

LITERARY JOURNAL



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The Cahava Team

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تو نہ ایلینا

یہ غم کیا دل کی عادت ہے نہیں تو
کسی سے کچھ شکایت ہے نہیں تو

کسی کے بن کسی کی یاد کے بن
جیتے جانے کی ہمت ہے نہیں تو

ہے وہ اک خواب بے تعبیر اس کو
بھلا دینے کی نیت ہے نہیں تو

کسی صورت بھی دل لگتا نہیں ہاں
تو کچھ دن سے یہ حالت ہے نہیں تو

ترے اس حال پر ہے سب کو حیرت
تجھے بھی اس پہ حیرت ہے نہیں تو

ہم آہنگی نہیں دنیا سے تیری
تجھے اس پرند امت ہے نہیں تو

ہو اجو کچھ یہی مقسوم تھا کیا
یہی ساری حکایت ہے نہیں تو

اماں پانے کی حسرت ہے نہیں تو
اذیت ناک امیدوں سے تجھ کو

یہ غم کیا دل کی عادت ہے نہیں تو
کسی سے کچھ شکایت ہے نہیں تو

روزنامہ

جنگ

ملک میں مہنگائی میں کمی، اعداد و

ادارہ شماریات کے مطابق مہنگائی کی شرح 17.3 فیصد

اسلام آباد (نیوزڈسک) ادارہ شماریات
نے اپریل 2024 کے لئے مہنگائی کے اعداد
شمار جاری کر دیے۔ رپورٹ کے مطابق
ملک میں مہنگائی کی شرح میں نمایاں کمی
ریکارڈ کی گئی ہے۔
اعدادہ شمار کے مطابق اپریل میں
مہنگائی کی شرح 11.8 فیصد رہی جو گزشتہ
ماہ مارچ میں 17.3 فیصد تھی۔

رپورٹ
اشیاء کے
پر مہنگا
ماہرین
رہا تو

Is this sorrow just a habit of the heart? No,
not at all.
Do you hold a grievance against someone? No,
not at all.

Someone who remains an unfulfilled dream,
Do you intend to forget that someone? No,
not at all.

Without someone... without the memories of that someone...
Do you have the courage to go on living? No,
not at all.

The heart can find no peace at all?
Has this condition persisted for a few days? No,
not at all.

Your current state has everyone astonished,
Are you astounded by it? No,
not at all.

The asceticism that you rejected,
Are these riches the price of it? No,
not at all.

You've fallen out of step with this world,
Do you have any regrets over this? No,
not at all.

Whatever happened — was this what was destined?
Is this the complete story? No,
not at all.

This gut-wrenching desperation,
Are you desperate now to finally find some peace? No,
not at all.

Is this sorrow just a habit of the heart? No,
not at all.
Do you hold a grievance against someone? No,
not at all.

IS THIS SORROW JUST A HABIT OF THE HEART? NO, NOT AT ALL

JAUN ELIA



Jaun Elia (1931–2002)

*Jaun Elia, born in Amroha, migrated to Pakistan in 1957 and spent the rest of his life in Karachi. His verse fused classical ghazal craft with a confessional, nihilistic despair that made him one of the most distinctive voices in modern Urdu poetry. Reluctant to publish, he brought out his first collection, *Shayad*, only in 1990. Yet he remains among the most widely quoted poets in South Asia — if you are South Asian, the odds are high that you have received a WhatsApp forward with his couplets.*

DAVID LEE

On paper, the borders hold:
thin blue veins obedient to ink.
But walk long enough and everything loosens:

My grandfather said the earth recognizes no ownership:
only the weight of what lingers.

We carried our names like small, guarded fires
until rain found a way to speak them.

Now even the stones hesitate.

Stand anywhere long enough
and you begin to thin:
first into memory,
then into rumor.



THE GRAMMAR OF MECHANICAL BREATH

DAVID LEE

The ventilator inhales
before the body consents.

Numbers gather at the bedside:
tidal volume, oxygen saturation;
a syntax no one claims to understand
yet everyone obeys.

I rest a hand on a shoulder
already practicing absence.

The family asks if he can hear them.

