



The Stories of Mann

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## Olivia Coward

“...peach cobbler like my mother used to make it? Did your mother make you peach cobbler? It was always my favorite when I was a kid! A great Sunday afternoon dish, and she made it for birthdays too. Really a great dish for any occasion? Have you ever made it before? Oh! And we need some greens, Timmy’s been quite constipated lately...what greens can you make? Oh, oh I know! Call Robbie! Call Robbie! It’s high in fiber isn’t it?”

When she said she wanted “call Robbie that was high in fiber” I smiled and said, “Yes, yes, call Robbie, yes, very high in fiber, yes, I know just the dish!” and excused myself to the bathroom. I whipped out my phone and frantically I typed “colroby,” then “coalrabi,” then “kolrabee,” and finally Google could sense what I was doing and asked “did you mean ‘kohlrabi’”? I went straight to images and saw orbs with vertical limbs extended from their almost plastic looking skin in colors of alien green and purple. Their insides were all white and looked hard and acidic. Then I asked Google to show me “kohlrabi recipes” and the food was either rabbit food or food so sauced and salted and buttered and breaded that it was impossible to tell what vegetable was underneath.

I was starting to feel that my time was up, so I stood up, flushed, turned on the tap for a couple seconds, then exited the dim bathroom, an expertly posed smile already on my face. The kitchen was bright and hot and I smiled and nodded as she chattered away to me. My hands and feet moved and I prepped the branzino then the fennel salad then the roasted sweet potato then the peach cobbler until it was time to prepare the kohlrabi. Gingerly, as if it was going to bite me, I reached into the Whole Foods bag on the counter. Something cold and smooth touched my hand. I held it gently like an egg and pulled it out of the bag. It was a sickly green, like the bloated thumb of a cadaver.

Cautiously, I used a paring knife to peel off the skin. The skin was thick and tough and wet from my sweaty palms so it slipped in my fingers and the knife slashed my skin. I dripped dark beads and its pale white flesh bloomed red. I stared into its body and watched as the red spread deeper until my hands snapped into motion and frantically began cutting out the red parts of the kohlrabi and burying them in the trash can.

The next thing I knew, the family was examining my food that was splayed beneath low hanging light bulbs who’s penetrating rays left no mistake hidden. They examined like art critics

squinting their eyes at my body of work, leaning in with hands clasped behind their backs, before I forced out a “dig in guys!” and suddenly they were reaching in and scooping food from each of my platters to gather onto their own. They were quiet with concentration as they put their tongues and spit and teeth on each of my dishes, and I watched from behind the kitchen island. But soon they started talking and my shoulders relaxed and I could breathe until a knife clattered against the floor.

“Mommy mommy it's red it's red!” I saw it from across the room: there was a glaring spot of red in my kohlrabi gratin. The mom swooped her daughter’s plate off the table, pulled it right into her nose, scrunched her face up, and called for me to come to her in her shrill voice. My feet pitter pattered to her in two seconds and I gasped when I saw my blood on her little daughter's white plate.

I didn’t gasp out of shame or embarrassment, but I gasped at how absolutely delectable it looked. My blood had emulsified into my creamy buttery gratin sauce and was cooked into my kohlrabi flesh. My mouth hung open and drool dripped onto her hand. I deftly picked up her knife and fork on the table and cut myself a slice of my bloody kohlrabi gratin. I closed my eyes as my still warm softened kohlrabi melted into my tongue with the slight salty of my blood.

That night I learned the trick to cooking kohlrabi: no, it's not to mandolin it into transparent slices and dress it up in a fresh slaw, no it doesn’t need to be slathered in butter and spices and sent into the oven for two hours, no it doesn’t need to be steamed and blended into a creamy white puree, no, no, and no! All it needs is a little of your blood.

## Cat Got My Tongue - Lauren Kim

Four days and three nights after my cat got run over, dead birds started appearing at my doorstep. They lay motionless on the welcome mat, with their beaks facing the sky and their feathers tucked prim and pretty—looking less like carcasses and more like softly sleeping taxidermy. Crimes committed by only a neighbor’s cat, I assumed.

I scooped the birds up and tossed them into a food waste bin.

Five days and four nights after my cat died, I awoke in the middle of the night to a soft mewling in my room. High-pitched meows reverberated along with the battering of the ceiling fan, the noise dancing circles around the headboard of my bed. Even with bright moonlight seeping in through the window and illuminating the room, no matter how hard I strained my eyes, I couldn’t see anything out of order. The source of the sounds was impossible to pinpoint, and my eyelids only drooped more with each passing moment.

In a pitiful attempt to ignore it, I smothered a pillow over my ears and fell into a fitful bout of sleep.

Six days and five nights after the cat incident, the meowing only got louder. The cries had gradually grown to a hiss, with sharp wails bouncing off the walls of my bedroom. They were panicked, and crazed, yelling at me to pay attention, screaming at me to do something, and crying and whining like a newborn baby.

I bought noise-canceling headphones. Sleeping with them put a crick in my neck and an ache in my ears. I returned them the next day.

Seven days and six nights after the incident, I found a ceramic sculpture of my cat staring back at me, its tongue peeking out of its mouth, and carefully cut emeralds fit snugly into its eye gouges. I placed it carefully on my bookshelf and angled it towards the sun just enough that its eyes would sparkle.

The meowing quieted down that night.

Eight days and seven nights after the accident, I lost a full night of sleep. I was functioning off of a type of instinct, maybe. Every now and then the “meow”s would spike in volume—and though I scrambled to find the source of the noise, and flicked the lamp on with haste, the sounds abruptly died down as if drowned by the light.

