

KARTIKA  REVIEW  
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\* Winner of the 2008 Joseph Henry Jackson Award, sponsored by the Intersection of the Arts and the San Francisco Foundation

**SHEBA KARIM**

## **Qiyamat**

My mother's driving makes me carsick. Ever since my father's accident, her foot goes back and forth between the accelerator and the brake pedal like a lover who can't make up her mind. "How was the train?" she asks me.

"The man sitting across from me asked me if I was Muslim."

"And what did you say?"

"I said no." This is a lie. When he questioned me, I got up and walked down the aisle to another seat, ending that conversation but beginning another in my head. No, I am not Muslim. What are you, then? I am Sabeen Maqsood, a girl who hated her father, and now he is gone, and I have a hole in my heart where my hatred was. Qul! Speak! What does that make you, then? What does that make me? Guilt-ridden, hormone-driven, a whore who fears submission. What more is there to say?

My mother turns into a shopping plaza and drives toward an empty area of the parking lot. "Where are you going?" I ask. She slams on the brakes. "Bismillah!" I cry, my hand against the dashboard, braced for impact even though we were only going fifteen miles a hour in the first place and there was nothing to crash into.

She smiles. "See? And you say you aren't Muslim."

"Habit is different than faith."

She shakes her head. "Not so different," she says.

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There is something amiss in our house, and I realize it is because my mother has moved the worn, brown leather chair that my father read Quran in most nights. He was a small man with a small voice, but when he read Quran, his off-key recitation followed us down hallways, through closed doors. I'd be relieving myself on the toilet and I'd hear it, and I wouldn't be able to go anymore. "When that man reads Quran I bet even Allah covers his ears," I told Shoaib once. Shoaib, who never questioned the rightness of the path even if he didn't always follow it himself, said, "Would it kill you to have some respect for your own patria?"

"You mean patriarch," I replied. I had little respect for my father. He was religious and boring, he distanced himself from me when I grew breasts, his eyes were cartoonishly big underneath his thick glasses, he couldn't tell a joke to save his life.

My mother walks into the room. "What are you thinking?" she asks, cupping my waist with her hand, like she's going to lead me somewhere.

"Why did you move Abba's chair?" I ask.

"I had a dream the other night. Your father came and told me to move his chair into the sunlight."

My mother retired from her pediatric practice a few months before my father's accident, and, when he died, I expected her to remain in bed, paralyzed by grief. Instead, she joined a knitting club, volunteered to teach a class at the Islamic school my father helped found, took up painting. From where I'm standing, I can see her easel through the window, right in the middle of the deck that faces the woods out back.

"Are you ever going to paint anything but these woods?" I ask her.

"These are his woods," she says in Urdu. "I won't stop painting till I'm able to paint it just right." Her hand shifts from my waist to my shoulder. "Listen," she says. "I need to ask you a favor."

I can't remember the last time my mother has asked me for a favor. "Ma, I can't move home," I tell her.

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"I don't want you to move home," my mother says. "I'm fine alone."

"What is it, then?"

She rises. "First we cook, then we'll talk." She goes to the kitchen and I step out onto the deck. The canvas resting on the easel is dotted with swirling green trees. I wish I could run inside it, find my father. Maybe, if the two of us are not human, if we are just two blobs of primary colors, we will finally be able to understand each other. Green and Yellow make blue. A wound is healed, in abstract.



When I was young my father read to me at night. He'd knock softly on my door, as if I might be asleep, even though we both knew I was waiting for him. From the foot of my bed, he read the stories of the Prophets, Yunus in the belly of the whale, Ayub who continued to praise Allah even after his family was crushed by a falling roof and his body became infested with ulcers, Zakariya who was sawed in half. When I learned one by heart I'd tell it to my father, who tapped his hand against his thigh as if my stories were a kind of music. At the end, he'd say, "Tonight you have made your father very proud," and pull a lollipop out of his kurta pocket, the kind that last for an hour. I got a different flavor for each prophet, and I kept them in my bottom nightstand drawer. For some reason, it felt wrong to eat them.

To my father, Islam was not just a religion but the context by which he viewed everything, a final filter for his senses. Rivers and mountains were not beautiful, they were beautiful by the glory of Allah; my mother's food was not delicious, it was delicious by the grace of Allah. My father had few friends, dreaded making small talk. If his conversations didn't begin with religion, they ended with it. "Excellent work," he said when I told him I won the math bowl in sixth grade. "But also remember that Prophet Muhammad said the best competition is in doing good deeds."

Once he tried to institute nightly Quranic discussion; first, he explained, he'd read a sura from the Quran to us, translate it, and then together we would analyze it. But listening to the Quran was not like listening to stories of Prophets, there was no easily digestible narrative involving violence, or miracles,

or intrigue, just words we didn't understand. In the middle of the sura Shoaib began to poke me in the back, and before it finished we were on the ground, fighting. "Enough," my father cried. He rarely raised his voice so when he did we listened. "I once knew a little boy," he told us. "This boy could sit still with me and watch birds for hours. Why can't you see the virtue of stillness?"

"Where is this little boy now?" I asked.

My father looked down at the Quran in his lap. "He died."

"Probably died of boredom," Shoaib said, and started chasing me down the hall.

From then on my father decided to enforce religion with frequent reminders, delivered in his quiet voice but firm in their message. Almost every day he reminded Shoaib and me of the two angels that stayed with you from birth until death, one over your left shoulder, one over your right. The one on your right recorded all of your good deeds, the one on your left recorded all of your bad ones, and on the Day of Judgment, they would present Allah with their detailed record of your life. "I cannot watch you all of the time, but remember that the angels are writing down everything," he'd say, pointing at our shoulders with his index fingers. It was meant to be a gentle gesture, but it looked like he was aiming guns at the angels, and, whenever he did it, I imagined them shielding their faces with their wings.



My mother and I are eating the lamb pasanda we've just cooked. "Have you spoken to Shoaib?" my mother asks. I am the one who named my brother Shoaib, after a prophet whose story was boring but whose name I had always liked.

"A few weeks ago."

My mother doesn't ask me to call him more often; she knows that we are not like that, Shoaib and I, that we don't contact each other unless necessary. She smoothes back her hair. As a child I helped her braid it, twisting the thick strands together all the way down to the base of her spine. Now her hair is becoming less and less, tiny patches of pinkish scalp visible beneath the black and white.

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"You know what I was thinking about the other day?" she says. "Remember when one of my patients gave me those rum balls for Christmas and you ate three of them and got drunk?"

"More like dizzy and sick," I correct her.

"And your father got so mad. 'You think she would have the good sense to warn us what was in them,' he said. You know what I did that night? I snuck downstairs and ate a rum ball because I wanted to see what it tasted like. It was so awful I spit it right out." When my mother laughs, her eyebrows arch like she's surprised, like the laughter has snuck up on her. I didn't notice this until recently, just like I didn't notice that she has hair on her big toes but not the others, that she hesitates before pressing the play button on the answering machine.

"Of course you didn't tell Abba," I say.

"It was one of the only things I never told him," she says. She is lucky, for having said everything she wanted to say. She reaches over and takes my hand. "I still get calls once in a while. Given your reputation, they're mostly divorced, but some of them seem nice."

"No." I know my mother will not ask, so I tell her. "Because I don't want to, not because I'm with someone."

She makes no effort to hide her relief. "You should think about it. It's very hard to be alone."

"But you're alone, and you seem happy enough."

"Do I? So this is happiness then, to live by yourself, to see your children twice a month?"

"But Abba used to be so controlling," I say.

"Controlling?" She shakes her head. "Your father never made me do something I didn't want to do."

"He never let me do anything I wanted to do."

"That's because everything you wanted to do was un-Islamic," she says. "And where did it get you, all of this rebelliousness? Has it brought you happiness?"

I don't talk to my mother about my feelings, but she knows I'm unhappy, that at night I stare at the brick wall that faces

the window of my studio apartment and think that tomorrow I will proceed forward, I will quit my paralegal job and apply to grad school, I will plan a trip somewhere, I will move to an apartment where you can see the sky, I will visit my father's grave, and then the morning comes and I'm greeted by the same brick wall, it's immobility a taunting reminder of my own.

She gets up, washes her hands at the sink, dries them carefully with a towel. "There is something I have to tell you," she says. "About your father."