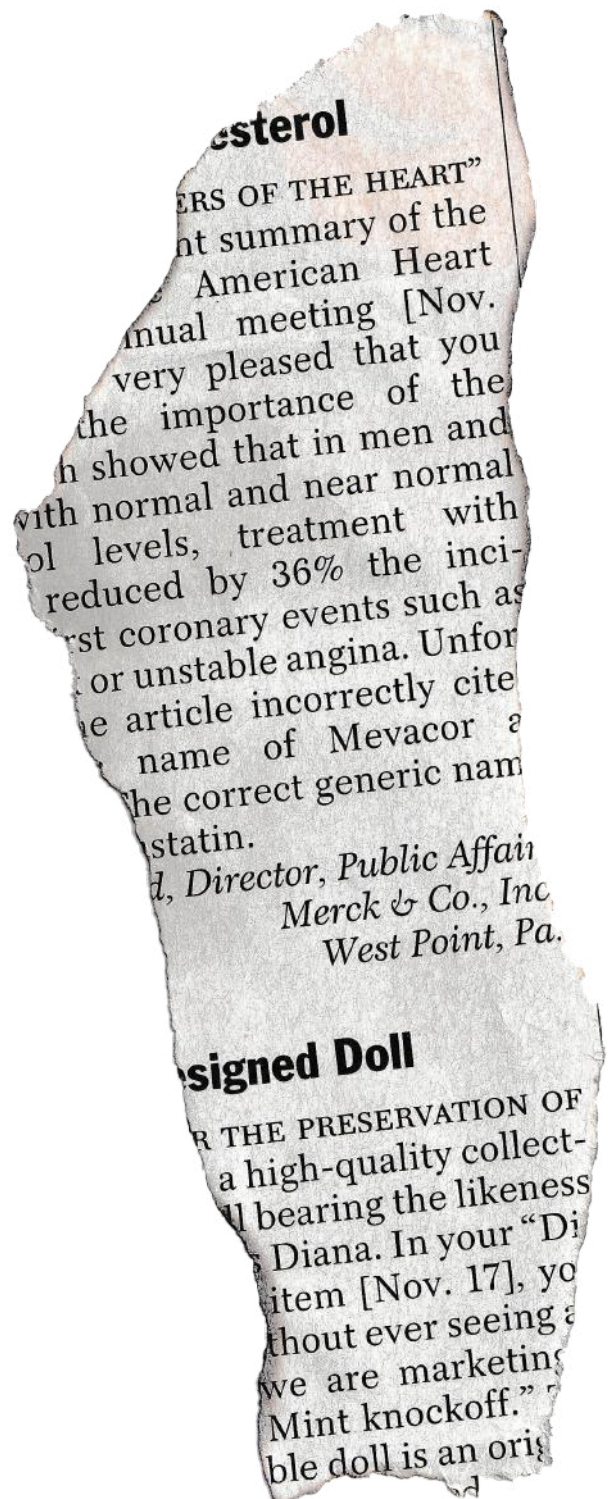
I say yes,
because hope is the last intervention
we administer without charting.

Outside, the sky continues its quiet revisions:
cloud dissolving into cloud,
light altering nothing it touches.

Inside, we negotiate with silence
as if it were a guarded crossing.

The machine exhales.

No one thinks to thank it.



FIELD NOTES FROM A COUNTRY THAT WITHDREW ITS LANGUAGE

DAVID LEE

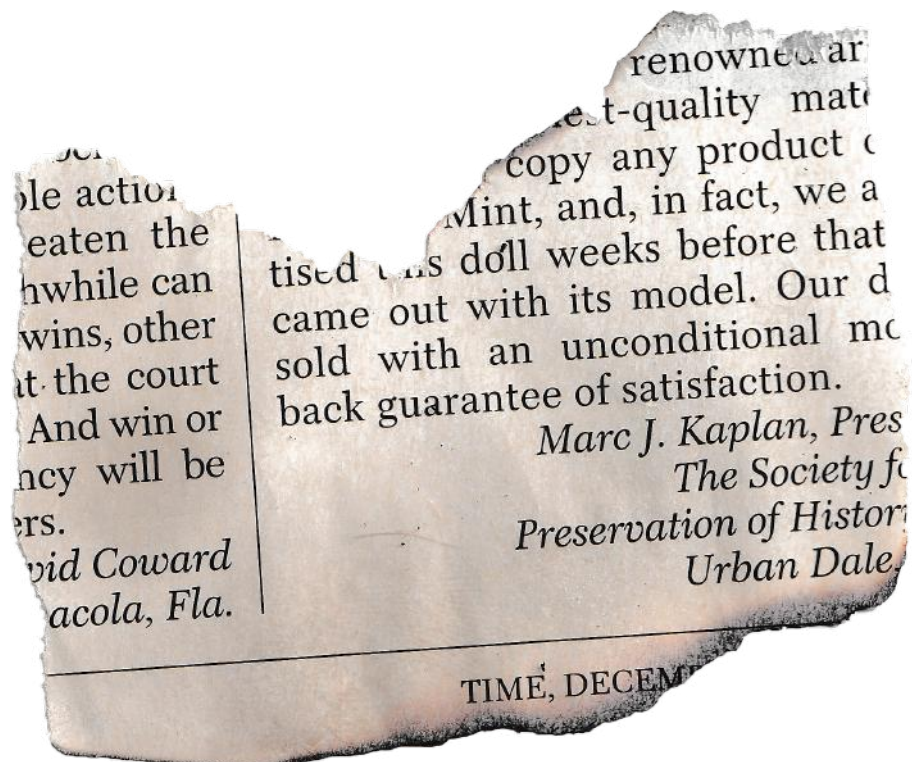
We arrived after language had already thinned into gesture. In the square, the old men spoke in fragments, as if conversation were a structure partially collapsed but still in use. Someone handed me bread that tasted first of dust, then unexpectedly of rain.

Maps were available, but none aligned. Roads ended in suggestion. Rivers bent away from their former certainties. A woman told me the capital had relocated several times without informing those who lived within it.

At night, the sky held with unusual precision. Each star seemed contractually fixed. I tried to name them, but the names felt provisional: on loan from elsewhere.

By morning, it became clear the country had not disappeared. It had declined description.

I left without evidence of having been there,
which now seems to have been the point.



THE BOY WHO BOTTLED THUNDER

DAVID LEE

When he was ten,
my cousin collected thunderstorms.

