makeup there was a fashion magazine, a crossword book, and a sudoku, a hopeful attempt at distracting you, keeping you occupied if all you wanted to do was go back to that bathroom at the end of the bus and do the thing you vowed you would not do, not on this day. There was a bottle of water and a can of cola, some fruit chew candy—the cravings would be fierce and you were going to have to do something—and a granola bar, Band-aids and wipes. Two kinds of wipes, just like there were two kinds of underwear. I wasn't naïve enough to think you wouldn't work if you had to.

But on the way back. Not before grad. You'd get there, you'd be there for her, you'd stay quiet enough around the rest of the family and not let them get to you. We both knew you'd use, but later. You'd be there for her and even if you weren't with her for now you'd be in the photographs, a mother and daughter in dresses, each with a corsage. You'd smile together. Make a new memory together. That photograph would be a promise of what was to come, that repairs can happen and forgiveness is possible. That everything can be made up, in time.

You turned then, walked from the Shell station. It was near the corner where you worked and I'd seen you there countless times, usually at dark. In the day you really did look like you were just someone a bit dishevelled from being on a car trip too long. I'd long since abandoned the notion that women working down here were young and pretty and sparkly. Sure, there were miniskirted teens in their stiletto boots, boots they still wore because they were new enough they didn't yet know sometimes this work meant you had to run. These sparkly girls looked the part, but that clean sparkliness didn't usually last, or they didn't, and most of the women down here looked like you. Just an ordinary person, a bit frayed.

I watched you walk away and I hoped.

And I hoped through the day, in between emails at work and in line at the food store, while waiting at traffic lights and getting distracted by a bus that was the same type as the one you would be on. Four thirty came and I pictured you straightening your dress, stepping off the bus and wiping your hands, nervous but determined. The dress would be a bit wrinkled from the long ride but not too wrinkly: weeks ago we'd agreed that I'd hang on to it until the morning you left. It wasn't that you weren't capable of keeping it nice; it's just that in the shelter things got stolen and on the street things went missing, and this mattered too much to risk.

The next night, when you still hadn't texted, I didn't get a call. I'm not family. Not kin. Am I even a friend, exactly? What are we? What –

This isn't how the story should end. If it were a proper story there would be redemption.

Struggle, adversity, conflict, tears, yes – but redemption. Or at least an attempt at reconciliation.

A mother and daughter in a photograph if nothing else, flowers pinned on chests and a bouquet in the girl's hands, that girl thankfully seventeen without needing braces and years ago taller than you, though you didn't know when, exactly, that happened. A photograph of difficult smiles, of struggle, of simmering anger and a legacy of disappointment, but also of hope. A memory made, nonetheless.

But there wasn't that. And there wasn't a text and there wasn't a call that next night.

There was just Lacy, spinning on the heel of her little plum getaway boots, her worn leather jacket stained red and yellow from the glow of the Shell sign behind her, her fingers rubbing the

hem of her jean skirt in that way she did when she'd been waiting too long or when something was up.

And when Lacy looked at me her eyes told me before her mouth did. Her eyes were shiny in the fragments of light, hard and soft all at once, her gaze right there and yet so impossibly far away.

And I didn't yet know about the man, the night-shift man who'd been sweeping, who found you.

You curled against the lockers in the bus station just blocks from here, curled against a wall in that way I'd seen you many times before, sleeping, hair across your face to keep the world out.

I'll never know what the phone found beside your hand said, if there was any message at all, sent or received.

I don't even know who has your phone now. Things like that happen all the time out here – your phone has probably already been resold, or gone somehow, living its next life. And you, you're still here, in this city, maybe even wearing that dress, with maybe your makeup still vibrant, still here.

But that is not how this story should end.

Biography

Joanna Cockerline, B.A., M.A., is a writer and street-level outreach activist based in unceded Syilx Territory also known as Kelowna, BC, Canada. A CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) Literary Awards prizewinner, her fiction and poetry have been published in national and international publications such as Room, The Fiddlehead, and En Route. She teaches in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at the University of British Columbia Okanagan, and is at a work on a novel focused on street-level sex work, Still.