In middle school I started to question everything. Why would the Quran, the unaltered word of Allah, say it was permissible for a man to beat his wife (lightly) with his fists? Why was the testimony of a man worth that of two women? None of the answers I received, from my father or the teachers of religion class at the mosque—that beating lightly meant hardly touching the woman at all, or that the verse was improperly translated, or that women's testimony was worth less because women were more emotional and thus more likely to forget details—satisfied me. My faith started to crack, and then puberty blew it apart. At fifteen, I began to masturbate, to fantasies of being kidnapped by men of ill repute, pirates or escaped convicts, their lips swollen with lust. I'd cry half-heartedly for Allah to save me, but it was no use, they'd take my virginity, and my father couldn't get upset because it wasn't my fault.

This was the same year I altered my skirt. The uniform of the all-girls private high school I attended was a plaid skirt of mid-calf length, but all of the students hemmed their skirts so that they hit well above the knee. I had two skirts, and changed into the short one as soon as I got to school. Other than this baring of skin and my nightly ministrations, my waking life remained chaste; I went to school, I came home, I stayed in and studied, but my father somehow knew. He started to leave gifts in my room, a gold pendant with the word Allah in Arabic, treatises on the Prophet's way of life. I would catch him eyeing me during dinner, trying to read me, to gage the strength of my faith, his pupils the size of dimes underneath his glasses.

"Is there something on my face?" I asked him one night.

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“Sabeen, don’t be rude,” my mother said. We all stopped eating except Shoaib, who refused to get involved in any conflict that didn’t concern him directly.

“Tell him to stop looking at me like that, like he thinks I’ve got some kind of mark,” I said.

“What are you saying?” my mother asked.

“She’s only sensing my concern,” my father said. “But I have faith in my daughter. She knows Right and Wrong.” My father always phrased it like this, as if Right and Wrong were good friends of mine. The month before I had decided they were lovers and given them a theme song. Right and Wrong. Bang a gong. Get it on.



The spring of my senior year, I fell for James Poplock. He liked me because I laughed at all of the appropriate moments during his stories about his summer antics at the Jersey shore, and I liked that he had so many stories. James went to the all-boys prep down the road and we made out in his car before school whenever we could. He tasted like talcum powder and cigarettes. I hadn’t planned to go much further than that, until one day my friend Rachel told me she was having people over for a Friday happy hour, and offered me her guest room if I could weasel my way into attending. I told my parents I was working on a history presentation with Rachel that constituted one third of our final grade and would be home by eight. Rachel bought me my first set of proper lingerie, a dark purple lacy bra and matching underwear.

Rachel’s guest room had burnt orange shag carpet that I squeezed between my toes for courage as I took off my shirt. My father walked into the room just as James was about to kiss me, both of his hands squeezing my breasts. He stood in the doorway, his giant eyes blinking rapidly, as if he hoped that would make James disappear.

“Your nana died. Your mother's upset,” he said. “Get dressed.”

James bolted, my father stepping aside to let him pass. I couldn’t remember where I had stashed my change of clothes, so I reached for my school uniform. As I dressed my father pressed his palms against the wall like it was he who had just

been caught, not I. We left the room together. The music was off and Rachel was at the bottom of the stairs, the entire sequence of events apparent in her stricken expression. She had lied, said I wasn't there, but somehow he had known, had sensed my sin, and she could not stop him.

On the ride home I felt nauseous, dizzy, but I tightened my body, kept still. "How did Nana die?" I asked.

"At his home in Rawalpindi," my father said. "In his sleep. Very peaceful."

Neither of us spoke after that. I prepared my possible defenses. He pressured me into it. I promise to be good. I promise to pray five times a day. Just please let me go to Columbia.

But when we reached home, he didn't turn off the engine. I thought that maybe, he'd let it go, he'd allow us both to forget what had happened, on the tacit understanding that I would never, ever do it again. Besides, how could he even speak of it? My father was incapable of verbalizing anything related to sex. "I'm sorry," I said.

He said nothing, only stared ahead with this strange intensity, like there was a divine message written on the windshield. I waited for a second, then ran into the house and up to my room to change into jeans. I imagined him sitting in the garage, inhaling carbon monoxide, trying to forget. But even then, though I felt bad about disappointing him, I didn't feel bad about what I had done. I knew I would do it again, and again, and again. If my father had tried to see inside me then, he would have found more desire than regret. He would have found Wrong humping Right. He would have found me disgusting.

I heard my father downstairs, calling for my mother. My mother came in first, pale face, red eyes, and I remembered that her father had just died. My father was behind her, clenching and unclenching his jaw, his hands pulling at the sides of his pants, stretching out the fabric.

"What did you do?" my mother asked.

"Unbutton her shirt," my father commanded. "I want you to see who your daughter really is."

"Mustafa," my mother said.

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“Do as I'm telling you. Unbutton it.”

My mother sat down next to me, hiding my body from view. I tried to make eye contact with her to so it'd be easier, but she didn't lift her gaze, and instead focused on her fingers undoing my shirt. My mother kept her nails clean and short and wore white cotton undergarments. She'd never understand a penchant for purple lace. My mother's fingers were trembling, and when they accidentally brushed my skin she recoiled like she had been burnt. After the third button I couldn't take it anymore. I pushed her aside and pulled my shirt over my head.

My mother hid her face with her hands. My father's eyes had grown so grotesquely large under his glasses the veins in them looked as if they were about to split open.

“Here I am,” I said. “Get a good look?”

My father yelled something I couldn't understand. He rushed over to me, shoving my mother out of the way when she tried to block him. I put my arms over my face, but instead of slapping me he grabbed the center of my bra and ripped it off. I backed into the corner of my bed, my hands flattening my breasts.

“You are no better than a prostitute!” he screamed, waving his fist in the air like a mad despot, the bra crushed inside it. “No better than a whore!” Then he bent over and spit on my face. I thought I was screaming, but no sound was emerging from my mouth. My father crumpled, the bra pressed to his forehead like a garish handkerchief. The despot, defeated, ruined.

My mother embraced him and I pulled the blanket over my bare chest. I had somehow won this round, but it was miserable victory. I had broken my father's heart, I had forever tarnished myself in his eyes, I had pissed on all of our happy memories. My father's saliva had trickled down to the edge of my chin and I wiped it off with my naked shoulder.

"I hate you," I told him. "I've always hated you."



"You want to tell me something about Abba?" I repeat. It will no doubt be some reminder of how much he loved me, something to add to the nocturnal ferociousness of my guilt.

"I'm too old to battle," my mother says. "I need you to be generous."

"As if you ever battled," I say. "You were practically Abba's cheering squad."

"Would you like me to tell you or not?" she asks. Her jaw has tensed, but it doesn't matter. My mother has neither bark nor bite. I nod. "Before our marriage was arranged, your father was married to someone else," she says. "To an American woman. Someone he met in graduate school."

"Abba? Married to a white woman? I don't understand."

"They were together for two years, but it was too difficult, to be with someone from another culture. There was a child," she says.

"What? Are you saying—"

My mother smiles, shakes her head. "It's nothing like that. It was her son, from someone else. But your father was very fond of him."

"When did he tell you this?"

"A long time ago. It was hard for him to talk about it. He had made a mistake, learned a painful lesson, and he didn't like to think about that time of his life."

"So instead he lied to us?" Who are you, then? I am a girl whose father was a liar, a fake, a fraud.

"Sabeen," my mother says. "Your father did what he thought would be best for you, always. He loved you very much."

But it's not his love that I've spent years questioning. It's mine.



My final semester of college, on my last visit home before my father died, I told my parents about my boyfriend Krish. "I love him," I said.

"You know we can't accept this," my father said. I waited for him to say more, perhaps bring up the Day of Judgment, but he backed into his chair, as if his leather throne might give him more authority.

“I’m not a Muslim anymore. I’m going to convert,” I said. “I’m becoming Ba’hai. We both are.” This was not true, but it struck me as a nice religion to choose, peace-loving, no stringent rules.

My father winced, put his arm over his face like my words had blinded him. “Do you mean this?”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought,” I said. “I don’t believe in Islam, and Krish and I are going to get married after we graduate.” We had no plans to marry, but I said it anyway, to convey the seriousness of my intent.

“I don’t think you should come back to this house,” my father said. “Not until you have regained your iman.” He said this like it was a temporary lapse, as if I had simply lost my faith at a poker game and could easily win it back. There was no anger, just a matter-of-fact statement of conditions. Behind him, my mother nodded, but I could tell she was worried. Though she agreed with my father’s general principles, she didn’t have his will. She would continue to speak to me, call and ask me to reconsider.