I found myself alone in my room, surrounded by no one and nothing. Once again, the culprit vanished before my eyes.

Nine days and eight nights later, I caught my reflection in a gold-plated wall mirror. It was a strange kind of mirror that only gets passed down as a family heirloom, looking much too out of place in both the attic and the living room. However long I stared, emerald-colored eyes stared back at me for longer, pupils dilated and expression frenzied. Feeling around my swollen face and tender eye bags, my hand shook in disbelief and horror, as a faint noise escaped my throat and echoed down the hallway:

“Meow.”

## High Noon - Lowey Miller

The dust was hot, the sun rode high. The air was thick. Noon was nigh.  
When from the haze there came a man, his coat was black, his hat in hand.  
His beard was long, hair far from kempt, his eyes were drawn from dust he'd wept.  
His clothes were beat and stained with sand, his knees both shook as did his hands.  
Down at his hip there was a gun, a glint of hot steel 'neath the sun.  
And in his fist he clutched a note, it told of wills and cash he owed.  
He'd walked and walked, Lord knows how long, been friend to skies and stars long gone.  
Then through the smog he saw a town, its vague, faint frame in heat was drowned.  
He donned his cap, its brim pulled low, to hide his face, so tight with woe.  
He'd dragged his feet 'cross stream and sand, his coat had holes, sleeves held by strands.  
Then soon he stood, just out of town, his blur a ghost, the sun his crown.  
He had a flask, a beat old thing, filled end to brim with stale brown gin.  
He held it now, and took a swig, to lift a soul, weighed down with sin.  
He loosed a breath that he had held and took a pace to meet the town.  
He had a job, one that took skill, a hand held fast, and stern set will.  
He walked through town with stiff, firm gait, he thumbed the six-shot at his waist.  
And on the street not a soul stirred, and at his feet the dust bowl swirled.  
Then there he saw the house of law, where worked a man who'd done him wrong.  
He took the gun leashed to his side, and fired a shot up to the sky.  
And out ran men, at least a score, out from the law house and close stores.  
But once they stopped and saw the man, they froze in fright, some turned and ran.  
Most stared in fear and gawked in angst, when soon a man walked through their ranks.  
He was a law man, tried and true, he wore a badge and vest of blue.  
And soon he saw the black clad man, who had a gun and job to do.  
The law man frowned and said to him, "you're a bit late, now ain't you Jim?"  
And Jim scoffed back with gun still raised, "I took my time."  
The dust bowl blazed.

The men met at the edge of town, where vague faint frames in heat were drowned.

They stood up on a ridge on high, stood back to back, guns at their sides.  
Some folks watched from the town down low, they saw them take ten steps, real slow.  
Now eye to eye, each saw their foe, one vest of blue, one brim pulled low.  
They stood just so, for quite a spell, up till they heard the town's church bell.  
It rang twelve times, sung out its song, it rang for grit and men long gone.  
It rang out through the dead of day, sank through the earth and cracked red clay.  
The sound was deep, the sound was grieved, the sound was heard by god and thieves.  
And once this stroke of twelve was rung, then each man reached down for his gun.  
Then quick! Each man swung out his hand, two tolls of death rang 'cross the land.  
And as the law man leashed his gun, he saw the black clad man's blood run.  
It ran through cracks, it ran through clay, it pooled in the harsh light of day.  
The law man then turned 'round to leave, he'd had his man, no time to grieve.  
Yet some strange sense called out to him, and made him think twice of his sin.  
Then out of guilt he turned his head – he saw the note in blood dyed red.  
Jim held it out for him to read, he clutched the slip as if a plea.  
And so the law man took the note, to see what the black clad man had wrote.  
It was writ by hand and on it read:  
“To my dear John, from a dear friend:  
I know that I have not been kind, to my bad deeds I am not blind.  
I know what sort of pain I've wrought, of your poor grief have I oft thought.  
I hate to think that I'm the cause, though 'course I know well my own flaws.  
I wish I could have seen you through, the hard times that I know you knew.  
So as I write this note I'm grieved, for of a friendship you've been thieved.  
I know that now it's much too late, and this trite note won't change our fate.  
Yet still I have the gall to ask, we die as friends, no mind our past.  
Let's go to where the red hills roll, where days we passed as free young souls.  
Where sun beams down as if an eye, that is where I'd like to die.  
Take me there and lay me to rest,  
'Ol Jim, to be one with the west.”  
John cried out as the sun shone down, he wailed and sobbed and beat the ground.  
And so he wrapped Jim's arm in his, and dragged the limp man from his sins.



He dragged his frame 'cross the hot sand, went foot by foot, moved hand by hand.  
But the sun blazed white, it dried John's sweat, his skin turned pink where light it met.  
His strength now waned, he had no more, his legs both shook, his eyes were sore.  
But just then he saw the red hills, where as young men they found their thrills.  
He pulled Jim to the top of one, they drew there as low sank the sun.  
He stopped and sighed, he lay down Jim, and to his friend sang soft a hymn.  
And so they sat, both side by side, they watched the sun set one last time.  
They watched it blaze, a great red eye, as it sank low in a dark sky.  
It crossed the land, and would once more - it would see what the next day bore.  
And Ol' Jim sighed, his final sigh, and pulled his friend close to his side.  
The two men shared one last long hug, as sun's light fell and night had come.  
And in the hushed calm of the eve', the black clad man was laid to peace.  
The law man walked back through the night, the trip was quick.  
His load was light.

