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## *Dear Reader,*

With this issue of the *Algonquin Reader*, we are delighted to present original essays by the exceptionally talented fiction writers on our Spring 2017 list. In each essay, the author discusses the inspiration behind his or her forthcoming book, providing a window to the story behind each story. A short excerpt from the novel or collection of short fiction follows each essay.

***Our Short History***, the latest novel from bestselling author Lauren Grodstein, is narrated by Karen Neulander, a successful political consultant with a six-year-old son named Jake. Because Jake's father made it clear he had no interest in becoming a parent, Karen has been raising Jake on her own. But now Jake is asking to meet his dad, and for good reason: Karen is dying. Through heart-wrenching poignancy and perfectly pitched humor, Grodstein has created an unforgettable novel about parenthood, sacrifice, and the depths of love.

In ***The Last Days of Café Leila***, Noor returns to her native Tehran for the first time in thirty years, with her teenage daughter by her side. So much is different, but Café Leila — the restaurant Noor's family has run for three generations — hasn't changed. Her father still acts as patriarch to the ragtag group of regulars who call the café home. Noor is soon reminded that Tehran is a place of contradictions, where grace and brutal violence both have a foothold, and it's not long before her rebellious daughter is caught up in both. From debut novelist Donia Bijan, this is a powerful story about the delicate balance between history and progress and the resilience of a family in the face of upheaval.

***When the English Fall*** just might be unlike anything you've ever read before. This literary work of postapocalyptic Amish fiction is based on a brilliant concept: that the Amish would be the best prepared to survive after a solar storm has dismantled technology and communication systems all over the world. Told from the point of view of a loving Amish father, David Williams's debut novel is a riveting examination of "civilization" and what remains when the center cannot hold.

Winner of the PEN/Bellwether Prize, ***The Leavers*** tells the story of a Chinese American boy whose mother suddenly disappears. This leads to his

adoption by a white American family and his struggle to adapt to a new identity, even as he continues to search for his birth mother. Praised by Barbara Kingsolver as “courageous, sensitive, and perfectly of this moment,” Lisa Ko’s debut is an engrossing and moving examination of borders and belonging.

Critically acclaimed author Bill Roorbach returns to short fiction with *The Girl of the Lake*, a collection of nine rich, funny, compelling stories that examine our capacity for love. Among the unforgettable characters Roorbach creates are a couple hiking through the mountains whose vacation and relationship ends catastrophically; a teenager being pursued by three sisters all at once; a tech genius who exacts revenge on his wife and best friend over a stolen kiss; and many more. These stories — some being published for the first time, the rest originally from magazines such as the *Atlantic*, *Playboy*, and *Ploughshares* — are as satisfying as Bill Roorbach’s novels.

Dave Boling’s *The Lost History of Stars* takes place during the Boer War, a mostly forgotten conflict that began in the late 1800s in southern Africa. Fourteen-year-old Aletta and her family are Afrikaners, Dutch settlers who are taken by the British and forced into a concentration camp. Through the eyes and actions of this courageous young protagonist, Boling shows how humanity and hope can shine through even the darkest hours of human history. For fans of *All the Light We Cannot See*, *The Lost History of Stars* is carefully researched, richly drawn, and deeply moving.

Whether by debut novelists or writers with several works published, the books on this list display a mastery of craft, and we could not be more excited to share these writers’ stories with you. Thank you for turning our pages.

*The Algonquin Staff*

# *The Nest*

— AN ESSAY BY —

LAUREN GRODSTEIN

**A**t the intersection of two highways near my house in New Jersey sits an improbably cheap fruit and flower store. The last time I was there, they were running a six-dollar special on hanging planters, so I bought one, filled it with petunias, and hung it from my porch. The petunias draped fetchingly over the sides of the pot and made my house look very charming.

A week later, a nervous chirpy sparrow started dashing from the innards of my planter every time I came close. What's with the sparrow? I wondered aloud. Who's it hiding from?

I bet it built a nest in there, said my seven-year-old son, Nathaniel.

Sparrows have nests? I said. I'd always thought of sparrows as kind of homeless birds, congregating by the trash cans outside pizza places. My son looked at me like I was crazy and then requested that I hoist him up to look inside the planter. And sure enough, there it was, a perfect nest, maybe three inches in diameter, made out of twigs and bits of fluff.

In the next few days, more magic: first, two tiny bluish eggs, then a third, and then a fourth, all neatly arranged. How did the sparrow find the time to do all this? Some days it was all I could do to fold the laundry.

And then, that Saturday, a mystery: a slightly larger, more speckled egg nestled among its four fellows.

I don't think that one belongs there, my son said. I think it belongs to a different bird. Does that ever happen, where a bird ends up in someone else's nest?

We went inside to have a discussion with Google, who told us that sure enough, this egg was not a sparrow's egg but rather the egg of a cowbird. Instead of raising its own young, the cowbird drops its egg in another

bird's nest in the hopes that the other bird will be a sport about it and raise the baby cowbird as its own. The technical name for this kind of bird is a "brood parasite," but that sounded pretty nasty, so Nathaniel and I decided we would call the cowbird something else: the biological mother.

Biological mothers are on our minds a lot these days, as we anxiously await the arrival of my son's sister, our new daughter, who is currently living in an orphanage in China. As I write this in May 2016, our daughter, Xiaoxiao, is almost two years old. She will be with us this fall—we have been working on bringing her home for fourteen months. We are so close now that we've begun to count days.

What do you think the biological mother is doing right now? my son asked, peering into the nest the day after we found the cowbird egg. Maybe working, I said. Maybe going back to school.

I wonder if she thinks about her egg, Nathaniel said. I would, if I were her.

My husband, the only one of us tall enough to see into the nest without using a stepladder, started reporting on the eggs on his way in from work. Eggs looking good, he'd say. Flowers need water. Then we'd eat dinner, and after dinner we'd watch the videos of Xiaoxiao the orphanage sent us.

But then last Thursday, I checked and saw that two sparrow's eggs were missing from the nest. The next day, one more was gone. My heart thudded. The following morning, the nest was empty. Even the cowbird's egg had disappeared.

What had we done wrong? Had we checked too vigilantly? Driven the sparrow crazy with all our comings and goings?

My son and husband both seemed a little disappointed about the mysteriously empty nest, but as for me, I was beside myself. I looked all around the porch for eggshells but didn't find the merest feather. It was as if the eggs had never been there at all. I stood by my back door, looking out at the planter hanging from the porch, feeling like an idiot because I was crying.

What kind of mother was I? What kind of mother would I be?

I wrote my new novel, *Our Short History*, because I'd been thinking about motherhood and fear: the fear of not being able to raise my son, the fear of having to live without him. Every so often I think about these things,

because I write books, and my imagination can be hard to tame, and because I'm a mother, and my imagination can be hard to tame.

*Our Short History* tells the story of a single mother named Karen who has stage IV ovarian cancer. Karen knows that when the time comes, she will have to leave her young son, Jake, to her sister's care, and she wants to make sure that things go exactly to plan. She's diligent about every detail, even freezing an absurd amount of baked ziti so that whenever Jake misses her, there it will be, something she made for him with her own hands.

In the beginning of the novel, Jake asks to meet his father, a man Karen dated briefly who broke up with her after she found out she was pregnant. She agrees to the meeting because she assumes it will be a blip, a moment's interest. Instead, Jake and his father fall in love at first sight. They share a dorky sense of humor, a fierce love of video games, an obsession with Star Wars. They have the same half-curly hair and hazel eyes.

Karen doesn't want to let Jake have a relationship with his father, because a) his father broke her heart, and b) she's been raising Jake herself for six years and suddenly this guy gets to swoop in and be Superdad? No way, Karen thinks. Not happening. She goes a little crazy at the thought of this man getting his undeserving hands on her son.

But Jake loves his father. And she loves Jake more than anything else she can name.

The more I think about Karen, the more I identify with her: It's easy to become a little crazy when, for instance, you're waiting for news of the daughter you've never met. But more than that, I think I was able to write *Our Short History* because I know the desperation, the helplessness, of loving your child, and the way that kind of love can derange a person. It's the kind of love that lifts cars and steals bread and gladly sacrifices itself again and again. I know this because I live it. And that's why, even though imagination is my job and my hobby, I can't imagine what it took for Xiaoxiao's biological mother to let her go.

But for some reason I was able to imagine Karen, desperately missing the little boy who was still standing in front of her. I was able to imagine her cataloging the way he runs, the scrapes on his knee, his favorite T-shirts, his favorite songs. I loved Karen for the way she loved her son, and for what

she was willing to do to keep him by her side. I also loved writing about her because it felt like a way of explaining to my own children—the one I know and the one I have yet to meet—how desperately I love them. It seems almost unhinged to say these sorts of things out loud, maybe: I love you more than anyone. I love you more than I love me.

But one day I hope they'll have nests of their own, and they'll understand.

FROM

## *Our Short History*

BY LAUREN GRODSTEIN



**W**hen I was a kid, not much older than you, I was certain I'd grow up to be a writer. I had a portable typewriter—my dad bought it for me at a garage sale—and late at night, when everyone else was asleep, I'd sit in the kitchen and painstakingly type out little scenes and scraps of fiction. I liked mystery stories a lot, suspense, moments of horror and surprising redemption. I hoped one day to write something about the Holocaust, but give it a happy ending. This was when I was a teenager and thought I could rewrite any script.

Now I'm grown and know that very few of us get to become the people we thought we'd be when we were kids. I never did write a novel, is what I'm saying, or even a decent short story, although I found other successes and pleasures in life and don't regret most of the things I haven't done. That said, I still have time, Jake, and I still like putting down words on paper. So I've decided to write a book for you, with chapters, a title, maybe even an appendix of photographs. It seems like the right way to tell you everything I want you to know. And this island, my sister's guesthouse, the cloudy Northwest: it's all very conducive to writing. I have a comfortable chair here and a shiny new laptop. And there's so much I want to tell you.

