

Lillies

By Ahmad Abdullah Albasir

They drove in silence under the pale blue and iron sky of early morning, traces of tangerine and red fading from the clouds as the sun rose. The tree passed in a vanishing green swirl, colors blending from bark and needles and stretches of sky peeking through leaves, specks of rising pink and blue-grey and then the dark brown and mauve of late autumn hues to clay and rock and stone and back again- a repetitious blur of scenic monotony as they descended the mountain.

They began picking up speed. He glanced briefly at the speedometer. In the seat next to him she wondered "is he still pressing the gas?" then "is he going to press the brake?" while the lime and rock, the pine and sky sloped and blurred into one melted background as they picked up momentum down the steepening grade.

The car slowed and there was the subtle high pitched sound of metal on metal. She'd noticed it earlier, at the station, thinking simply "the brakes" at the time she thought not registering past a cursory awareness, the sound of the sensor now triggering a subconscious warning faded by rising consternation, a pinprick into the dam of antipathy and frustration slowly mixing in a swirl of dread and memory: horns and traffic lights, a lifeless clean smell, echoes and voices and faces all blurring into one name, one tag: Dr. so and so- because the name had stopped mattering- the flood slowly welling up and running just beneath the surface, thinking "it's been a month, why haven't they been changed?" but saying nothing, instead trying to focus on breathing, making air move in and out of her lungs in cycles making it move slowly, in rhythm.

The anger subsided, lassitude replacing it as the deluge seeped slowly back into that dark grey murky place behind forgetting and dismissal, phantom shapes in a discordant play moving behind the cambric layer, settling just behind awareness.

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Her thoughts returned to the passing landscape as she watched the trees through her reflection in the window, her face blank, calm, intent, thinking "Vermont's beautiful this time of year," her thought shifting, "But what's the point? This place, going back... there's nothing here."

A car sat at the side of the road, something rarely seen. She turned her head, watching it go by, watching them go by it, the car becoming a tiny speck and vanishing from sight, disappearing in the mirror and soon memory, memory then seeing only skeletal remains and something more deformed than she knew sight had seen; faces gaunt, empty, the driver standing at the side of the car, despondent, devoid of emotion and life, a scarecrow dangling in the still, frigid grey air, remembering, thinking "How does something like that just get left?" How do people end up like that, forgotten and unraveling out into the cold silence."

He'd seen her before she saw him, as usual. "She's too short" he thought "she can't see over them even while she's on that platform." Which wasn't completely true, it was more of a joke he liked to tell himself, and her whenever he could. She was average height, as she would say.

She looked frailer in a way standing on the platform scanning the crowd, her bag held in front almost like a shield. She began maneuvering with the line moving toward the train, slowly, not quite hesitatingly but aware, alert in that way of hers, fluid, her eyes steadily searching, using the advantage of elevation while she could. She descended into the crowd.

He watched her head disappear beneath a wave of winter hats and hair and earmuffs which he could not understand the point of, why not just wear a whole hat?

He began moving too, leaving the train and plunging into the crowd that was now moving as one organism, trying to remember the pattern

of hair and hats surrounding where he'd seen her last, shuffling with the mass of people in the pre-occupied silence, each face bearing the mark of that occupation, of time and each individuals measure of it spread out in distance and destination and the seconds between while the silence droned on, broken only by the metronomic sounds of footsteps and distant chattering.

He made his way through them, thinking at all the people, each with some separate destination, yet now existing as a mass of lives held in the hue of this specific time, this place, held in the ambience at echoes and light, gift-shops, rust and wastebaskets all under skeletal ruffers like skeletal hands trying to hold it all in; the atmosphere, the people all a single organism held like a single breath inhaled on waiting to be exhaled into daylight from this moment, expelled from togetherness and into suffusion forever separating, many into their own singular mysterious hubs; moving out of, leaving the tangible identity of one uniform mass sequestered in the dense rushed breathless space and into memory then forgetting and finally non-existence. And then he was looking at her, staring down before he'd realized it, his head bent, body reflexively arched as if she'd been standing next to him and they'd been talking the whole time.