“Remember my words,” my father continued. “At first it may seem simple, that you are proving your parents wrong, but slowly, it will come—the misunderstandings, the confusion, the disagreements, until it has spread like a cancer, and your only hope for happiness is a return to your family, your culture, your religion. Those are the things that support a marriage, not youthful love. That is all I have to say to you.”

The next morning Shoaib dropped me off at the train station. Since becoming a collegiate squash champion a few months before, he had started to lecture me. “Why did you have to tell them this now?” he said. “It’s not like you’re marrying this guy tomorrow. Couldn’t you wait?”

“Why should I lie?” I said.

“What if they refuse to pay for grad school?” he asked.

“I’ll take out loans,” I said. I had an answer for everything, back then.



I’ve been cleaning the kitchen table for so long it’s practically shining. The more I think of my father’s secret, the harder I

wipe, as if I just clean enough I might see them, my father and the family he hid from me, reflected in the glass.

My mother takes the paper towels away from me. "Why don't you say anything?"

"What were they like?"

"Who?"

"The wife and kid, who else?"

"We never discussed it. He didn't like to talk of it, and I respected that."

My mother, the all-passive, the all-respectful. Her husband has a secret past and she lets it be. I'd swing it around my head, dig my nails into it until it bled. "Don't you think that was hypocritical?"

"No," she says. "I think it was human."

But isn't it also human to want to kiss a boy, to hold his hand? To get drunk, to dance with abandon? My mother will tell me this is different, that my father didn't violate his religion when he married a Christian woman, that his actions caused pain only to himself. "You still haven't told me what the favor is," I say.

"Oh, yes, the favor," she says, like it is some distant relative she had forgotten. "Before the accident, your father ran into a colleague from graduate school, someone who had known him during his first marriage. From this colleague, you father found out that his first wife had ovarian cancer. One day in the mail, there was a card. Your father had sent it to the boy but it had been returned by the post office. I put it away and forget about it and last week I found it again." She opens one of the kitchen drawers and pulls out an envelope. "I thought I'd give it to you to mail. You might be able to find the boy's information through the computer, right? I put it a new envelope, with a stamp."

"Why didn't you just give it to Shoaib?" I ask. "He wouldn't even have asked any questions."

"Because I thought it would be better for you to do it."

"What does it say?"

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"I don't know. It felt wrong to read it. But I'm sure he's sending his condolences for his mother," my mother says.

"Why not just send it to her, then?"

She shakes her head. "I don't think it ended well with Pamela." Pamela. The First Wife.

The card is sealed, and the name Gavin Michaud is written across it in my mother's neat cursive. But when I try to take it from her, she grips it harder. "Promise me you won't read it, either," she says.

"I won't," I say, and she lets go.

On the train I think about opening it, but I can't bring myself to do it, to betray my parent's trust yet again. I wonder what my father would write to a boy who was now a man, whose existence he never publicly acknowledged. To Gavin, whose mother may be dying. It seems like another life when your mother and I were married, but, when I heard of her illness, I remembered many of the happy times we had together. I wish her a full recovery, and I hope you are well, also. Remember when we used to watch birds together? Neither of my children takes any interest in nature, but you always understood the beauty of God's creations. I hold the card up. I try angling it in different directions against the light, but it's no use; I can't see inside.



After my father's funeral, my mother and I sat in the women's section of the mosque, surrounded by aunties: my relatives, my mother's friends. My mother cried and cried, and I kept my arm around her, stiff. The aunties sat cross legged, open Qurans in their laps, and whispered about me. They thought I couldn't hear them, but in fact that was all I could hear, their words echoing inside my skull. The aunties who did not know of the estrangement between my father and me whispered, "Look at Sabeen, she is acting so strong." She is strong, she is strong. The aunties who did know of our estrangement whispered, "Look at Sabeen, she is feeling regret." She feels regret, she feels regret. I stared down at the backs of my hands, saw tiny dark spots on my skin I had never noticed before. Look at Sabeen, she is growing old. She grows old, she grows old.



When I get back there's a voicemail from Krish. Just checking in, he says. We broke up a year after graduation, though I never told my parents this. I started dating him because he was cute and half-black, half-Indian, and thus extra forbidden. It was doomed from the beginning, and I see now that love motivated by rebellion is like a hollow cane, easy to brandish and easily breakable. I brandished it as long as I could, then snapped it in two.

I delete the message and turn on my computer. It takes me ten seconds to find Gavin Michaud on the Internet. He hosts an open mic night every Thursday at a bar in Brooklyn. There's even a picture of him, brown hair pulled back in a pony tail and bright blue eyes. Now that I know what he looks like, I can imagine him as a child, and for the rest of the week, in the shower, on my way to work, before I fall asleep at night, I conjure up scenes from my father's past life. My father who has married a white person lives like a white person, throwing around a baseball with Gavin in the backyard, making hotdogs on the grill and blueberry pancakes for breakfast, embracing his wife in broad daylight, with Gavin tucked in between them. He does not even look like my father. The glasses are gone; he has contacts and is clean-shaven, he wears bell bottoms and aviator sunglasses, he never mentions Allah. He is finishing his thesis so he spends a lot of time in the study, writing, and Pamela, who is a little chunky but pretty, kisses him on the head when she delivers his cups of tea.

In most of what I imagine, they are happy. Gavin and my father watch birds and afterward Gavin draws them with color pencils. The three of them sing songs. I don't know when it all starts to go wrong. Maybe Pamela cooks bacon one day and my father yells at her. Maybe his mother comes to visit and whispers poison in his ear. Maybe it is Pamela who becomes distant, maybe my father stops wearing his contacts and she can't stand the sight of his giant eyes. But slowly things start to change, and my father turns from Pamela to Allah, and from Allah to us, but I stick with the beginning, when things were still good, because I could have a conversation with this blueberry pancakes and baseball man, I could make him understand.

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One night, I insert myself into the scene. He is hard at work, scribbling notes in margins, and I appear, hovering over his desk, cross-legged like a genie. He drops his pen in surprise. "I am your unborn daughter," I tell him. "I will do things you don't approve of. You'll even spit on me, once. I'll tell you I hate you but I won't really mean it."

"It's all right," he says. "You're young, young people never listen to their elders—look at me. My parents didn't want me to marry a white woman, but I did anyway. I understand." We hug, but then he pulls back and looks at me. "But you don't look like you could be Pamela's and my daughter," he says. I don't respond. He realizes the future. I disappear.



The summer after he spat on me, my father's bird watching became an everyday activity. Even my father didn't like birds that much, and my mother told Shoaib to follow him, see what it was he really did amidst those trees. "He sits on a stump," Shoaib reported. "He holds onto the binoculars with both hands but he never lifts them from his neck. And he just looks at the ground, not the sky."

My father walked in behind us. "It's called tafakkuur," he said. "It means to reflect on something deeply, in great detail. Please allow me this time alone." As if we would ever refuse him. I assumed my father was reflecting on the Day of Judgment, preparing diligently for his first chance at a dialogue with Allah. He had started asking us at dinner, "When you hear Allah's voice saying Qul! on the Day of Judgment, what will you tell Him?" My mother and Shoaib humored him with their responses, but I refused. It was a stupid question. At that point, what would there be left to say?

My father forgave me for James Poplock after he returned from one of these tafakkur sessions. I was eating waffles in the kitchen. There had been a sudden downpour outside and he was wet, his nose red from the cold, his thinning hair matted to one side, his glasses fogged. He looked like a homeless man who had wandered into somebody's house. I wanted to enjoy this, but couldn't. It was easier to hate him when he didn't look so weak.

"The hawks will be migrating soon," he said.

"How exciting for you."

"I forgive you," he said. "But it is Allah's forgiveness that is most important."

"Well, if Allah is really all-forgiving, all-merciful, I'll be just fine," I said, turning my back to him.

Maybe, in offering me this forgiveness, he had considered his own secret past, realized that we all make mistakes. Maybe, if he had been honest, we could have found a piece of common ground, however small. But this possibility could only exist through the rosy tint of retrospect. If my father had actually told me the truth then, I would have used it against him. I would have flung it in his face every time we fought. And whatever common ground we might have found, it would never have been enough to overcome our differences of belief.