As of course you know, this island where my sister lives with her family—Mercer Island—is all pine trees and lacrosse fields and half-caff americanos. You can see the churning waters of Lake Washington from every direction, usually iron gray but sometimes unaccountably blue. Seattle lies a few miles to the west. I've always thought it was peaceful here, and good for us, although I do miss our home in Manhattan. (Remember how you used to ask if we could build a tunnel from West Seventy-Fourth



Street to Mercer Island? And because I thought I had all the time in the world, I used to say, maybe later?)

This will be a wonderful place for you to do the bulk of your growing up, after you've moved here for good. You'll have your cousins to hang out with, and your aunt Allie to make sure you eat your vegetables. And your uncle Bruce is one of the most senior people at Starbucks, which means that living here you'll be very nicely provided for. You'll ski at Whistler and spend Christmas in Hawaii and pass long summer weekends at the family estate in Friday Harbor. You'll learn to drive and then you'll get a car.

That said, I've instructed Allison to send you to one of the public schools on the island instead of the private cloister where she sends her own kids. Public school matters to me; I want you to know how the real world lives, or what passes for the real world here on Mercer Island. I can't bear the idea of you growing up amid all this privilege without some awareness that there are people who grow up on free lunch. Remember, Jacob, I spent my own childhood in a Long Island duplex, my father's parents in the apartment upstairs. As I've told you a million times—as I hope you still remember—my mother was the fifth daughter of a Bronx postman. My father was the only child of Hungarian immigrants who barely survived World War II. Neither one of them grew up with anything like luxury, and neither did my sister or I.

Allison and I frequently discuss issues of privilege and economy. She says it doesn't mean we have to raise our kids broke just because that's how we grew up. She thinks that insecurity about money doesn't necessarily make a person more empathetic or kind: sometimes it just makes a person nervous her whole life. And she's right, I know she's right, but still it irks me to think you'll never understand that you are, in so many ways, so very lucky. Allison says, But in at least one way you aren't lucky at all.

None of us are. And money is no compensation.

There is no compensation. I am your only parent; I am forty-three years old; I have stage IV ovarian cancer. I have perhaps two or three years left in my life, and once I am gone you will move here, to Mercer Island, to live with my sister, Allison, and her family. You can bring your hamster and all your toys. You can bring anything you want. You know this, Jake. You know that if it were up to me, I would live forever with you in my arms.

This will be a strange exercise, this book, I can tell. As I type, I feel like I'm writing about someone else. Like this couldn't be happening to me, or to us. And then—there—I feel the port above my ribs, and there it is again, the staggering truth.

I still haven't decided how often I want you to think of me in the future, Jake, or what kind of memory I want to be. I mean, of course I want you to remember me—I want you to remember that I existed, and that I loved you, and that generally speaking we were pretty happy. But I don't know if I want you to remember every single specific about our life together, so that your life on Mercer Island always feels like your “new” life, as though you're comparing it to something that came before that was somehow truer. I want this to be your true life, and I want Allison and Bruce to be like your mother and father, and your cousins to be like your siblings, and for you to consider yourself one of theirs. I want them to be your soft place to land. This is, I think, the best thing a family can be.

But I also want you to remember days like last Monday, when I took you to the Woodland Park Zoo and we paid five dollars to feed a leaf to that giraffe and instead of eating the leaf the giraffe licked your hand with its prehensile tongue and you were so surprised you froze and she did it again. This time you shrieked and I shrieked too and then we laughed until we got the hiccups. The zookeeper said, *I've never seen her do that before! You must be delicious.* You blushed a bit and said, *That's what my mom thinks. That I'm delicious.* And oh, how you are, Jacob. You, with your soft longish hair and your feathery eyelashes, you have no idea.

Sometimes I find myself daydreaming—sometimes in the middle of a conversation, even—and I realize I'm imagining what you'll look like in a few years. Will your hair still curl around the edges? Will you still wear Derek Jeter T-shirts every day? Since you were a toddler you've been a New York Yankees fanatic, but then the other day I caught you in your cousin Dustin's old Mariners jersey—I hadn't done laundry in a while—and I thought, There it is, the beginning of a kid I'll never know. The thought made me more curious than melancholy; I was like an anthropologist studying the future you. Your cousin Dustin was chasing you around the lawn while Allie yelled at both of you to come in for dinner, and I was just sitting on the dock, witnessing. Your life without me. Dr. Susan says this

sort of witnessing is normal. This sort of floating away. You had a scrape on your shin I'd never noticed before.

“What time is it in New York, anyway, Mom?” you asked me at breakfast. I told you it was eleven, and you said that's what you thought. You said, “In New York, it's already the future.”

Jacob, I promise, if I do nothing else with the time I have left, I will write this book. I'm not sure of its title yet—do titles matter if you have only one reader?—but I know what I'm going to include: whatever wisdom I have, whatever lessons I'd pass on to you later, if I were going to be here later, when you were old enough to need them. My hope is that whenever you miss me or whenever you just want to know more about the person I was, you'll be able to open this book and read these pages and remember me. Learn more about me. And that way, even though you won't always be with me, I will always, at least a little, be with you.

I plan to be honest here. I plan to be excruciatingly, extraordinarily honest. I will not edit out the truth; I will not try to make myself look better than I really was. Than I really am. If I can't tell you the truth, why should I tell you anything at all?

OUR SHORT HISTORY

by Lauren Grodstein

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On Sale March 2017

## *The Women's Hour*

— AN ESSAY BY —

DONIA BIJAN

**S**trange things happened when I returned to Tehran in 2010 after thirty-two years in exile. Arriving past midnight, when many of the international flights land, I sipped lukewarm coffee while waiting for my bags. Seated together on a nearby bench, two sleepy looking toddlers were draped across their mother's lap. Another boy clutched a game device; a woman plunked down beside him and checked her watch. Perfect strangers looked familiar. This was Imam Khomeini Airport—his glowering portrait there to remind us—but it was no different from LAX or Charles de Gaulle or Heathrow. I understood the PA announcements, the monitors, the restroom signs, and the currency exchange booths. I felt safe in this neutral zone, imagining boarding another flight on a whim. I was born here, yet I had no idea what sort of place lay outside. Was it still the city of my youth?

My sisters and I had arranged for a driver to pick us up. Seeing the sympathetic face of a young man holding a placard with our last name on it in Persian script was deeply endearing, as if he had taken special care to write BIJAN. This was a homecoming, but we had no place to go, no family to come back to. Did I really think that the house where I grew up, seized postrevolution by the regime, would be returned to my family? No. But, emboldened by smooth talking mediators who stood to gain from the transaction, we had come to try.

What I found most striking in the first twenty-four hours was how I felt constantly close to tears. At the small family-run hotel, upon answering a call to our room from the front desk, I came undone when I heard “Good morning, *Khanoom* Bijan” (Mrs. Bijan). *Khanoom*? No one had ever called me that—I had left Iran at fifteen, too young to be a Mrs. How beautifully she pronounced my name. “Yes! Yes, it's me, *Khanoom* Bijan,” I announced, with such exuberance that the caller probably thought she was disappointing me with such ordinary news that breakfast was served until 10 a.m.

The first thing we did was ride a taxi through unrecognizable streets in search of our house. Along an avenue that was once named after my father for the hospital he built in the 1950s, on yet undeveloped land, was a low building set far back, a quiet relic of old Tehran. If it weren't for the gate, we would have missed it altogether. How many dreams were interrupted by husbands pounding on that very gate beside their pregnant wives in labor, howling in the night for Doktor Bijan? We stood before the hospital where I was born, where our family had lived on the top floor, the building my father built brick by brick. Here was where my parents delivered thousands of babies. Here was the yard where we buried our dog Sasha, and here was the pool where I learned to swim.

Finding the gate unlatched, we ventured inside. Turf now covered the pool. Bath towels, green and blue, hung from the upstairs balconies, furling and unfurling, seeming to taunt us as we gazed from below at our girlhood bedrooms, holding back our tears. The caretaker emerged from his cottage to shoo us away, shutting the gate in our faces.

By the third morning, still jet-lagged but anxious for exercise, I threw a swimsuit in my backpack and set out for a local pool that was open to women a few hours a week. I left the hotel with the vague idea that I'd blend in wearing a knee-length sweater over jeans, covering my hair with a scarf that periodically slid off my head. I observed other women walking by in stylish manteaus with cinched waists worn over tailored pants. Above their charcoal-rimmed eyes, their hair was swooped into a cone at the crown and wrapped in elaborate head scarves. I looked every bit the foreigner with my oafish backpack.

I approached the façade of a building covered with a dark panel of fabric. Even the door had to wear a cloak for ladies' hours. I pushed the cloth aside to enter and stood for a moment to breathe the saturated scent. As a swimmer, I am fond of the thick smell of chlorine. Standing in the front office was a pretty young woman, her hair unraveled, holding a loaf of bread. While I paid the entrance fee, my eyes wandered past her bare shoulder to the voices behind the desk. Two attendants sat at a small table, waiting for their colleague to join them. A kettle whistled. It was still early, and I had interrupted their breakfast, the rare moment when they could sit, unencumbered by veils, rules, and threats, to eat and chat freely. Yet here was

their first customer with only one selfish thought—to tear her silly scarf off and swim laps. I rushed into the changing room, apologetic but filled with an intense desire to sit with them, feeling such affection for them, wanting to know what kind of lives they led. My middle-aged American self was already snapping goggles in place, while the Persian girl who left long ago wondered if they might call out to her, if they had saved her a seat. I shivered at the edge of the outdoor pool while a voice inside my head told me to throw myself in. For a few seconds, with my head under water, I pushed through, giving it my all. Gasping when I reached the wall, I looked up at the sky, my head buzzing with thoughts. Yes, I may have lost my footing in Iran, but I still felt like I belonged, regardless of who occupied our house or how far I had traveled.