At least that is what he claimed.

Each summer afternoon,
before the first drop fell,

he would run into the yard
carrying empty mason jars,

holding them aloft
beneath darkening clouds.

“What are you doing?”

“Catching thunder.”

He answered
with the certainty available only
to children and prophets.

The adults laughed.

Children did not.

Children understand
that impossible things
require witnesses.

Years passed.

but
squeezed
may be
advocate
Lincoln, his
bullet. Lin
people have
a long time, all
ns to oust him
nd prospects for
e grim, then the
to remove him by
lister is correct: this
icans, but we should
ms about providing
ts or technical assis-

*Lefever, Senior Fellow
and Public Policy Center
Washington*

FACT TIME TO RID THE WORLD OF
m once and for all was at the end of
ert Storm. He should have been pun-
ed for his crimes then. You don't just
hase away a rattler.

The jars gathered dust
in a collapsing shed behind the house.

Then came the year of the funeral.

The year grief enlarged every room
and reduced every conversation.

While clearing the shed,
I found one of the jars.

Clouded glass.

Rusting lid.

Nothing inside.

Or so I believed.

When I twisted the metal ring free,
a low rumble crossed the distance.

Not from the jar.

From memory.

A storm was assembling itself
beyond the fields.

I stood listening.

For a moment,
I understood my cousin perfectly.

Some things are too vast to keep.

Yet we spend our lives
inventing containers for them.



*David Anson Lee is a physician, poet, and medical humanities writer. A glaucoma specialist and Professor Emeritus at McGovern Medical School, UTHealth Houston, he explores the intersections of medicine, memory, identity, technology, and the human body. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals including Eclectica Magazine, Star*Line, The Pharos, Kinsman Quarterly, Magma Poetry, and other literary publications. He is the author of The Pinhole Cathedral and other poetry manuscripts. [Link](#)*

CAKE SWEATED IN AQUA BOX

HANNAN KHAN

you summoned at seven —
whispered the meeting ran over
whispered you'd be home soon
whispered save you a piece

i tapped the chocolate one your crush & darling
dense, rich, with raspberry
textured like a secret
we ceased sighing into

the girl behind the counter harvested
'any amour message on top?'
i uttered, 'just the cognomen'
she scribed it wrong, i let her

i flared a candle —
not for enumerating years but for reminiscing them
i sang the song under my suspiration
like i was harmonizing to your absence

by nine, i'd devoured two slices
& by ten, i was chewing the third without savouring it
grazing through our first anniversary:
gateau in bed, mouth sticky with laughter, no missed trains

no late meetings
just voracity in the sculpture of each other
now the living room light holds onto catching
your photo on the shelf —

you in that lilac-lavender sari
from your cousin's wedding
the one you murmured made you feel, 'too beheld'
i adored it, you hated it



i pine for the chick you were
when you didn't yet pine for yourself
i thought i'd toss the rest away
but something in me —

kept scraping the edge of porcelain plate
kept harkening for your keys at the door
kept feigning as it alluded to something —
that i retained the icing & washed away the deadline

you came home late —
your stilettos struck the hallway
like punctuation... periods... full stops
you whiffed like office air & someone else's cologne

you kissed my cheek like mail — swift, unregistered
like a love letter reverted to sender
'you didn't wait up, did you?'
i languidly lied, 'just about to kick off'

we lounged back to back
like yellowing pages in a favorite book
that halted turning
you toiled, i tarried

you dwelled late, i dwelled lonely
you hugged your laptop, i poured coffee
you stared at a screen, i stared at the torta
love used to be something we chopped

now it's something we dodge
& the cake sweated in aqua box

neither of us craved it



WHERE NEEDLES BLOOM

HANNAN KHAN



they loved before the morphine seeped
but they love differently now — in lulls, in shards
in the strange silence between twain of beeping monitors

she undresses him more languid than illness does
her hands are careful where the piercing needles bloom
where synthetic snakes susurrate under his skin
he's ashamed of choreography — velcro straps, pliable bands
hospital's emerald gowns that bare at the back like secrets

they were fabled amour was candlelight & champagne
theirs is antiseptic & clouded corridors
their feast is the stale crackers by bedside
their luxurious champagne: the fizz of oxygen

they guffaw anyway, though guffaw hurts
they touch anyway, though touch is a trice
they love anyway, though love is tandem of fire & ash

she morphs into nurse when the nurses leave
she rises as lover when his body betrays
she turns into rage when he loathes himself
she metamorphoses into mirror when he vanishes

he bestows fragments of desire, splintered but lucent
she bestows patience gooey as honey
even when he cannot swallow

they clap for ideal couples who dance at weddings
this duo dance in the dark; tangled in wires
she orchestrating; he stumbling
both of them laughing like survivors of bloody war

their intimacy isn't the absence of ailment
it is the savage script illness demands
not in spite of but begotten from it

he's weak but he loves her fervidly & fiercely
he's shattered but keeps offering pieces
he's exhausted but keeps reaching & grasping
this is his damned paradox — his pulse, his vow, his fevered prayer