She looked up, not seeing him for the first time - she'd seen him moving through the crowd, his head just visible - but now looking directly at him, her gaze steady, measured, quiet, just barely and then only for a fraction of a second betraying a hint of tension, a flicker of pain as the people continued moving around them.

"I hate crowds," she said calmly, softly, without inflection.

"They've got their purpose. Where are the kids?" he asked, continuing without preamble. His voice came out more raspy than he'd anticipated betraying a lack of sleep and something of fatigue, wariness.

She was silent for a moment, still holding his gaze, then saying "they're at moms, she wanted to see them. They went Friday night." she paused, pensive, almost as if sensing something, waiting. "What did the doctor say? Did he change anything?" he asked. She looked away. "Yeah" she said, looking into the crowd. "I can't remember the name it's the one with the Asian name. It's in my bag."

He watched her for a moment, seeing she wanted to change the subject, asking "how are the kids?"

She looked up again, imperceptibly shifting her weight to the other foot, saying "they're fine. They haven't seen the puppy yet either. I think they're going to like it."

He smiled, looking over her head at something further off, shuttering distantly "...they're at your moms, that's good" then as if suddenly remembering something, returning, saying "You really think they'll like it, the dog?" and before she could answer abruptly again saying "Why didn't you have Summer drive" and before he could finish she was answering "I can drive myself fine and yes, they'll love him Raman, he's adorable."

He remembered something, pulling out a small rectangular object wrapped in brown paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. She hesitated then took the package, a quizzical smile on her face.

They began walking.

As they walked she leaned into his side slightly resting her weight on his arm for a moment, a busy of familiarity, both sensing something growing warming it's way out from inside, from beneath vaguely veiled and buried layers stretching its hand out and touching the peripheries of thought before reaching back into the murky folds of obscurity.

The lights flickered, just for a second; returning to the dim rust and faded yellow of a displaced afternoon, someplace old and forgotten and remote, a scene from a cracked sepia photograph strange and anachronistic and almost having its own pulse.

She opened her eyes from the memory, the conscious dream, moving into another as the road hummed on.

They drove in silence, not awkward but the impregnable silence of nothing, a ball, a knotted barrier of unsaid words settling in empty space held suspended and guarded, a pensive strain moving in valence between them its wall inviolable from every angle until the words were spoken breaking loose from the dam and in the flood it became clear again that just the act itself of interaction had become a hostage to silence and the the reverberation of unknowns and maybes and what-ifs, that hope itself hung in the balance of each word - not fear, fear sometimes propelled the words but hope gave weight on the scale tipping silence into the lingering flurry of unsaid things or resolutions or the promise of something better because whether the words seemed meaningless or not hope was an embellishment the nerves couldn't do without; because who knew, this could be the last time.

They arrived at the house. It was dark, sitting empty and quietly occupied a squared out field near a forest, the house itself bordered by looming pines and a path leading from the road; the incuse entrenched by the forest and both increasing in the idea of seclusion and at the same time a sense of welcoming, of beckoning into the vacuum of wooded grey fall silence; a resolute and familiar place sustained in a quality of absence.

They parked on the side and walked to the front door. He brought the bags from the trunk.

The door creaked as they entered, the fall air drifting over the porch and past them, rushing into the house and carrying with it a feeling, a faraway presence like something lost and familiar returning from the desolation of absence looking for warmth and rest, a place to remember in the quiet confines of familiarity what it all was like before being snatched from the reverie without warning and flung senseless into the ephemeral grey void in a seeping rush of air and sound sealed in abrupt finality by the closing door.

They stopped in the doorway.

He stood there for a moment, an expression of weariness settling on his face as he scanned the living room, not really seeing the things, the room, but more feeling, reacting unconsciously, automatically to them, like how breathing is automatic until the moment you notice it and then it becomes a labor, something you wish you could forget again, seeing the couch, the chair, the fireplace, deftly scanning as if more so trying to forget something than to find it.