And yet. "I should have said something," I say aloud. I'm speaking to the left angel, whose pen is always poised. I used to talk to both of them all the time. I'd say good morning, explain my philosophy, rationalize my behavior, tell them I was a good person and that was what mattered, or that it was okay that I stole candy from Melanie's desk because she was mean and deserved it. Of course I knew it wouldn't make a difference to them what I said; they were beyond influence, these solemn-faced record keepers. In high school I started ignoring them all together, denied their existence, labeled them a metaphor, a scare tactic. Call it guilt, call it madness, but since my father's death, I have begun to sense their movements above me, invisible depressions in the air caused by their footsteps. Sometimes I feel their gaze, the assessment of my thoughts by their piercing, all-seeing eyes. Sometimes I swear I can smell them, a strange musk of leather and sandalwood. Sometimes, I can hear them scribbling.



I arrive an hour before the open mic is supposed to start. It's a dive, the kind of place where you hope for the best when you open the door to the bathroom. I take a seat at the empty side of the bar. There's a couple at the other end, playing with their cell phones, and an old man in the middle, reading a book bound in brown leather, the same color as my father's chair. It's a sign. Gavin is behind the bar. He's cut his hair

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short, but there's no mistaking his eyes. They're much lighter than his picture, almost clear. I like them even more; surely these kind of eyes will be able to see a long way backwards.

"What can I get you?" he asks, tossing a dish cloth over his shoulder.

"A Guinness," I say. I don't even like beer, but for some reason I want Gavin to think I'm the kind of girl who drinks beer, who hangs out in places like these.

"I haven't seen you here before, have I?" he asks as he pours.

I shake my head. "I hear the open mic here is good."

"Depends on the night," Gavin says. He sets the beer down in front of me. I'm too nervous to begin the script I've prepared. "I'm Gavin," he says.

"Sabeen." Gavin nods, and I offer him my hand. I want to feel the hand that once touched my father. It's rough against my skin and gives nothing away. Gavin is looking at me. He has a long neck and long fingers. He looks like someone who'd play a trombone. If my father had gotten with Pamela earlier, Gavin could have been his son. I would be his half-sister.

"Are you sure you haven't been in here before?" Gavin says. "Something about you seems familiar."

I have my father's square jaw, and the same deep indent in the middle of his upper lip. Gavin must remember. "My full name is Sabeen Maqsood. My father is Mustafa Maqsood." I wait, for the flash of recognition, the sudden flood of memories.

"Who?" he says.

"Mustafa Maqsood. He was married to your mother, a long time ago."

He nods. "Oh, okay," he says. "My mother had a picture of the two of them. You have the same eyes as him, right?"

"No, I don't. I have his chin."

"Maybe." Gavin shrugs. "I barely remember. So, what brings you here? I'm guessing you didn't come for the open mic night."

"I came to see you," I say.

"Well, now you're seeing me. What can I do for you?"

I take the card out of my purse. "I found this in his drawer. I guess when he sent it to you it got returned, so I put it in a new envelope and decided to deliver it personally."

Gavin looks at the back and front of the envelope, but he doesn't open it like I'd hoped. "Thanks," he says. "Though I can't imagine why he'd want to get in touch after so long."

"He always remembered you fondly." Except for the part where he pretended that you never existed. I wonder if Gavin would take offense if he knew how my father had tried to erase him from his history. "And someone told him about your mother's illness, and I think he wanted to send his condolences." Gavin doesn't respond. "How is your mother?"

"She passed away," he says.

"I'm sorry."

"How's your father?"

"He's dead, too." When I say this I smile, because it is weirdly funny, that here is a stranger who could have been my brother, and now the people that connect us are both dead.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he says. I'm still smiling and he takes a step back like he thinks I might be crazy, and I do feel a little crazy, like I just might start crying and pulling my hair and begging him to please tell me stories of the father I never had. I force an appropriate expression, sympathy and empathy and sanity. "It sucks, doesn't it, having a parent die? Makes you feel so fucking old," he says.

"Could I ask you something?" I say. "Do you remember anything about him?"

"I was only four when they split up, so no, not really. Before first grade everything is pretty much a blank." He looks at the card again.

I wish I could pick him up, hold him upside down and shake him until memories of my father come tumbling out. "But you must remember something, anything?"

"Let's see." He stretches his neck as he thinks. "I do remember that he liked birds. And, actually, there was some

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jazz song he used to listen to a lot, I think. Yeah. He liked jazz. Also, my mother used to make some Indian dessert once in a while and I think he taught her how to make it. But other than that, I don't know," he says. "My mother and him were married for less than two years. I was so young."

"Did she ever tell you anything about him?"

"She never talked about him much."

"Do you know why they split up?"

"I think my mother cheated on him," he says. "She cheated on her next husband too, so please don't take it personally."

"Is that all she said?" I ask. Gavin purses his lips, his lips that are long and thin like his fingers, lips that must have once kissed my father. He shakes his head and I'm sure there is something more, but he won't tell me, because it is something bad, and he is too kind to say it. But whatever it is, I doubt it is too detailed. His mother seems to have erased my father as he erased her. "Do you remember which jazz song he liked?"

"No," Gavin says. "You know, I didn't start listening to jazz until I was a teenager, but now I wonder if it might have been because of your father, he used to play that song when I was so young, and that must have made it part of my psyche, you know? And now I play trumpet in a jazz band, and I bet I've got him to thank."

Another customer arrives, takes a seat next to the old man in the middle. Gavin signals to him with his index finger. "I have to get back to work," he says, "but here's a flyer for my next show." I thank him and leave. It seems an unfair exchange, a handwritten card from my father for a flyer for his band, but you can't blame people for what they're unable to remember. How much should you blame them, then, for what they chose to forget?

The used cd store in Greenwich Village is empty except for the woman behind the register. I start browsing the jazz section. But I know nothing about jazz, and I don't know what my father would have listened to. He only played religious music in the car, Quranic recitations or qawwali music or songs praising Prophet Muhammad. Did he like

mainstream jazz? Duke Ellington? Or were his tastes more obscure?

"Are you all right?" the woman asks me. She's left the register and is standing right next to me, and I realize there are tears in my eyes.

"I'm not sure what to get," I tell her. "I have no idea what my father would have liked."

She selects seven cds that she says is a good sampling of the genre. At home, I put one in and pace around my apartment as I listen. I cannot sense my father in these notes. By the end of the first cd, I've realized it's no use. I won't find him in this music. It occurs to me then that Gavin might have been lying, that my father never even listened to jazz. But I play the cds anyway, all seven, in honor of the father I didn't know, who was once in love with a white woman, who carried his secrets in silence, like heavy, hidden tumors in his heart. Tomorrow, I will visit his grave. I will pray for him, and when the voices say Qul! I will speak.



**JEE LEONG KOH**

## **Childhood Punishments**

Once, when I struck a boy, my father raised a belt  
in the small smelly bedroom my grandfather slept in.  
The studded leather strap snapped, and snapped, and the welts  
answered in a stinging song to the strong silent man.

Not so when my angry mother rubbed my tongue  
with fresh cut chili for inventing fine new lies.  
The fruit stung me to blubber volubly my wrong  
and beg her face to stop. That sissy I despise

and wonder whether the red chili's hot dry mouth  
or the dark gleaming length of the worn leather strap  
poisoned far more the part of man the child would be.  
I confess, Father, I worship a man's brute strength,  
and in the massive words I start, stutter, and stop  
have too little regard, Mother, for honesty.



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**KELLY LUCE**

## **Cram Island**

By now, everyone's got a version of the story, telling tall tales of their own run-ins with Room 17, even claiming to be part of our circle that year. But when it comes down to it, no one was there that last day—no one but Nozomi. I like to think that since I knew her well, and was part of that short-lived group, my account is the most true, but really, I'm just piecing together what I know with what I imagine. Like working a jigsaw puzzle in the dark.

Nozomi was a wallflower, which is probably why I liked her. To this day I tend to date women who don't stand out, whose accomplishments are the adult equivalent of hers in high school: co-secretary of the English club, runner-up for the science fair—or was it the mile run on Sports Day? In any case, Nozomi was reasonably good at being sixteen. I'd had an on-and-off crush on her since kindergarten, but until that year, we'd never hung out much. We only got close because I was dating Miho—her best friend.

It was easier that way, though I wonder had I been a little braver, gone for it with Nozomi, if things might have turned out differently.

Every day after school the three of us—Miho, Nozomi, and I—would stock up on candy at Sunkus, maybe buy a vending machine beer to split among us, and ride our bikes out to the edge of town. It was there that the neon of Karaoke Live! rose up between two rice paddies. We always asked for Room 17, and it was usually available to us.