I have never felt closer to strangers than I did during the women's hour at that pool. Long after I returned to America, I could not get the image of the three women at their breakfast table out of my head. Like a baton in a relay race, they slipped a clue into my hands—I was both sister and stranger. I ran with it and began writing.

I gave the women names—Ferry, Bahar, Sahar—imagined their triumphs and heartaches, and created a connection between them and an outsider returning from exile to Tehran, her birthplace, who brings along her very American daughter. A cook by profession, I reconstructed the beautiful ruins of my city as a beloved café. To write about such a place was to enter troubled waters, for I did not want to mitigate the grim and gruesome side of the world beyond the café but bear witness to loss, explore how people behave in the shadow of fear and mayhem. Who turns a blind eye to the atrocities that erupt on the streets, and who shows courage? It so happened that my characters were open to a whole world of possibility. Café Leila became a place of refuge, where outsiders form a kind of family, where someone saves you a seat.

I knew when I put my face to the gap in the hospital gate that I would never see my childhood home again, but my return to Tehran was not a futile journey. *Daughter, what took you so long?* I imagined hearing from the very soil. It is my hope that as you read *The Last Days of Café Leila*, you will feel the same sense of place that I felt during the women's hour and experience belonging in a new and unexpected light.

FROM

## *The Last Days of Café Leila*

BY DONIA BIJAN



**N**oor stood at the sink with her sleeves rolled up peeling yellow potatoes and dropping them into a water bath. The long blade of her knife, sharpened without a scratch, gleamed on the chopping board. Her father believed that anything cut with a knife is tastier than mauling it in a food processor, so even in her modern San Francisco kitchen, she didn't own one and took special care of her knives. She liked to use her black cast-iron skillet to cook the onions with crumbled sage from the dried bouquets above her stove, cooking them in oil until they were quite tender before adding the sliced potatoes. Already the onions' sweetness wafted through the house, settling into the linens. She knew that her daughter would not like the pungent smell, so she closed her bedroom door and opened the tall windows to the cool morning air and the sound of a faraway lawnmower.

Most of her recipes came from her father, but Noor learned how to make the luscious potato cake from Nelson's mother. The recipe her mother-in-law had whispered into Noor's ear was the authentic one used by Nelson's great-grandmother. In its own unpretentious way, the Spanish Tortilla is an honest love omelet, and every bite must be suffused with fragrant olive oil—in this case, too much of a good thing is not a sin. Even when Noor was an amateur and the potatoes were sometimes raw, Nelson would say, "Oh my God! That was the best tortilla of my whole life!" Which of course wasn't true, but he was acknowledging the effort of peeling and slicing immense quantities of potatoes.

What she loved most about Spanish food was its lusty simplicity, so unlike the gastronomical somersaults of French cuisine or the complexity of the Persian food she grew up with. When she was little she could eat

pyramids of saffron rice and rich meat stews, but she now associated the colors and perfumes of her husband's native cuisine with their courtship, with paddleboats and honeymoons and champagne in silver buckets, with flamenco and candlelight and little fried sardines with sea salt by the water. Her postcards were menus, smudged and wine-stained, saved from their meals, addressed to herself and read carefully like romance manuals.

With just two hours to prepare a picnic, there would be no time to get her nails done before going to work. It seemed a waste of time when she could better spend that hour layering rows of cured black olives with roasted red peppers. There were still cucumbers and radishes to slice, strawberries to wash. She thought about how Nelson would point at each bowl like a giddy child and speculate with excitement on what the food would taste like and then enjoy it all a hundred times more than painted fingernails. And when would they ever be as eager to celebrate as now, as today, their sixteenth anniversary, on a ferry over to Angel Island at dusk? They saw so little of each other lately that her heart was set on this annual tradition, which coincided with the first days of spring, when they would break away from work to escape to the harbor, leaving their patients in the care of their colleagues.

"There we are," she said to herself. "I just have the lemon left." She cut a lemon into eighths and placed it with sprigs of cilantro on a blue butter dish from a set they were given as a wedding present, then rinsed the knife under hot water, drying it with a dish towel before placing it in the drawer. From the cupboard she took a wicker picnic basket and put it on the kitchen island to begin the careful assembly of silver, two china plates and crystal flutes, each item nestled between linen-covered tiers. No matter how hungry they were, there was a certain slowness to unpacking the basket, to unfurling their napkins and popping the champagne, that made the afternoon last longer, allowing them more time to tell each other stories they had kept to themselves until now. It was as if before Nelson she had eaten in the dark, and when he came into her life their meals became as companionable and good as grilling sausages and peppers over an open fire under the stars.

On the counter lay a note for her daughter that she would be home late, with instructions on how to heat the veggie lasagna when she returned from volleyball practice. Lily had only recently become a finicky eater, vowing not to swallow anything that could walk, fly, or swim, but Noor felt safe with



pasta. All that was left was to brew a thermos of black coffee and remove the tortilla from the mold before leaving for the hospital. She hummed and flitted about the kitchen like a moth in a kind of ecstasy, catching a glimpse of her flushed face in the glass oven door, her cheeks ablaze.

THE HOSPITAL BREAK ROOM was small and sparsely furnished with a watercolor painting and not much more than the necessities of a microwave and a refrigerator. Here the staff relished any indulgence, from party napkins and frosted cakes to the contents of their lunch boxes, which could be anything from barbecued chicken to carrot raisin salad—whatever added cheer to the drab decor and their long shifts. Thus they broke into wild applause with the appearance of flowers, especially from boyfriends and husbands.

The anniversary bouquet of red roses for Noor arrived just as she started her shift, and the nurses paused their lunchtime banter to tease her good-naturedly when she brought her flowers into the break room. Noor took the flowers to the sink to clip their stems. She rinsed a vase and filled it with cool water, then carefully cut the thick ends of the two dozen roses with surgical scissors before placing them in the vase on the nurses' table.

There was an outburst of sympathy when Noor read Nelson's note out loud: "*Mi vida*, can we postpone our picnic? I'm so sorry, I have a surgery this afternoon." This had never happened before. She said nothing and sat down with her arms wrapped around herself. It was good how disappointment slowed things down so she could ease back into the chair with her coffee and look out on the spray of roses, letting the chatter continue without her. Amy took her hand and squeezed it as if they were thinking the same thing, but Noor was thinking about the basket in the trunk of her car beneath a blue-and-white checked tablecloth. *What about all that food?* she thought. *There's no sense in wasting the tortilla; he has to eat after all.* She would drop it off for him after work. With that, she went to check on her patients, who looked at her kindly and with renewed relief as if she had been gone for weeks.

Nelson was an in-demand heart surgeon, though he rarely missed family occasions and even managed to coach Lily's soccer team. Noor would have walked to cardiology when her shift ended, but being on the other end of the compound, it was easier to drive rather than carry the food over. Her

eyes were focused on finding a parking space until they were drawn to a familiar shape near an unfamiliar car. Nelson, in pale blue scrubs, stood in the parking lot at arm's length of a nurse Noor met once at a staff Christmas party. He leaned forward to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and she smiled up at him. Noor had just pulled in, and without needing to see or hear more she knew the affection in this small gesture revealed everything between them. One glance told her what was lost and could not be mended. A little gasp of surprise escaped her lips.

Without thinking, she drove straight home and unpacked the picnic as if it had simply rained and there was a change of plans. She threw away the olives and the peppers, dumped the tortilla in the garbage, and poured the champagne down the drain. As she washed the Tupperware, she slipped her wedding ring off her soap-slippery finger and left it by the kitchen sink. Then, seeing the school bus across the street, she ran outside and startled Lily with a hug.

THE LAST DAYS OF CAFÉ LEILA

by Donia Bijan

ISBN 978-1-61620-585-0

On Sale April 2017

# *The Root of Apocalypse*

— AN ESSAY BY —

DAVID WILLIAMS

**I**would get a bit of a snicker whenever I'd tell friends what I was writing. "What kind of book is it?" they'd ask.

"Postapocalyptic Amish fiction," I'd say.

And there'd come that smile and the familiar shake of a head that seemed to be the politest way to note that I'm a little "touched."

But if you have a sense of who the Amish are and what the word *apocalypse* means, it becomes a little clearer.

I first seriously encountered Amish culture in my religious studies program at the University of Virginia and was fascinated by this remarkable, unique community. The Amish are primordial Baptists, the Protestant equivalent of one of those strange prehistoric fish you find in deep ocean waters. Since immigrating to the United States from Switzerland back in the 1860s, the lives of the Old Order Amish have remained remarkably static. In most communities, they still speak *Deitsch*, which isn't Dutch but a variant of old Swiss German. Because they've chosen to reject the world and live in simple community, they do not engage with most modern technology.

Daily life for the Amish today looks much like it did back in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It's plain, involving family farming and older, manual crafts. It all feels very much like the world of the Little House books, peculiarly transposed into our modern era. No cars, no lights, no motorboats, not a single luxury, as they sang on *Gilligan's Island*. This is how they have chosen to live, independent of our increasingly interconnected industrial society. They call all people who aren't Amish "the English." Sure, we may be Scottish or French or Korean or Guatemalan. But to the Amish, we are all English, an echo of their Germanic separation from their English-speaking neighbors.

The Amish world is governed by some very different principles than ours.

Three are key. There is *hochmut*, which describes human pride, arrogance, and selfishness. There is *demut*, which involves humility and humbleness. And there's *gelassenheit*, or nonviolent spiritual detachment. You do not grasp, or seek your own advancement. You maintain a gentle contentment with whatever lot you are given. The Amish see these principles as a way to live the apocalyptic life taught by Jesus, uncompromised by the distractions of our cluttered, grasping world.