She paused as well, looking straight ahead, memory for a moment lapsing as it collided with reality, her eyes catching in clear detail the unmoving, non-breathing complete stillness of no-sound, no-life.

She moved around his still figure, walking through the living room and stopping briefly in the kitchen before moving down the hall toward the last bedroom, walking slowly, steadily, her worn in soft soled boots padding quietly over the hardwood floor with each step precisely placed and then moving in complete silence over carpet as she entered the bedroom.

She placed the bag on the bed, staring down, becoming lost in thought.

"Mirah."

His ears rang for a moment in the dampened quiet with the sound

of his fading voice.

He realized he was walking now, moving through the house. The stupor of suddenly moving into a drastically different atmosphere had begun to wear off, the electric hum dissipating. It is roaring though now stood in complete contrast to the silence he'd entered, his thoughts no longer veiled by the ambient outside sounds of things at least remotely audible: a breeze moving through the grass, the subtle drone of branches and leaves and birds calling back and forth, an owl; and then moving into less, from at least a quiet vibrancy into a vacuum of soundless space, its wood-smell dark confines untouched, unoccupied, remote, not remote in proximity but in its air, it's quality of unreachableness and yet still retaining a sense of gravity, of drawing in to the point where he actually felt his lungs deflate, the air siphoned without warning before he was able to finish his last breath as he came in.

The roaring faded. As it did he began to notice just at the edge of awareness something that was by itself, by its own volition creeping past the periphery trying to be remembered.

He stopped in the kitchen. It was the same as he'd remembered it, sparse, the same pots hanging, the stove bare. He stood at the counter, a conversation he and Mitah had had suddenly coming to mind. It was almost night. She'd been saying something about getting the kids to school, he'd taken them and they'd been late that morning. He'd been drifting in and out of the conversation, his focus switching between the words and something he'd forgotten in the car. He remembered staring out of the back sliding glass doors and for some reason

just then noticing the trees and how they seemed so remote, moody and looming and almost unrealistic like cutouts in a play, a backdrop almost to perfectly placed, watching the twilights glow as it drifted in draping itself over the floor, the couch, their feet, its soft violet light stretching, reaching into and blending with shadows - they still hadn't turned the lights on - wondering, "am I missing something," alarmed by the question and its randomness and then laughing to himself because of the irony and seeing the perplexed look on Mirahs face realizing that he'd laughed out loud; and then the light fading completely, disappearing into the dark and the sounds of night: the soft echoes of leaves and wind and voices, Mirahs then his own and the kids in the background all coming from somewhere distant, juxtaposed yet still in harmony with the pale moan of sound outside, permeating, reaching into memory; the chorus of gusts and shutters creaking, a gutter sporadically rattling while the wind blew winding through the through the trees and dark and against the house; the atmosphere inside muted, bathed in warm light, comfortable, haunting in its contrast like an island insulated by a sea of life and dissolving light set against the phantoms, the signs of the insipient night.

His skin tingled, goosebumps rising.

He turned to go when something at the edge of his vision caught his attention. It was the thing that had been tugging at the corners of his mind, a small rectangular object. He picked it up, turning it over, seeing the picture, the figures in the foreground, the scene he'd forgotten: All four standing in front of the tree, a maple in the backyard.

It had been taken around the time Summer had lost her first tooth. There was an engraving on the back but no date: Fall - Mirah, Roman, Summer, Jack. In the picture by pretending to be busy, Jack: head was slightly tilted, showing his infectious grin, Summer was smiling the missing tooth showing, her arm around the then much smaller Jack, and Roman kneeling, his arms on Summer and Jack.

The picture had been taken spur of the moment by Mirah's brother who'd been visiting for the weekend. They had all come to the backyard at different times for different reasons. Jack and Summer were playing in the leaves burying Jack; Mirah had been getting something from the car and had stopped to watch them, a smile slowly fading into a look at consternation as she watched them obliterate the newly piled leaves. Roman had been on the phone, distractedly wandering out onto the back patio and not yet noticing the people or the scene absently thinking "I just raked this thing..."

