

JUNG YOUNG MOON

# Home on the Range

*Translated from Korean by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton*

I WAS STAYING WITH A FRIEND back then. Not my Friend of All Friends. Just someone I'd gotten to know, and we'd hit it off. That was my perception anyway. He wasn't a fussy sort. I wasn't either. Everything was fine with him. And with me too. The house he lived in was smack dab in the middle of a livestock range. And the range was a perfectly natural surrounding. The range and the house were his. That range was home to a herd of sheep. There was no other livestock, no milk cows or domesticated deer. There were rabbits, but the sheep were the priority.

There was a hill on the range, a gentle slope. Walking up that hill wasn't a chore as long as I didn't overdo it. But I didn't take much pleasure from the walk unless I was herding the sheep. Which for the most part involved lying on the grass at a distance as they grazed. My favorite place was a craterlike hollow midway up the hill, where I would lie still and gaze at the sky. From there the sky was confined by the near outlines of the hill. But from higher up it was vast.

I liked to refer to this range of ours as a free range. Granted it was fenced, but the term *free range* made me feel that all life within it ranged freely. To be sure, the free-ranging sheep had to turn back at the fence, knowing they shouldn't go outside it. They could have if they'd wanted—the fence was old and broken-down—but they didn't. Whether this was a matter of learned behavior or inborn timidity I couldn't tell.

I wasn't sure how many sheep were in the herd. And my friend never told me. If I was curious I could have asked. But it didn't matter to me. And there weren't that many of them. I could have counted them easily enough—even if they were on the move.

But I viewed them as a herd, and they moved as a herd. One of the main characteristics I discovered about sheep is that they like forming themselves into a herd. From time to time I found one or two strays, but they soon came to their senses and made their way back to

where they belonged. And when the sheep were on the move, they made sure the herd didn't leave them behind. By nature sheep were not loners.

At the times when sheep are usually sheared, our sheep weren't. Their fleece didn't look attractive, because we neglected to groom them. In any event, we had little use for their wool; they were being raised for their meat instead. But prospective buyers of mature sheep for their meat were few. Considering the lack of demand, it was a blessing that the herd wasn't large. The main consumers of their meat were those who shepherded them—namely my friend and me and two helping hands. These two men lived in the nearby village and came by once every few days to help with chores. They put in their time, then took a break or, if they'd slaughtered a sheep, ate some of the mutton before taking the leftovers home to their families. They both hit the bottle hard and were always a bit tipsy.

Our range was in a remote area and difficult to find, but there were occasional visitors in the form of stragglers who had missed the turn to the large cattle ranch nearby, which catered to tourists. Hanging from our gatepost was a welcome sign, but you might not have felt welcome at the sight of the post leaning so far that the sign almost touched the ground. Next to the sign was the kind of small stone pagoda you would see on the path to a temple up in the hills. I never did figure out why it was there. Nor could my friend enlighten me. There was no temple adjoining our pasture.

I functioned as a guide to the lost souls who showed up at our gate. But I didn't go on at length about the sheep, and I only answered those questions that struck my fancy. Once these accidental tourists realized I wasn't their friendly neighborhood guide, they shut up. Mainly I wanted to prevent them from getting up close and personal with our sheep or squealing and startling them. Whenever kids were present, I had to be on constant alert lest a miscreant throw something at them. Despite my best efforts a kid occasionally succeeded at this nefarious deed, earning an instant ejection. That created discord with the parents, but I stood firm. I was not unaware that I was an imperfect guide, but I didn't mind.

The serene range never seemed to change, but it wore a different aspect from one season to the next. During the long, snow-packed winter the sheep stayed quietly in their pen. Nibbling at the hay tossed to them at feeding time, they waited for winter to end so they could go

back out on the range. They liked summer best, when the pasture was covered with new grass that they could graze to their hearts' content, to the accompaniment of a mad chorus of screaming insects.

The range was absolute heaven for a butterfly collector. Butterflies were plentiful, and some of their patterns were absolutely beautiful. But there were no tiger swallowtails, my favorite. In my humble opinion they are incomparable. And so I felt no attachment to the butterflies fluttering over our range. But that didn't stop them from passing overhead, dancing enticingly for one another, never for me, moving sometimes in a line and sometimes front to back or back to front. For all I knew, their dancing was meant to impart detailed information about honey to their comrades, in the way honeybees do—how far away the honey-infused flowers are, how to get there, how yummy the honey is. Whatever the case, there seemed to be meaning to their dancing.

For me the most affecting time on the range was when no sheep were to be seen. In the morning, when the range was frequently shrouded in mist, or on a midsummer day when the skies clouded over and thick fog curtained the pasture, the sheep were concealed, their existence known only through their bleating, sometimes from afar and sometimes nearby. Never did the range feel as eerie and yet cozy as it did then. Such moments were almost surreal. Unless you experienced them at that time and place it would be difficult to really feel yourself seized by that surreal eeriness.

My position at the range was ambiguous. I had arrived as a guest but there was no way I could remain a guest there forever. My friend the owner had hoped I would be a helping hand but learned right off I wasn't of much use in that capacity and gave up on the idea. Even so, I became a caretaker, or something resembling a caretaker. In my mind, that is; no one bestowed on me that title. But I did nothing in the way of caretaking, or in any specific role for that matter. I did, though, volunteer in a few different ways for my friend. As long as it wasn't physically demanding. I didn't do what I wasn't cut out for. What I mainly did was watch the herd in the way I thought they wanted to be watched, and to listen to their bleating in the way I thought they wished to be heard. And I didn't let them stray beyond the fence—but I didn't consider that task absolutely necessary, because they had never done that before. But I performed that task anyway. If something wasn't absolutely necessary I tended not to do it, but who wants to get hung up on tendencies?

Day in and day out I kept an eye on the sheep but never did I develop great affection for each and every one of them. My friend knew each of them, but I didn't. To me the sheep existed as a herd, and I dealt with them as a herd. If I picked one out of the crowd, I wasn't left with a good impression. The individual somehow came across to me as irritated and nervous, and indeed it was not that those sheep lacked such traits. They were distrusting and in no way sheepish—totally different from docile, trusting cows. And different as well from goats, which, though ornery, are also adorable. I could have spent time in close proximity to any of the sheep, but I felt there was something ominous about that. They were all right as a herd, though, and the ominous feeling I experienced with a single sheep was absent. Needless to say, this was all a matter of my own feelings.

What I liked about the sheep was their appearance. They looked like they were chewing their thoughts the way a ruminant chews its cud. They chewed and they chewed, all day long. Their day was spent chewing. With their four-compartment stomach they chewed and swallowed and regurgitated and chewed all over again. All the while they looked to be lost in thought, but I didn't think they actually were. Rather than thought-loss they appeared thought-less, what with the endless movement of their chin in time with their chewing. But they could also resemble deep thinkers—though I had no idea whatever it was they might have been thinking. Anyway, their enigmatic look was food for my own thought.

I had hoped in a vague sort of way to spend a year there. A vague sort of year. But that didn't mean I wanted to see the range in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. There was no reason it had to be a year. But a year had passed and I hadn't left. How could I leave before I found a reason to leave? Where I happened to be was no longer important for me.

For a time I didn't venture outside my home on the range. I had come to feel that the world beyond was off limits. But then I broadened my radius, like livestock sneaking through a gap in the fence to sniff the outside world.

My first discovery during my strolls beyond the range was a nearby quarry. And there, my intrigue camouflaged by a tedious expression, I watched the sweaty stonemason industriously chiseling a gravestone or some such object. He didn't seem to mind being observed. Not that my watchful eye made him more industrious. He worked at the same

industrious rate, to the point that I wanted to tell him not to overdo it. I was absorbed in watching him absorbed in his work. Once in a while I dozed off, only to be awakened by the ring of chisel against rock, a sound that brought me to my feet. How would I like to help him? he once asked me. I had to chuckle, it was such a preposterous notion.

There was also a river nearby, and one day I tagged along with my friend to a potter's studio there. My friend and the potter made a big production out of greeting each other. The potter's lifestyle was a bit too intense for my taste. That intensity could be detected in his every word, indeed was reflected in his every word. But the intensity of his life didn't seem in any way positive. I have to say I find the intense approach to life a bit laughable. I myself have taken the opposite approach and have no complaints about my rather insipid life.

And on a lark I went to a temple. I was sure I had never gone there before, but somehow I felt as if I had. As I grew older everything began to feel like a rerun, either exactly the same or only slightly changed, and while this seemed natural, the moment a rerun began I couldn't help feeling that something was peculiar. I got to chat with the old monk at the temple. When I mentioned that he came across to me as a sort of fraud, he didn't exactly deny it. Not that his speech was laced with obscenities, mind you, but now and then a vulgarity was mixed in. It was fun shooting the breeze with him. He liked to talk about women. And suddenly he would launch himself toward the dharma hall to chant a sutra while beating on his wooden fish. I followed him there, sat nearby, and gawked at his shenanigans. When he was finished he would give me a deadpan look and we went back to our bantering.

I enjoyed listening to his chanting, which filled the cool dharma hall with a tone that was more languid than clear and ringing. For fun I followed along, and even memorized a few lines: "When Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was practicing the profound Prajna Paramita, he illuminated the Five Skandhas and saw that they are all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty. Shariputra, form, does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. Form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. So too are feeling, cognition, formation, and consciousness."<sup>1</sup> The Heart Sutra was the only sutra he liked to chant; I wondered if he knew any others.

When he was done, we each had a cup of tea. Not bad, the monk kept saying—his subtle way of emphasizing its quality. I gently shook my cup so the floating tea leaves would sink, but they kept floating.

“Come on, just drink it,” said the monk. And to show me, he drank his tea, leaves and all. Again I gave my cup a gentle shake, but the leaves stayed afloat. What the heck—I went ahead and drank it as is. Between sips of tea the monk told me in so many words to chill out, not be a stick in the mud, and open my heart—there was no set way of doing things. I responded with a shrug. Which brought another prescription. Staring at me, he said, “Live the way you are!” Enjoying the delicate taste of the tea, I told him I already was. The monk chuckled, and we diverted our attention to the shrilling of the cicadas, which rose in a blood-curdling crescendo before leveling off. And so it was that I went almost daily to the temple for a gabfest with the old monk.