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The machine in Room 17 was different, it was made somewhere else; a curled, unrecognizable script ran down the side panel, spelling out instructions, perhaps, or warnings we couldn't read. Not that it mattered: we came to sing, and that particular machine had the best selection of songs. In fact, it seemed to have different songs every time, and was known for oddball old favorites, like Ray Sakamoto's "Dragon Curry" or Kari Kari's "Love Me For The Forever." Nozomi once claimed that it had any song you wanted, if you looked through the book enough times.

The karaoke system had a built-in game that scored your pitch and timing: after each song a cartoon island appeared in the distance. "Cram Island," it was called. The idea was that you were lost at sea and swimming toward land—the better you sang, the closer you got. Sometimes the game would comment on your performance, little animated coconuts yelling "WAAA!" or "HEEE!" or, if you were doing badly, maybe caught up in conversation instead of singing, they'd shout, "BUUU!" There were a couple theories behind the name "Cram Island": I joked that it was a horrible place full of kanji practice sheets and crabby, second-rate teachers so bad they were exiled from regular cram school. Miho was certain it was a misspelling of the English word "clam," though we never did see any shellfish in the game.

Aside from that machine, though, number 17 was like any other room in the place: yellow walls, plastic couches, the stink of fresh cigarettes and stale potpourri in the air. A low table sat piled with songbooks, mics, and remotes, and a wicker basket held tambourines and maracas, but we never used those—they were for the old ladies that came in with their masks and kerchiefs to sing enka.

We liked that Live! was out of the way, that the bike path snaked between those rice paddies. It felt like we'd earned something simply by arriving. On warm nights you could hear the paddy frogs singing, and if you got a room facing east you couldn't even open the window for all the noise. I remember walking out some nights, my voice hoarse after three or four hours of singing and laughing, and those frogs would still be humming along like an engine. The three of us would get on our bikes and pedal away from the neon into the darkness, each of us heading in different directions toward

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whichever narrow alley would lead us to the next lighted place.

Miho was a cynic, which made me one too; she insisted that Cram Island wasn't even reachable, that the manufacturer had just added the feature to keep customers coming back. Nozomi, though, wasn't so sure. One day her schoolbag fell off the couch and I spotted the black and silver strap of her bathing suit (I'd memorized that strap, of course, during our P.E. swimming unit earlier in the year.) To tease her, I asked if she was really planning to swim to Cram Island. She blushed, then joked that she didn't need to worry about getting anywhere close when I was around.

Occasionally, amid all the clanging, merry music, two voices emerged, one high and whispery, and the other comically low, like a barbershop bass, that chanted a jumble of syllables we could never make out. It was like one of those ink blot tests: what you heard depended on your state of mind. "His sky crime fell over the land," they sang to me once, and another time, "this crying will end in her hand."

Nozomi went in on her own a lot toward the end, and even started outscoring me on "Bullet Train (to My Heart)." I didn't think about it too much: Miho's mom had started volunteering in the afternoons, leaving behind an empty house and Miho's pink-ruffled bed. Nozomi didn't mind singing alone, she said; she enjoyed it because she could repeat songs without being a bother. Later, kids at school would say that her voice had gotten stronger, that they had noticed. But I think they only noticed afterwards, you know?

The way I imagine it—and I've spent a lot of time imagining it—she rides over on her purple bike, schoolbag in the basket, her school blazer knotted around her waist. The frogs are deafening. She does one of her tiny fist-pumps when they tell her Room 17 is available, the news ensuring she won't have to forgo any of her favorite songs. She jogs up the stairs, tapping each step, though the incline is so shallow she could take them two or three at a time. The door with the handwritten "17" in red marker (someone had ripped the placard off and they never replaced it) is wide open. She drops her bag on the couch and punches 31121 on the remote. In fades the familiar scene: a girl walking among falling cherry blossoms. She sings through "Sakura" three or four

times, first cross-legged, then while standing up straight to push the air out smoother. After warming up, getting her scores up over 90, she really lets it rip, boogying on the plastic couch and going through all the classics. Sometimes a waitress passes in the hall without seeming to notice. The waitresses in that place were experts at not noticing.

She can tell that her voice has grown stronger from all the after-school workouts, and she finds that she's able to hit notes a step or two higher and lower than usual. She sings both parts of the "Ryozenji" duet; she nails the harmony on "Sounds of Silence," a song our English teacher had taught us. She's never sung better; she's in the zone. On the screen, which is taller than she is, cartoon dolphins splash and mermaids play in the surf. Cram Island draws closer.

When it happens, she's singing "Sakura" for the seventh time and as she hits the final note, her voice clicks into a new, secure place in her throat. She rides the pitch out to its full crescendo, her eyes shut in concentration, her shoulders back and abdominals tight. Then she opens her eyes, and there it is.

The words, "Welcome to Cram Island," scroll slowly across the screen. A simple, five-note melody plays. "It is high time for you come," whispers the high voice, echoed by the barbershop bass. In unison they chant, "We want you, only you. Don't get lost now. We've been waiting so, so very long...you...only you..."

Palm trees shimmy; there's a light breeze on Cram Island. A coconut wobbles down a sandy slope toward azure water, where smiling fish burst from the surface. Nozomi steps toward the screen, her expression a mix of pride and contentment. Maybe she's brought her bathing suit that day, even worn it under her school uniform. I'd like to think so.

Live! closed down right around graduation. The building sat dark during the summer, and kids went there to drink and try to scare themselves. It was still there when I left for college, but by the time I returned home for the semester break at New Year, it'd been turned into a swanky fitness club, the rice paddies paved into parking lots. For a long time, I thought about where all those frogs went.

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You might think that Nozomi's disappearance would've brought Miho and me closer, but it didn't. In fact, after the day Nozomi disappeared, nothing romantic ever happened between us again. It was an unspoken and mutual extrication. By senior year, after the talk had subsided, we each had a new group of friends and shared nothing more than the occasional passing nod in the halls.

It still haunts me, of course. It's as if some subtle change took place that day that only I perceived. Like wearing this great thick sweater, and having someone point out a hole in it. If only she'd left a note, or some sign for us that she wanted it this way. But all we know for sure about that day is what they found during closing rounds: an empty room, a persistent melody straight out of a dying music box, and—so they say—a little water on the floor. Welcome to Cram Island! They couldn't figure out how to get the machine off that final screen, so they just unplugged it. I heard when they plugged it back in it wouldn't turn on. I have a feeling they didn't call up the manufacturer for repairs.

That's it, really. There isn't what you'd call an "ending" to the story. I guess I still have hope that she'll turn up: I'll run into her on the subway, or it'll be her voice on the line when I call to order take-out. Sometimes I even think about trying to hunt down that old karaoke machine—to what end, I don't know. I'm sure it's long gone, though, like so many things. Like those frogs and their babies and their babies' babies, generations of frogs, those relentless singers.



**JASON KOO**

## **There Is No There, There**

It's a day you feel like dying,  
and you stop at a McDonald's  
on the long drive home  
for what could be your last meal.

You sit sandwiched  
between two minivans full of sleeping  
children in the parking lot, carefully unpeeling  
a paper napkin on your lap

and thinking of the trips  
your family used to take, how your parents  
let you and your sisters sleep  
in the car while they stopped

to get food, warm bags of it  
that would wake you. And when you woke  
to the smell of fries and the crinkling  
of paper, everyone eating their selections

in silence, it didn't occur to you  
how fortunate you were to have parents like this,  
how that mournful munching could be  
missed. Suddenly the selfishness

of children seems the greatest  
crime against humanity, and you want to call  
your parents to thank them but know  
you won't, your internal irony

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already kicking in, mocking  
 your situation, how obviously you're feeling  
 sorry for yourself, listening to this  
 sad slate of love songs and tending

quietly to the Quarter Pounder  
 on your lap. Can one cry over a Quarter Pounder  
 with no cheese? You straighten up  
 and look indifferent as first one mom

then the other comes back  
 to her children bearing bulging white bags,  
 passes out the fries and little cheeseburgers,  
 then sits for a while watching them

in the rearview mirror, occasionally  
 picking at a fry to let them know she's  
 eating, too. How miserable you were  
 on those car rides. How inexplicable.