The memory began to fade back into the photo, spectres moving back into their shadows, into the stillness as the echoes, voices and fall receded, dissolving. An element of life and vibrancy, the impossible spontaneity of - moment had been captured and almost fully translated before it was returned as sight carried sound in the grasp of feeling back into memory and then further, the shapes, the moment dissipating into a wall of white noise and from that emerging a single voice, something like Mirah's but distant, underwater.

He set the dusty picture down and continued walking through

the house, to the back door, then outside.

He saw the swing, the most recent addition to the back yard, standing motionless near the tree. It was almost completely covered in leaves, layered in the damp and crumbling colors of autumn foliage. He brushed a spot clean and sat, not caring about the dampness of the seat, looking out into the distance as the wind and forest wove their whispers between each other, thinking "how can your life be held in one place like that? All of it unmoving and condensed at one point, even if it's just a moment in a yard?" and a minute later thinking "or on a swing" his breath catching as at the height of the thought his focus switched, disturbed suddenly and without warning, moving inward to a feeling, an idea clutching, grasping its way up, something shapeless, wordless, intangible, his defense intangible too but still trying in subconscious desperation to subdue its first words, the first letter even before he spoke it; and a moment later everything becoming still again, the thought and the thing dissipating while he sat pensive, staring into the trees - or the dark shapes of what should have been trees - feeling the cool air, the quiet, the words dissolving under the last of the fading light as it slowly stretched across each blade of grass leaving a patchwork of shadows, and then the grass and the shadows disappearing in the encroaching veil of night, his face becoming placid as a breeze died then began again, thinking "Fall always felt like home."

Mirah stood in the room, contemplative. She heard a voice and looked back over her shoulder into the hallway. She stood for a moment like that, thinking.

A moment later she looked up, realizing she'd been walking, lost in a living dream, she stopped. She'd walked into the kitchen. She saw the counter, a vase of flowers there, dried, wilted, a picture with fingerprints on its dusty edges lying on its back. She looked outside, past the sliding glass doors into the trees with their rustling leaves softly murmuring into the night. She went outside, walking toward the center of the year, a memory, an ephemeral dream gliding over the worn path lined by familiar rocks, thinking in a familiar voice, "Yes, I've asked about this place before but how do these dead stories give me answers?"

She stopped at the swing, sitting, the cool air chilling her skin, staring out into the night while the trees stood quietly in dark contrast outlined by what was left of the pale glow, their tips inconspicuous, their silhouettes held in the slightest relief to the dark.

And he remembers, not forcing the memory away this time. Mirah there, both of them sitting, watching the sun disappear through the trees and when it was gone still, sitting under the stars and purple sky watching the last of the glow recede, looking into the dark, the mirror of endless possibility looking into something like eternity.

And he remembers in a voice not quiet his own but as familiar, not quiet even a voice anymore at all but the sound of a moment itself reverberating, echoing from memory out into the present, its voices mingled and murmuring in the ambience the shared wonderment at the tranquil nothing, then sweeping into the inveterate star covered night.

He realizes then that the kids are still at her mothers house and he begins to rise but sits again, held in the reverie, reflective, his memories shifting and taking shape again of a familiar quiet form, transient and yet still vivid, thinking "fine, one more minute."

Memory shifts again and he's looking down, his hand on the wheel, the brakes squealing, the sound of a condensed crowd swirling into the soundlessness of the empty house, the subtle subdued cacophony slowly fading into the background and the reverie rushing to a close as he thinks "Why do you come here?" and the memory says into the wind "I come because you were here, because of these walls" and he hears "Roman, didn't you ask about this place, this place that everyone's left! The people that are not here anymore?" and in the quiet fall the memory fades carried into the aegis from the cold steeple while thought and twilight become thinner, mixing and leaving behind traces like the echoes of a vanishing dream.