One of my days on the range left me with long-lasting memories, though there was nothing earthshaking about it. On that day I went to market for my friend to sell a pair of rabbits. He had given me a choice: one of the sheep or two of the rabbits. He said he could do it himself but wanted me to have the opportunity. I tried to imagine myself taking a sheep to market. Me, a shepherd? No thanks. So I put the two rabbits in a sack with a hole they could breathe through. They wriggled around inside. “I’ll bet it’s stuffy in there,” I told them.

Off we went to the bus stop. Nobody was there. A field stretched out along the near side of the road, and along the far side ran a stream. A bridge crossed the stream and led to a village. *Village*, though, was somewhat of an extravagance, considering there was only a scattering of houses in sight. Suddenly it struck me that the pole bearing the beat-up sign for the bus stop was leaning. Thinking I’d like to see it lean more, I gave the pole a subtle shove but it didn’t budge.

Beneath the sign I waited patiently for the bus. Suddenly I felt abandoned, but I managed to block out the feeling. I didn’t like watching myself when my feelings were out of control. Instead I told myself, *Here I am, behaving myself at a country bus stop.*

I was feeling kind of bored and contemplated raising a cloud of dust with my shoe and watching it while feeling the energy drain from me in the presence of the powerless, silently rising cloud of dust—but I didn’t actually do it. The thought alone was sufficient; it wasn’t necessary to carry it out. For me, execution was less important than unexecuted thought.

Hmm, maybe if I looked in the direction from which the bus was coming I would see it coming in no time. So I went ahead and looked, but all I saw was the empty road stretching into the distance. Then I

looked at myself and discovered I had stuck my hands in my pockets. This was something I often did when I was standing around with nothing to do. It was as though my pockets were for my hands to stick into, and my hands were for sticking into my pockets. I thought about taking them out but left them in.

Just then I saw someone coming across the bridge—it was a woman and she had a bundle on her head. She looked like she was toddling, which I found quite unusual. She kept her head turned away from me as if there were something about me to be avoided, and looked instead in the direction from which the bus would come. I did the opposite, observing her, curious about the bundle. What was inside? I tried to convince myself I didn't care. But I couldn't hide my curiosity. And then she turned and looked at me. And then at my sack. She said something, but I understood only half of it. She had a strong accent—probably not native to this region.

Even so, I was able to figure out what she wanted to say, and I answered her. She likewise seemed to understand only half of what I said but figured out what I wanted to say. We both made ourselves understood through our half-understood conversation, she learning there were rabbits in my sack and I learning there were mushrooms in her bundle.

Finally the bus came into sight. We climbed aboard and soon arrived in town. Without a goodbye the woman disappeared. I found the market, which like all markets since the old days was active every five days, and ended up with a spot between two old women. I wasn't looking for a spot between two old women, it just happened that way. Deep down inside I was worried some guy would tell me I was on his turf, but no such person showed up. There wasn't much activity and already by noon the purveyors looked ready to pack up their goods and leave.

I nodded in greeting to the old women. They observed the newcomer with curious eyes and I observed them with nonchalant eyes, though I likewise had never seen them before. *I should have brought a sheep, darn it, then I could draw more curiosity out of them.* One woman had spinach, bracken fern, and other greens for sale, the other had three chickens that I assumed she wanted to get rid of. The chickens, tied to each other so they couldn't fly off, rested quietly, stomachs to the ground.

The novelty of my unexpected appearance didn't last long. With me in the middle, the vegetable vendor blurted something to the chicken

vendor. Something off-putting, to say the least. She was *really* plugged up: every morning was hell, the agony indescribable. I didn't want to hear it but couldn't help listening. Why did they have to engage in verbal ping-pong with me as the net?

Well, perhaps they had started in on constipation before I arrived. Still, why didn't they can it when they saw me? But then the chicken woman saw the bet and raised. *She* had *hemorrhoids*, and the suffering was indescribable. I happened to be afflicted with the same malady and had a mind to say, *I hear your pain, ladies*, but thought better of it.

The vegetable woman let loose again, maybe thinking her constipation was more severe than the chicken woman's hemorrhoids. I couldn't hold my silence any longer. "How bad is it?" I guess I fancied myself a constipation expert and a know-it-all for easing the pain. The two women gaped at me. "What, you got a cure?" the chicken woman asked.

I put on my absorbed-in-thought expression. The two old women eyed me. I looked back and forth at them, the one with constipation and the other with hemorrhoids. What came out from my mouth was, "Well, bad habits lead to constipation and also to hemorrhoids. There are more people than you might think who are constipated and hemorrhoidal." They stared at me as if it was the most ludicrous thing they'd ever heard. I stared at them as if their reaction was the most ludicrous thing I'd ever seen.

Just then one of the chickens shot up as if someone had lit a fire under it, and went *cluckcluckcluck!* What a smart bird, I told myself, it clucks whenever it wants. And what do you know, there on the ground were two white eggs. "What a smart bird," I marveled, "it not only clucks at any old time, it *lays eggs* in any old place." The chicken woman gathered the eggs and looked back and forth at me and the other woman, apparently counting the eggs and the mouths to feed and finding herself in a fix because of the mismatch.

*No way she'll ignore me, country folks aren't that hard-assed.* Well, guess what, they *were* that hard-assed. The chicken woman reached out right in front of me to give the vegetable woman one of the eggs, then ate the other one herself. The vegetable vendor eyed me, and now she was the one in a fix, and the next thing I knew, she gave me her egg. *Wow, they're not so hard-assed after all.*

Holding the still warm egg, I carefully made an aperture in the top and slurped the white and then the yoke. Never had I tasted such a fresh, delicious egg. I expressed my gratitude to the vegetable woman and the

hen. And the chicken woman? No need, and so I didn't. The vegetable woman looked like she had a heart, but not the chicken woman. And the vegetable woman spoke tenderly to me. I didn't ask her about herself, but she told me anyway. And then she asked about me. I said only that I worked at the sheep range. She said she knew the owner well and that her dear departed husband used to work there.

Just then a young woman appeared and bought some greens, and a short time later a middle-aged woman purchased two of the chickens. I tried to talk her into buying my rabbits but she didn't go for it. Not long after, an old man bought one of the rabbits, but declined my offer of a discount if he were to buy both of them.

Noon had passed and the flow of marketgoers seemed to have dried up. My stomach started growling. But I remained between the two old women, listening to the rumbling that signaled chow time. What to do with the remaining rabbit? The chicken woman had a clever idea—her chicken for my rabbit. I weighed the offer but it was a no-brainer. The remaining chicken was the two-for-one egg-laying hen.

Done for the day, I got up. The vegetable woman said she would stick around with her unsold greens, and the chicken woman said she would keep her company. And then I realized that when I had gotten up, something else had gotten up with me. And that something was hanging from my rear end. Gum. Deposited where I sat by someone before I had arrived. I didn't figure either woman for the culprit.

Flustered, I removed the gum, but not all of it came off. And what did come off was stuck to my fingers. I removed the gum from my fingers, but again not all of it came off. One of the characteristics of gum is that it's difficult to remove, and the gum attached to me was offering a model demonstration. The two oldsters were getting a kick out of it. I laughed as well but I wasn't getting a kick out of it. This kind of mishap was fun as long as you were the spectator. But I was always on the receiving end, and the mishap was more than just slightly unwelcoming. I guess I should have been thankful it was merely gum on bum. I wanted to blame my misfortune on the gum but the gum was blameless and so I blamed it on my sorry butt instead.

I pulled the hen up by the string around its legs and, as if venting my sticky misfortune, gave the string a little yank. The dazed hen sprang to its feet and followed its new master, not knowing it had a new master. But then it displayed the inborn recalcitrance of chickens and I had to practically drag it. The hen went along, as if it preferred

not to move under its own power, seemingly oblivious to how tiring the dragging was for both it and me. Or more precisely, it seemed to pretend to go along. Finally I had to put it in the rabbit sack. After a brief stir it poked its head through the breathing hole. It didn't look thrilled, its expression telling me something like *Don't you think you're overdoing it?*

The chicken and I went down the road through this godforsaken town. I spotted a banner—it was Sports Day at the elementary school dead ahead. But there were no sporting events—no paper gourd cracking open to shower the kids with confetti, no kids sprinting and tripping over their feet and falling. I rechecked the banner, saw the date, and realized the festivities had already taken place and were for the townspeople and not the schoolkids. I looked across the school's empty playfield, and through a classroom window in the one-story building saw kids all looking in the same direction—toward the teacher, a woman, as she industriously jotted down something on the chalkboard. The kids kept looking up in unison and looking down in unison. For some reason this saddened me deeply. Actually this was all in my imagination—the classroom was in fact empty. The school was doubtless on summer break.

I went into a restaurant, found a table, placed the sack on the floor next to it, and ordered a meal along with a bottle of *soju*. Drinking with a meal was for me an inexpensive and long-cherished luxury. The *soju* came out first and I started in. The first shot on an empty stomach was the best, and I enjoyed the taste spreading throughout my mouth as I scanned the surroundings. The guy at the next table looked already loaded and was mumbling something or other. His head was lowered as if he were meditating. He was moving back and forth and from side to side as if he couldn't keep his balance. Still looking at him out of the corner of my eye, I had another silent sip.

Suddenly he jerked his head up and glared at me through hazy eyes. "What're you lookin' at?" he growled. As if I were the one who was glowering at him. Next he tried to pick a fight. Should I give him the real me? I decided not to. The real me would probably have left by now. But I couldn't leave, there was still some *soju* left. And just then my meal arrived.