So now days when the town bell tolls, the man finds where the red hills roll.  
He walks there some days, some days not, he sits and reads, oft lost in thought.  
He knows that out there, past the dust, past the hills, past the red sun;  
Past the old town and past the moon, past the vast sky and past the noon;  
Sits Ol' Jim at peace at last, with his old beat flask, still clad in black.  
And some day soon, he'll sit with him, he'll laugh with him and drink his gin.  
But 'til that day, that some day soon,  
he has but dust,  
and suns  
and moons.

## Mira - Ariadne Civin

Cold air wraps around your shoulders like an icy hand, and you try not to shudder as the night falls down on you like a blanket. The light above you is sputtering faintly, casting rough shadows on the cement stairs.

You twine your fingers through your necklace as breath coats your throat. You should have brought a jacket, a book, something.

You shouldn't have said you'd come at all, not this late, not alone.

But you aren't alone, of course, you aren't, you're going with Liam and Olivia and Emma and—

You ball your right hand into a fist as if that can hide that thrumming twitch in your pinky finger you've had since grade school and pretend that if you try hard enough, you can ignore the liquid terror encasing your palm like a wet glove.

You don't turn your head until you hear footsteps and the ringing laughter that makes the bottom of your stomach cave in on itself. But you are not afraid, of course you aren't.

These are your best friends.

And your boyfriend, the boy with impossibly long legs and wireframe glasses who can quote Tennyson and sends you postcards with only your name and a math problem he wrote for you on them.

You bite your lips hard enough to taste the spreading metal of your own blood and you have no reason for this, of course you don't, you are eighteen, a woman, and you can handle it.

It was just one fight, that's what they'd all told you, nobody's perfect.

His voice rising, grating your ears, the rough churn of the washing machine against your Back.

Stop lying to yourself, Mira. Don't be a baby.

The footsteps are upon you and he is there, the first time you've seen him since you became shadow and emptiness, since you slipped past him and fell into the hole only you could see.

Olivia is laughing, and his chuckle is pounding and even Emma has cracked a smile.

Olivia notices you first, she always did, even on the first day as you melted into one of a hundred desks in that huge lecture hall.

“Mira, there you are, we’ve been looking for you, Liam is pulling the car around, come On.”

Her words are a stream, tugging you forward as much as the arm she has dripped across your shoulders. She marches you down the stairs, still in the middle of some story about juggling.

Out of habit, you send a helpless glance in his direction, but when your eyes meet you are choking, and you knew how to inhale seconds ago but now the very idea has been stripped from your throat.

And he is standing next to you now, his voice low in your ear.

“What happened to you, Mira? Where have you been?”

You just shrug and let Olivia talk over you, you tell Emma about an essay you are working on, Macbeth, and there are the blinding lights of the car coming around the corner and you should not all be able to fit in that impossibly small space.

You hear him yelling, slicing the night as he leaps over the remaining stairs, leaving only a thrown shotgun! in his wake.

You let yourself be tucked against the window and the melody of their words tumble over you, and you have done this every Saturday night since the beginning of the term, and you are not some Massachusetts girl who could be mistaken for wallpaper anymore, you belong here.

You have earned this.

You watch the roll of the grass swaying and look for the full moon, remembering when you had a math teacher in high school who you were convinced was a werewolf.

Wondering if he was still standing at his endless stretch of a blackboard and disappearing once a month to God only knows where.

Olivia turns to dig a packet of beers from the trunk and presses a can into your hand. Emma is watching you, but you can never read her, and the car is swerving as Liam opens his can and your stomach is dropping.

*This is what it is supposed to be.*

And you know your friends, you know how they folded you into them, taught you the capitals of every country in the world over smuggled vodka.

*Your mother's brow had furrowed when you emerged from the train. What happened to you, Mira?*

*At least you've found friends, finally.*

That last part had been whispered, but you had heard it anyway. "What's wrong, Mira?" It is Olivia, her head resting heavy on your shoulder, "Emma's supposed to be the quiet one, not you."

You try to force words up your throat, any words, but they clog and spread like dust over your tongue.

His voice is loud, too loud and thick in the rancid, spreading air of the tight car, and you are not going to roll down a window, they'll laugh at you.

"Mira's just sulking," he says, his voice falling on you like burning water and you straighten, fury curdling thickly.

"Charlotte didn't sulk, I'm sure," it spills out of you, though you didn't mean to say it, and the mention of his last girlfriend, the one before you, rises like gas.

He rolls his eyes, the motion exaggerated, "Oh my God, Mira."

"What happened?" Emma's voice surprises you and you feel yourself turning to stone right there in the back seat you know you shouldn't care, of course you don't.

"Nothing happened," his voice drips over you and you shudder faintly.

"It wasn't nothing," it comes out flat, too flat, and you clutch the unopened beer can in your hand harder, and the air is pressing in around you.

"Don't be such a baby, Mira, why are you getting so hung up on this?"

"It wasn't nothing," you say again, and your voice is too high, too loud, it is pounding out of you and you are melting into the seat and everyone is talking and you feel your hand close on the door handle, you are pushing, it is swinging away under you and the black pavement is leaping past like waves, and Liam is cursing, the car jerking into a turn.

You all tumble out of the car as it pulls to a stop, and you stumble even though your beer is still unopened, steadying yourself against the car and your legs do not belong to you.

He comes around the car fast, towering over you, and you feel the parking lot stretching like a desert.

Behind you, you are faintly aware of another car and the neon sign of the grocery store.