Here is where our stories about the Amish and our stories of apocalypse come together. The word *apocalypse* does not mean destruction. ἀποκάλυψις means, in the Greek from which we received that word, an “unveiling,” a “making clear.” Apocalypses, as a genre, are about stripping away all of the fluff and pretense and getting down to what matters.

That is what draws us English to apocalyptic literature. We sense, somehow, that most of the madness of our modern lives is unnecessary, our stresses and rushing about all faintly superfluous. So we tell ourselves stories of what it would be like if we had to get back to basics, if we had to rebuild after something immense rocked our complex, delicate world.

It was reflection on our fragility that stirred the vision for my novel *When the English Fall*. Years ago, on a beautiful, warm autumn day, I went for my lunchtime walk, taking the time to allow my mind to wander. That morning, being both a pastor and an avid reader of things scientific, I'd encountered an article about the Carrington Event. The Carrington Event was the single largest solar storm in modern history. It was 1859, early in the industrial era, and an immense blast of charged particles from our sun plowed into the earth. It blew out telegraph systems, delivered electric shocks to people who touched metal objects, and caused auroras so brilliant in the continental United States that people came outside in the dead of night thinking the sun had risen.

If that happened now? It would be catastrophic, a crippling and potentially fatal blow to our technology-dependent civilization. What would the world look like after such a thing? Commerce would be strangled. Communications, silenced. I walked and reflected on the paradoxical frailty of our technological power, and suddenly another image came into my mind. It was a vignette, a fragment of a reverie, one that had come from another fallow moment.

I had been driving my family home from a trip to western Maryland, back from what we call “the house in the country.” The minivan was warm and quiet, the family lulled to sleep by the drone of the road. My mind was on autopilot, the familiar highway rolling by, and I was lost in a daydream. As we approached a perfect bucolic hillside, I visualized an Amish man and his daughter sitting there together, watching us drive by. I imagined the girl asking her father about us and the gentle conversation that might have followed. What would he tell her about us? About our differences? About our lives, in their wild rush of busyness and movement, as fleeting as mayflies? That little vignette hung in my mind, a seed of something, returning whenever we would pass that place in the road.

That lunchtime, as I walked and meditated, the two images connected.

The Amish community, untouched by a global calamity. Our society, a fragmented ruin, within which the Amish would carry on. Yet the Amish, for all of their efforts at separateness, would not be unaffected. The collateral damage of the technological collapse would spill out across those boundaries and touch their lives in ways that no willful separation could avoid.

What would the Amish do, I wondered, when we English fell?

And from that wondering, this apocalyptic story took form, told through the journal entries of that imagined Amish man on a hillside. It reveals, or so I hope, a little about who we are as human beings and how fundamentally connected we are no matter our beliefs—Amish, English, all of us.

FROM

## *When the English Fall*

BY DAVID WILLIAMS



September 6

**H**annah tells me it was not so good with Sadie today, not good at all. She did not sleep last night, that I know. And she was so distressed today, Hannah says. There were no seizures, but she is so unhappy.

She broods, and will only sleep, or talk in strange circles, as she has since it got worse.

But now it is only one thing she can seem to think about. She talks about the lights, and about the darkness. The skies are bright with angel wings, she will shout, suddenly. The English fall! The English fall! Again and again she says this. The skies filled with angel wings, about the English, and about the fall. We give her the medicine, and it quiets her, but the quiet passes more quickly.

I confess I am troubled, and I am praying much over it.

Sadie was always different. Before the doctors told us there was something wrong, before the seizures, she was different. She was born with a caul, which means nothing. I have seen calves born with cauls, and there is no magic I can see in them. They get eaten, just like all of the other calves. Their jerky tastes no different from regular jerky. But sometimes the old women still talk, Hannah tells me.

The angel's touch, some said she had. And the folk still remember what she said about Bishop Beiler, before even the first signs of the cancer. And about the Hostetler girl. And about that calf. It was strange, and Bishop Schrock had many talks with me about the whisperings that should not be part of the order.

“There is no Christ in this,” he said. “This seems the Devil’s work,” he said.

I nodded, but told him she was a good girl, because she was, even if she did say strange things. I felt anger, too, for Bishop Schrock can be a hard man. Of the bishops in this district, his heart turns most quickly to discipline. But prayer and more prayer returned my heart to the grace of Christ.

And now she moans in the night, and I hear her whisper. Every night, every night for a month, as I read back.

And every night, it is the same thing.

The angel wings, and the sky, and the English. And the fall.

Though she is my little girl, barely more than a child, the hairs rise on my arms as I write this. It is just a sickness, I say to my soul. Just a sickness of the mind.

But I do not believe myself when I say it. I cannot but worry that something bad will happen.

## September 16

This early morning, after the milking, Jacob and I slaughtered a pig, the big one. Much of the morning was cutting and preparing, and setting the meat into the freezer.

There will be more, but it was the whole work of our morning. It took longer than anticipated, and our breakfast was no longer warm, but Hannah was forgiving, even as she chided us.

After breakfast, we finished building the last of the order. Mike will be pleased. I sent Jacob to the community phone, so that we could tell Mike.

Hannah prepared simple food, slaw and some meat pies, and Sadie helped, as the Fishers were to come in the late afternoon. Joseph and Rachel and their five, plus Rachel pregnant again, they have been blessed and fruitful. And they are still not old. There will be more children, a larger family.

Their oldest, also Rachel, is fourteen just like our Sadie, then Fritz and Hosheah, then Mariam, then Micah.

It was a lively afternoon. The Fishers came in their wagon and a buggy, and Jacob was at once off with the boys to play. Sadie was calm, and she and Rachel went to talking and walking for a while, as Hannah and the older Rachel rested with lemonade before cooking for the evening.

Joseph and I sat, and we talked. He was worried about the Johansons, who operate the 375 acres just to the south of his own. They had always had problems, and always been the sort of family that struggles, even in the good times when the harvest was good and the money was plentiful. Even the best blessings of Providence cannot turn a soul from sorrow if it has set itself down that path.

But with the terrible weather, and the power outages, and the trouble, they were suffering. The hot and dry summer stunted their corn, and all they grew was corn. When the fierce rains began again, their fields were much damaged. Some rains, they can handle, but two or three inches an hour?

Joseph shook his head as he spoke. The Johansons had seen almost no yield this year. The herbicide-treated soil had no quackgrass, nothing to hold it, and the slight incline of much of that property meant that much corn and soil were washed away. I had seen it, the washes cutting across what had been good earth.

The Johansons also had several chicken coops, long flat structures with hens by the tens of thousands, all packed into crates. That had been a good cash yield, from one of the big companies that puts chicken into the stores in the cities. But then the power failed midsummer, not one of the storm outages, but when one power company wouldn't provide to another. The fans failed, and the coops became ovens. Most of the hens died.

Mr. Johanson was beside himself, deep in debt to the bank, and the loans and loan guarantees and payments from the government that used to tide English farmers over no longer came through. Something about China, and austerity measures. Mike has told me about these things, too.

Joseph was worried, because his neighbor had taken to drinking more and more. Two nights before, there had been angry shouting in the distance. It was just drunkenness and rage, as he stumbled through the fields shouting with a bottle in his hand, cursing uselessly at his own fields, blasting the sun-blasted earth with his hate. The police came, called by another neighbor. Very sad thing, we both thought.

So we prayed together for his neighbor, for the family. And then we ate, and gave thanks. It was good, to be together. A blessing.



I WAS LOOKING OUT ACROSS our little farm, in the halfdarkness of the night, and giving thanks for the blessing we had been given, when she was suddenly by my side without my knowing it. Like a wraith, she moves sometimes, my Sadie.

I asked her how she had enjoyed her time with Rachel, and she smiled and said it was good to see her.

She looked at the night sky, dimming at the cool of day. She said that the angels were coming soon. The sky will be filled with their wings. She was not upset, as she had been before. There was no seizure. She was very calm. But she was still saying it.

“We will be all right, when they come,” she said. “But it will not be easy, Dadi.”

And then she went inside. “It’s late, Dadi,” she called to me. “Come in.”

## September 22

And on the third night, the angels came and filled the heavens.

It began in early evening, as I watched, sitting with Sadie again, just as she had asked.

It was just darkening, the last colors of the sun vanishing, the first stars showing, the light of the town brightening. It had been a beautiful sunset.

And then they came. A flicker here, and a flicker there, color danced in the sky. Then sheets of it, brighter and brighter, dancing wild sheets cast across the skies, beautiful purples and blues and pinks.

The sky became full of them, dancing, waving, and pulsing. They would fade a little, and strengthen, and then grow stronger and stronger.

So beautiful. But terrible. What was this? Angels? It was not as I would have thought. So bright and silent. I do not know. I do not yet know.

Hannah came, and Jacob, and we watched together, as the wings of angels lit the skies, and the earth glowed under the warm light. Jacob laughed and pointed and jumped around at the joy of it.

Then it grew so bright that it was brighter than midnight under a full moon, bright enough to see my hand, to see the house. Angel wings dipped, radiant with color, and touched the earth. There was a feeling of strangeness in the air, I do not know what it was, but the hairs on my arm rose.

From fear, perhaps, because it was strange, but also because the air seemed sharp with . . . something. I do not know. But the smell changed.

“Dadi, it’s so bright, what is that smell?” asked Jacob, suddenly stilled, his voice filled with awe and alarm. Hannah pulled in close, but Sadie stood separate, looking up, rocking back and forth a little.

It went on, radiant and terrible and beautiful. We stood silent.

And then Jacob said, “Dadi, look, there are no lights in the town now,” he said, “and there are no lights on the road.”

It was true. And he was excited and frightened, and looking everywhere and talking, and then he pointed up.