By now the drunk was ugly. It was a challenge to enjoy my meal in peace, but I quietly put up with him. The lush decided to make an issue of my lack of a response. Still I didn't respond. You don't want to

get started with a drunk. But that doesn't always work. And it didn't work now.

He lurched to his feet, staggered over, and looked down at me. I pretended to be nonchalant and kept my eyes on the shot glass in front of me. The outlook wasn't rosy. If I just sat there I might get slugged in the mug before I knew it. Even if I kept up my guard, I was too much of a slug to avoid a flying fist. In the meantime the woman who ran the place periodically stuck her head out from the kitchen with a so-what's-new look, which she punctuated by rattling the dishes she was washing until I thought they would break.

What if I made the first move? Maybe that would get me out of this mess. As it turned out, he was too loaded to stand up straight. And I wasn't born to cause trouble. I had a hunch he would tire himself out. And right I was. Before long he seemed to run out of steam, or maybe something else had crossed his mind, but in any event he was having trouble keeping his eyes open and he slumped down in his chair and started gibbering. I didn't understand a word of it. And then his head came down on the table and he started snoring, but the gibbering continued—and then he was talking in his sleep.

Listening to his sleep-talking, I took my time eating my meal and finishing my *soju*. As his babbling died down, his snoring cranked up. I finished my meal and hit the road again. I took the hen out of the sack and tried again to make it walk, but it still didn't want to do things my way, so back in the sack it went. Hardly a soul was to be seen on the road. A guy was leaning against an A-frame carrier, butt parked on the ground, eyes closed. It must have been a sweet nap. I wanted to conk out then and there myself but I continued on my way. Tipsy from the *soju*, I thought that everything around me was moving along with me. Now I was out of town and still there was no one to be seen. I took my time. I felt sleepy and told myself that if this kept up, maybe I could walk in my sleep. Just then an ox cart came by. Sitting at an angle in the cart was an old man. I was hoping for a lift but he pretty much ignored me. From the way his head drooped, maybe he had nodded off too. It was nap time for everyone. It looked like the ox was taking its somnolent master home. And it seemed to know the way. Maybe that's all it knew.

As I watched the receding cart I sang a short song, the kind that once you start in, you sing it over and over. And I thought some murky thoughts, the kind you end up forgetting after you've walked

for a while even though you remember you were thinking while you walked, thinking thoughts about how useless it is to make an effort to sort out your thoughts.

Before I knew it I was almost back to our free range. I arrived at the bus stop nearby but didn't go straight home. Not that I no longer considered myself to be home on the range. I merely stood there without reason, or more precisely I stood there for no particular reason. The road stretched out into the distance. "The long, stretched-out road is played out," I murmured. Me and my wordplay. I liked to play with words. Words are good to play with.

In this case *played out* meant lying dead with your four limbs stretched out. "The long, stretched-out road is played out," I murmured again. And here *stretched-out* reminded me of a dead animal. Again I observed the scene that lay ahead. I didn't want to see it just as it appeared, I wanted to tweak it, but I couldn't think of a good tweak and so I left the scene alone.

Mindlessly I paced about the bus stop—meaningless thought expressed in meaningless behavior. I felt my thoughts were gradually losing themselves in behavior that had no outcome. This confused me. So I went back to where I had started pacing and stayed there. When I had stood there pointlessly for a sufficient length of time, I began to pointlessly enjoy it.

A short while later the bus arrived and an old woman got off. The woman selling greens at the market. It was like we had arranged to meet here. She said hello. I did likewise—what did I have to lose? She said she lived in the village across the bridge. I had a look at it. It was a miserable-looking village in a miserable location. And then out of the blue she blurted an invitation: How about some potatoes at her place? They were yummy, she said. I was in no position to decline and so I said sure.

She took the lead, and the chicken and I followed. From the bridge I looked down at the stream. The water wasn't deep, and I saw a school of minnows. Instead of hurrying me along, the old woman waited calmly for me at the far end.

We entered the village. The houses were flimsy and one of them seemed about to collapse. Another one looked abandoned, what with all the weeds in the yard. A narrow path led between low walls. I caught a whiff of cow dung. All that this scene needed was pumpkin vines draping the walls, and the moment this thought came to mind

some pumpkin vines came into sight. I stopped beside the pumpkin vines and stood there for a brief time thinking that standing beside a wall draped in pumpkin vines was enough to make a person smile. Again the old woman stopped to wait for me.

Her home was at the far end of the village. You could hardly call it a human habitation. A huff and a puff would blow it right down. I wondered if goblins popped out of it at night. The wretched dwelling was coming apart at the seams but it struck me as almost holy.

She went to the potato patch in her kitchen garden. I kept an eye on her as she unearthed the potatoes. Then something got into me and I began digging along with her. The digging was fun and just for fun I dug a few potatoes. Those potatoes I dug for fun were nice and fleshy.

The old woman went into her kitchen to steam the potatoes. Smoke was soon rising from the chimney at the side of the house. "Nice little puffs, that's the best way to describe it," I murmured. Faint traces of a bush-clover broom were visible on the bare ground—it must have been several days ago that the old woman had swept it. The kitchen garden also contained peppers, cucumbers, and eggplants, all of them ripening nicely. The eggplants looked luscious with their lustrous skin. A few stalks of corn that looked fully ripe stood to the side of the garden.

Off to another side was a small pool of water. I couldn't figure out why it was there—it didn't look drinkable, so maybe it was used for the vegetables. Had it always been there? Or was it dug after the woman's house was built?

The pool didn't look deep but the water was inky. My face was reflected on the glassy surface and for a brief time I watched it. And then a leaf fell onto the water, causing a faint shimmer, and my face broke apart. And then the shimmering stopped and my face reappeared.

Suddenly I remembered once having been fixated on water like I was now. I couldn't remember if it was a pool of water like this one, a well, or a pond. But I was almost sure it was a place where water had pooled. As I was watching I thought I saw something on the surface sinking slowly, ever so slowly, as if in a display of mastery by a trickster. I couldn't remember what the slowly sinking object was. It could have been a leaf, it could have been something else.

In any event, what I remembered was that the object, whatever it was, that object I couldn't remember, that object that was able to sink ever so slowly, was sinking slowly before my eyes. The memory was suddenly so fresh in my mind it saddened me a bit. But soon I felt

better knowing I was capable of feeling a brief moment of sadness. I knew it was difficult for such a memory to last long, and felt good that such a difficult-to-last memory had resurfaced.

A short time later, out came the steamed potatoes. Corn too? Nope. Potatoes would be better with corn. Finally I had to remind myself this was potato time, not corn time. *C'mon, stupid!* And so we dug in. Yikes—I burned the roof of my mouth and made a fuss. She cackled. And the next moment I let loose with a racy joke that left her howling in laughter, potato in hand rather than mouth. Here was an unspoiled woman. I lacked the proclivity for saying something people found funny, but now and then I said something that people found hilarious and that I myself believed was funny.

I didn't find it odd that I was eating potatoes at the home of a woman I had just met that day. Eating potatoes together made me feel that she and I now knew each other. We talked about this and we talked about that. This and that. Nothing special. And then she said she came from a family of slash-and-burn farmers, and when she was young, that's what her family did. I looked at her in a new light, this descendant of itinerant people who were over the rainbow and gone.

I tried to picture the woman before me as a girl who with her parents set fire to the woods and tilled the fields of ash. It wasn't easy. I could, though, imagine a girl with a sooty face. It must have been a marvelous experience. The old woman pointed off in the distance, showing me where the fire fields used to be. I looked toward the hills she indicated. "Well, you can't see it from here," she said. Once again I tried to picture the girl who with her parents had tilled those fields that couldn't be seen from here.

Suddenly we were hit with a rain shower. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. At first the thunder was far away and suddenly it was close by. *You always hear thunder far away and suddenly it's close by.* The thunder sounded so good I had myself another potato.

As we ate we watched the rain streak from the sky and stream from the eaves. Faint billows of steam rose from the heap of decomposing grass at the side of the yard; the compost smelled good. I pointed out the steam. "That's compost for you," said the old woman. For her it was just compost but for me it was fodder for my delight.

Watching the rain at a humble dwelling in this hillside hamlet, the home of an old woman I didn't know very well, for some strange reason warmed my heart but on the other hand saddened me. But the

warmth outweighed the sadness. That warmth reminded me of the heat inside the potatoes I was eating.

And that was all. And the fact that that was all was good, there was no more to it than that. The rain stopped and I got to my feet. She looked like she wanted me to stay longer. I said I would come again when I had the time. She said I was always welcome.

After I left I paused where the pumpkin vines draped the wall and I paused again on the bridge over the stream. I looked down from the bridge, expecting to see something. The shallow stream flowed over a stream bed composed of rocks of various sizes. Maybe that school of minnows was cutting through the water and swimming upstream. But I couldn't see them. I felt dispirited.

But soon I was in-spirited by a thought: *What would it be like to live in the water like a minnow? Or to live in the sky like a bird? Or to live in the ground like a mole or a mole cricket?* It would feel different for sure. But apart from that, how could I know?

I lifted my gaze to the sky. As I had expected, not a bird was in sight. I lowered my gaze to the stream and heard something. Running water. I closed my eyes and listened to it. It still sounded like running water. The sound grew clearer. I guess that was what I needed, and I left.

It was evening when I got home on the range. The rain shower made the sodden sheep look like they'd jumped in a lake. My friend watched silently as I headed for my room. I stopped and offered him the hen. He silently accepted it, or rather he took the string tied around its ankle. He didn't ask about his rabbits. He studied me as if the two-rabbits-turned-one-hen was a mystery, but left it at that. He never asked me why I acted as I did, tended merely to look at me uncomprehendingly.

Sleep was long in coming that night, and I tossed and turned thinking about all that had happened that day. When finally I got to sleep I had a dream. My friend and I were arguing. I said I was going to move in with the sheep but my friend said no way, that wouldn't be good for them. I was mad when I woke up.