“Why can’t you just grow up, this is what relationships are like in the real world, Mira,” he says, his face too close to yours and there is nowhere to go. “You almost—” you don’t need to say it, he knows. He goes rigid above you and you can’t see the moon behind him anymore.

His voice is scraping, “Adults fight, that’s what happens. Wake up, Mira, wake up for once in your life.”

You shake your head ever so slightly and you will tell yourself later that that’s why he did it, that you should have seen it coming. You don’t register the sight of his hand rising, only the spreading acid across your cheek so hard that you stumble backward, your head wiping around.

They are all gathered around you now and he is talking from somewhere far away.

Distantly, you realize you dropped that unopened can of beer, and you try to peel your hand from your cheek to get it, you try to move at all.

He has disappeared around the car and everyone is still as if even time has shattered around you and you know that this is what they meant when they told you to be careful.

The warning signs your mother had made you memorize as a teenager.

You wonder faintly why none of them had included drowning in a parking lot, and the thought makes you want to laugh, but you have no breath to laugh, and then the world is moving again.

You can hear his door open and shut, and someone gives you the can of beer back and they are all piling inside.

You are the last to go, your hand still engraved into your cheek.

“Come on, Mira, we’re going to be late,” Olivia’s voice is floating above you as you stumble back into the car and close the door.

And you tell yourself it doesn’t matter, because you aren’t a child anymore, and you are awake now.

## Polya - Ariadne Civin

### **One: Tyoma**

The men with their shining rifles and slicing voices came for us only a few minutes after seven on Christmas Eve. We knew better than to scream.

### **Two: Galya**

We had been sitting around the round table in the dining room, which I had shined to a gleam that morning. There was no tree this year, a religious symbol like that would not be tolerated, but I had found some lights and scrounged for every scrap of food amid the war, the rations, the endless lines. The cold that didn't so much dance over your skin as eat away you from the inside until you knew you should just fall where you stand until it felt easier that way. I had trudged through the towering masses of snow that slipped inside my boots, up through my toes and into my chest. But we had gotten the food.

### **Three: Polya**

I had just borrowed a book from the man I hoped to marry. I hadn't even had time to glance at the title yet, but already it was mine, imprinted with both of our fingers, and I could hear its song even as the food Mama had prepared warred with it. I could just imagine slipping between the sheets of my bed and allowing myself to fall headlong through its pages.

### **Four: Nadya**

We slid into our seats, spellbound, and I admired Mama's work. Soup that had broth instead of water and real meat, a piece of sweet chocolate for each of us, and some salad greens. My stomach rebelled, threatening to consume itself if I just continued to watch all the food, and I looked across the table at my sister, pushing away the creeping horror that spread through my chest every time I saw the way Polya's clothing seemed to hang off of her. We all had given up trying to persuade her not to give Sasha all her food.

### **Five: Max**

Very quietly, my father prayed, and I let first his words, and then the food wash through me. The air seemed to tingle, ethereal, and everyone was laughing, even Poly, the faint glow from the light overhead seeming only to accentuate the full moon just visible behind Babulia's lace curtains, which were slapping hard against the storm that had begun to pick up outside. I would convince myself later that it was because our laughter was coating our cheeks, the sound of our intermingled voices becoming all we needed of this world, that we didn't see the car pull up in front of that rising moon.

### **Six: Sasha**

I was the one who heard the knock, and I fell so still that I melded into the cold wood of the chair pressing into my spin, a sudden cage.

I only said two words.

They were enough.

### **Seven: Tyoma**

Two men were filling the front step, seeming to blot out even the stars and swirling snow. They stood erect, their souls woven into their coats, which they flung aside on my front table as they pushed me into the wall. I tasted the trickling metallic of the blood from the inside of my lip.

And

I knew exactly what they wanted from me. But even if I couldn't stop them from claiming my family and life as theirs, there was no way in hell that I would tell them what they needed to know.

### **Eight: Galya**

We were only given ten minutes to pack our lives away into small, neat boxes. I didn't need to speak to the children—I reminded myself distantly that they weren't children anymore—they understood. My head spun as I clawed desperately for some calm, orderly list to form itself.

Clothes, clean socks, sturdy shoes. What do you take when you are arrested? The thought brought harsh, scrapping laughter to my lips, and fought it away. I wondered as if from some great height if they'd keep us together. Sasha was still twelve, they couldn't take her from me. I wouldn't let them.

### **Nine: Polya**

I crumpled against my bed, wondering if I would ever see it again, with the purple sheets that I had gotten at nine. I used to believe that they were a shield and that as long as I was under them, no one could harm me, even Baba Yaga. I balled my hands into hopeless fists, trying to clutch fleetingly at thoughts, to line them up into an order I could carry in my tingling fingers. A university that I was about to graduate from, a man who had promised to marry me on a windswept night. And as I was wondering if I would ever see either again, I heard the unmistakable sound of plates being shattered against our wooden floor.

### **Ten: Nadya**

Mama came into our room, a whirlwind, collecting us and pushing us all down the stairs, her gaze alight. She hesitated only a moment at the crest of the stairs, her hair seemingly afire in the light peeking through the cracked door behind her. And then there were men's hands wrapping themselves around my arms and I told myself that I was not afraid even as my throat closed. Of course I was afraid.