& she orbits around him cradling care, love & loyalty

CLEAR SKIES AREN'T HAZARD PAY

HANNAN KHAN

morn dawns like a hangar door yawning
forecast is agony with gusts — calor presses its palms
against his neck, bouncing off aluminium skin, off the
parked airbus bleeding fuel odor

jet wash jostles him backward between
orange cones & chalked lines, then feigns it never palpated
him — they peruse the welkin through departure boards
& radios not nimbi but countdowns

lluvia doesn't fall here, it sheets off wings
thwacks the tarmac on schedule; sol clocks in early, reflects
off cockpit glass, slants on his spine, enumerates every
vertebra in hi-vis topaz

lift... lock... lift... bags slide down
the belt loader, thudding like wee verdicts; tags know his
numeral before any supervisor does; each suitcase dickers
with his wrists & each one wins

cold lands later, leaks out of cargo holds
slithers into his gloves, makes his fingers forget their aliases
he drops nothing; dropping tolls write-ups; dropping
levies shifts; dropping demands more than dolor

engines spool up, an ululation under the bones
then pause — pause like clemency, clemency like pause
never long enough to respire; some days the winds cradle
jet fuel & jokes, some days foreign coins & caveats

he heeds anyway; heeding is endurance
between taxiing tires — by shift's sunset his body is all
climate: bruises blossoming under reflective tape
exudation evaporating into exhaust

weather passing through him without
probing clearance — at home, they pose, 'how was work'
he sighs, 'clear skies,' his shoulders sustain the
runaway lights nictitating



ŚĀVAN FALLS FOR EVERYONE

HANNAN KHAN

I thunder without tintinnabulating, and Avarpur rejoins me with tin roofs & cracked throats. The village lies sutured between a drained canal & a road that pretends to be a promise. When I penetrate, the road forgets its lines. When I penetrate, the canal memorizes ancient names. I am not tender here. I am consummate.

At cockcrow, women wring dupattas like confessions. At crepuscule, men tally nets as if numerals could mend absence. I absorb them all by the way they look up — some with tawakkul that bruises the neck, some with dread that houses behind the molars. They say śāvan is mercy. They say śāvan is curse. They are both veridical & still abortive.

The first to speak to me is Jahan, the fisherman whose palms scent of rope & yesterday. He holds ankle-deep where his courtyard used to bicker with dust. ‘Come slow,’ he tells me, as if languor were a leash. His wife, Zella, watches from the threshold. Her streaked eyes cradle a map I have perused before: avenues of leaving etched over avenues of staying.

I slowly press harder. The yard obliterates its edges. The goat bleats, then learns quietude. Quietude learns to float.

In the school veranda, the teacher piles attendance registers on a stool. ‘Children,’ she says, ‘write your sweet names clearly.’ Names smudge. Ink blooms. She chortles once — brief, defensive. ‘We drill letters,’ she tells the headman later, ‘but pānī drills erasure.’

The headman arrives with dastaar that has seen too many fucking cameras. He howls, ‘Control the drains.’ He howls, ‘Dwell calm.’ He howls, ‘Relief is coming actually.’ Relief comes belated, cameras come timely. When a boy queries where to stand for the photograph, the headman howls, ‘Where the mud looks true-hearted.’

I carry on falling. Falling, falling — because recurrence is how verity endures. The mosque loudspeaker crackles with dua & tutelage braided together. ‘Latch your door.’ ‘Trust the Almighty.’ ‘Trust the office.’ Denizens share a mic & neither blushes.

Zella steps into the downpour. She doesn’t look at Jahan. She looks at me, the way one looks at a stranger who already knows the clayed body. Her blouse darkens; the line of her spine woos through kameez. Lust here is not a fête; it’s a weather — felt without warrant, replied without applause. Jahan eyes the look pass between us & hisses, ‘You fall for everyone.’

I unerringly do & everyone falls for me, differently.

By noontide, the river surmounts the embankment like musings it shouldn’t be having. Boys cheer, then halt cheering. The senescent fisherman Rama laughs, then coughs, then laughs again.

‘We are indigent,’ he intones to no one, ‘but we aren’t aeriform.’

His daughter torques her braid & whispers,
'Hefty things drown first.'

Sacks tear at the ration shop. Rice learns to
natate. A clerk shrieks, 'Order, order!' Order
slides off sodden floors. 'We necessitate lists,'
he insists. 'We necessitate lists,' the crowd
echoes. Lists saturate through.

When night lands early, it lands hungry.
Electricity abdicates without apology. Candles
quake. In Zella's room, the fenestra will not
shut. The odor of damp woods unfurls
memories like drawers. She says to Jahan, 'We
married to sculpt a house.' He says, 'We
sculpted a house to marry.' The words cross &
uncross between them, sculpting & marrying,
marrying & sculpting until the room feels
judged.

Outside, the road metamorphoses into a mirror
that refuses faces. A bus stalls, passengers
wrangling in a choir of blame. 'If the state
moved briskier,' one shouts. 'If the sky waited,'
another roars. Nimbus grins, neither speaker
hears it.

I bow on the embankment. It sighs. It doesn't
break yet. Blokes pile sandbags with a cadence
that strives to be faith. 'Lift, lift,' someone
chants. Lift transpires into an orison. Lift
evolves into a bruise.

A journalist wades in; shoes held like fucking
surrender. He interpellates Rama, 'How does it
feel?' Rama answers, 'It fucks like practice.'
The journalist nictates. Practice for what?
Rama doesn't say. He watches the water weigh
doorframes.