SILENT PROTEST

by Jen Ross

Natálie hurries across the train platform at the Náměstí Míru Metro Station in Prague's picturesque city centre. She passes the towering spires of the 19th century basilica of Saint Ludmila, where Roma girls in shabby dresses gather in droves to beg.

Her workplace is still ten blocks away, but she walks – for the exercise and to avoid the confusion of another train transfer. She can't hear the announcements if there is a delay.

Having lost her hearing at age 6 after a meningitis infection, the doctors had tried hearing aids and an operation, both to no avail.

Her teacher had tried to accommodate her by writing out words or drawing pictures, but would often forget to face her so she could read her lips.

"I don't understand what you're saying!" Natálie blurted out one day, nearly in tears. Although she couldn't hear their laughter, the sight of the kids' gaping mouths and contorted faces traumatized her for years.

Natálie's parents hired a tutor after school, initially to help her catch up. Eventually to teach her Czech sign language.

"Maybe we should switch her to one of those special schools?" her mother suggested one day.

"Don't you think she should grow up as *normal* as possible?" her father asked.

"But she's struggling. She comes home crying and doesn't know how to do her homework."

Her father nodded: “Ok, but we don’t know what they teach at *those* schools.”

“Well, it would help having teachers who can communicate without sound. And she could make friends with other deaf students. Haven’t you noticed that she doesn’t get invited to birthday parties anymore?”

“Friends only get kids into trouble!” her father retorted.

So, Natálie had remained at the public school, struggling socially and academically, and growing hypersensitive to her classmates’ body language. She’d notice their eyes roll when the teacher stopped to draw her a picture. By the end of the school year, it was obvious to everyone that a special school was the best option.

The School for the Deaf was 45 minutes away by train, which made her father grumpy because he had to wake up early to take Natálie there on his way to work at the factory. Her mother, a tour guide, reduced her working hours so she could pick Natálie up after school.

But Natálie loved the commute and staring out the train windows at the world whizzing by, imagining where she might one day find her place in it.

Her new teachers used ‘total communication’, expressing words in writing, with pictures, mime and sign language.

She made two close friends, who she’d get ice cream, have tea parties and play board games with on weekends.

After her parents bought her a laptop, everything was easier. Natálie started excelling, particularly in math and technology. She mastered Czech sign language and started learning English online. By high school, she was taking French, as well as online American sign language

in her spare time.

To practice, she joined some online chat groups for people with disabilities, communicating primarily in English and soon making virtual friends around the world.

Who out there feels alone sometimes? she posted in her first online foray, under the alias DeafCzech.

All 10 people online at the time agreed that they often felt lonely and misunderstood by family and friends. One person confided that he felt so alone he'd contemplated suicide.

Never think of that! Natálie had responded. *Have you ever heard Nietzsche's saying: 'What does not kill us makes us stronger'?* Remember that.

Many others expressed encouragement, sympathy and support. A touching display of openness and sharing among strangers. Shielded by aliases, there was comfort in their anonymity. Natálie too found herself expressing deep-seated fears she hadn't even shared with her best friends.

They chatted about school, work, and challenges with transportation or access to public spaces. They shared practical solutions for day-to-day problems, like pocket devices with different vibrations to mark different sounds, like the doorbell or fire alarm.

Natálie loved socializing online and spent much of her spare time on the Internet.

"Don't you worry?" her mother asked her father one night. "She spends so much time in front of a screen. She should be outside or with friends."

"Hey, at least she's not doing drugs or getting into trouble."

The Internet expanded Natálie's horizons, connecting her with people facing similar challenges around the world. At the same time, it frustrated her to come across videos without closed captions or PDFs that her blind friends couldn't read. So, she endeavoured to change that. She took up coding, learning HTML and JavaScript within weeks. By the time she was 15, Natálie was a skilled web developer.

François, a blind online friend from France, encouraged her to look for a part-time job while. He had one with a telecommunications company, cold-calling clients to convince them to upgrade their services.

Natálie hadn't really thought of working, imagining doors being shut because of her disability. But she liked the idea of earning her own money and felt emboldened by her online community.

So, she prepared a résumé, mainly listing her languages and coding skills. After a few months of unanswered open solicitations, she decided to visit a few web development companies. The first was a small start-up making mobile-responsive websites and apps.