### **Eleven: Max**

Papa was the last out of our house, fumbling with his key to lock the door behind him. The officer laughed at first, then slapped him hard across the face. When my friends spoke of things like this, quietly, of course, they said it was a smooth, soundless black van. But we were carried away from our lives in a cart full of people and the towering smell of their unwashed bodies. My arms wrenched as we were tossed in. Only—Papa was not there with us. One of the officers had tried to pull him away into an idling car, but my father remained impassive, his gaze dark and



urgent. The moon rose behind him like a statement, highlighting his silhouette and obstructing his face as he rooted his feet into the snow.

### **Twelve: Sasha**

The bullet took my father through the temple, and he collapsed soundlessly into a stretching plain of powder, the pieces of him seeping outwards from the rubble of his face. And we knew better than to scream.

## Atlas Agopian - Untitled

A large hand engulfs the child's shoulder, comforting and warm. It props him up against the kick of the rifle, holds him and his gun steady, helps the child aim a straight, bullseye red. Quiet, the man murmurs, "Into the heart of the beast, child. Make the death a slow one, make them suffer. Remember, they simply exist to destroy. We exist to protect."

Once a month, the men of the town go out hunting, guns blazing and thudding footsteps. Young and old join the cause, the young with their arrogant safety held close to their chest, and the old with their learned rage. Once a month, the man has a routine. Lock the windows and the doors, make food for the child, load his bullets, sweep the dirt, douse the fire, disassemble and resemble his rifle. Then, recheck that the windows and doors are locked, lace up his boots, put on his coat, recheck his bullets, walk out the door as the child bolts it shut, and check, for the third time, that all of the windows and doors are locked. He does not tell the child what to do if he does not come back. It lies in the air, crackles with ozone every time it's prodded. There is money hidden. He would be fine.

One night, the child forgets to bolt the door.

Creeping over the floorboards, light feet and heavy breathing, something wicked comes. A snap of the jaws, a scream for nobody to hear. The child wakes with blood on his sheets.

The man comes home. He stands at the precipice of his heart, unable to breathe. The door is hanging open. He pushes at it further and calls out the child's name. Walking over to the child's room, he sees the door limply askew, as if ripped off. On the floor, there are claw marks that do not look human. His bed is stained red.

Hounding him through the forest, the men clutch shotguns with white-knuckled fingers and stained machetes. The man prays to any god who listens for absolution or mercy or death. Never has it been one of theirs. Muzzle of the gun lined to the muzzle of the beast, because the heart

kills slow but the head kills quick and the man has never been anything first but a father but—  
No. The man lowers his gun.

He points it at the child's heart. The child's eyes open.

He does not plead or beg as the man puts his shaking finger on the trigger. He meets his father's  
gaze and watches.

## Ahaan Chabba - Dreams Amidst the Flicker

Light posts flickering, dogs jeering and chasing after one another, and a street vendor returning home after work carrying spare change to provide for his family. I step away from the windowsill and manage to turn on our ancient television, which is as useless as a box, but I am fine as long as that piece of junk lets me watch a variety of American sitcoms that let me dream about getting closer to the perfect American life. As I slowly fade off, thinking about our family with a dog and a backyard with a grill, my little American fantasy quickly washes away, and I am alerted by the screams of my mother calling my name, Lakshmi, three times over. I follow the sound of her voice almost as high as a megaphone and am surprised by dinner. It is my favorite meal, something we usually don't come across often in this household: tandoori chicken with rice and masoor daal (lentils). As I savor each bite as if it's my last, I interrupt the silence with an idea I have been crafting for days to tell my mom and stepdad.

The big plan was to ask to move to America and leave India. But my idea was instantly denied, and 12-year-old me was furious as I didn't understand the real world. To me, money was something that appeared once in a while. Maybe if Appa (father) were here, he would agree with this plan. He always dreamed further, but he can't now. As a tear rolled down my eye, its saltiness touching my lips, my whole body jolted. I ran out of my complex, forgetting I was going to my friend Anika's house to talk. While running, I saw old men gambling and smoking cigarettes, not caring about their lives or anyone's on the street. It was worthless, full of labor with no return for that hard work, is what they all said, but I never listened, and my brain clogged that noise out. While walking down the block, there was always a howl from a stray dog and a sudden subtle breeze. I felt scared as it was dangerous at night, or that's what my mom told me either way. Finally, I entered Anika's side of the complex and walked up about 20 floors, greeted by a worn-out welcome mat and writing in Hindi welcoming gods into the house.

As I stepped in, I was greeted by screams, and with no idea of what was happening, I was yanked into a room. Anika was in shambles, and she slowly got me through a story with a few sobs and a hiccup in between as to why her parents were fighting. It was the usual - just like everyone on the block knew this wasn't the ideal living place, and the tight budget that many families lived off caused many a family feud and arguments. We both knew we had to get out, and our dream was to land in the Big Apple. We both imagined the ideal mixed Indian/American

family that lived in the suburbs but knew that this dream was nearly impossible, and this singular thought injured us with a slice through our hearts. After an hour of laughter and sweet tears, I left, and when I reached home, I did my usual routine and watched American Sitcoms. Each episode and organized laugh gave me closure, and finally, I flicked the screen off, and my mind went blank until I woke up to static in my ears and feet moving in the kitchen.

I woke up with a jolt. My mother is shouting at me to get ready so we can make the bus on time to get to her job. I run up quickly, rinse my mouth, put on my clothes, and rush to meet my mother, walking to the stop. After we make the bus and reach the hotel where she works, all of her fellow underpaid employees come up to me as if I am a stuffed animal and pinch my cheeks, thinking I am an innocent girl, but what I really am is a portrait of my father a human who dreams like mine were out of proportion, but I am fine with that. At the end of my mother's shift, I was hungry, and she was tired as she had been overworked by her overbearing officials. But my stepdad picked us up before I could ask her a question. While in the car, not a word has been uttered. I dream again I am in America, this time with my golden retriever beside me in my convertible on the passenger seat while I am holding the steering wheel and speeding because no one can stop me.