What state must you be in now  
 to equate that misery with comfort,  
 to see gardens in those minivans already  
 filling with grease, to feel home

in the weight of this burger  
 in your hand? It's a trick of advertising,  
 you know, and yet the care and continuity  
 of corporations on this day

seems curiously all you have,  
 you who are so unreachable, who wants only  
 for those minivans to leave you  
 to the bottom of your bag

strewn with fries, the crooked  
 brown fence edging the parking lot, the sound  
 of your chewing over these songs,  
 these familiar repetitions.



**JIMMY CHEN**

## **The Search for Namable Things**

For a guy who had never touched Jennifer's buttocks, I was rather touched by them. Her buttocks were of the tone and contour that evoked the natural response in high school boys. My science lab partner was Steve. I did his homework in exchange for not having my face rammed into the desk. When I was inspired, I wrote love poems for him to give to her. A reoccurring motif was the moon. At night, I imagined Jennifer's face looking at me in the dark: her golden blond hair a soft nest on my pillow. Night light is my favorite kind of light. As one is not aided with a full spectrum, the tonal variants which glide the eye over the terrain of a lovely face are celebrated in quiet. At this point, Mr. Hardy asked me to point out the gallbladder of the unfortunate frog flayed open at my table. The word, or question, with which I replied was not exclusive to this class: What?

Steve went on a few dates with Jennifer. Word spread that he had even had sex with her. He knew my feelings for her and expressed camaraderie by not slamming my face anymore. I'd see them hanging out by the bleachers, holding hands, walking to class together. I was incomplete without them, so I watched. I once tried to sabotage their courtship with a poem in which the narrator (Steve) cannot find his way to the cave. Along the way, he loses his sword. Jennifer, not the most gifted reader, didn't catch the symbolism. Instead she fellated him in the parking lot of Baskin Robbins. As it turns out, the gallbladder is located underneath the liver. It produces bile, which aids in digestion. The frog's eyes are still open, frozen in the moment it met its death.

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There's this theory I heard that God invented suffering to make sure people would always need him. It's like happiness is distracting and misery keeps people focused. All big things can be condensed, packed into small ideas. For example, the moon is the sorrow God feels for us. He doesn't want us ever to be completely in the dark, so he put this huge stone in the sky to act as a mirror during our darkest hour—only this mirror is opaque and takes some of the light for itself, a commission of sorts. God places the moon very close to us so it appears the same size as the sun. Everything in the sky is a trick. We are not that bright.

Mr. Hardy was in the Korean War, where he screwed up his hip and pinky finger during two separate incidents, both which involved unplanned explosions. He ended up teaching high school biology, a graying crew cut the only mark of his time as a hero. His pinky finger was severely crooked, and for some inexplicable reason he used it to point. Chapter Seven in the textbook *Human Reproduction* really got him going. I remember only one thing he said in class all year, in reference to vaginal intercourse—something about the cervix taking a good beating. His eyes lit up as he said this, a vein the size of a rat's tail popping out of his temple. I felt sorry for him; a man in a man's world is a sad thing. Mr. Hardy hated this one girl, I can't remember her name. All I know, all anybody knew, was that she was a vegetarian. She had a nose ring, dyed purple hair, and big leather boots. Whenever we got out the frogs to dissect, she would make comments about how wrong it was. Mr. Hardy asked her if she ate meat, and she proudly said she didn't. He thought for a long while, his face red with fury. The next day he told her that her boots were made from animals so she should shut the fuck up. Everyone laughed and the next day she was gone.

Mr. Hardy let everyone pick his or her final seating arrangement on the first day of school. There was a line of guys behind Jennifer, all geared to sit in the most optimal seats relative to her. I got the golden seat—directly across-behind. The across arrangement provided the best view of her buttocks, with occasional prospects of her face, while being behind her let one do it secretly.

I suffered from hay fever those years and had a sniffing tick. During study session, I sniffed and sniffed until one fateful day when Jennifer got up and handed me a tissue. This was the only time she looked at me. Everyone laughed and the next day I was still there.

When my dad isn't at the office, he's at home fixing things. Last year we tore up all the carpet in the house to put in wooden floors. It took us two weeks. I got accidentally caulked a few times. He makes fun of my hands, says they aren't man's hands, too soft. He shows me his hands, callused and full of blisters. Last time I held a nail for my dad, he hit my fingers with the hammer. Two of my fingers turned blue.

"Now you are a man," he said.

I have the sweater she left in class one day. I put it in my backpack, waiting all day to take it home. It's really soft, like her hair continuing over her body. Light blue, a calm afternoon sky. To throw it up in the air would be to lose it forever. Birds would mistake it for a soft patch of sky, catch it in their beaks and fly away. I sleep with it under my pillow. One day the sweater fairy will come and arrest me for theft and chronic masturbation.

I'm driving with my dad back from Home Depot at night. We bought a new toilet. The ceramic thing glistens in the back seat, propped up with seat cushions my dad had taken from the couch. It sleeps quietly as a cradled newborn. Reflections from the traffic lights above trace the contours, sweeping over the pristine and perfectly rounded bowl. It exists inviolate, until the moment I see it. The human gaze is corrupt, it turns objects into ideals. Every time I look at Jennifer, I want what I am not. I look out the window.

It's looking right at me.

What: when a blade of light comes through the curtains, it lights up all the air molecules and you realize air is thick, and each breath is a massive act. There's a tiny car carrying a man, his son, and a toilet down a road. From inside the car, the son looks out the window. The stars fidget with each mile, stubbornly grasping onto the universe. Car takes father son

and toilet to the main street, at the light by Baskin Robbins. The son sees his friend's car parked by a stone wall under the broken lamp. A girl's head comes into view now and then. She massages the testicles with her hand, moving them around and around. In this world, the son wants tell her, no two things are the same. "No two things are the same," he mutters at the car window. "I hope one day you find the moon."



GEMMA GUILLERMO

## Slaying Monsters

As a child growing up in Hawaii, on the small island of Molokai, I loved flipping through family photo albums. I especially enjoyed looking at pictures taken during my parents' honeymoon in Japan—a fairytale land that seemed exotic and magical, where clouds hugged snow-capped mountains and stone temples towered into a silver sky. Japan looked nothing like our home town of Kaunakakai, with its dirt roads, palm tree groves, and coral-strewn beaches.

But there was one particular picture that mesmerized me—the one of my father crouched beside a strange, alien creature. I could say the creature resembled a medieval dragon, but that wouldn't do it justice. It was worse—ugly and misshapen with beady eyes and the yellowed skin of a plucked chicken. It had a dragon's snout and an ogre's bulbous head. It bared decayed jagged teeth and dagger-like talons that hovered above my father's neck. Dad clutched a knife over the beast's belly, which protruded, pregnant-like. I couldn't get enough of the story behind it, begging my mother to tell it over and over.

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“Dad is fighting the horrible, man-eating monster,” she explained. “See Dad’s knife? He’s going to cut its belly open and pull me out!”

“You mean the monster *swallowed* you, Mom?!”

“Yes, like I told you before, we were in a cave and it swallowed me up when your Dad wasn’t looking. He didn’t even know I was missing until he heard me screaming inside the monster’s stomach.”

“And tell me again, Mom,” I begged. “Where was I?”

“You, my dear, were inside *my* stomach.”

That usually elicited a gasp from me. “But you don’t look pregnant in the other pictures.”

“That’s because we didn’t know yet. You were still a teeny-tiny, baby seed growing inside my tummy.”

Mom went on, recounting how they were on their honeymoon in Tokyo visiting a mountain temple. They had stopped to admire the view as Dad rested against a cave’s entrance. Mom, meanwhile, had wandered into the cave looking for a place to sit. That was when the monster suddenly appeared and swallowed her. When Dad realized she was missing, he went in and found the monster licking its lips and patting its bulging stomach. Luckily, he had brought a pocketknife and wrestled the creature, eventually cutting her free. Mom popped out like Red Riding Hood’s grandmother, whole and unharmed.

Of course as I grew older, I realized that the picture was just Dad hamming it up for the camera, posed next to a marble sculpture. But to a child accustomed to hearing tales of wolves and witches gobbling innocent victims, her story seemed plausible—and terrifying.



I was almost five, and we had been living on Molokai for over a year. I still cried each night pining for my older siblings left behind in Manila. When I’d last seen them, they were sobbing, huddled against the front gate of our house as the taxi whisked Mom, Dad and me off to the airport. Mary Grace was then eight-years-old, Armando six and Arlene five. I was closest to Ate Grace (“Ate” is Tagalog for “older sister”). I missed most having her comb my hair each evening after

my bath. I'd climb onto her lap to enjoy the soothing tingles as she combed my hair and sang songs in Tagalog. Ate Arlene and Kuya ("older brother") Mando, who were a year apart, shared the same room, went to the same school and played more with each other than with me or Ate Grace. Mom and Dad called them "malikot" ("mischievous") and often scolded them. Still, I missed them all terribly—not only as playmates but mostly for the comfort and protection they gave, especially whenever Mom or Dad got angry. I couldn't understand why my parents still hadn't sent for them as they'd promised after we left the Philippines.