Out on the range I went. Whenever I had an urge to get a handle on all my unclaimed baggage, I would take a stroll around the range to calm myself. In the dead of night, when sleep wouldn't come and my head was somehow the clearer for it, I would walk the pasture gazing at the star-studded sky. Sometimes I took a tumble and bruised my knee and would have to rub it before going back.

It was delightful wandering the range late at night when the sheep too must have been sleeping and all was quiet. It was especially delightful when the moon was full and bright, and sky and earth met at the crest of the hills. I couldn't tell if the illusion of sky meeting earth arose from a natural phenomenon, but in any event I liked the unreality of it. Strolling the range at such times I indulged myself in fanciful speculation. In my imagination the sheep might die in an epidemic or from having their throats cut, their remains strewn about the range, a scene bizarre yet lyrical. Or they might be absent from the range, and in their place a great beast or two, perhaps elephants or giraffes, casting huge shadows. The incongruity of such animals that were not home on the range made me appreciate the range in a new way.

As it happened, there was no moon that night, full or otherwise, only a few stars. All was dark. It was a chore to put one foot in front of the other. I ended up stumbling and falling, and god knows why, instead of getting back on my feet I moved on all fours. I felt I was a sheep. And for a short time I sheepishly walked the range. Back in my room I saw that my knees were red.

Time passed and a new season arrived. I didn't know what I wanted, or even if I had something I wanted. My past faded into my memory, and some of my memories were erased. All I could focus on were meaningless things, and I was happy to do so. On one such day I went to a prehistoric archaeological site not far from the range. My friend had told me about it, suggesting I go there if I were bored. I went there not from a desire to learn more about the locale where I'd been staying, but probably because I was drawn to it as a prehistoric site.

All that was left at the site were vestiges of a dwelling—hollows in the ground that might have been rooms; the artifacts must have been removed to a museum. The site was pretty much neglected, whether because its significance as a historic site was minimal or else not properly recognized I didn't know. There was no Access Restricted sign.

"It's a ruin all right," I said to myself. The word *ruin* didn't adequately convey the emotional impact I expected here. I focused intently on this prehistoric place that had been buried in time and had now reappeared in time, but it didn't arouse much in the way of feelings. Was this because no words were adequate to convey my impression of the place? Whatever the reason, I remained there for some time before I was able to come up with an impression: "The people who lived here must have lived simple lives, using simple tools to make the simplest

of objects.” Sure enough, it was a lame impression. And the site itself struck me as unremarkable. My impressions of things, whether I found them significant or insignificant, depended on my ability to express those impressions.

I had myself a wide-angle view of the prehistoric archaeological site and its setting. Gradually it lost all meaning for me. To anything that I observed long enough a moment arrived in which it all became meaningless. That moment had come sooner this time than at others.

It wasn't that I wanted to sing on the spur of the moment, but a song suitable for singing at such a place came to mind, and I launched in on it. But then I broke off, feeling as if something was forcing me to break off singing, but there was no such something. Suddenly I recalled having heard that there was a limestone cave nearby. Fortunately I spied a rusty sign indicating its location.

I left the archaeological site and started up a narrow path into the hills. Visible far below were railroad tracks for the trains that used to transport coal and limestone from the local mines. Those mines must have been shut down and abandoned, because the tracks were overgrown with undergrowth. I guessed the mines were scattered among the rugged mountains. This locality where slash-and-burn farmers had lived not so long ago was growing on me.

I wouldn't have called the scenery exquisite, but there was a nice harmony among the steep mountains near and far, the narrow fields squeezed between them, and the stream flowing through it all. “Mother nature's composition always approaches the ideal,” I murmured. *Wow, nice thought!* I told myself.

The trail grew rugged and was covered with lush growth. I was being tripped up enough to get me thinking of turning back. But I didn't give up. And after a while the cave appeared. A Cave Unsafe—Do Not Enter sign was posted at the entrance. After a furtive look about, I went in anyway. The cave had a wide mouth, allowing sunlight to penetrate deep inside. A complex array of passages led in from the entrance. I remained where I was, thinking the cave was not what I had imagined—did a cave have to be this complicated? Then again I'd never been at the entrance to this cave wondering what lay inside.

Gingerly I went down the man-made steps, thinking I might find the faint outlines of cave paintings from long ago. No such luck. I went to the middle of a chamber thinking I was in a large room, and tried to imagine all the effort that cave had devoted to becoming a

cave, but I came up short. But not so short that I couldn't think that it mustn't have been easy for the cave. Which told me that my knowledge of caves was basic, nothing more.

I shouted into several of the passages, listening to the differences in the echoes. The shouts rang inside the cave, some of the echoes spilling outside while others fell far into the dark depths. I ventured farther into the chamber. I felt I was toting a certain thought on my back—or at least that it was possible for me to express it in that way. It was getting darker and finally a world of utter darkness appeared. And like a person entering a dark world, I groped the wall and slowly advanced. But suddenly the way ahead was blocked. I stood still in the darkness like a person who's lost his way. And indeed that is how I felt. I wasn't one to think that everything depends on how one thinks. I was, though, a tad frightened.

In reality, finding my way back to the entrance to the cave didn't seem all that difficult. Even so, I stood there like a person trapped in a cave who can't find the entrance. And then I heard a sound, or at least I thought I heard a sound, but I didn't know what it might be or where it might have been coming from. Bats? I imagined countless bats hanging from the ceiling of the cave watching me with their atrophied eyes. I didn't think it was right for me to make my own noise, so I kept silent. And then the surroundings became silent.

In darkness so deep I couldn't distinguish myself, I felt my body was gone and only my thoughts remained. The least I could do was retain those thoughts, and so I didn't attempt to dispense with them.

All of a sudden the events of that day at the market came to mind: meeting the two old women, watching the hen unexpectedly laying, contending with the menacing, slobbering drunk, eating potatoes at the vegetable woman's home, observing the pool of water in her yard and at that moment remembering from long ago a time I thought I saw something on the surface of the water sinking slowly, ever so slowly, as if in a display of mastery by a trickster—all of these events were still fresh in my memory.

Before I knew it I felt myself smiling. And then all those thoughts submerged like the sound I thought I had heard going silent. And then among those submerged thoughts there flashed an image of none other than the herd of sheep that were home on the range. They couldn't be seen because of the fog but I knew they were somewhere in that fog because of their bleating, which I found so peculiar. And that's the way

in which the sheep range comes to mind—a fog-shrouded scene in which nothing can be seen, not the sheep grazing on the green, hilly pasture, not the free range in the light of the moon, not the range absent the sheep who have returned to their pen. And then the fog slowly dissipates and there on the range is an elephant. I imagine it not as a real live elephant but as a gigantic stuffed specimen, similar to the imitation elephant you might see in a celebration of the Buddha's birthday.

<sup>1</sup> “The Heart Sutra,” translation by the Buddhist Text Translation Society.

JULIE MURPHY

# I'm Not Any of the Things I Used to Be

VI

It was as ordinary a day as a day can be now.  
I had a bit of extra time since the nursery event  
turned out to be next Tuesday so I stopped  
for a coffee and was walking down Pacific  
to the bookshop to read the last chapters  
of the novel *Unsheltered* that disappeared  
from my Kindle when the library loan expired—  
it's unsettling not to finish. What happened  
with the woman who lay in the grass counting ants  
after her man ran off with his mistress? What  
about the couple, whose house crumbled bit by bit?  
And the fate of the motherless child? Forget fiction,  
isn't everyone unsheltered—each with our own litany  
of losses? I was thinking about mine  
when I saw him across the street. A man  
who looked exactly like my husband. Same build.  
Same height. Same short gray and white hair  
above a long neck. Same old school blue jeans,  
leather shoes, collared shirt, wire-rimmed glasses.  
Same length stride. And even the same damn  
coffee cup. There was a jaunt in his step,  
though, my husband didn't have. I watched him  
turn the corner and walk out of sight.  
To almost see my husband. No—  
to *see* my husband for the tiniest second  
before seeing *not* my husband.  
On an already lonely day after rains. I wanted  
to lie down on the wet sidewalk. I wanted

to scream like I did that first night.  
I pushed myself forward like a stern farmer  
snapping the reins of the workhorse  
on a cold morning, at the edge of a field  
that needs to be plowed under.

NANCY MILLER GOMEZ

## My First-Grade Picture

The dress bound my body  
like a bandage staunching a wound.  
Lace choked my throat.  
My arms were cinched in tourniquets of tulle.

I was a hand grenade of a girl  
vacuum packed into a costume,  
my fingers poised in the fuselage of my lap.  
I'd chopped my hair short.

My eyes so black no light escaped.  
My lips stretched across my face  
like a crossbow. The man with the camera  
said, *You can do better. Give me a smile.*

I set my mouth into the look  
I've kept all these years.  
That's still me in the photo,  
waiting to pull the pin.

BRIAN CHIKWAVA

## Heroes of Our Time

I HAD TO TAKE OFF, because I did not trust myself not to change my mind. I was fat and out of shape. Even at the best of times I had never been one for running, because I considered it an undignifying exercise. But this was not the time for preserving dignity.

The squatter camp—like the rest of the squalid rebirth of Zimbabwe in the roar of history at the turn of the century—was a disorderly site forever sprawling downhill. It seemed impossible to escape. With each stride the township that I was trying to reach seemed to float farther away.

I knew the township well. I had grown up there. We were the *povo*, and it seemed inconceivable back then that another social rung could materialize beneath the dirt on which our feet were planted. I knew little about the squatter camp and had never been there before. Now the camp was an extension of the township and had twice been bulldozed by local authorities not so long ago. It always returned bigger, with greater desperation, its people more disqualified from regular society than before.

Instead of the usual streets and avenues in rectangular form, that staple of town planners, the camp's main artery was a rough, stony path that was wide enough for a car and meandered all over. Sometimes it took a sharp turn when some squatting personage decided to build a cluster of corrugated-iron houses in its way.

When I could no longer go on I lost the strength to restrain myself. I started laughing my head off because I was beginning to fear that if I continued without release something terrible was going to happen to me, though I was not sure what. People continued to walk past, paying no attention. As if they were used to all manner of cracked people here.