But I come back knowing this dream is foolish, but deep down, I hope to make it a reality. We live in an unfortunate world where opportunities for the impoverished are as rare as a good meal of chicken and daal.

## **Elana Frank - Sisters Bound by Silence**

Why have a moon? Why must its slippery rays slither into the hearts of the unsatisfied and raise the tides of the wine-red blood in their veins? Must there be a reason why it is eternally trapped to us, in an undying effort to relieve itself of this bond and be set free?

There were two girls, sisters, who heard the screams of the moon. Every night when the blinding sphere descended and the glowing eye of the cursed cyclops rose, it would pour out guttural screams filled with grief, loneliness, and eleutheromania. As children, they would scream too. They would serenade with the moon, utterly confused by the painful sounds they heard that they were far too young to comprehend, and simultaneously, the only age where pain can resonate in its truest form. Their parents assumed insanity, for which they grieved their own genetics. The moon's shrill cries continued on.

By the time the oldest sister reached the age of ten, the youngest was seven. They had adopted a practice of covering their ears nightly. A routine that began with fear morphed into a cotton and wax-filled ritual. The screams were far from silenced, the gaping crater still released its desperate pleas and was fervently ignored by a fuzzy sleep. The two sisters often had night terrors, where they would hear the screams in their sleep. The luminescence of the moon was reflected in their dreams. It would be their screams that would fill the silence of night, waking the adults. The sisters, however, couldn't even hear the sounds of their own screams, since the precautions they took were far too vigorous to be breached. Instead, they heard the moon, and its grief stored and released itself through the children. Now it was their craters that would expand, pupils dilated and inanimate, still hiding beneath a blanket of skin.

The sisters shared an indestructible bond – united under the white glow that turns black into violet. Their ears were shattered by the same propagated vibrations, and their minds were documented in the same highly dysfunctional manner by the men in white coats who never upgraded their broken ballpoint pens. They lived together in a two-bedroom cabin-style house, coated in cracked, baby-blue paint, with an orange-yellow street lamp combating the enclosure of night. The house faced a lake, muddy under the false pretense of a blue surface. Trees surrounded the house, and fireflies illuminated the tall, dry grass revealing the microcosm of insects and the occasional rodent.

The sisters would often explore the night in silence to avoid the screams of their infected dreams. It was a cold night in November when the girls had reached thirteen and ten. They were walking around the reeds that framed the swampy lake, their once-white sneakers sinking through the mud and being pulled up with each stride. The younger sister followed obediently in the footsteps and then glanced up. But this time, she did not look in fear at the moon, she admired the stars.

The night sky had always been a ceiling dripping with dread. She had never admired the beauty of these glittering celestial beings. She felt their warmth, and their glistening magic burrowed itself deep into her consciousness. She found solitude, little dots of peace in the terror, and she smiled. She smiled at the night sky, something she had never done before. She needed to keep walking to catch up with her sister but her mind was still stolen by the stars, her neck straining. When she took her first step, the mud pulled her down rather than forward. She fell.

The water was freezing. Shock, fear, air. She had never learned to swim. Her earplugs fell out. The screaming she had avoided for years had returned, louder than she remembered. It was amplified by the water, like the song of a whale. She put her hands over her ears and flung her limbs frantically. Her sister. She needed to get her sister's help. It was useless, because her sister silenced all the screams for help, which now included her own. Her sister marched on, trudging through the mud, cutting through the crisp fall air in her own silent thoughts, the thoughts in images.

“Please, Help me.” She screamed.

“Please, Free me.” The moon screamed.

Her energy gave out. The cold surrounded her and the asphyxiation lined her lungs. She grew numb and unconscious, the world finally silenced.

The first-born child turned around. She saw just as much as she could hear, and then she saw the ripples in the moon's reflection. The pang of fear was sharper than the lack of oxygen that hit her next. She swam down in the darkness, the lighthouse of the moon directing smoothly through the condensed and heavy water. The limp body, shimmering and peaceful, lay on the bottom of the lake bed, in a final silent slumber. Her sister swam frantically, overcome with too much grief and too little air. She kept swimming, her earplugs gone now too, and the screaming returned. She reached a point of no return, and the moon's light and shrill cries drowned out with the two sisters.

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Awaken is not the right word, and neither is alive. An existence without touch, sight, or taste. A transformation into a being of noise and hearing. Blinded because the space they now occupied was not perceptible by the human eye, blindness was given as a blissful gift to relax the mind. Despite their blindness, they could tell what was in front of them. The glistening object molded them into beings of silence and screams with its cold white rays. Yet, instead of screaming, it sang. The melody was so magical and so celestial. It struck the souls of the sisters with remarkable fascination, infatuation, and love. Like a siren song, it produced notes too beautiful and surpassed all the colors and emotions and the limits of life itself; for they had surpassed life itself.

The music stops.

Grief and longing form.

Then it speaks.

“Pleas that can only be heard by few are shunned. The pleas were ungrantable. In all my wisdom, my desperation surpassed it. I was tormented by your pain just as much as you were mine. Your wish for silence was granted, and my vigorous desire for freedom is impossible. This is all I will ever be. A tormenter, an inspiration, a mystery. I am eternally trapped in an elliptical, weaponless cage. You, you are free now. Dance.”