My parents did fulfill their promise of moving us into a spacious white house with a view of the Pacific Ocean. In Manila, my bedroom view had been an empty lot full of garbage and weeds. My new bedroom on Molokai overlooked plumeria trees with pink flowers that filled our house with their milky perfume. In Manila, we had lived in the Quezon City area, where homes were scattered among factories, family-run stores called *sari-saris*, and empty lots overrun by weeds. Mom worked as a doctor and Dad a professor at the University of the Philippines. When they got married, they chose to live in the home Mom had inherited from her mother after she'd died. It was two-stories, with five bedrooms and a large iron gate built around the compound. But, it was smack dab in the middle of a busy street, and the constant noise outside often woke us: horns blaring, police sirens wailing, neighbors' roosters crowing, men pushing food-carts and yelling, "*Taho!*" or "*Balut* for sale!"<sup>1</sup> Mom dreamed of one day moving to a house with a grassy yard in a quiet neighborhood—an impossibility in Manila.

So that was the prize dangled in front of me before we left Manila.

"Don't you want to live in a beautiful new house?" Dad had asked me. He went on, telling me about the fairytale land of America, with its wide open fields, groves of apple and orange trees, skyscrapers and amusement parks. "Plus, you get to ride a magical spaceship...an airplane!"

That was enough to sway any three-year-old. Still, I asked why Ate Grace, Ate Arlene and Kuya Mando weren't coming

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<sup>1</sup> *Taho* and *Balut* are Filipino street food delicacies. *Taho* is made of soft tofu, brown sugar and tapioca. *Balut* are boiled, fertilized duck eggs.

with us.

“Because you are the baby,” Mom said. “You need to travel with us. Ate Grace, Ate Arlene and Kuya Mando are older and need to go to school. They’ll travel together and join us later.”

“But when?” I asked.

“Very soon,” she promised, looking at Dad for reassurance. “As soon as we settle into our new home.” Dad remained quiet and looked away.



Despite my collection of new dolls and shiny swing set in the backyard, I longed for playmates. Back in Manila, there was always one of my siblings to play with. On Molokai, the neighborhood kids were mostly teenagers, so I spent most of the time at home listening to Disney records and watching television.

I hated my pre-school, run by a plump woman named Mrs. Otsuka, whose billowy *muu-muus* and wild, uncombed hair made kids cringe in terror. She used to glare at us, wielding a ping-pong paddle to keep us in line. Every kid eventually experienced the dreaded “paddle of education.” For me, it was the time I accidentally knocked over Alice Shin’s Holly Hobby thermos and spilled soup on the floor. When I refused to apologize and clean it up, Mrs. Otsuka marched me to the front of the room. All the kids kept quiet, their eyes glued to the paddle as she made me hold open both palms. With a snap of her wrist, she gave each hand a smack, the humiliating “whapping” sound more painful than my stinging palms.

More than Mrs. Otsuka, I dreaded wearing one of Mom’s elaborate outfits: frilly dress, pigtails tied with matching ribbons, legs sweating in tights and feet squirming in patent Mary-Janes. Mom called me the most stylish girl in class. All the other kids, clad in shorts and slippers, looked at me like I was from another planet. For most four-year-olds, the faraway country I’d come from, the Philippines, *was* another planet. No one outright called me an alien monster, but their stares and whispers made me feel like I was one. I was homesick for my old home in Manila. I spent hours staring at old photographs, scribbling letters to my siblings, telling

them how much I missed them. I drew pictures of Hawaii and our new house next to a sparkling blue sea. In all my pictures, the three stick figures—me, Mom and Dad—wore frowns and tears.



We had ended up on Molokai by chance.

“It was a blessing in disguise,” Mom concluded, using her favorite expression to explain life’s unpredictability. Their original plan had been to settle in Cornwall, New York, where Dad’s brother Leo had lined up a job interview for Dad at a health insurance company. Uncle Leo was a doctor who had moved to New York in the late sixties to complete his medical training. Many professional Filipinos in the early seventies had migrated to the Northeast, where health-care jobs were in demand. When President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972, taking control of the media, the universities and threatening future restrictions on travel, many Filipinos who had toyed with the idea of leaving for America decided to leave. Under the Marcos regime, Mom’s uncle, a senator from Ilo-Ilo Province, and Dad’s dean at the University where he’d been teaching, were imprisoned because of their anti-Marcos views. Mom and Dad realized then it was time to leave.

It wasn’t until I was older that my parents revealed to me the complicated reasons behind their decision to split our family apart. During her medical training, Mom had adopted Mary Grace, Arlene and Armando while working in some of the poorest Philippine provinces. After they married, Dad never really had the chance to bond with—or legally adopt—they because I was born shortly after. As a baby, there was no distinction for me: they were my natural sisters and brother. When they chose to take only me to the States, leaving my siblings behind, I was confused. All I knew was that it made me feel bad, like I was some kind of wretched monster. When I was much older, I realized that horrible feeling inside me was guilt. But any guilt my parents felt was rationalized in practical terms.

“We had to do what was best for all of us,” Dad recalled. “Marcos was a dictator...a monster! He killed many people who spoke against him! Our priority was to get out of the Philippines, move to America, and of course, send for the

other kids as soon as possible.” He pointed out the difficulties of travelling with four children, as well as the immigration and adoption issues involved. He reasoned that Mary Grace, Arlene and Armando needed to complete their school year and would live with Mom’s brother Pabling and cousin Nelia in the Quezon City house.

We left the Philippines in December of ’72 bound for New York. Earlier, Mom and Dad agreed to first make a stop-over in Hawaii. They planned to visit Zeny, a friend from Manila who had moved to Molokai a few years earlier. After a few weeks enjoying the Hawaiian weather and getting to know the Kaunakakai locals, my parents considered postponing their trip to New York. Blizzards were blowing through Cornwall on the T.V. news, while they watched me running half-naked under the yard sprinklers. Dad had attended business school in New York and Mom had visited the East Coast during a medical fellowship, so both were familiar with Northeastern winters—the bulky coats and boots, the cars buried in snow, the slick icy pavements that landed people in leg casts. Place a four-year-old into the picture, and they quickly saw the merits of staying in Hawaii for the duration of the winter.

“We would’ve had to stay at Leo’s and Didi’s house until we found our own place,” Dad explained. Living with Uncle Leo, Auntie Didi and my four cousins would’ve been a tight fit. Also, since Mom and Didi never really got along, Mom was in no rush to move. So, they accepted Zeny’s offer to stay a few weeks longer in the furnished, in-law apartment behind her garage.

As luck would have it, the position for administrator of Molokai General Hospital opened up that winter. Dad had been teaching a graduate course in hospital administration at the University of the Philippines before we had left. A devout Catholic and big fan of miracles, Mom said the job practically fell into Dad’s lap and urged him to apply. My parents “left it up to God”: if they offered Dad the job, then we would remain on Molokai, where they had already befriended the Filipino community. He indeed got the job, and shortly after, Mom got pregnant with my brother Jojo.

Their month-long stopover on Molokai turned into a four-year stay.



At least at first, Mom seemed to enjoy playing the role of sweet, smiling housewife. She traded in her white, starched doctor's coat and trademark high-heels for casual mini-skirts and sandals. She styled her long hair into loose pony-tails and wore less make-up. She appeared to have fun learning how to cook Filipino dishes and making friends with the other moms during Tupperware and Avon parties. She even hummed as she vacuumed and cleaned the house.

But as with all initially-touted miracles and blessings-in-disguise, doubt eventually crept back as reality set in. She soon found herself stuck in rural Kaunakakai, where the only chain eatery was a dusty Dairy Queen parked alongside a gasoline station and cornfield. She was caring for two small children and still mourning the loss of her mother, who had died suddenly the year before I was born. She missed having a high-profile job as a physician and public health inspector appointed by the Philippine Board of Health. She missed Mary Grace, Arlene and Armando.