Turning around, I saw behind me in the distance a plume of smoke coming from the house that I'd just fled. The boys' \$85,000 car was ablaze and they were being forced, hands and feet tied, to watch the spectacle. One of the *povo* had decided that, since honest toil and thrift—cardinal rites for worshippers of the money-god—were alien

to the boys, he'd set them off on the right path with a sacrifice on their behalf. After that, he'd move on to more important things.

I WAS BACK in my home country, taking a break from New York City because that place was beginning to make me feel as if I'd misplaced my soul.

I shuffled through the squatter camp. The armpits of my jacket were soaked and the skin on the insides of my thighs, rubbing against each other as always, was raw.

I walked in the direction of the marshy stretch of land separating the camp from the township. Gum trees had been planted there to drain the place and make it less of a public health hazard, but now half the plantation had been chopped down for firewood and a stream of glorious raw sewage flowed through the area.

I had lost Sharai two hours back, at the funeral where she abandoned me with the boys. This trip back home was the first time I had seen her in years. A couple of days before the funeral the Moyo brothers had asked her to come to their stepsister's funeral.

As if it was an invitation to a tea party, she laughed. We had a soaring, catch-up conversation about school days and how back then the Moyo brothers and their posse would never waste a glance on any of us. For over a year now one of the twin brothers had been trying to get into Sharai's knickers and would not take no for an answer, never mind that he had dozens of girls throwing their knickers at him every day.

Sharai had not wanted to go but, now that I had arrived, she decided it would be a good laugh if I accompanied her. The Moyo brothers could always be relied on to provide spectacle: they could never be trusted to step out into the world clothed every morning. There was always the prospect of one day being able to say, I was there when . . .

Initially I was not sold on Sharai's idea. I had no desire to come into contact with the Moyo boys again and had refused repeated Facebook requests to be friends. I had not forgotten how the twins made fun of the fact that the only reason I was at the same school as them was that my uncle was a janitor there. The school laborers' children and dependents were exempt from paying school fees, and I was one of them.

After their very public excesses, and with enemies circling their VIP mother, the Moyo boys were only one public scandal away from disaster, Sharai said. War vets, hugely influential in the ruling ZANU

PF party, were already calling for the boys' mother to resign from the cabinet, and her children's distasteful public displays of wealth were giving her enemies another stick to beat her with. If she can't even control her children, how can she control the most ill-disciplined ministry in government?

The boys' relationship with their mother had recently taken a knock over their insistence on attending their stepsister's funeral, to which they'd invited Sharai. Their father had died in a car crash last year, and their mother did not want them to go rushing to honor a woman who was likely a gold digger posing as a stepsister and had only emerged after the death of the boys' father. But matters of blood have a way of drawing unexpected responses out of people. Or maybe the notion of a stepsister lost and found satisfied a need in the peculiar psychology of people so impoverished that money was the only thing they had in their lives. In a country where fifteen billion USD of diamond money can mysteriously vanish from government coffers, you can end up with a new kind of person.

Emerging from the gum trees, I was home and dry. I took a pot-holed street in the direction of my aunt and uncle's house. I felt unburdened. I was buzzing with a newfound confidence: I even believed myself capable of a dozen cartwheels, topped off with a backflip, like Nani after scoring a goal.

WHEN I LIFTED my head to look around one more time, the funeral had descended into disarray. A humble man in a bin man's attire had taken over and was turning the whole funeral upside down. Speech delivered, he disappeared along with the little girl who had been hanging onto his trousers throughout.

There were all kinds of mourners: from sincere, God-fearing folk and the type that is drawn by a morbid curiosity right up to the township foxes, with good antennae for a free lunch. Before this assorted gathering, the Moyo brothers had been cast into a state of confused, inarticulate contrition. It was not their style.

You would have been forgiven for thinking earlier that the Moyo boys and their groupies had come to the funeral just to stream it live on Facebook or something. They and their entourage, a restless noisy lot, had arrived in hip style. To see them roll in was to witness a flock of birds land on a tree just before sunset: mock disputes, genuine squabbles, and the mindless chatter of boys in baseball caps with barely

clothed girls. Now some of these hangers were slinking away to wait at the car park.

Because my mind started wandering, I had missed the beginning of the drama. Sharai had to bring me up to speed. The coffin had been about to be lowered into the grave when the man, holding the hand of the little girl, pushed his way from the back of the crowd of mourners. He looked like any of the *povo* who had been stepping forward to pour their hearts out about the deceased. His opening line had been spot on, even the impassioned, Pentecostal manner with which his finger kept stabbing the air to point down at the coffin: "I know this woman and I'm going to tell you the truth!"

All three Moyo brothers were still pointing their phones at the man, before it sank in that his impromptu speech was not an effusion of sorrow over their stepsister.

Finishing his ultimatum with a despotic hand gesture, the man turned around, whisked the little girl off the ground, and threw her onto his back. Then he stepped off. He was out of the cemetery before anyone could formulate a clear thought. Finding him in the sprawling squatter camp where he was supposed to live was going to be fun.

THE MOYO BROTHERS had never had to handle ultimatums before. Certainly not from someone in a pair of municipality overalls with their reflective straps around legs and arms. Not from the *povo*.

When I switched on my phone, a WhatsApp message from a number I did not recognize appeared. I felt ashamed to be looking at the photo. Sharai made a face at me.

Since returning home, I had seen plenty of images like this one. Images that speak to the grinding poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. But this one was in a category of its own: the camera zoomed in on an unsuspecting young woman's posterior as she bent down to drink water from a standpipe. She could have been one of our township girls. A good chunk of her dress was missing, as if she had rescued it from a termite nest; half her bum and knickers were exposed and the caption above the image read, "If you want to show us everything in the end, keep voting for ZANU PF thieves."

I'd lost count of the number of times I'd received the same image that day. Earlier in the morning the Moyo brothers, after learning from Sharai that I was back, had added me to their WhatsApp group, The Boys. They shared the image shortly after, and at first I wasn't sure how

to read that, since their mother was a top member of the ZANU PF, our ruling party.

“Put that thing away, please,” Sharai said. I slipped the phone into my breast pocket and folded my arms.

The boys, they were rudderless. I wondered if this was what the terror-struck villagers of Gwata looked like when they got pranked by a squad of bored soldiers. The soldiers, bayonets ready, are said to have frogmarched unsuspecting peasants to what looked like a convincing site of slaughter and informed the villagers that anyone who could put on a convincing dancing display would be free to walk away.

Turns out terror strips one of psychological complexity, and dancing becomes impossible. It was as if the boys had been ordered to dance in the crosshairs of a dozen AK-47 rifles.

The twins, Tanaka and Tawanda, carried faces struck blank with terror. They had arrived wearing what is now their signature sartorial style, ever since they launched as a rap duo: identical watermelon-pink suits and designer smoking pipes. They had managed to pull off the Congolese *sapeurs* style, though under present circumstances such looks invoked the absurd. Mercifully, no one was asking for a selfie with them.

Two men had started shoveling earth into the grave, mourners were already dispersing, and the three Moyo boys were still rooted to the spot. Even the simple task of putting one foot in front of the other had become complicated: Tawanda managed to trip and would have planted his face on the dusty earth had his brothers not caught him.

“At last the boys are beginning to understand,” Sharai said. She and I had also thought that the dead sister’s only child, a young man in his twenties, would step forward to support his uncles, since he was the root of all this, but he was nowhere to be seen. Sharai saw the look of horror on his face when the aggrieved man appeared. His words—“I know this woman and I’m going to tell you the truth! I know her well, I know she carried a dark, gnarled heart!”—had settled into something of a refrain. By the time they did, the young man had vanished.

A few years back the man’s daughter fell pregnant by the dead woman’s son. As per custom, the girl’s family ordered the girl to pack her bags and go to the young man’s family. It was expected that the young man’s family would return with the girl to formally start righting wrongs. But the boy’s mother would have none of that. She would

not even allow the girl into the house and instead left her to spend the night on the doorstep. Early in the morning she opened the door to empty a jug of urine on the girl's head.

In the middle of all the chaos and confusion, Sharai felt free to impersonate the man: "To have your daughter spend the night on the doorstep while a big woman is in the house, busy pissing into a jug all night so she can humiliate her? I can only conclude that after God had finished making all the beautiful plants and creatures on earth, he was left with an evil lump of clay which he threw into a pit, only for Satan to find it and make the black mamba, the toad, other evil creatures. And this woman!" Sharai jabbed the air with her finger. "Worse still, she and her son contributed nothing toward the care of this child! Not one red cent!"

Sharai's gesticulation did not go unnoticed: Melusi, the eldest of the boys, gave us a greasy look, as if he had been lip-reading Sharai, who now without missing a beat waved at Melusi. She had dropped her performance right before the moment the Moyo brothers' nemesis, grim and looking for terrible words, turned his head to address them directly: "You have until sunset to find me or else all of you and your family will, one by one, start falling like flies!"

He was disappointed, he said, that their stepsister had died before he had sorted her out. If it was possible he would pursue her to Gehenna, where she had gone, and finish her off there!

He concluded with an injunction directed at the mourners in general: no food was to be touched until this matter had been resolved, or else!

They believed in science, the boys, and not the black magic with which their new enemy was threatening their entire family. But it was clear they also knew that black magic works even if you don't believe in it. They didn't want to die, had put away their smartphones and stood dazed, like a trio that had just stumbled out of a cave unsure if they were the vampires or the victims.

Sharai and I were about to slip away when one of the twins, Tawanda, cast his gaze in our direction and made eye contact. His face lit up. I could not just turn and walk away.

"Should we go and hold their hands as per custom?" I asked Sharai. Her eyeballs bulged out of their sockets; she turned on her heel and started walking away. I nearly followed her impulsively, but instead stepped forward in the direction of the boys.

Tawanda threw himself around my neck. He seemed relieved to have something else to shift his attention to. His twin brother joined in the hugfest. We had not seen each other in years.