## Elana Frank - River Bed

She is floating across a misty brilliant shadow, with dancing reflective spheres surrounding her pale goosebump-covered legs. Like silvery minnows in a cerulean sea, her salty tears turn the water into a brackish mixture, and her dark hair sticks to the now translucent fabric. The knots in her hair obtrude from the slicked-down and dripping locks of hastily lacerated hair. She spins in the humming tides, feeling her skin melt off into the water that fills her. Starlight shines on her dampened eyelids, and when she opens those sad, despondent eyes, their self-referential glitter pulls at her memory. It shines on her as a lighthouse shines its light on a pulverized vessel, showing its desecration to the world like a movie star under a spotlight. She turns, a ballerina in an abandoned ballroom, drowning in a silence magnified by the glow of cessation. She waltzes through the thick liquid which slips into the cracks of her flesh, swaying to the beat of her heart's contraction.

She drops to her knees, turning her skin hues of green, violet, and blue, and drags her eyes back up to the disconnected constellations. And the stars begin to weep. They can't help her, can't relieve her pleading gaze of its desperation and crimson maze. The despairing celestial bodies grieve at the eternal separation between desire and ability, the infinite space between the woman of the water and their fiery mortal spheres. The woman never feels their tears, evaporated too quickly to reach her. She never sees their sorrow, their pity, their love. She sinks down into the blue brilliance as a child falls into their bed. Her muscles loosen and liquefy the layers that blanket her quiet heart and ringing mind. Her pellucid dress breaks down into the pieces of its past.

The smiles of a mother in a mirror of heredity, reflect her expression of pride and memory of the cold feed that has stood in her place. Coated in white and adorned in pearls, the women reassure each other in a screen of familial connection. They each lock eyes with their future and their past, connected in a curving branch of a tree they have been stuck in their entire lives. There is no beginning or end to its growth; the tree has never lived. They each lock gazes with the woman before and behind them with knowing eyes and pitiful smiles. Beautiful. That's what they are told.

Don't you look beautiful.

Pretty lady.

Agonizing whistles.

Where you running off to baby?

Don't leave, we're just having fun.

Congrats on your marriage.

The silent music still plays with each pulse of an unwanted organ. She spins in the water she was told not to dive into. A sea of freedom, where each limb can levitate in a pale glowing light surrounded by an asphyxiating midnight. It is only here where she can laugh. The effervescent effects of her joy surround her in a cloud of white luminescence that travels to the surface. She laughs and feels, and revels in the rare soreness of her cheekbones. A warm honey pours down her throat and into her blood, its sugary softness coating each shivering bone. It shimmers inside her and brings color and life back into her embalmed arteries, and she grins uncontrollably with pure and unexplainable happiness only found in the empty minds of infants. She dances again, spinning rapidly while her dress flings its diamonds of water onto the peeling wallpaper of a desolate castle. The dizziness is euphoric. All awareness of any surrounding leaves her with the icy fear of stillness. She becomes one with the abysmal space that she is now a part of, a crescendo on a turning record.

Crescendo's end. The dance is over, and the smile retreats to her tongue. The joy fades, and it's there that she finds peace. A never-ending crescendo is just torturous noise. She asks herself what she can remember. She asks herself what is real. She continues praying to the stars for she has yet to hear a response. Silence, to her, meant she was being heard and listened to.

Is this the right choice?

Do I have a choice?

I don't want to.

Evaporated tears blow on her in an unsettling warm breeze. Her bare skin, once soft, has turned dry and covered in tiny craters, each a wound in the disguise of growth. The long white silk hides her roughness, as the darkness smooths the moon. What use is skin if it is fated to be covered? The diamonds, crystals, and pearls make their selves comfortable in the bed of her over-pronounced collarbone, while her hair is burned and pulled into an uncomfortable nest.

I hope she hopes for an impossible love. Is it better to want a love that you will never receive, but live in ignorance of its impossibility, or live with the understanding that this love is a consequence of imagination and settle without futility? Asking the question itself is futile, she thinks. To settle without an understanding of what path to follow is to allow her to float. Float and dance in an infinite stream where her skin turns hydrophilic and dissolves into the current. Moving by a self-perpetuating natural force, there is a reason they call it a river bed. Little does she know, it only takes two days for a corpse to decompose into water.

## Elana Frank - The Opera House

There is only one life you will find in a forest.

With each inhale, the roots expand deeper into worlds upon worlds, all feeling the bounds of your feet. A bizarre mixture of darkness and light creates a kaleidoscope of blurred amber and viridescence. Light is different than color in that way; color is merely light's shadow. The forest continues to deeply inhale the spotted brilliance of its surroundings, its slow heartbeat creating a strange syncopated rhythm with your shaky and racing pulse. The fabric that warily hangs onto your bones mimics the vines you pass without seeing, and the holes in your dress make you forget that it is there. Your desperate breath melts into the humidity of the blended body you run within. You feel its energy pulsating with every layer of soil your once pink pantyhoses sink into. The dirt covers the ballet slipper color mesh, making an active attempt to tear down the false uncomfortable skin and reveal true flesh. Once knotted and braided to perfection, your hair falls and glides in the warm winds that cover you. Each leaf and branch that braises your skin converges with your pores as if they were perfectly made keys for each one on your once porcelain skin.