“Look at the plane,” he called out, and there it was, an airplane, a big one. It was not where the planes normally fly, high and moving north or south. The silhouette was low and large. There were no lights on it, or in it, just the beautiful light dancing on and behind it.

It was sideways. It was coming down.

I could see both wings, bent back dark like a broken cross, and it was floating downward, downward, very slow. It was very wrong, I began to pray.

The plane moved down, southward, like a dark, windblown leaf against the color-splashed sky. We lost it to view behind the trees.

And then there was a faint flash, and a few seconds later, a crump like a short peal of thunder.

“Oh blessed Jesus, all those people,” said Hannah, and she began to pray softly and in earnest, her whispered prayers melding with mine.

Still, the skies danced, so bright, so silent.

And a few seconds later, another flash, to the north. And a minute later, another to the southwest.

Sadie turned to us, and her eyes were huge and wet with tears.

“The English fall,” she said.

And then she went inside, away from the light that filled the sky over the darkened earth.

#### WHEN THE ENGLISH FALL

by David Williams

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# *A Better Life*

— AN ESSAY BY —

LISA KO

**I** had been working on my first novel, *The Leavers*, for a little over a year when I cashed in a decade's worth of airline miles and flew from New York City to Fuzhou, China. I checked into a hotel and spent a week wandering the city by myself, hoping to spark some insight into my characters.

I'm ethnically Chinese but have zero personal connection to China. My parents were born and raised in the Philippines; they arrived in the United States shortly after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which reversed nearly a century of racist quotas that effectively prohibited immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean while allowing European immigrants to enter the country legally. Timing enabled me to be born in New York, to grow up middle class and "legal" in America. My parents and I lived in a nearly all-white suburb and took regular trips to Manhattan Chinatown for groceries, but we felt like we didn't belong there either, among more recent immigrants. "You're lucky," my parents said, and I knew I was supposed to be grateful for something, but *lucky* also felt like a warning—how precarious status could be.

I couldn't read, understand, or speak Chinese. In Fuzhou, shop owners and cab drivers eyeballed me and asked, "What kind of person are you?" when I stammered nonsensically at them. I didn't blame them. Each night, I got lost on my way back to my hotel. As I walked, I thought of the many Fuzhounese immigrants who had moved to New York. Unlike many of them, I had the privilege of a US passport, the freedom of mobility.

When I started writing *The Leavers* in 2009, I had a folder stuffed with newspaper clippings about immigrant women and their children. I was fascinated by how these women were represented in mainstream media, as tragic victims or evil invaders. And I was furious at the for-profit detention

facilities—outsourced to private prison corporations and functioning, in many ways, as above the law—that jailed hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants.

I was drawn to stories of individual mothers, fathers, and children. There was Xiu Ping Jiang, an undocumented immigrant from Fuzhou who'd been stopped by immigration agents while taking a bus from New York City to Florida. When a *New York Times* reporter found her, Jiang had been held in an immigration detention jail for over a year, often in solitary confinement. What struck me the most was that she had tried to bring her eight-year-old son into the United States from Canada, but he was caught by officials and adopted by a Canadian family.

There was Cirila Baltazar Cruz, a Mexican immigrant discharged from a Mississippi hospital after giving birth, but without her baby. The baby had been declared neglected because Cruz had failed to learn English, and a court gave custody to an American couple. There were Jack and Casey He, Chinese immigrants who'd signed papers for temporary foster care for their baby daughter, Anna Mae, after Jack lost his job. But Anna's foster parents, the Bakers, refused to give her back and wanted to adopt her. A Tennessee judge terminated the Hes' parental rights, the Bakers' lawyer arguing that the Hes were unfit parents, and Anna would have a better life in the United States: "What kind of quality of life is the child going to have in China?" But no one asked what kind of life the child would have in the United States, separated from her family.

I based my character Polly, very loosely, on Xiu Ping Jiang. Then I gave her an eleven-year-old son, Deming; a home in the Bronx; a job at a nail salon. One morning she leaves for work and never comes home. Polly's voice, her hustle, her journey—she pays \$50,000 to be smuggled into the United States in a box—came to me in a flash. But by the time I traveled to Fuzhou, her narrative had been stalled for months. I was so worried about misrepresenting China that I was avoiding writing critical chapters that took place there.

ON MY NEXT TO LAST DAY in Fuzhou, I decided to venture out of the city, boarding the first bus that came past my hotel. An hour later, I got off

at the last stop and realized I had arrived in the town on which I'd based Polly's village. Here were the half-constructed mansions Polly passed on her daily walks. Here was the snack vendor, the school, the market.

Back in New York, I used the details from my trip to propel new chapters of my novel, adding Polly's life into the buildings I had seen, the buses I had ridden. Yet I kept returning to the children in the news clippings, the ones separated from their mothers and adopted by Americans. Why did these mothers have to be deported while the children stayed behind? Why were wealthy white American parents deemed "fit" while immigrant parents who wanted to raise their own children were deemed "unfit"? And what, exactly, constituted a better life? The adoptive parents in these cases seemed to believe that they were—that America was—entitled to these children. Anna Mae He's foster mother, Louise Baker, said, "If [Anna's mother] truly loved her daughter, she would leave her with us."

Gradually, I realized the crux of my novel lay not just in Polly but also in Polly's son, Deming. I needed to tell both stories. I decided to intersperse Deming's story of being adopted by a white couple and moved upstate with Polly's story of why she left China, her early years in New York, and what happens after her separation from him. At twenty-one, ten years after his mother's disappearance, Deming moves back to New York City and starts looking for Polly. I won't spoil it for you—you'll have to read the novel to see if he finds her—but it's Deming's search for his mother that is the heart of *The Leavers*.

After being profiled in the *Times*, Xiu Ping Jiang was released from prison and later received asylum. She was lucky. Nearly a quarter of the 316,000 immigrants deported from the United States in 2014 were parents of children who were US citizens, and there are currently more than 15,000 children in foster care whose parents have been deported or are being imprisoned indefinitely. *The Leavers* is my effort to go beyond the news articles, using real-life details as a template to build from, not to adhere to. It's the story behind the story, a tribute to sweat, heart, and grind. But it's really the story of one mother and her son—what brings them together and takes them apart.

FROM

## *The Leavers*

BY LISA KO



**T**he day before Deming Guo saw his mother for the last time, she surprised him at school. A navy blue hat sat low on her forehead, scarf around her neck like a big brown snake. “What are you waiting for, Kid? It’s cold out.”

He stood in the doorway of PS 33 as she zipped his coat so hard the collar pinched. “Did you get off work early?” It was four thirty, already dark, but she didn’t usually leave the nail salon until six.

They spoke, as always, in Fuzhounese. “Short shift. Michael said you had to stay late to get help on an assignment.” Her eyes narrowed behind her glasses, and he couldn’t tell if she bought it or not. Teachers didn’t call your mom when you got detention, only gave a form you had to return with a signature, which he forged. Michael, who never got detention, had left after eighth period, and Deming wanted to get back home with him, in front of the television, where, in the safety of a laugh track, he didn’t have to worry about letting anyone down.

Snow fell like clots of wet laundry. Deming and his mother walked up Jerome Avenue. In the back of a concrete courtyard three older boys were passing a blunt, coats unzipped, wearing neither backpacks nor hats, sweet smoke and slow laughter warming the thin February air. “I don’t want you to be like that,” she said. “I don’t want you to be like me. I didn’t even finish eighth grade.”

What a sweet idea, not finishing eighth grade. He could barely finish fifth. His teachers said it was an issue of focus, of not applying himself. Yet when he tripped Travis Bhopa in math class Deming had been as shocked as Travis was. “I’ll come to your school tomorrow,” his mother said, “talk to

your teacher about that assignment.” He kept his arm against his mother’s, loved the scratchy sound of their jackets rubbing together. She wasn’t one of those TV moms, always hugging their kids or watching them with bemused smiles, but insisted on holding his hand when they crossed a busy street. Inside her gloves her hands were red and scraped, the skin angry and peeling, and every night before she went to sleep she rubbed a thick lotion onto her fingers and winced. Once he asked if it made them hurt less. She said only for a little while, and he wished there was a special lotion that could make new skin grow, a pair of superpower gloves.

Short and blocky, she wore loose jeans—never had he seen her in a dress—and her voice was so loud that when she called his name dogs would bark and other kids jerked around. When she saw his last report card he thought her shouting would set off the car alarms four stories below. But her laughter was as loud as her shouting, and there was no better, more gratifying sound than when she slapped her knee and cackled at something silly. She laughed at things that weren’t meant to be funny, like TV dramas and the swollen orchestral soundtracks that accompanied them, or, better yet, at things Deming said, like when he nailed the way their neighbor Tommie always went, “Not-bad-not-bad-not-bad” when they passed him in the stairwell, an automatic response to a “Hello-how-are-you” that hadn’t yet been issued. Or the time she’d asked, flipping through TV stations, “*Dancing with the Stars* isn’t on?” and he had excavated Michael’s old paper mobile of the solar system and waltzed with it through the living room as she clapped. It was almost as good as getting cheered on by his friends.

When he had lived in Minjiang with his grandfather, Deming’s mother had explored New York by herself. There was a restlessness to her, an inability to be still or settled. She jiggled her legs, bounced her knees, cracked her knuckles, twirled her thumbs. She hated being cooped up in the apartment on a sunny day, paced the rooms from wall to wall to wall, a cigarette dangling from her mouth. “Who wants to go for a walk?” she would say. Her boyfriend Leon would tell her to relax, sit down. “Sit down? We’ve been sitting all day!” Deming would want to stay on the couch with Michael, but he couldn’t say no to her and they’d go out, no family but each other. He would have her to himself, an ambling walk in the park or along the river, making up stories about who lived in the apartments they saw

from the outside—a family named Smith, five kids, father dead, mother addicted to bagels, he speculated the day they went to the Upper East Side. “To bagels?” she said. “What flavor bagel?” “Everything bagels,” he said, which made her giggle harder, until they were both bent over on Madison Avenue, laughing so hard no sounds were coming out, and his stomach hurt but he couldn’t stop laughing, old white people giving them stink eye for stopping in the middle of the sidewalk. Deming and his mother loved everything bagels, the sheer balls of it, the New York audacity that a bagel could proclaim to be everything, even if it was only topped with sesame seeds and poppy seeds and salt.