Zella slips. Jahan grabs. The net entangles.
Net, knot, knee — all of them collide. For a
breath, cruel time forgets which way to go.
Then I surge stealthily, Jahan's voice saunters
into pieces: 'Hold — hold — hold.' It breaks,
breaks, breaks.

The fragile embankment gives up. Not with
ululation — with a shrug. I rush where I've
been bidden for yesteryears by neglect &
speeches. Houses float the way promises once
floated. A buffalo natates with offended
dignity. The mosque steps founder. The school
bell bells underwater, or perhaps it is memory
belling.

Zella's door bursts. She laughs — a timbre like
glass drilling to absolve — and pulls Arham
onto the bed. Jahan stands knee-deep, then
waist-deep. 'Take him,' he tells Zella. 'Take
him,' Zella tells Jahan. Water holds the cavern
between them, rising, indecisive, forcing both
hands to let go.

I don't stop. I never do. I am told to desist every
fucking year. I am venerated every fucking
year. Both are bloody lies that need rehashing.
The headman boards onto a tractor, dastaar
plastered to his throat. 'Dwell together,' he
shouts. 'Dwell together.' The tractor stalls.
Togetherness submerges.

At dawn again — because dawn is perpetually
stubborn — I thin. I leave behind a carcass of
wreck. Rama unearths the net wrapped around
a neem. Jahan's house has learned to breathe
through fissures. The teacher unbars a
register, the page stinks like a river. She pens
attendance from memory. Names come back,
altered.

Zella stands where the new road reappears.
'Will you ever come back?' she implores me. I
have already begun to reply by leaving.

Goddamn relief trucks put in with horns &
hashtags. Blankets unfold like frickin' excuses.
An old man argues over whose loss reckons
first. 'We lost cattle,' one sobs. 'We lost papers,'
another sobs. Papers float back weeks later,
signatures debased into ghosts.

At night, Zella sits on the roof that survives.
Jahan's hand finds her ankle. The touch is
trice, electrified, unfinished. They do not need
a cot to reminisce being alive. Below them,
Avarpur efflates mud.

I move on, hailed elsewhere by the same
invitation. Before I go, I write across the village
— not with sayings but with consequence:
those who mapped without listening will
reengineer without learning, those who
listened will retain without exonerating.

When I am ebbbed, they will debate about me,
cite me, fuck me.

Raḥmah. Mal'ūn.

They will be right twice & wrong once.

The once is: I didn't plump for them.

They plumped for me.

Hannan Khan — a nefelibata, poet, fiction writer, editor, and scholar of literature & linguistics from Pakistan. He combs through moments of love, death, delirium, identity, and relational complexities. He is the winner of the Native Voices Award 2025 for his poetry collection Isn't Cooked Is Cursed, and a finalist for the Rhysling Award 2026. He is longlisted for the erbacce-prize for Poetry 2026. His work has appeared in Evergreen Review, Fahmidan Journal, Strange Horizons, IHRAM Literary Magazine, Liminal Lit, Twenty-two Twenty-eight, Abyss & Apex, Winds Of Asia, 4LPH4NUM3R1C, Uncanny Magazine, Usawa Literary Review, Native Voices II: The Cry of Creation, Full Bleed. [@hannan.khan.official](https://hannan.khan.official)

WAITING

VINH HOANG

So much of our lives consists of waiting. In traffic. In line. At the grocery store. At the airport. At the DMV. In the waiting room of a hospital for test results. For the end to come up to our face. From one perspective, it could be said that we're all waiting to die, which sounds artless, so here's something more artful—my mom died while I was waiting.

Four cars boxed me in on I-94 while I was on my way to teach my ten AM Tuesday-Thursday composition section. There was construction. To manage the tedium of the inch-by-inch movement, I was picturing who would be in class and who would skip based on their general disposition from the week before. The semester had only just started.

My father called me, which prompted me to cross four lanes, get off an exit ramp, turn onto a small street, and pull over. He never called me on a weekday. And even on the weekends, it was always the end of the month. I canceled classes for the day, drove home, booked a ticket, and phoned my therapist.

My mother had wanted to be cremated, a Buddhist funeral, which meant a forty-nine-day vigil, or seven Sundays at the Buddhist center to observe her passing. But I lived in Chicago. Despite whatever issues I had with my father, he was always diligent with arrangements. He said it was okay if I just flew down to Houston for the last day.

After seeing my mom off at the temple, I drove my father back to my parents' house, where I proceeded to make dinner for us. It was the least I could do seeing as I was flying out the next day. I had never intended to stay much longer. As I chopped vegetables and tofu in the kitchen, I realized I was standing in the exact spot my mom must have been right before the aneurysm. She had been making lunch as she had for the last thirty-two years my parents lived together.

We ate in silence, watching a soap opera from Viet Nam. My father never acclimated to American culture. He was always too busy working. He never wanted to try any American food. It was something that my mom and I had accepted. As I took our plates and washed them in the sink, I wondered if my father would be able to take care of himself.

Later that evening, I awoke on the couch to a movie on the TV. Outside, the porchlight glared across the backyard. The garden was pretty; full of the various flowers my mom had planted, the names of which I knew none. When I first heard about how she passed, the image of a flower of blood blossoming inside her brain came to me. From the screen door, I could see a stream of smoke drift into view. My father was sitting in a lawn chair, smoking a Marlboro red, his favorite. He looked as though he had washed his face without patting it dry. He didn't notice me.