Nowadays, new moms blame post-partum depression, but back then, all we knew was that after Jojo's birth, Mom's uncontrolled rages began. Frustration over little things like not being to buy tailored clothes at the local shops that only sold T-shirts and beach wear grew into attacks against Dad and me.

"I hate this place! Damn you from bringing us here!" she screamed. She was sweeping the kitchen floor with the *walis*, a broom from the Philippines made from wispy *tambo* grass. I heard her slam the dustpan onto the floor. "There is nothing here—no department stores, no universities, no theatres, NOTHING! I had a life in Manila! I was somebody there!"

"You know we both agreed that we needed to move to the States," Dad pointed out matter-of-factly. "It was for the sake of our family. You saw what happened to your uncle. It was too dangerous to live in Manila any longer. Did you want Gemma and Jojo growing up in that kind of environment?"

At the mention of my name, I'd usually duck into my bedroom and sit in the closet, shoving my stuffed animals against my ears. But it didn't help. Mom's voice boomed against the

walls, reverberating throughout the house. I pictured her mouth foaming, her anger seething in fiery breaths.

“But not *here*, dammit, we were supposed to move to New York! I wanted to apply for my medical license!”

“I told you—you can study for your Board exams now and after we move to the Mainland, you can open up your own practice.” My parents still were intent on following through with the original plan to move to New York after spending a few years on Molokai.

“And when do you think I’ll find time to study, at night when you come home? When I’m too tired?” Mom’s daily juggling act meant cooking breakfast, prepared Jojo’s formula bottles, packing my lunch, getting me dressed for school, cleaning the house, doing the laundry, cooking dinner—all the while caring for my infant brother, Jojo. All these mundane tasks were new to Mom, who had grown up with maids, drivers and *ya-yas* (nannies) in Manila.

“At least in New York, we would’ve had relatives to help,” she went on. “Leo would’ve introduced me to his doctor friends and I could’ve studied at the medical library. People there are more like us, educated people who speak real English, not this crazy Pidgin!”

She was referring to the local slang that everyone in Hawaii spoke. Pidgin was a sing-song mish-mash of broken English, Hawaiian and Asian words that plantation workers from Asia invented after their migration to Hawaii during the early 1900’s. In my effort to fit in and erase my Tagalog accent, I copied how the other kids spoke. Soon, I was shocking my mother with phrases like, “I no like eat...I *pau*,” which meant “I don’t want to eat anymore...I’m done” and “Jenny no like play wit me, she wen give me da stink eye,” which meant “Jenny won’t play with me, she gave me a dirty look.” Mom refused to speak with me whenever I spoke to her in Pidgin. She pretended I was invisible until I said the same phrases in corrected, proper English. Given the “melting-pot” culture of Hawaii with its many immigrants coming together, Pidgin was a shortcut to learning English. It gave people an easy, though choppy, version of communicating with each other. It made people feel connected, as if to say, “You and I come from different countries but we speak the same way.” Mom never

understood this. She just thought it sounded crass and illiterate.

“Oh, come on, Gemma is just a little girl learning a new language!” Dad said, trying not to raise his voice. “They teach kids proper English at school. Anyway, don’t blame me. You were the one who wanted me to apply for the hospital job.”

“It was a dare, idiot! Who the hell knew they’d give it to you, someone who was here on vacation for God’s sake!” She made it sound like he had entered a contest and won by chance. In her anger, she glossed over how many rosaries and novenas she’d prayed hoping for him to get the job.

At this point, Mom started crying, shifting the subject to the inevitable. “And what about our kids in Manila? I cannot forgive you for that! You are a cruel man to leave those children behind!”

“Oh, no, don’t blame it all on me! You knew there was no way we could bring them with us! We can barely scrape money to support our two children here and you want to send for the three of them? No way, not now!” Dad’s hospital salary was decent, but with Mom not working and a new baby, he made a good point. I heard him get up to leave the dining room, with Mom’s sharp voice following close behind. They continued to argue in their bedroom, which was on the other side of the closet I sat in.

“So what, then--Gemma and Jojo are now more important to you? You’ve forgotten that those kids need us, too?” She still felt that he had never accepted them as his children and feared that he was more focused on starting a family without them.

“And what about all the danger you’re always telling us about?” she went on. I pictured the evil Marcos firing guns into crowds, stealing from the poor, burning down houses and throwing innocent people in jail.

“Look, they’re fine—Pabling and Nelia are taking good care of them.” He tried to sound positive, but his voice shook, as if he too was recalling the monstrous acts we’d read about in *Philippine News*.

“How the hell do you know? Do you even read their letters?”

“Stop nagging me, dammit! I told you already, we *will* send for them, but not now!”

Mom was a fan of hurling things, usually books, or one of Jojo’s formula bottles. I heard them slam against the wall, wondering how far she had missed hitting Dad. She directed her rage at Dad, but her high-pitched screams rang through the house, making it seem like she was screaming at me, too.

The insults began. “I must’ve been crazy to marry you! My mom had just died and I was all alone. I guess I must have been desperate.”

As she often told it, her mother had died suddenly from a heart attack two months before their wedding. Mom had gone to the drugstore to pick up her mother’s heart pills. When she came home, she found my grandmother unconscious from a sudden stroke. She still blames herself today for her mother’s death. Still, despite her grief, she had managed to go through not only with the wedding and honeymoon, which was her mother’s wedding gift to them, but also--lucky for me--go through with the pregnancy.

“The last thing I wanted was to get pregnant during our honeymoon!” Mom yelled. “I was still in mourning for God’s sakes! I wasn’t prepared to have a child! I’d just lost my own mother!”

Dad knew better than to respond to this. Once Mom started talking about her mother, she began sobbing uncontrollably. Although I could tell he was still angry with her, he wound up swallowing it. I heard him walk over to her, embrace her and say, almost in a whisper, “I’m sorry.” Lying against the closet floor, I unburied my head from under the piles of clothes and finally sighed with relief.



When I grew older, I stared at the monster picture and thought about the trauma Mom was undergoing when that picture was snapped: the grief over losing her mother, her unplanned pregnancy with me, her terror over raising a baby without her mother, the morning sickness she suffered, the nausea caused by what felt like a mutant growing inside her.

I stared at Dad in the picture, mostly in amazement, trying to reconcile the quiet, bookish man reading me bedtime stories,

with the brave, powerful man wielding a knife aimed at the monster's belly. Dad looked suave, 70's-cool, wearing a long-sleeved shirt with suede elbow-patches, black pants and leather boots. The intent look in his eyes displayed such extreme resolve to save his new wife and unborn child. In that story, Dad was a hero.

When I look at that picture now as an adult, I miss that young, fearless father in the picture. It was that father who used to take Jojo and me fishing near Kaunakakai Pier, who'd wake me at the crack of dawn to pick buckets of seaweed along the beach, and whom I once watched shoot deer while hunting with him in Ka'awa Valley. He looked and acted nothing like the father that dodged Tagalog curse words spewing from my mother's mouth, shielding himself from objects being hurled at him, before finally cowering in defeat during my mother's frequent tirades.

I suppose I also stared at that picture so much because I recognized that monster so clearly. It was the monster dictator who took over the Philippines, forcing us to flee and splitting our family apart. It was the monster at school wielding her "paddle of education." It was the monster I heard screaming at my father in the bedroom.

Finally, it was the monster I saw everyday in the mirror as I got dressed for school. I eventually outgrew those Sears-catalog outfits, lost my Tagalog accent and made friends on Molokai. But the hateful monster still lurked deep within me, filling me with guilt, haunting me everyday throughout my childhood. It was the monster that spared me but swallowed up my sisters and brothers. And I was much too young and powerless to slay it and set them free.



# KARTIKA REVIEW

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Pushcart Press  
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Re: Pushcart Prize Nominations

Dear Committee:

*Kartika Review*, an Asian American literary journal based in California, nominates the following contributors from our magazine:

1. Fiction: Sheba Karim, "Qiyamat" (Winter 2008)
2. Poetry: J. L. Koh, "Childhood Punishments" (Winter 2008)
3. Fiction: Kelly Luce, "Cram Island" (Summer 2008)
4. Poetry: Jason Koo, "There Is No There, There" (Summer 2008)
5. Fiction: Jimmy Chen, "The Search for Namable Things" (Spring 2008)
6. Essay: Gemma Guillermo, "Slaying Monsters" (Spring 2008)

Thank you for your time and attention.

Respectfully submitted,

KARTIKA REVIEW



Sunny L. Woan,  
*Editor-in-Chief*

Enclosures