A bus lumbered past, spraying slush. The WALK sign flashed on. “You know what I did today?” his mother said. “One lady, she had a callus the size of your nose on her heel. I had to scrape all that dead skin off. It took forever. And her tip was shit. You’ll never do that, if you’re careful.”

He dreaded this familiar refrain. His mother could curse, but the one time he’d let *motherfucker* bounce out in front of her, loving the way the syllables got meatbally in his mouth, she had slapped his arm and said he was better than that. Now he silently said the word to himself as he walked, one syllable per footstep.

“Did you think that when I was growing up, a small girl your age, I thought: hey, one day, I’m going to come all the way to New York so I can pick gao gao out of a stranger’s toe? That was not my plan.”

Always be prepared, she liked to say. Never rely on anyone else to give you things you could get yourself. She despised laziness, softness, people who were weak. She had few friends, but was true to the ones she had. She could hold a fierce grudge, would walk an extra three blocks to another grocery store because, two years ago, a cashier at the one around the corner had smirked at her lousy English. It was lousy, Deming agreed.

“Take Leon, for instance. He look okay to you?”

“Leon’s always okay.”

“His back’s screwed up. His shoulders are busted. Men don’t work in nail salons. You don’t finish school, you end up cutting meat like Leon, arthritis by the time you’re thirty-five.”

It seemed disloyal to talk like this about Yi Ba Leon, who was so strong he’d do one-arm push-ups for Deming and Michael and their friends, let



them punch him in the gut for kicks, though Deming stopped short of punching as hard as he could. “Do it again,” Leon would say. “You call that a punch? That’s a handshake. Even if Leon wasn’t his real father—on this topic, his mother was so tightlipped that all he knew about the man was that he’d never been around—he made Deming proud. If he could grow up to be like any man, he wanted to be like Leon, or the guy who played the saxophone in the subway station, surrounded by people as his fingers danced and his chest heaved and the tunnel filled with flashes of purples and oranges. Oh, to be loved like that!

Fordham Road was unusually quiet in the snow. Ice covered the sidewalk in front of an abandoned building, a reddish piece of gum clinging to it like a lonely pepperoni atop a frozen pizza. “This winter is never-ending,” Deming’s mother said, and they gripped each other’s arms for balance as they made their way across the sidewalk. “Don’t you want to get out of here, go somewhere warm?”

“It’s warm at home.” In their apartment, if they could just get there, the heat was blasting. Some days they even wore T-shirts inside.

His mother scowled. “I was the first girl in my village to go to the provincial capital. I made it all the way to New York. I was supposed to travel the world.”

“But then.”

“But then I had you. Then I met Leon. You’re my home now.” They started up the hill on University Avenue. “We’re moving.”

He stopped in a slush puddle. “What? Where?”

“Florida. I got a new job at a restaurant. It’s near this Disney World. I’ll take you there.” She grinned at him like she was expecting a grin back.

“Is Yi Ba Leon coming?”

She pulled him away from the puddle. “Of course.”

“What about Michael and Vivian?”

“They’ll join us later.”

“When?”

“The job starts soon. In a week or two.”

“A week? I have school.”

“Since when do you love school so much?”

“But I have friends.” Travis Bhopa had been calling Michael and Deming cockroaches for months, and the impulse to stick a foot out as he lumbered

down the aisle was brilliant, spontaneous, the look on Travis's face one of disbelief, the sound of Travis's body going down an oozy plop. Michael and their friends had high-fived him. *Badass, Deming!* Detention had been worth it.

They stood in front of the bodega. "You're going to go to a good school. The new job is going to pay good money. We'll live in a quiet town."

Her voice was a trumpet, her words sharp triangles. Deming remembered the years without her, the silent house on 3 Alley with Yi Gong, and saw a street so quiet he could only hear himself blink. "I'm not going."

"I'm your mother. You have to go with me."

The bodega door slammed shut. Mrs. Johnson, who lived in their building, walked out with two plastic bags.

"You weren't with me when I was in China," he said.

"Yi Gong was with you then. I was working so I could save money to have you here. It's different now."

He removed his hand from hers. "Different how?"

"You'll love Florida. You'll have a big house and your own room."

"I don't want my own room. I want Michael there."

"You've moved before. It wasn't so hard, was it?"

The light had changed, but Mrs. Johnson remained on their side of the street, watching them. University Avenue wasn't Chinatown, where they had lived before moving in with Leon in the Bronx. There were no other Fuzhounese families on their block, and sometimes people looked at them like their language had come out of the drain.

Deming answered in English. "I'm not going. Leave me alone."

She raised her hand. He jolted back as she lunged forward. Then she hugged him, the snowy front of her jacket brushing against his cheek, his nose pressing into her chest. He could hear her heartbeat through the layers of clothing, thumping and determined, and before he could relax he forced himself to wriggle out of her arms and race up the block, backpack bumping against his spine. She clomped after him in her plastic boots, hooting as she slid across the sidewalk.

#### THE LEAVERS

by Lisa Ko

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# *The Girl on the Raft*

— AN ESSAY BY —

BILL ROORBACH

**H**ere's a game for readers of *The Girl of the Lake*: find the girl of the lake in each of the stories. I didn't set the puzzle on purpose—these stories were written over the course of ten years with no conscious reference to one another—but when the title story gave its title to the book, something clicked.

I realized that in one form or another, that girl of the lake (call her woman) is in every story. And in all of my novels, all of my nonfiction books, too.

Water and all.

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, midway through the sweet miseries of junior high, my family took a week at Newfound Lake in New Hampshire, where old friends of my parents' had decided to gather. My older brother brought his girlfriend, and the two of them made me sick with their cooing and billing and walking off together into the forested fairylands behind the cluster of cottages that shared a rocky beach, that crystal water lapping the shore, mountains distant, reflected. My younger siblings had their own worlds, too, buckets and shovels and sand castles. My only respite was a dented old Grumman canoe, that and the communal raft that floated so placidly far out there in the sun—too much shade shoreward, huge red oaks. This would be around 1965. I never had a bathing suit but cutoff jeans that would stay wet for hours. I'd swim out to the raft and lie there daydreaming, the raft of no interest to the adults—the adults gathered in lawn chairs and roared with laughter, shouted instructions to the new swimmers, offered deviled eggs. Or I'd paddle the canoe out and tie it to the raft such that if adults started shouting about everyone, time for a swim, I could climb in it and paddle off and around the point and out of sight, just bob there in perfect adolescent solitude.

One hot morning there was a girl on the raft. She lay on her back with her hands behind her head and her feet crossed at the ankles, hair blonder than blond, bathing suit just a shade pinker than her skin, a tattered high-waisted two-piece from an earlier era: bikinis hadn't made it to inland New Hampshire, not yet. I paddled past her in the Grumman, silently, the way I'd learned at Boy Scout camp in case there were Nazi U-boats below. I didn't look, but somehow I saw her freckles, her flat chest, her dreams behind closed eyes, all very appealing: she was twelve, too, something you just knew.

I paddled around the point all disturbed by her, and doubly disturbed by being disturbed at all, floated along an undeveloped part of the shore, a loon my only company, big, confident bird diving, coming back up, diving, coming back up. I turned it into a game, guessed where I'd see him next. I decided it would be easy to say hi to the girl, made a resolution.

I paddled back, but she was gone from the raft.

The next morning she was there again, same bathing suit, same posture, ankles crossed the other way, all of her pinker yet. We didn't know about sunscreen then, just Sea and Ski tanning lotion, that citrusy fragrance, which I caught as I secretly paddled past. I kept going, too shy to hail her, paddled around the point to visit my loon. On the way back, the girl was still there. She'd turned onto her tummy. Again I'd made a resolution, but this time I managed to speak: "Hi."

She started, rolled to face the interloper, shielding her eyes from the sun. She didn't say hi, didn't say anything, but pursed her lips in a kind of smile, maybe the best she could do. What I felt just then I hadn't ever felt before.

The next morning I played horseshoes with the little kids and watched my brother walk off with his girl—they'd found a pond of their own at the end of a long trail and would come back in the late afternoon, leaves and pine needles in their hair. Lunch with the grown-ups—Mr. Lindblad made the best grilled cheese.

I never did see which cottage she came from but then there she was on the raft, lying on her back, her ankles crossed as always, maybe getting a little browner than pink, seeming longer, too, as if she were growing.

The littler kids had commandeered the canoe and were swamping it, the greatest game in the world, so I'd formerly thought, turning the canoe belly

up and swimming under it, making echo-y imprecations under there. Mr. Northrup had asked me to watch them, so that's what I did, an eye to the raft—the girl out there, the girl out there, the girl out there, and then, when I wasn't looking, she disappeared, was gone.

The next two days, rain, which meant Monopoly and Clue and various card games and brownies and the adults and the older teens going off in cars and leaving me in charge. The raft tugged at its mooring in the wind. The Northrups were in Cottage A, my family in Cottage B, the Lindblads in Cottage C. Over a rocky promontory was Cottage D, the only possibility. I watched it in the rain through our big windows but never saw anything happening there.

Sun again. And the girl was on the raft, ankles crossed, skin truly brown now, hair, if possible, lighter, doubtless freckles having spread. I hurried to organize the younger kids into landward games and paddled out to the raft.