There was genuine affection in their hugs, which surprised me. I expressed my sympathies over their stepsister, and even Melusi seemed more positively disposed toward me now. One remark led to another, and the next. We started walking. I had expected that once we got to their car, I would make my excuse and go my own way.

MELUSI WAS DRIVING, Takura was in the passenger seat, and Tawanda was beside me in the back seat. What remained of the brothers' entourage was in a seven-seater van whose driver briefly hung his head out of the window to talk to Melusi about leading the way. The elderly lady we'd just been speaking to had been herded into the van. She was sat next to the van driver, looking like a convict in spite of her Anglican Church uniform. She knew where the boys' nemesis lived. She had given copious directions that none of us could quite follow. Then the boys begged and paid her to come with us. These boys drop coins, so went their reputation. That's why they were loved.

Before going to our nemesis, we had to go fetch another man—someone who was old enough to look believable as a family elder, someone who could be the go-between. The man was not related to the boys, which was unheard of. But the boys never did normal.

As soon as we started rolling, the boys and I started reminiscing about school days. They were less tense talking about anything other than the current situation. The fact of me having spent all these years as a cab driver, instead of styling it up in a glamorous New York office, fell out of me unbidden. At this revelation, the boys were silent. They exchanged looks. Then they burst out laughing.

"You should come to Bay Ridge one day and see me," I said as they lolled all over the car in fits. "You know those overworked migrant drivers you see in the small hours, crashed on a couch in the cab company restroom, dreaming under the flicker of a flatscreen TV pouring out fake Peruvian music? That's me, bro!"

"Now you have to drive us, man!" Tawanda cried. "Melusi let him drive! We must be driven by a New York taxi driver today! We have to!"

I was hoping Melusi would disregard his brothers, but he brought the vehicle to a halt on the side of an open drain and leapt out of the driver's seat.

I hadn't even put on the seat belt before Takura slapped a wad of notes on my thigh.

"Here, *chibhanzi* for you!" he said triumphantly. Like bank robbers, the boys were incapable of demonstrating affection in any other way but through money.

"Don't just stare at me like that, *ive shaz!* A thousand USD. That's a fair number, no? Or are you now one of those old people who are embarrassed by money?" Takura laughed.

A thousand USD was ridiculously generous, unless they were expecting me to be their driver until I returned to New York. I left the money untouched on my lap and started driving.

"Maybe you guys should write a new rap number: 'Bankrupt Yourself or Die Trying!' Looks like that's what you're angling for!" I said.

"That will break the Internet!" said Tawanda. He started tapping the idea into a notebook on his phone.

Their car was the most retro thing I'd ever been in, let alone driven.

"A taxi driver from Trumpland driving me an me niggaz in ma Cadillac! That's a wicked lyric, right?" Tawanda laughed. Their music career and celebrity status were things they bought for themselves with the money that their father made from the Marange diamond rush, before he perished in a car crash. Sharai had told me that the boys paid their groupies to play their music on Spotify to help them break into the charts.

Soon enough "Taxi Driver from Trumpland" had evolved into a rhyme of some sort.

"You guys going to wipe the floor with that man who ruined your sister's funeral," I said. They had paid me handsomely to chauffeur them around for maybe an hour. And money does strange things sometimes. For a thousand dollars an hour one feels obliged to add bells and whistles to the customer experience. Do a bit of emotional labor, maybe. So, if they could not persuade the old dude who was earmarked for the role of go-between, we laughed over the possibility of me stepping up to the plate. After all, our nemesis was only a bin man! *A mabhini!*

"He probably isn't even employed by the city council and instead stole that waste collection uniform he was wearing," I added.

"Who cares if you don't look like an elderly uncle?" Takura said.

"Yeah, I've got the best words ever!" I exclaimed. "Nobody knows a *mabhini* better than I do!" The twins slumped sideways with laughter.

“You guys are easy to please,” I observed. I remembered them as just spoiled, charmless brats, boys whose family used to be fairly comfortable, not wealthy. That was before they became certain of their place in the world.

The supposed go-between was also supposed to be a traditional healer. By the time we got to his address, I’d heard enough about him to know that he was only a healer in the way Idi Amin was “Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Seas and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular.”

He was sporting a Boston Red Sox cap, beat-up Converse All Star sneakers on his feet, and it was obvious he had clocked quite some mileage on planet Earth and required a walking stick to aid him along.

You’d think that this fraud and the money-flashing boys were perfectly matched, but even to him their money did not talk but yelled obscenities. He thought himself above them and took offense at the notion that the boys could step into his yard, lift him off his chair, and cart him off to wherever they pleased for a few pieces of silver.

“You must think me a lightweight,” he said indignantly, waving a hand to signal that the meeting was over.

Now the boys started bidding against themselves, progressively raising the money offer from fifty dollars to five hundred, on condition that, if he was interested in the money, he dressed up respectfully.

“You can’t lure me with peanuts like a rat!” the man said.

It soon became apparent that it was not the money that the old man found unattractive but the circumstances of the task: they were ripe for someone’s head to be hacked to pieces with an axe in broad daylight. I must have been the only one who knew that the boys were walking right into an elephant trap.

In the car the boys were speechless. The lady who was going to lead us to our nemesis’s place had given back their money and left without explanation. At least she had scribbled a rudimentary map with directions to *mabhini’s* home before walking away. I waited for the boys to gather themselves before I started the engine. The driver of the van followed us.

“Listen, I can do this, if you want me to.”

“Do what?” Melusi’s tone was always hostile.

“I’m only trying to help.”

I did not even know why I was doing this. Maybe I did not know myself well enough. Maybe I was just an idiot, but whichever it was,

I was untouched by fear. I'd never bought into all that spiel about the heart having its reasons of which reason does not know. And this was not the time for introspection.

The boys' tempers were fraying. It did not help that they'd all given up on the task of navigation, and I was having to drive and navigate as we entered the squatter camp. They were shouting at me every time I took a wrong turn. It is here when I thought, *Fuck, what am I even doing with these people?* I became aware of a sensation; it was as if I had allowed my heart to be taken far out of myself by the boys. I had to steady myself by remembering that some animals survive without a heart. Jellyfish, flatworms, and most microscopic primitive animals. They were thriving all over the planet.

"Listen, I can do this, if you want me to," I offered. "I can talk to the man for you guys if you want."

For about a minute, no one said a word.

"Sorry, that's a stupid thing to say. I take that back."

"No, no. It could work!" Takura brightened up.

"No, I don't think it will work. Think about it. You need someone with gravitas. That man is unlikely to take me seriously and may even feel insulted you sent me."

"Think outside the box, man! Think like a music promoter. You're our promoter!" Tawanda too had pivoted from bad-tempered anxiety to tremendous enthusiasm.

"You mean I should behave as if I'm unscrupulously negotiating a gig for you?"

Takura giggled.

Melusi, who had been silent, said, "I think it's a stupid idea."

"Why is it stupid?" Takura sounded hurt.

"Are you mad?"

"Okay, give us your better idea then, Einstein." said Takura.

No answer from Melusi.

"I'll talk to the man myself, then," Melusi said after a period of silence.

"Really? Just like that? You, Melusi, walking up to the man's front door and saying, 'Let's talk?'" Tawanda clapped his hands satirically.

"That would be disrespecting the man, Melusi. Try that and you'll stagger out of his hovel with an axe sticking out of your head," I said.

Now the boys started cracking jokes about the whole thing, as if it were an abstract problem and they were mere observers.

“Why are we terrified by this *mabhini*?” said Melusi. “It’s not our problem that the man did not get on with our sister. Why are we so bothered by this bullshit?”

“That’s the spirit, bro!” cried Tawanda. Melusi was starting to talk as if a gun had materialized in his pocket.

“What about your mother?” I reminded them. “Are you sure this will not turn into a PR issue for her, if you guys don’t kill it off right now?”

That boy fell silent. No one said a thing for a while.

By the time we had located our nemesis’s home, a plan had already taken shape.

“I will go out alone first, to introduce myself to the big man. I am going to be African American. If our enemy can be forced to speak English instead of Shona, we’ve won the first round. The risk is not small, but the rewards are great if all works out.” I reiterated the plan.

The boys had bought into the idea though they were terrified by the stakes. They understood that the strategy was to maneuver the big man onto cultural territory that he was not confident about.

“That’s the weakness of the *povo*,” I said. “The same Zimbabwean who speaks Shona becomes an entirely different person when he speaks English—he will even walk differently when speaking English.

“We Zimbabweans are terminally inclined to be more forgiving toward a foreigner than one of our own. That’s why our history is marked with incidents of us being cleaned up by foreigners who come here and are allowed to operate outside our cultural regimes, which impose all manner of ridiculous obligations on us. Next thing we know, the foreign dude has helped himself to the land and gold deposits, and no one can figure out how it happened.”

The boys listened in silence. They were racked with nerves. I was going to keep the big man captive in an unfamiliar orbit, close all escape routes for the duration of the negotiations, and make him sign onto our terms, I promised.

“But if he escapes, be prepared for your expensive trousers to rip in abrupt flight!” I said, but no one was paying attention anymore. They’d already pulled out from somewhere a bottle of Ace of Spades Armand de Brignac champagne. It was a Jay-Z favorite. The boys looked touchingly vulnerable trying to steady their nerves with alcohol. I wondered if any of the boys had ever imagined delivering the most sensitive parts of their anatomy into my hand like this.

“You,” I said to Tawanda.

“I’ve got a name!” he exploded. “Why you suddenly started calling us You this, You that? What’s that all about?”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Let’s go through the plan one more time,” Takura said. “So what are you going to do?”

“You talking to me?” I finger-jabbed my chest. I expected that they’d get it that my patience had limits.

“Who else, potato face?” Tawanda barked.

“Well, how many times do you guys want me to repeat it?”

“Just one more time, please,” Takura pleaded.