I remember asking him once why he smoked. He simply looked back at me and told me to worry about myself instead. Something about the sight of him sitting there took me back to those nights when I watched my mom come home from work to cook, while he would recline on the couch to watch TV. It made me never want to smoke.

I went back to my hotel without saying good night because I had to pack for my flight. But that wasn't the only reason. Had I stepped out to say anything, a possibility, however slim, existed of him waxing didactic, which I was too old for. Last I saw, he was staring out into whatever remained of the garden. I wondered if he knew anything more than I did about those flowers, which shaded darker in the night, and the woman who tended to them.

The next day, my father had insisted on driving me to George Bush. I was not one to argue, so we drove in silence down Beltway Eight. When we passed the Westchase district, he asked if I remembered going to the movies there. All I saw were two office buildings with six-story garages and a nondescript water feature. I chalked it up to his aging memory. When we got to the drop off, I pulled my luggage from his car. For a moment, we stood there awkwardly.

"Alright," I said. "Well, bye dad."

As I turned to go in, I felt something envelop me. His arms came around me, clasping me tight. It was a hug, something I felt I no longer retained the muscle memory of. He held me, but it was as if I was carrying him.

Every year on the anniversary of my mom's passing, my father would call to tell me something I hadn't known about my mom: like how she had had a pet dog in Viet Nam, how she had laughed at him the first time they met for having a big nose (the kind that's meant to be punched), how their boat almost capsized before they reached the Philippines, how I would have had an older brother had she not fallen down some stairs. It was the most that he ever talked. I simply listened. He kept doing this until the lung cancer made it impossible for him to speak.

When he died, I flew down to Houston to make arrangements. He wanted to be put in the ground because he grew up Catholic before marrying my mom. I won't lie to you: his grave did nothing for me. I had known that the years of our estrangement would lead to this. When rain poured, I quit the place with my rental. Drove past the dispensaries, vape shops, teahouses, and fusion restaurants, which had once been nail salons, Chinese takeout, and movie rentals.

I stopped at a drugstore and, on a whim, bought a pack of reds. I thought of Westchase. I couldn't recall the logic, only that a sensation pushed me there. I hadn't recognized it during that drive to the airport with my dad those years ago, but there used to be a theater there.

After parking, I walked around where the box office had been or where I thought it had been. I pulled out a cigarette. My first ever puff. There was heat and coolness. A clawing in my chest. Then the rain caught up. I drove away again, but, as I drove, I remembered.

Remembered how—before my divorce from Chelsea, before my mother passed, before I invited my father to our wedding (only because Chelsea pushed me to) and, when he didn't show, I said "fuck him and I told you so", before I stopped answering his calls, before I left for college, before we stopped making eye contact when we talked, before I punched him back after he slapped me, before he first ever lectured me on living under his roof—on the weekends after work, my mom would take me there to catch a movie.

The Westchase Tinseltown theatre had neon signage and giant searchlights like from the 20th Century Fox introduction. I always felt like a star walking to my own premiere. It was in the cinema where I learned about other worlds full of light, color, movement, and lives so unlike mine. Of course, whenever I tried to describe that memory and those sensations out loud to others, the searchlights made no sense. My father never came with us because he complained it hurt his ass if he sat still too long.

However, once, on my seventh birthday, my mom and I pulled up to the theater late because of traffic. My dad had been waiting, my mom's idea. His face and everything glowing from the theater's neon lights. Smoking a red. Tickets in his hands. Eyes tired but he was somehow still smiling, waiting for me. And when I remembered this, I wept.

Not because he was no longer around, but because the day he called me about my mom's passing, I had sat in my car for hours before driving home. The day had been beautiful. A preluding false spring after a heavy-depressive winter. The chill was thawing, and the soft rays of sun could be felt again after months of snow and gray. Birds were out chittering. The street I parked on was lined with brick buildings. An apartment building, a warehouse, a multipurpose with a tailoring shop and bank. People inside working. On the sidewalk, a determined woman in a dark purple jacket tugged along her curious border collie, its tongue lolling, as they jogged together. A pair of bikers covered in tattoos climbed past my window, laughing, while a truck wove by in the opposite direction. In the park nearby, two mothers were pushing the swings, their children giggling wildly. The green in the trees, the bushes, the grass, returning. A solitary plane rose gently into the air, probably from O'Hare. Somewhere in the distance, a train rattled down tracks. I could feel all this life outside, and yet in my head, I kept turning over—why her and not him?

Vinh Hoang (he/him) is a Vietnamese-American educator, filmmaker, and writer who was born and raised in Houston, Texas, now based in the south side of Chicago. He graduated with an MFA in fiction from the University of Mississippi. He teaches at Saint Xavier University and Prairie State College. His prose work can be found in *Bridge Eight*, *Cahava*, *Defunkt Magazine*, and others. He is a 2025 Liturgy Salon recipient and 2026 Production Institute cohort member through the University of Chicago's Logan Center Digital Storytelling Initiative in partnership with the Community Film Workshop of Chicago. [Link](#)



DEATH AND THE CHILD 2

ISIOMA KASIM

I have told this story before. But I was just a baby. Seeing the world through the keyhole of the door. I could not see many things then. Like Grandpa saying that death is freedom, and living is dying. I could not tell.