“Hi,” I said, and climbed on, an awkward proposition. She shielded her eyes, looked at me long, didn't say a word, just that tight smile, maybe a notch more friendly. I lay on my back as far from her as the raft would permit, but still within an intimate space. She turned on her side, and so I did, too, and we were facing one another, seeing one another, sweetest long gaze, and that feeling I'd had intensified to excruciating proportions. She lay back again, extended a hand toward me, and so I lay back and extended mine such that our fingertips were no more than a foot apart. And we day-dreamed in tandem, I was sure of it. She was humming something, very happily humming something. Maybe the Beatles. Isn't it good, Norwegian wood. After a long and dreamy half hour in the hot sun I felt the raft bob and let my eyes crack open only to spy her getting ready to dive, perfect form, her old suit sagging in the bottom. And then she did dive, and the raft spun, and the canoe clonged against it. She swam perfectly to shore, waded up out of the water, turned back to look at me, this long moment. I hurried to untie the canoe, climbed into it, but in those seconds she'd gone utterly missing. She'd never said a word.

I thought about her for years, made it something of a ghost story in my head, though no doubt there was an explanation.

Helping my fantasy along, Mr. Northrup said there was no one in Cottage D, hadn't been all summer. There'd been some kind of family tragedy

over there. He wasn't clearer about it than that—there were little children around. There was me, too, and you just didn't talk that way around youngsters, even if they were twelve. No doubt other folks and families had access to the raft, to the beach. No doubt, yes, a sensible, everyday kind of explanation. But I turned my powerful emotion into a story I only told myself, embellished for myself, a much better story than mere regret: my girl was a spirit.

I guess I wrote "The Girl of the Lake" to tell myself that ghost story again, a total transmutation, nothing left of the original, slight event, unconscious association, all bobbing on a raft. And I wrote the rest of this collection to tell more of those stories, to call up the shades of other girls and women (and boys and men, of course) and the lakes and oceans, rivers and seas, and simple human tides that give me all my stories, really.

FROM

## *The Girl of the Lake*

BY BILL ROORBACH



### From “The Fall”

**H**ow’s your pack?” Jean called forward.  
“Heavy,” Timothy said. He could say just the one word *heavy* in such an ironic way that it meant everything about the little argument they’d had last night and the bigger one this morning, and about all her complaining, and yet how good she suddenly felt, even climbing up the big rocks here. Looming in the woods above them was a gargantuan boulder, yellow where all the rock around them was gray, a glacial erratic, Jean knew from a half-forgotten geology class, a mammoth presence, dragged by the ancient glacier all the way from Vermont, likely, cracked magnificently along the way, fallen into two pieces you wanted to push back together. “That is a glacial erratic,” Jean called forward. Timothy said nothing, hiked on, though she knew he had heard her by the brief and infinitesimal tightening of his neck.

Well, altogether she had preferred art history in any case: Bonnard, Kandinsky, Cézanne, Max Planck, Otto someone, Courbet, Delacroix, Manet: why were they all men? Someone had complained and Professor Della Sessa had agreed, stopped his own class, rewritten his own syllabus in front of them, come back the next week with slides from Käthe Kolwitz, Vanessa Bell, Suzanne Valadon, Mary Cassatt, Romaine Brooks, Natalia Goncharova. He’d stopped the class! Of course it was all planned, to make his point, a great point about the place of women not so much in art but in art history. He was a beautiful man. Jean missed her college days. Her publishing job was basically secretarial, second assistant to the curator of the image bank at Time Warner. At least it was about art.

They stopped a little higher, sat on a kind of wide shelf of cool, dry granite, pulled the top layer out of Jean's pack, ate a lunch of chicken roll-ups she'd made this morning, two carrots each (Timothy had peeled them unnecessarily, making fun of Uncle Bud's garden—its very existence when there were grocery stores), and then two big pieces of the carrot cake she'd made for Uncle Bud—carrots were the theme—a quart of water between them (which would be altogether nearly three pounds less for her to carry).

"Here's to Drunkel Bud," Timothy said.

Then he was silent, merely ate. He was often silent. He was twenty-five, too. Jean knew he was thinking and not to interrupt. He'd listen if she said something—but if she did talk, then he wouldn't say whatever was coming, whatever bit of conversation he was brewing up—this was the silence before the talk, and she loved to hear him talk, loved him, in fact, from the bottom of her shoes, despite what Uncle Bud had said, late (Timothy already reading in bed), poor, unshaven Uncle Bud slurring his whispered words, eyes liquid, but so full of warmest caring and gentle humor: "You'll marry him and stay with him like your mother stays with your fucked-up father, even not loving him, thirty years to realize it's so, yes, Jean-Jean, it's so for her as for you, and she still can't shake him, just lies down for him, bed of nails. Nothing can stop you, I know. No, no, I know it's true, Jean-Jean. No, no, I'm right, no use to argue: it's misery you're courting, since that's all you've known."

Jameson Irish whiskey speaking.

There in the forest, waiting for Timothy to speak, Jean finished her sandwich and repeated to herself what she had whispered back to Uncle Bud (who had finally let her talk, listened unbelieving): she loved Timothy and felt just wonderful about him. And it was true—she could hardly remember what they'd argued about last night when she'd come to bed, what they'd argued about this morning (or ever, for that matter), and wanted to be his wife.

Suddenly Timothy spoke: "It's hard to imagine," he said. "Hard to think of ourselves like, fifty years old, like Uncle Bud, huh, isn't it? That such a thing could happen? I mean, what if it's just a kind of joke they play on younger people, just to make 'em feel bad—right?—like, they know goddamn well that we're going to be always just like this, more or less like



this—I mean, there are young people, which is one unchanging species, and then there are old people, which is another—and the old-people species have as a kind of group joke that they pretend it’s all one-in-the-same species—that we young ones are on a long trip that leads to their sorry-ass state.”

Jean laughed for him and he smiled and that melted Jean, that very handsome smile. She looked in his eyes and said, “But, Herr Doktor, I distinctly remember being younger. I’m not sure you’ve included all the evidence here.” Two years and they had this whole kind of private vaudeville act together, where she played graduate student and he played crazy brilliant professor. She really, really wanted to go to grad school, art history, to follow her favorite prof to his new position in Paris—he’d emailed her twice inviting her to apply—but that would have to wait.

“Well, right—but we’re the kind that go from zero to about twenty-six and just hover there, always almost twenty-six, like someone in a book—always the same age every time you read it. We’re the somewhere-under-twenty-six-always species.”

“What about a book where the characters grow old and die? I can name a few.”

“Written by the Olds! Self-serving tripe! What on earth garbage have you been reading?” Even being funny he sounded harsh, like the joke was on her.

“I don’t read trash,” she said, trying to keep the tone of high comedy, failing.

He wasn’t listening anyway, just shuffled through the side pocket of his pack, eventually tugged out his tiny jar of insane pot. Methodically he rolled a parsimonious and perfectly cylindrical joint, then lit it, one of their twelve waterproof matches, and they had two tiny hard-sucked puffs each.

Coughing a little, trying to suppress it, trying to rescue the moment, Jean said, “So we’re the species that gets only so old. So I’ll get to catch up to you, yes?” She was three months younger than Timothy.

He didn’t rejoin.

The feeling of the pot overtook her immediately. She knew he’d have little more to say for a while. No one was around them in the woods, so Jean (in love) put her ear on Timothy’s chest to listen to his heart, and he leaned

back against the rock and mulled his important thoughts while she undid his blue jeans just partly, just enough to get her hand in and hold his dumb, dependable willy, which rose tenderly to greet her grip. This, she liked. And he liked it, too, and tucked a hand back of her blue jeans and kind of hefted her on top of him for a long kiss, and on the moss there on the side of the faint trail they gradually got their pants down and wriggled to get his jacket on the rock beneath them without taking their hiking boots off, even, and had a very brief grind 'em (as he liked to call it—she didn't mind so much anymore) and then some kissing, which showed that he was in a good mood, too, a very lot of kissing, as when they first met and would make love for hours in her old sublet, a great apartment in the Village now long gone, pretty white walls with art, and she couldn't orgasm at all, he made her so nervous, and if she brought it up (she believed in communication) he just said that *orgasm* was not a verb. Here in the woods and more firmly in herself she surprised herself coming quickly, if not too hard (coming was his word), *orgasming* to his overeager fingers while they kissed. Something about the forest made it easy and different, also that he bothered.

“You are a glacial erratic,” he said.

“That is an insult, Doktor,” she said, quite pleased that he'd been listening earlier, just saving it up. He'd know what a glacial erratic was, knew a lot about the world and the woods. They cleaned themselves up some with a paper towel that she dutifully stored in a baggie and pulled their pants up and hefted their packs. She could feel that hers was lighter.

THE GIRL OF THE LAKE

by Bill Roorbach

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# *A Young Girl in a Forgotten War*

— AN ESSAY BY —

DAVE BOLING

**A** story doesn't mature for me until I uncover what's at its heart. In the early stages, I can sketch rough plot points and shape the still-soft bones of the characters. But the work seems dully clerical until I arrive at a crystalized nugget of emotion that gives fire and fuel to the novel.

That process took me a while in the production of *The Lost History of Stars*. I wrote two full versions in succession that were thick with research and drama but too lean on humanity. It wasn't until I trashed a couple years' work that I realized the story wasn't about the political mechanics of war. It was about a young country girl; it was about the forgotten victims of every war.

At that point, I surrendered the narration of the book to the character who could breathe life into it: an adolescent girl named Aletta Venter.

Aging from twelve to fourteen in the book, Aletta has the audacity to believe she can carve out bits of normalcy while imprisoned in a British concentration camp in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). She grows, adapts, and takes joy in her small daily insurgences. When facing a lack of paper for her journal, she steals every copy of the posted camp rules she can find. Because, as she reasons, among the many rules imposed by the Brits, none forbids the stealing of the rules.