She took a deep breath before opening the heavy glass doors that stood between her and the white beanbag chairs in the lobby. When the bubbly, manicured young woman at the reception started speaking, Natálie carefully followed her lips, acing the initial greetings and handing over her résumé. But when the young woman started smacking her gum and speaking into her desk, Natálie could no longer make out the words.

“So, a chick who can code, huh?” said the young woman, flipping her lop-sided bangs. “Nice! We usually get geeky guys applying here.”

The receptionist laughed, so Natálie did too.

“So, what kind of work are you looking for, exactly?”

Natálie smiled nervously, not having understood what the receptionist said. After some time, she looked up impatiently, one eyebrow raised. Knowing she was busted, Natálie grabbed her notebook, scrawled a piece of paper and handed it to the woman: *I am hearing impaired, could you please repeat your question, slowly?*

The colour drained from the young woman’s face as she read. “I’m so sorry!”

After an awkward pause, she continued: “You are a bit young,” she mouthed, exaggerating her pronunciation.

Natálie got the message. She smiled politely and left in a hurry. Flustered and unable to hear the honking of an oncoming taxi, she narrowly escaped getting hit as she absentmindedly crossed the street. Natálie wanted to run home, halfway across Prague, after that.

Two years and hundreds of applications later, without having received a single call from an employer, Natálie worked up the courage to try visiting a few companies in-person again. Now 17 and graduating soon, she expected the search to be easier.

The first company on her list was a few blocks from the train station, on Lužická, a quaint street lined with large trees that would make for beautiful autumn walks to work. But the office was on an upper floor and, although she tried pressing the intercom and speaking intermittently, she couldn’t tell if anyone answered.

She decided to try another place.

A red-and-white tram slinked alongside her, down the centre of a wide cobblestone street interrupted by sleek metal tracks. She sighed as she found the next address: a white six-storey building. She hoped it wouldn't have an intercom. The ornate arched entrance was wide enough for a car, so she walked in, spotting an elevator. The agency was on the top floor.

Out the elevator and down a dimly lit hall, Natálie found a door etched with the agency's gold initials and knocked. A tall young man emerged, welcoming her into the overly air-conditioned office. Natálie handed him her résumé, this time with a note explaining that she was hearing impaired and looking for work. He smiled wide, almost congratulatorily.

The man motioned for her to sit on a worn beige couch as he her résumé attentively. Meanwhile, she scanned the small workplace, with its barren walls, eight small cubicles and two small offices. Most were empty, since it was lunch time.

The man motioned for her to follow him to one of the offices, where he handed her a tablet and sat behind his computer to type.

“Here, this might be easier;” his note appeared on the screen. *“Tell me what interested you about us?”*

Feeling as if she were being seen for the first time, Natálie smiled appreciatively typed:

“I’ve done my research on you. I love your portfolio, responsive web design, and attention to accessibility.”

“Are you looking for a part-time job?”

“Yes. I’m finishing high school next year and want to pursue web development or design. I’ve taken online courses but I’d really like some hands-on experience in the workplace.”

“Let me ask you another question: From what you’ve seen, what could we do better?”

Natálie wasn’t sure how to respond. She didn’t want to criticize when trying to make a good first impression. Still, she had analysed their website from a disability perspective and found a few flaws. She paused before typing:

“I appreciate your efforts to make your content accessible for people with disabilities...”

Natálie immediately studied his face after hitting send. She always told her parents you can tell a person’s true state of mind by watching their micro reactions within the first seconds. The man’s left eyebrow rose slightly, perhaps in doubt: *“Do you think we could be doing better on accessibility?”*

“Well, there is room for improvement,” she wrote, smiling and shrugging apologetically.

After pausing to look at the time on his computer, the man wrote: *“I’m sorry. I actually have a conference call shortly with some clients.”*

Shit. I blew it, Natálie thought.

“But... I’d like you to come back next week and show me where you think we could improve. Are you available next Wednesday?” he asked.

“Absolutely!” replied Natálie, adding three happy-face emoticons. Overkill.

Then they shook hands and smiled the kind of genuine smiles strangers seldom share. He handed her his business card: *Michal Salát, Director, MD Design.*

When Natálie returned the following week, she had studied the company's content methodically and come loaded with questions and ideas about where they could improve their accessibility.