As we were preparing for my birthday, it rained in the evening. I liked the sound of rain on the roof. It was sweet like music in my dreams. Mum said it was bad to play in the rain. But Mum was not home. Bota said to me:

“Playing in the rain is like bathing under the shower.”

We played in the rain. It was like bathing under the shower. Then it was not like bathing under the shower. I was not happy. I scraped the ground and channelled water. I wanted to make a river, like dirty River Osun flowing under Oke Gada Bridge after the rain. But the water was not flowing like River Osun.

I saw an earthworm. I showed the earthworm to Bota. Bota ran into the house and brought some salt.

“Salt brings meaning and sense to life, that’s what Mum says,” Bota said.

“Why?”

“Don’t you know that her kitchen doesn’t make sense without salt?” Bota asked.

“I know, I know, but how does a kitchen make sense?”

Bota did not answer. Then he put some of the salt into his mouth and closed his eyes. Like he was licking that yum yum chocolate-strawberry ice cream that Mummy buys from the supermarket. Ah, I love my Mummy. Mummy brings meaning and sense to life.

“Salt makes sense in the mouth,” he said.

“Salt brings meaning and sense to life,” he said again and laughed.

But I did not know it like Bota. Then I asked again; “How does a kitchen make sense?”

“You are only a baby,” Bota replied, eyes still closed.

I was happy for Bota. Then, he opened his eyes and put the salt on the earthworm. The earthworm danced and danced. I was happy. Then it cut into two, three and four parts. Bota said:

“It’s dead.”

“The salt has made sense of it,” I said.

“The salt cannot make sense of it,” Bota shouted. “The salt killed it.”

“The salt killed it and made sense of it, can’t you see?”

I laughed. Bota did not laugh. And then he laughed. I was happy. The salt made sense of the earthworm.

Because I was still in the nursery class. Bota said: "It's six o'clock."

"Who told you?" I asked.

"Didn't you hear the clock now?" he said.

"Can a clock talk?"

"It cannot talk, but it can tell the time," Bota said.

"That means the clock can talk."

"The clock cannot talk, you are just a baby," Bota shouted.

I did not say anything.

"Grandpa said that time is friend and enemy of all," I said.

"That's not what Grandpa said. Grandpa said time is the womb and grave of all, that's what he said," Bota said.

"Why did Grandpa say that?"

Bota did not say anything. Then he said, "Because clock can tell the time and time can tell all, that's why. Time is the womb and grave of all."

I was sleeping. No, I was not sleeping. I was lying down and Bota was sleeping. I was not happy. There was no salt anywhere. I could not make sense of anything. I climbed down from the bed quietly and went to the kitchen. I took some salt and came back to the room. I wanted to put it on Bota. Bota stirred and turned. I could not tell.

I went to Grandpa's room. Grandpa was not snoring. I waited. Grandpa did not stir or turn. I put the salt on Grandpa. He did not dance. I was not happy. The salt did not make sense of Grandpa. Then I returned to the room and joined Bota in bed.

I was sleeping. I was dreaming. Grandpa was well dressed like he was going to a big, big party. Grandpa was playing with me. He was playing and playing and playing with me but I was not happy. I was not happy. Then Grandpa was walking away.

"Grandpa! Grandpa! Where are you going?" I shouted.

"My salt has finished. I'm going to Mum's kitchen," Grandpa replied. Then I ran after him. I could not catch up with Grandpa. I ran and ran with all my strength, but I was not fast enough. I could not catch up with Grandpa. Grandpa was not walking fast. I could not catch up. So I cried and begged that he should wait for me. Grandpa did not wait for me. I cried and cried and cried and cried. Then Dad woke me up. There were tears in my eyes.

"What's the matter now?" Dad said. "Are you the only child that experiences nightmares that you must blow off the roof with your cry?"

"It's Grandpa," I said. Dad's face changed. It was like Rowena's evil face. It gave me the chills. And I could not tell again. Dad took me to the sitting room. Many of our neighbours were there, and some women were crying. I wanted to go and greet Grandpa in his room. Dad said no, I should not go to Grandpa's room because Grandpa had gone home.

But this is Grandpa's home," I said.

"Grandpa is dead," Dad said.

I was happy Grandpa was dead. I laughed and jumped and jumped until Dad's mighty hand slapped my face. His Rowena face said: "You wicked and evil child. Do you have any sense at all?"

I could not tell. It was then that Mum took me away. I was not happy again because Dad's Rowena face just stayed in my face. That was all I could see.

I was in the room with Bota. The sun was shining outside. And I could tell. Then I said to Bota: "Let's go and play in the sun."

Bota said: "Grandpa is dead."

Then I laughed. Bota did not laugh. Then he asked why I laughed. "Grandpa is dead, you said Grandpa is dead," I said and laughed again. Bota did not laugh.

Then he said: "You don't laugh when somebody dies. You cry instead."

"Who said so?"

"Nobody said so. But I know it."

I did not know it like Bota. Because I was still in the nursery class. I did not say anything. Then I said: "Why should I cry?"

"Because somebody is dead. Grandpa is dead. Don't you understand?"