“Okay. I’m going to go in there, keep fucking *mabhini* captive in the English-speaking domain. And then, when I get bored, let him escape into his Shonahood. Then he can come out and ram a pineapple, crown-end first, into your reprobate asses!”

A couple of beats passed before they burst out laughing.

“Now listen up. Seriously now. The other option is to offer the man one ballpark figure to take care of everything. More money than his ass has ever seen in his lifetime. I don’t expect him to immediately understand the offer. He’ll probably be like the Sioux Indian chief to whom the notion that European settlers wanted to buy his people’s land seemed so ludicrous that he and his people had to ask the prospective buyers if they wanted to buy the sky as well. But once *mabhini* and I are on the same wavelength, I expect a very fast attitude adjustment. The rest should be easy, and you guys will soon be on your way to your sister’s house to start partying with the mourners, right?”

Now they started to talk about food. They had placed a huge order with a catering company to feed the mourners. Maybe they had become conscious of their hunger, but under the circumstances, it was hard to understand their behavior.

They’re supposed to have adrenaline coursing through their blood vessels, FFS. *What is wrong with them?* I thought. This was the cue I needed to step out of the car.

I SLAMMED THE DOOR behind me and tried not to overthink. I felt myself slip into the primal rush of blind impulse. My game face was on; I’d entered the zone. With each breath, I felt acutely aware of every bodily sensation. I was present and inhabiting the moment to the maximum. It was as if parts of my brain that I had never used before

had sprung to life. I was at last effortlessly extraordinary.

By the shack was a young woman who must have been the unfortunate daughter who had pee poured on her head. She was accompanied by the little girl that *mabhini* had brought to the funeral.

“Yes, I’ve come to see the old man,” I said, after she asked if she could help.

The young woman’s father sat on a bench, chatting to two other men under a tree. He got up and disappeared into the house as soon as he saw me. His two friends followed him, as did his daughter. I was left standing in the yard with just the little girl, who continued to look up at me with bright-eyed curiosity.

Another woman, perhaps the pee victim’s mother, emerged from the shack. She said I should take a seat on the bench and wait. Then she dragged the little girl into the house.

A minute later, the little girl was back: there, peeking out of the corner of the house, a small face. Missing teeth. A winning smile.

“I can see you,” I said.

“No, you can’t!”

“Yes I can!”

She came out into the open now, the hem of her dress lifted over her head.

“I still can see you!”

“I’m a bat now!”

“But I can still see you!”

“But it’s nighttime. You can’t see at night!”

“I can still see a bat at night.”

“Do you know many things that move at night?”

“Yes.”

“Name three.”

“A car, a bicycle, and a train.”

“No! No! No!”

“Well, why don’t you name them?”

“Bats! Rats! And, and. . . *sekuni!*”

“Your grandfather? Really? What does he do when he’s moving at night?”

“I don’t know! Ask him!”

Our nemesis moved at night. This was supposed to be significant, I was sure, but I could not think how. I feared for the boys, though not because of the man. I was scared for the boys because of the thing that

my heart now craved. I liked where I was, sensing a rare sort of uncertainty, the sort that only ever appears when everything and anything is possible. I had not felt like this in a very long time.

“Look, this is Mary!” the little girl said, pointing to one of the hens inside a coop. She’ll never be able to eat Mary, I immediately knew. Eating an animal that you’ve named? Who does that?

GABRIELLA KURUVILLA

# That's Life, Honey

*Translated from Italian by Jamie Richards and Alex Valente*

I LOVE MY NONNO very much. That's Italian for "grandpa." I love Italian too. One of my two languages that, for reasons beyond my control, is my only language: the one, the survivor.

Anyway, I love Italian. And I'm getting to know it, and to know it I write it: I carefully trace the letters of each new word I learn on any scrap of paper I can get my hands on.

Natasha — my name, which is not from my only language, the one, the survivor, is also not from the other, the aborted, the rejected — becomes N-A-T-A-S-H-A. Hell to write, especially because of that "SH" that to me sounds like it should be "SCI." But I've accepted things as they are: for everyone else "SCI" is "SCI," for me "SCI" is "SH." I'm different, nothing I can do about it. I'm someone with an "H" instead of a "CI." Someone without all her letters in the right place, and as if that wasn't enough, someone with one letter instead of two. Someone with a missing letter, someone with something missing.

It's no better with other words either. After Natasha, for example, there's "mamma," which everyone writes as M-A-M-M-A, like me, but there's no "papà." For structural reasons, I guess. That is, structurally, there's no papà in my life, so there isn't one in my vocabulary. He went back to India before I was born, and Mamma, every time she complains about something or someone, yells, "Fucking nigger!" Even if it makes no sense. She'll drop her cup of milk on the ground and yell, "Fucking nigger!" And it's totally unrelated.

Anyway, I can write M-A-M-M-A but I can't write P-A-P-À. Otherwise I'll hear Mamma yell, "Fucking nigger!" In this case, it's not unrelated.

Then there's P-U-T-T-A-N-A. Downstairs, on every corner, it's full of whores. And my neighborhood is full of corners. Familiar figures, those whores, almost maternal, I'd say.

I see them every day on the way to and back from school. It's like they're waiting for me at the corner just to say: "Hi, good morning, that bag looks heavy..." And, "Hey, how'd it go? What's for lunch?"

Fuck if I know, whatever I find in the fridge and reheat. I just hope that Mamma changed out the pots or at least their contents: I've been living on chicken curry for three days. Now, fish starts to smell after three days, but chicken doesn't fare so well either. Nope: chicken curry. Fine.

Maybe it's a progressive sweepstakes diet: week one is chicken curry, two is curry rice, and three is curry bananas. At the end, if I survive, I win a trip to India and stay in an Italian place where I can order a different dish every day. Bring on the *pasta al pomodoro*, eggplant parmigiana, salt-baked branzino, and every other national culinary treasure.

Meanwhile, I reheat my chicken curry, waiting for Nonno to come. To kill some time and calm my nerves, I write my favorite words on scraps of paper and scatter them around the house. P-U-T-T-A-N-A is right on the kitchen table.

Nonno turns the key in the front door, changes into his felt slippers, nearly falling as he slides down the hall, and finally appears in the kitchen.

"G'morning, kitten," he says.

"Meow," I reply, already purring.

He strokes my hair, then freezes.

"What's this?" he shouts, menacingly waving the P-U-T-T-A-N-A paper in the air.

I knew it, I got the Ts wrong. "Puttana" must only have one T. With my problem of always missing something, I'm always adding things everywhere. But I won't let myself be caught unprepared. When I make a mistake I fix it.

"Putana," I say, "I put an extra T as a joke, I'm so funny."

His reply is a slap, landing perfectly on my left cheek. I don't understand. I look down and can't hold back the tears. Or a sob. My nose even starts to run. Nonno grabs a curry-stained tissue, the one I wiped my mouth with after eating, and rubs it under my nose. It feels like he wants to sandpaper my face.

I look at him in astonishment. Nonno is always sweet. He's all smiles, kisses, and cuddles. Violence, in actions or words, isn't like him. Indeed, he pulls himself together as best he can.

"Never, ever write, and most importantly don't say, that word," he says.

"That word does not exist," he concludes.

I want to reply that not only does that word exist, but what it stands for also exists.

It's nothing like "happiness" or "love," words that also exist, even though I don't really know what they mean.

A "puttana" you can reach out and touch—you just have to pay, my friend Filippo says. But "happiness" and "love" can't be touched, even if you pay for them. That's what I say. Though my ideas on this are a bit confused, because Giulia, the whore who says "Hi, good morning, that bag looks heavy. . ." and "Hey, how'd it go? What's for lunch?" yesterday said to some old man: "Two hundred euros, baby, and happiness and love are yours." So maybe "happiness" and "love" exist: I don't know if you can touch them, but Giulia definitely sells them. At a high price, I think. Anyway, maybe Giulia is right. As is Filippo, who gave ten euros to Giulia yesterday so she'd let him touch her tits. And Filippo said to me, "I love her, and I'm happy." *That's it?* I said to myself.

I turned my ten-euro bill round and round in my hands, looked over at Giulia and her tits, and then went back home and put the money back in my elephant bank. I'd taken it out without letting Mamma see. She says that money is important for my future.

Mamma got laid off from work, and when they told her she yelled "Fucking nigger!" Except her boss is white and blond, with green eyes framed by round gold glasses, and wears a dark blue suit with a white shirt and a blue tie. He doesn't look like Papà, Mamma's boss.

It's Mamma's boss's fault that now I can't have the money I put in my elephant bank. Mamma says that money is important for my future.

"It's your retirement fund," she says.

"What's retirement?" I ask.

"The opposite of unemployment."

"What's unemployment?"

"Getting laid off."

"But Mamma. . . I don't want to get laid for my future. . ."

"Fucking nigger!" she yells.

And with that the discussion is over.

"Fucking nigger!" always puts an end to everything.

I'M A BIG GIRL NOW, I'm twelve. But I keep getting my words wrong, adding or dropping double letters at random.

On my way home from school carrying my heavy bag and thinking about what I'll have for lunch, a couple pulls up next to me. The

man turns off the engine, the woman rolls down the window. "Come here," she says.

I do as I'm told, always. By Mamma, Nonno, even my teachers.

That means also ladies I find in the street who drive up to me and talk to me through the window. I go over and stare at her with a questioning look.

"Want to come to a room with the two of us and watch while we touch each other?" she says. "You don't have to do anything," she explains. "We'll give you two hundred euros for your presence," she says.

"I don't sell happiness and love," I say. I don't want to trick her. I do as I'm told, and don't lie. I just get my doubles wrong.

This time she's the one staring at me with a questioning look.

"She's dumb," I think.

"We'll give you two hundred euros," she says again, undeterred.

Not only dumb, deaf too. "I don't sell happiness and love," I say again, also unfazed. I'm not dumb or deaf. I just get my doubles wrong.