When she befriends a more worldly city girl, Aletta begs her to decode the secret lives of boys. And Aletta overcomes her hatred for the British invaders when she meets a teenage British guard, as dispirited as any of the prisoners, who gives her the rare gift of a little positive attention.

To Aletta, imprisonment is a state of mind. She sneaks from her tent in the middle of the night to study the free-roaming stars, as she so often did at home with her grandfather. When confined to her small tent, she withdraws into her imagination to execute grand escapes. She may lie on a dirt

floor within guarded fences in the middle of the burned-out veld, but in her mind is the universe—a more welcoming place. So she wages her tiny war against the British Empire with her only weapons: hope and imagination.

It took several rewrites, but Aletta finally convinced me she could tell this story. She wanted to be a writer, so I gave her the chance. She made me wither at the thought of what terrible things humans can do to each other, and marvel at the steel some people still have inside when almost everything else has been pared away.

She became my hero.

ONE OF THE ORIGINAL impetuses for *The Lost History of Stars* was that my grandfather had been some manner of camp guard in the British Army during the Boer War. I realized after just a little bit of research that this war has been largely forgotten by most of the world, even though it was a blueprint for the warfare and cruelty to come later in the twentieth century.

With the Boer men and boys (ages eight to eighty) in commandos out on the veld, the British burned the Boer farms and forced the displaced women and children into hastily constructed concentration camps. In the face of terrible sanitation, overcrowding, and lack of food and medical services, twenty-seven thousand women and children died in the camps, a total nearly ten times greater than the number of deaths of soldiers in combat on both sides. It was, truly, a war against children.

Online, I discovered a photo of a terribly sick young girl in a camp, Lizzie van Zyl, who was reduced to slack skin over bones by typhoid fever. Her face shows a beauty that would never blossom, her cheekbones high and wide and her lips pulled back to suggest an attempted smile. It was her eyes that most haunted me. They are pale and curious and seem to be asking: “Why?”

While I didn’t create Aletta as an embodiment of Lizzie—among other differences, Aletta is older and much healthier—I wanted Aletta to carry Lizzie’s spirit. But how to get inside Aletta’s head? I asked dozens of women to recall their thoughts at age fourteen, a survey that produced two leading results: boys, and concerns over their own shaky self-image.

After consulting psychiatrists for insight into ways an adolescent mind would cope with such stress at a critical period of development, I was led to two books born of the Holocaust: Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for*

*Meaning* and Etty Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life*. Frankl was an Austrian psychologist who survived, and Hillesum was a young woman who did not. Both draw the conclusion that an active mind, inner strength, and a singular reason for living are the critical factors.

And, of course, as I shaped Aletta Venter—within the first institutionalized concentration camps, four decades before the Nazi experiment in inhumanity—I thought often of Anne Frank. Aletta shares Anne's determination to be optimistic in the most difficult circumstances, and I think of them as sisters displaced in time.

Through Aletta's eyes, and through my research, I saw more clearly two of the great fallacies of war: One is the common notion that soldiers monopolize the pain and death. It's just that there are no medals or parades for the innocents who die in every war. The other is that anybody ever learns anything from a war other than new ways to conduct later wars. The British imperialist aggression in South Africa was spurred by the discovery of gold and diamonds. One hundred years later, it was oil that made the Middle East a target for misguided nation-building. The power vacuum created in South Africa after the Brits pulled out was at the root of the distrust, suspicion, and hatred that led to the disastrous apartheid system.

All those things, the geopolitical power plays, the hunger for resources, the movement of armies like lethal chess pieces, are covered by history books. Over time, that's left too few opportunities to celebrate the small, hard-won individual victories of brave characters like Aletta Venter. *The Lost History of Stars* is her story, the kind that repeats in times of conflict but too often is forgotten.

FROM  
*The Lost History of Stars*

BY DAVE BOLING



September 1900, Venter Farm

**T**he first warning was so delicate: Moeder's hanging cups lightly touched lips in the china cabinet. By the time we turned to look at them, stacked plates rattled on the shelves from the vibration of hoofbeats.

"Ma . . . they're coming," Willem said, his voice so calm I didn't believe him. "It's them."

"Is it just our men again?"

"Too much dust, it's them . . . the British."

"Lettie, take your sister. Willem, turn out the stock. Bina, gather food," my mother said with rehearsed precision.

"I'll get your point-two-two," Willem said, retrieving the rifle my mother kept in her bed on the side where my father had slept before the war. The weapon was almost as tall as my little brother.

The British swept upon us like a grass fire, and by the time we reached the *stoep*, two dozen soldiers had dismounted; more were pouring into the barn and rounding up stock. Mother had drilled us for this moment every day since the men left almost a year earlier. Her first rule was that the children were not to speak. Not a single word, no matter what the Tommies did. Say nothing, she told us, pointing her finger as if to jab the rule inside us.

"Where are your men?" the officer at the front of the group shouted.

"Out killing British," I yelled, my silence lasting no more than five seconds.

My mother and the soldiers focused stares on me.

“We know they’ve been here. . . . You’ve been supplying them and that makes you spies,” the officer said. “They destroyed the rail line near here . . .”

“Were many killed?” I asked.

“Lettie . . . shhhh.” Mother turned to me with such force that I feared she’d aim her rifle at me.

“Yes . . . Lettie . . . shhh,” the officer mocked, approaching the stairs. “We’ve been getting sniped at for miles, and you give them support. We could hang you from that tree. All of you.”

I was enraged. They were at our house, with their fat British horses and their knives on the ends of their British rifles. Here . . . in *our* country, at *our* house. They were no longer a vague threat, some distant rumbling in the night. They were here, looking into our faces. I stood tall and narrowed my eyes at the officer. The fool. I took a step toward him, sending hatred in my gaze. I am small . . . but dangerous.

“Do you have more to say, little girl?”

Little girl?

I raised both hands above me and shook my fists at him . . . and made a growling noise through my teeth.

The officer laughed. “Will you hurt us with your dolly?”

I had gathered my little sister’s things when the soldiers rode up. I still had Cecelia’s doll, Lollie, in my shaking hand. The British were not threatened.

“Stop laughing at her, *rooinek*,” Moeder shouted, turning the .22 at the officer.

“Put it down, missus . . .,” the officer said. “What—”

A pebble bounced off the officer’s shoulder. Willem had fired his slingshot at him from the corner of the *stoep*.

A dozen soldiers lifted weapons; half aimed at Mother, the others at Willem. Two Tommies twisted at her rifle, a small-caliber shot pinging into the sky before they could wrench it from her.

“We’ll shoot her right now,” the officer said to Willem. “You’ve attacked us with a weapon and she fired a shot. We could hang you all right now. Or put together a firing squad.”

Willem waited, considering . . .

“Put it down, Willem,” Mother said. Willem turned and cocked his head to her. He placed the slingshot on the *stoep*.

“Bring him here . . .”

He looked so small, a barefoot eight-year-old under a too-large hat, wiggling as two soldiers dragged him by the arms. They stood him in front of the officer, and when they released their grip, Willem straightened into a post.

“Where are the men, boy?”

Silence.

“Where are the men, boy?”

Silence, with a defiant stare.

“You know the penalty for being a spy . . . and for attacking an officer,” he said, signaling for men to come forward. “Firing squad.”

I screamed and Moeder pulled at the soldiers holding her arms. She tore free from one, but another came from behind and coiled an arm around her throat. My mouth dried so quickly that I couldn’t speak. I turned to pick up little Cecelia and shield her eyes.

Five aligned in front of Willem in such a straight line it was clear they had been drilled.

“Stop it, he doesn’t know where they are . . . none of us knows,” Moeder said. “They haven’t been home. . . . They could be anywhere.”

The officer ignored her, focusing on Willem.

“Where are the men, boy?”

Silence.

“Brave officer . . . threatening a little boy,” I said, barely able to raise a sound.

Willem broke his focus on the officer to glare at me.

“It’s no threat. . . . Where are the men?”

Silence.

“Ready . . .”

Moeder twisted again, and the soldier lifted so hard against her neck he squeezed out a choking gasp.

“He doesn’t know,” I said. “They never tell us where they’re going. No, wait, they never come home. They haven’t been home.”

“Aim. . . . Where are the men?” The officer screamed it this time.

Silence.

Soldiers’ rifles angled toward his center, Willem inhaled to expand his chest toward their rifles. He curled his bottom lip over his top.



The tension in my arms pinched Cecelia so tightly she raised a wail, so long and at such a pitch that the officer and the men recoiled from their rigid stance.

“As you were,” the officer said.

The squad lowered weapons.

“Fine boy you have there, ma’am,” the officer said to Moeder. “They usually start crying and tell everything they know the second the squad lines up. He’s the first one to just go mute.” He offered his hand to Willem to shake but withdrew it empty when Willem sneered. “But you’re still spies, and we’re taking you in. You have ten minutes to get what you can from the house.”

Mother spent the first moments staring at the officer, and then at every Tommy who walked past her, studying each man’s face as if memorizing it for later.

Willem and I scrambled into the house to get our bags as two of the soldiers carried our chests and tossed them from the *stoep*. In the parlor, a soldier started up at mother’s organ, a man at each shoulder. Offended by their nerve, Moeder rushed at them. She was blocked by the men. The Tommy played so well I stopped to listen. His playing was equal to Moeder’s as he read off the sheet music that had been open on the stand. Three sang in ragged harmony as Moeder stood helpless.

*Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From thy wounded side which flowed,  
Be of sin, the double cure;  
Save from wrath and make me pure.*

The singing felt so out of place but struck me as the perfect prayer.  
Let me hide myself . . . yes, I thought, please, dear God.

THE LOST HISTORY OF STARS

by Dave Boling

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