"Dad said Grandpa has gone home, that's what Dad told me," I said. Bota did not say anything. Then I asked: "Where is Grandpa's home?"

"Why, here is our home, and here is Grandpa's home," Bota said.

But I did not know it like Bota. Because I did not say anything. Then I thought and said to myself: Bota put salt on the earthworm. It died and we laughed. I put salt on Grandpa. Grandpa died and Bota said I should cry. Maybe because it's not Bota that put the salt on Grandpa. "I will ask Grandpa," I said to myself.

Bota and I were playing games under the sun. I was happy playing games under the sun. But it was not like those days before Grandpa went home. It was not like it. I was happy I was winning. Then the sun changed. There were clouds in the sky. Bota looked at his wristwatch and said it was time for dinner, we should stop playing. I wanted to continue playing. Bota said it was time. Then I said:

"Grandpa said you cannot cheat time, but time can cheat you."

Bota did not say anything. When I became tired of waiting, he said: "We can cheat time. Let's cheat time."

We played and played and played. Then we saw a lizard on the wall. The lizard nodded its head. "The lizard is cheating time," I said.

"It's a lie," Bota said. "It's just nodding its head."

"It's cheating time," I said again.

"It's just nodding its head," Bota insisted.

"Why is it nodding its head?"

"It's praising itself since nobody is praising it, that's what Mum said," Bota said.

"Mum said it's not good to praise yourself," I said.

"But Grandpa said we should be proud of who we are, that's what Grandpa said before he died," Bota said.

"It's a lie, Grandpa did not die. Grandpa only went home. He will come back," I said.

"You are just a baby. You don't know anything. Going home is the same thing as dying," Bota insisted.

"Grandpa will still come back. I know it. He told me yesterday he will still come back."

"You are a liar. I will tell Mum. You cannot see Grandpa anymore. Where did you see Grandpa?"

"He came to the room yesterday. I was lying on the bed. He said I should pray for you," I said.

"You are lying," Bota said.

"I saw Grandpa. I know it, I know it."

Then Bota did not say anything. He did not play again. I did not like Bota again. I did not lie.

"Mum said you lose love when you lie, because we live to love," I said.

"No, we love to love, like the chocolate-strawberry ice cream mix that Mum buys from the supermarket."

"You will see, I will show you Grandpa when he returns," I said.

"Let's kill the lizard," Bota shouted.

We picked stones. Then Bota threw the stones at the lizard and I threw my stones too. The lizard was moving away. Bota threw, I threw. Bota threw and it hit the lizard. It fell and hit its tail on the ground many times. Bota ran to it. I did not. Then Bota hit it with a stone. The tail danced and danced and stopped.

Bota said: "It's dead." We laughed and laughed. I was happy.

I joined Bota. But I saw the head of the lizard. It was badly smashed. There was blood on the ground. I didn't like it at all. The eyes were popping out of the head and were looking at me. Like the lizard was saying something to me. I felt sorry for the lizard. I was not happy. Maybe it didn't feel good to kill. The popping eyes of the lizard!

Then rain started falling on the lizard. Bota wanted us to play in the rain. But I was not happy. Mum called us inside.

"We cheated time," Bota said. Because Bota knew it, I nodded my head. But I was not happy. Then we went to bed. And I saw the smashed head of that lizard. It was nodding at me.

"Life and death are two sides of a coin," the eyes of the lizard said to me.

Isioma Kasim is Nigerian. He obtained Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English from University of Ibadan in 1994 and 2003 respectively, and a PhD in Creative Writing from Adeleke University in 2025. He is a lecturer at Adeleke University, Ede. He has written numerous short stories, one of which made the final shortlist in a BBC international short story competition. His novel, The Fire Festival, was published in 2015 in the United States.

BODY

KHLOE KAMMERZELL

There is something about the shower.

I think it's the sound.

Silence filling the shape of water and the hum of the fan, scrubbing
the scent of pine and smoke from my skin. Its hands roam

my flesh. Its heel is at my throat. I called this cruelty before, but it is rage now—undefinable and
inconsolable the longer it

Rots

in my body.

I stand in front of the mirror dripping water onto the floor.

Wipe the condensation from the glass.

Brush out the tangles in my hair.

Downstairs, my mother will be making him breakfast. They are in love, she tells me.

Love.

Appreciative moans will climb up his throat and fall out his mouth

as he eats. He'll compliment her cooking, her beauty, her curves. He'll hug her from behind as she
stands over the stove and bury his chin into her neck.

He'll smell like pine and cigarettes.

My mother will smile at me when I come into the kitchen. Morning, she'll say.

Wastin' all the hot water again, he will chide.

I'll pour myself a cup of coffee and place a bagel in the toaster.

I won't look either of them in the eye, but I will wonder all day if they can endure pain better than
I can.

Well after dark, when the trees are black against the sky, he will come knocking on my door
again.

This time, I'll be ready for him.

Half the bathroom cabinet down my throat, vodka burning holes through my blood.

I will crack open my door and tell him to come back in twenty minutes, I will have a surprise for
him then.

He will smile like a fool.

"Actually," I'll change my mind. I'll want to be sure.

"Make it twenty-five."

*Khloe Kammerzell lives in Chicago, writing about identity,
memory, loss, chaos, and the inexhaustible complexities of
being human.*

Love

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