I leave, I've had enough. Even if I could use that two hundred euros. I saw a yellow dress with pink flowers at Fiorucci that costs a hundred and eighty. The remaining twenty I could invest in sweets. Even if Mamma says I shouldn't eat too many or I'll get fat and ugly and ruin that treasure of a girl she made.

She often makes me feel like her property. She'll look at me, stroke herself from her belly down to her cooch, then say, "You used to be in here, here's where you came out," pressing a hand on her belly and then on her cooch.

"Cooch" is the word my friend Filippo uses, because he says that "pussy" or "beaver" is cheesy and misleading. Because a pussy or a beaver, or worse, a cooter, is nothing like a cooch. "Cooter . . ." Let's not even go there.

Cooch or coochie? Filippo and I don't know how we should write it: with or without the "-ie"? That's the question. They're interchangeable, Filippo says. But I'm not convinced that cooch/coochie are interchangeable: I write it with an -ie; that makes it special.

So, because I used to be in Mamma's belly and then came out of Mamma's coochie, well, I can't be fat and ugly, now or ever. But every time I think about it I want to stuff myself with sweets.

The couple in the car set off—he turns on the engine, she closes the window, and it's goodbye two hundred euros. Goodbye dress and sweets. Goodbye double score. I always get doubles wrong. In my

lumpy Peruvian sweater, my faded bell-bottoms and my worn-down brown Clarks, I go back home.

No pastries or cake, just that damn chicken curry. It's Monday: I eat all the week's rations of pre-made food and go straight to bed to forget about the couple in the car, the two hundred euros, the yellow dress with pink flowers and, most of all, sweets. Around four a retch sends me running to the toilet: chicken curry sprays everywhere. The baby-sitter sees me. And she gives me a slap, open palm, on my left cheek. I look her straight in the eye, no crying or sobs. No runny nose either.

"*Puttana*," I say. With two Ts.

"*Negra*," she replies. Nigger.

Geez, I hadn't expected that. I call Filippo and ask him how it's spelled: N-I-G-G-E-R, he says.

I'M ALMOST A WOMAN now, I'm sixteen. And I bought a yellow dress with pink flowers that cost my entire future: my retirement closed up in an elephant piggy bank that a few days ago I smashed to bits, the trunk here, an ear there, hurling it onto the already chipped tiles in my bedroom.

I'm hardly ever in my bedroom. I'm always out, so I don't see or hear Mamma in her green housecoat with blue hearts on it yelling "Fucking nigger!" and dragging herself from the bed to the bathroom, the bathroom to the kitchen, the kitchen to the bed. She never goes out. Getting laid off means house arrest, I guess.

I'm always out. I'm always on the street. It's full of nigger whores, now, downstairs, on every corner. Giulia—who now owns a flat full of white whores—explains that the white ones work inside.

"Inside where?" I asked.

"In my flat," she replied. "Do you want to work for me?" she asked.

"I don't know, I'll think about it, but I don't have any happiness and love to sell."

"That's fine, happiness and love don't exist."

I knew it.

I'm sixteen and I have a yellow dress with pink flowers. It's nine p.m. I'm waiting for the 90 bus. I had dinner at Ilaria's, now I have to go back to Mamma. The bus doesn't come, that's its habit. You see it pulling away as you're getting to the stop and then you need to wait at least five cigarettes, one after the other, before you see the next one. I'm on number four. With the tip of my leather boots I try to spear

the three butts I dropped on the ground. A car stops, the man in the driver's seat has no lady on the passenger side. He turns off the engine, he rolls down the window.

He leans out and asks, "Need a lift?"

"Two hundred euros," I reply. I add nothing about happiness and love, since by now I know they don't exist anyway.

He opens the door, I climb in. He turns on the engine, but doesn't ask me where I live. The car reeks of tobacco, and if I can smell it with my two packs a day it must really reek. He moves a hand toward me as he keeps the other on the wheel and makes no sign of stopping. He runs it up my knee, under my skirt, onto my panties. I lie back on the seat to help. He's old, must be around forty. He's white and blond, with green eyes framed by round gold glasses and wearing a dark blue suit with a white shirt and blue tie.

He slams on the brakes and pulls over to the sidewalk. He has a wedding ring on his finger, and he shoves it into my cooch. I get wet, I moan. I like what he's doing. But then he pulls a lever, my seat falls back, he takes off my panties, undoes his trousers, gets on top of me, and rapes me. I don't like what he's doing.

He gives me four hundred euros, opens the door and has me get out.

"Wait," I tell him. "I need to give you two hundred euros back." I do as I'm told, I don't lie, and I don't steal. And I always get my doubles wrong.

He takes it, spits on it, chucks it at me, and tells me: "Nigger whore, and a virgin too."

I walk all the way home thinking about how many Gs it has. The next day I call Filippo and tell him everything.

He says: "It's spelled V-I-R-G-I-N, with one G."

"Thanks," I reply.

He's a thousand times better than the dictionary.

I get on the 54 and go to San Babila. Fiorucci isn't there anymore, they opened a shop that doesn't sell yellow dresses with pink flowers. I'm wearing one I bought from SexyBaby, with some erotic lingerie for teenagers: the brand is called HardLolita. I don't need little yellow dresses with pink flowers now. I have one on already: it covers my leopard-print thong. I am hungry, though. I go into the bakery and buy four hundred euros of pastries. "Happy birthday," they say.

I turn seventeen today, but I didn't tell them that. I smile. I do as

I'm told, I don't lie, I don't steal, and I always smile. But I keep getting my doubles wrong.

I sit on the steps to the metro, unwrap the tray, and start eating the sweets. I go back home and throw up. Inside the toilet, without making a mess. Nonno is dead, the babysitter quit, but for a long time now, when I mess up my letters or anything else I give myself a slap, always on the left cheek.

That afternoon I go and see Giulia. She's under "G" on the intercom. She says it's cool: G like g-spot and G like Giulia. G in vagina and G in virgin, I think. She's right, it is cool.

"I want to work with you," I tell her.

"Then you have to go on the street," she replies.

"Why, because I don't sell happiness and love?" I ask.

"No, because you're a nigger whore," she says.

I look at her.

"That's life, honey."

She's right. I walk the streets. I do as I'm told, I don't lie, I don't steal, and I smile when I'm supposed to smile. I'll make an effort not to get my doubles wrong anymore. I even changed my name to help.

Now I'm T-I-N-A: one T, one I, one N, one A. I'm Tina, no doubles and no Gs. A name that's spelled how it sounds. I'm Tina, the nigger whore you see on the corner.

Nigger with a double G.

CHARLIE PECK

## Barricades

Around the courthouse they've built orange and white barricades, directed traffic to side streets to reduce heads craning from car windows, and as I walk the dog this morning with Kate, she turns and asks,

*What do you think?* and I say, *Must be a protest.* When my dad gave the eulogy at my grandfather's funeral, one woman afterwards was appalled that he quoted Grandpa's favorite phrase, *Smiling like a cat*

*eating shit.* In her chapel nothing could be worse than something that profane. My dad just smiled and nodded at the open casket behind him. What a messy world we live in. Just last week I drove

to the state park and brought home a bass to cook for dinner. After I filleted the fish, I poked through its stomach to see what bait to use next time, and there among crayfish shells and worm chunks

was a sterling silver wedding band, which tells me two things:

1) After sweating for three hours in Loose Lefty's Tavern, some poor bastard stood on the river's bank and hurled his ring

at the current where it quickens around a fallen tree, and 2) Even fish know they too can feed on grief, that among all the suffering there is usually someone who attaches

like a limpet to a sea stone. *Room for Lease* is stapled to a barricade. Moody does his business by a potted plant behind the boardinghouse, and when we turn the corner to pass the courthouse a second time,

a sign by the marble steps reads *Round the Fountain Art Fair*. One paint-smattered canvas makes all three of us stop. It shows a dog lying beside a woman's cot, her head wrapped in bandages, and by the dog's

mismatched eyes you can tell the artist is amateur, but there's something there, a wanting to organize pain into something useful. It hits all of us. Even Moody sits down to look, his tail flat on the sidewalk.

PETER KRUMBACH

## Police Interrogation of Food Critic B. W. Ball

*Would you like a cigarette?* I'd prefer Talking Mule, 1979 Burgundy. Texture and hue of Bethlehem rust. Notes of must, slate, and pre-coital rouge when tongued to the roof of the mouth. Bold finish, lingering up to seventeen seconds, diminishing to uvular fog. 3.5 stars. *Have they treated you well?* Guard gave me an apple—Brandenburg Barbara. Thick-skinned, sturdy, heavy if held in a nondominant hand. Loud when bitten, rewarding moisture and zest, firm meat's sweetness haloed by sting. Best served with damp towels. 3 stars. *So what do you remember about last night?* Odor! Van Kuntengraaf goat cheese. Overwhelming to the point of striking a tabletop with one's palm. Once tears dabbed, olfactory reverberations producing surprising amount of saliva and thrill. Fed in ¼-centimeter tabs, fat, salt, and sour cream dominate at first, the second wave rising with suggestions of chalk, socked feet, and prewar wax. Bordering on gross. Pleasant. 4 stars. *Where were you at 8:30 when the alleged theft of chef Klausmayer's hat occurred?* Table 7, eating a protein snack. Pete's Peanutbutter Pop. Shape of a steamrolled spud on a stick. Color reminiscent of north New Jersey. Looks, tastes, and sounds like silt. Although enjoyable at first, aftertaste distinctly metallic, almost German. Recommended before and after calisthenics. May cause choking. Stick chewable. 2.5 stars. *Your attorney claims you were poisoned by salad dressing. Is that true?* Ali's Valley, Tunisian olive oil. Possibly laced with psychotropic ants. Offered in a carafe instead of an eye-dropper. Warning label missing. Stupendous. *Do you recall entering the kitchen area and lunging at chef Klausmayer?* Consumed too many servings before realizing efficacy, resulting in midvolume howling and Renaissance visions unrecalable upon waking in the borscht scent of the borough's emergency ward. *How are you feeling now, Mr. Ball?* 5 stars. Though I could use some Perrier.