When she first sat down with Michal, his colleagues – also men in their 30s, she guessed – initially looked skeptical. But as she typed and motioned at her screen, they began glancing at one another approvingly.

After about 20 minutes, Michal interjected: *“Natálie, this is most useful insight. We would love to have you join our team!”*

Choking back tears of joy, Natálie cupped her hands over her mouth to muffle a squeal.

Natálie's parents wept and danced with her when she told them the news that evening.

The following week, Natálie was setting up cute fuzzy pink picture frames and postcards in her cubicle beneath the nameplate: Accessibility Intern.

She was the youngest member of the team, the only one working part-time, the only female, and the only one with a disability. Despite all of this, she felt welcomed.

Her boss told Natálie that he had privately spoken to all seven of his employees before she arrived, asking them to be mindful of that fact that she couldn't hear, and asking her to remind them if needed. They did sometimes forget, finding themselves in radio silence if they spoke to her when she wasn't looking. But that didn't bother her.

What she *did* find annoying was her colleagues leaving the toilet seat up in their shared

bathroom. Most also acted like they were her teachers, and they didn't appreciate hearing her advice on design elements unrelated to accessibility.

Besides that, Natálie loved working, being part of a team, being free to use her creativity, and problem-solving. And Michal made her feel respected for her ideas and opinions.

By the time she'd been with MD Designs for more than a year, Michal decided to hire another young intern. Her new cubicle mate, Marek, was also 18.

But he didn't even try to communicate with her. He had big blue eyes and well-groomed blond hair. If he hadn't been so stand-offish, Natálie would have found him quite attractive. But Marek soon made everything a competition. He would often criticize Natálie during meetings, garnering disapproving looks from Michal.

Then one day as he was about to leave for lunch, seemingly in a rush, Marek sent her an odd email: *"Another day at the grind, want to hook up later?"*

Judging by the tone of the rest of the email, Natálie quickly surmised that it was intended for another Natálie.

"Remind me why I do this for 25,000 crowns a month?" he signed off.

Natálie balked. What a liar! They didn't make that much! She earned 20,000 crowns and had been working a year longer than Marek. Surely he was inflating his salary to impress this other Natálie.

She replied politely, informing Marek that he had accidentally sent the email to her, adding:

"Maybe you should be honest with her about your salary! LOL."

Natálie watched over her shoulder as Marek read the email. His face went pink with embarrassment. Then, he wrinkled his face at what she imagined by now was her final comment. He looked over at her and shrugged, as if to ask why she thought he was being dishonest.

His reaction felt like a punch. So, he *was* earning more than her.

The rest of the day, Natálie went about her work without her usual drive. The spring was gone from her step on the walk home.

Over the coming days Natálie kept wondering if she was being paid less because she was a girl, or because she was disabled – or both. Michal had been so understanding about her disability.

That couldn't be the reason! Perhaps, then, it was because she was a girl. She was the only one on the team, after all. Marek was her age, so it couldn't be an age thing.

She was young, disabled and a girl. Three strikes.

Natálie pondered the kinds of intersecting discrimination other girls faced, picturing the Roma girls begging in the plaza she passed on the way to work. There were never any boys there. They didn't even speak Czech. She remembered the movie she'd seen about a black girl who was a slave, mistreated and sexually abused. So many other girls around the world lived on the margins because of their gender, while other things made their lives even more challenging.

The thought ignited something deep within. An idea for a platform she could create just for girls. A way for them to share their hopes, fears and ideas for change. A way to band together, in silent protest.

Biography

I'm a Chilean-Canadian (dual national) journalist with hundreds of nonfiction articles published in newspapers and magazines around the world. I also spent 10 years working for the UN (including OHCHR), in Chile and in New York, before moving to my husband's country, Aruba, where I took time off to write my first fiction and now reside and work as a freelance writer and editor.

My creative nonfiction has appeared in *Guernica Magazine*; my poetry in *The Poet Magazine* and *Better than Starbucks*; my short stories have appeared in *The Pine Cone Review* and *The Global Youth Review* (with another forthcoming in the *Arlington Literary Journal*); and I have novelette published in the *Everlast* anthology by Dragon Soul Press.