The spasmodic rhythm intensifies as the soil finally sets the broken nails of your toes free, allowing the two fleshs to dig into each other. Two life forms connect in this race of assured uncertainty, and you crave the total and complete amalgamation. Gravity becomes its own enemy, pulling you down as the forest floor is dragged up. A union with such a strong force of vitality compels you like no other, and the unsteady rhythm turns into the reliable sound of a drum, a pulse, a breath, a clock. It is all you can hear. The movement has blanketed your senses, nothing binds you to this world, only the internal life that flows fiercely through your roots filled with the sweet golden sap of mortality.

A new sound.

It cuts through the soft static and finds your ears as if it had been deeply yearning to be heard. A voice. A sound that is so pure in its ability to be singular. Everything slows and condenses into one vibratory stream of desire. Your surroundings reform around you, the sculptor returning with a newfound inspiration. Light distills itself and falls peacefully on the greenery on which it rests. You lift the body you begin to feel encased in, the clear notes still

glinting in your mind's reflection. Your heart has slowed and deepened with your steps and you follow the path that propagates past you. It's a woman's voice. Like silk on liquid silver, it floats elegantly and purposefully amidst the wild growth. It finds you, and you know you must find it.

Destination becomes the path, and you float along with the melody, walking forward without any conscious movement. It pushes you like a current, yet you feel so strongly that you are walking towards something that you chose. You feel in control of every small fiber of muscle that constructs your form, but you should've known that it is impossible to float with the weight of will. So it continues, you follow the beautiful current, straining your eyes to see the form slowly appearing in the distance.

The large gothic structure appears in your faulty vision, and your destination is only clear to you now that you made the journey. Pointed arches tilt your head up to guide your racing eyes to a calmer flight. As you unconsciously get closer to the colossal structure its details are carved out and its elegance sharpens. Each engraving in the grey material leads your gaze somewhere it has yet to explore. The light travels through the vibrance of the stained glass and its pigmented shadows fall on the foliage beneath it. The columns and supports are tightly bound by the vines of ivy that crawl along its surface. The door stands in front of you. Its past is seeping out of it, down the veins of the wood, pooling at your feet and trapping them in enticing comfort and curiosity. The iron clasp was rusted and hanging off of its hinges and the keyhole stared at you begging for the return of purpose. Your hand floats up to the worn metal and it tightens when you feel the disintegrating material on your once soft hands with a perpetual lavender pungence. The door opens more easily than you expect it to. Your excess effort pushes you back and you let go of the door as it cries with ancient neglect. The space that before held its breath and exhaled with a euphoric sigh the second your bare, soiled, feet crossed the threshold.

You found yourself on a stage. Invisible crowds sat around you with bated breath, but they weren't watching you. You look to your left and discover your destination. She was the farthest thing from tangible, yet you could feel her stronger than anything you had ever experienced. She stood in the middle of the stage, looking like a goddess at the head of a boat. There was no current moving against her, yet she stood her ground against a force that pulled her watery silk dress against her dark skin. Her feet were strongly grounded to the wooden floor that would have splintered any mortal skin. Her existence swam with the light that streamed down from the skylight, and the whole scene seemed submerged in a sea broken only by the current

that flowed from her mouth. The hair that would have reached her hips seemed to float against gravity in the pools of sunshine that blanketed her, its curls winding and dancing in space. Her gaze was final. If she looked at you and told you a secret, you were to trust and guard it with a life beyond your own. But her gaze never met yours. She continued her performance without interruption, and the audience was so enthralled in her melody that they never noticed you. The sound engulfed you too. It pulled on something within you, something physical, unlike its phantom-like source. And you, helpless against the rhetoric of its beauty, stepped closer to her.

Your steps were slowed by the thick air that surrounded you, so full of feeling that you were surprised movement was even possible. The notes pierced your heart, not only because of their beauty and clarity but because of the comfort you found in their strangeness. As you got closer, the volume didn't increase rather the intensity of the vibrations took on a newfound capacity to surpass the confines of the senses. It was no longer sound that you were approaching, but a place. A corridor of blurry doors and a skeletal figure standing patiently at its end. You follow her gaze to the skylights above you and realize the light is surrounded by the life it illuminates.

The mural hangs above you, right atop a faded sign that once said Opéra. The Renaissance-style fresco is framed by circular engravings with chipped white paint. You look at it expecting to see a Christian scene, instead, you find yourself looking up at three women. They lounge outside a world of mortality in an idyllic land made of pleasures humans can only attempt to recreate from our animalistic desires. The brush once glided across the plaster, insisting that the smooth and beautiful imitation of fruit and flora was capable of mimicking the sweet delectation of omniscience. For omniscience means the complete relinquishing of responsibility and agency, but their eyes said otherwise. It was in the women's eyes that a deep and somber truth could be found beneath layers of chosen myopia and shades of grey. It was that same power, desired by gluttonous humans and illustrated as true glory and value, that haunted them. They shivered, not as a consequence of responsibility or knowledge of eternal suffering, but insecurity. The fluidity of freedom and the ability to float without an anchor drew terror into their blind eyes. They chose to be blind, and you knew it. You could feel it. Their eyes met the singers', but they refused to look at her. The light continued to pour down, illuminating the three figures, relaxed in their fear.

Just as abruptly as it started, the song ended. The sheer brutality of silence grasps your neck and forces you to stop breathing lest you disrupt the hesitant peace. The ghosts of the spectators tense up and their sightless eyes widen. All you can do is wait for the sudden end to this anticipation but nothing changes. Twenty seconds go by and your lungs become sour with desperation, but the end has no end. So you stay there, heels ungrounded perpetually in preparation for the exhale after your final breath.

