

SHORT STORY COMPETITION 3rd PLACE 2017

BLOATED by Hanna Ali

His name feels overweight on my tongue; too heavy to roll out, too bloated to keep in. Sometimes I stare a bit longer than is normal at every middle-aged black man I come across in the street. Letting my eyes glaze over so that I can shine for him, or maybe so that he can shine for me. I have willed him into existence many times before, he was so handsome and young, but lately, he hides in grey-bearded men. He must be sixty-ish by now, with a frame large enough to cast a shadow on hidden shame. He looms in the palm of my little hand, between the lifeline and ink stains. I cannot wash him out of my hair, nor between my legs. His legacy still lingers in unwanted glances from men, I am now too old to search for his approval in mouths that reek of liquor and it is too late to un-eat the hurt. The day he died (in my version of events), I grew taller and more sure of myself. It's hard to imagine that little cherub faced I, big eyelashes and a scent of four scoops of *Nido*, couldn't glue my parents back together. His thighs, her shoulders, my chubby knees - their stubbornness for decoration. It's perhaps my biggest failure thus far, that I couldn't distract them long enough for them to grow into tolerating each other. All we ever do is merely tolerate each other. My mother's version of events has changed so much and so often that the only thing I can now be sure of is that of my existence. She calls him by his name, casually, like the way you do of an ex in a conversation, but I don't ever say his name aloud so there's no point in you asking me either. Okay? Good.

Between you and I, my father is very much alive but I haven't quite decided what I want to do about that yet.

Displacement in the reception hall smells like cold sweat in a *Baydhabo* bus station. Sweden holds the door open politely and smells of barley fields, smoked salmon and stale coffee. The clock on the wall is louder here, more determined. The woman opposite me is flicking through a fashion magazine with a malnourished seductive white woman on the cover. Every time she turns the page, she glances at the clock and then my way. I wonder if she sees me - through my colour, past my Somali scent and beyond my state-issued clothes. I am looking at her but my eyes wander and focus on the poster behind her of a young girl, about my age, laughing carelessly. Her arms are in the air with, what I could only describe at that point, as yellow hair, that does not defy gravity – ‘*du gamla, du fria*’ written on the left-hand corner. Years later, whilst sitting in a bus as a teenager in Southampton, I’ll suddenly remember this phrase – thou ancient, thou free. I did not understand this little girl's nonchalance and I experienced my first known bout of anxiety that I may lose something as big as myself, or memory, the day that I understood her.

I am suddenly startled by a man’s voice and the sheer effort he puts into making it sound sweet and harmless simply because I am a little girl. I enjoy this, the privilege of being spoken to as a little girl, where someone is conscious of filtering out harm and presenting you with a polished version of a human being. Up until then I had only been spoken to as someone who is responsible; the kind of responsibility that comes after memorising the smell of death and squeezing into an overcrowded jeep with only a pair of flipflops to take me across the border of Somalia and Kenya. I was a little woman, four years old and coping surprisingly well with the divorce – war has impeccable timing in distracting you from abandonment.

We are now in a much smaller room with a bean bag in the corner and an odd collection of toys that glisten in a way that shows off the variety of sticky fingers and snot that have recently found comfort in them. The bean bag is meant to signify safety and comfort, it says: you are too traumatised to sit in a chair like an adult, the innocence you're searching for can be found on the floor. I must write this down. Counselling is the nearest cure for children coping with the horrors of war, we were told by the immigration office, and so I learned to bring my anxieties to the surface, a sort of show-and-tell of hurt for someone else take note of. This is one of the few memories that remain so vivid, perhaps because the counsellor looked like my father. I memorised his face so much that, eventually, it became the only one I saw when I thought of my father. I suppose it would like buying a frame and preferring the stranger in the picture rather than your own, stranger, that is.

It took ten years to become a Swede and for good behaviour, we were rewarded with a nationality that would open-up the borders that we crawled through, sneaked into and hid from. In exchange for this, I traded in my mother tongue for an alphabet with dots on top and sounds that would have otherwise been used for trying to induce vomit, rather than articulating emotion. The year after we became Swedish, my mother shipped us to England and turned her back on the broken language that she had just managed to perfect in speaking badly enough to pass for a naturalised alien. I quite like that word, alien, it's too absurd to be an insult but instead it promises a remoteness and a distance that cannot be measured by man. Imagine, being so different, so *unfamiliar*, that your very scent can cause discomfort. Like moths, we flocked to England, as if earning the acknowledgement of being British would better suit a black face, rather than a Swede who sort of seemed to have the right to remain so exclusive. I still cringe at calling myself a Swede, knowing that I am looked upon no worse than declaring myself the vegetable version of the word, by having the audacity to wear a badge that white. But British I could grow into somehow; its colonial charm could mould

itself around me in a rather exotic fashion. I could learn to love being a subject of a Queen, these knees were made for kneeling and surrendering to forces greater than myself by way of being a medal for mediocre men.

The second time that I felt as small as I did in the room with the bean bags in the corner is right now, in the consultation room of the early pregnancy unit. Over two decades had passed and I was still being addressed as a little woman by a man who put equal amount of effort into sounding sweet and harmless. We both knew what was about to happen, a box of condoms and lubricants hidden from view. Abnormal bleeding in the first trimester had led me to this room with a man whose face was fully prepared to deliver, not babies, but bad news. He had a rehearsed sombre look to him, careful to not make the transvaginal ultrasound more horrible than it would be. His eyes dart from my face to the empty seat next to me and I am suddenly made aware of how lonely I must seem amid my sorrow with no partner to squeeze my hand. This is what my mother must have looked like. The doctor asked me what had happened and I started, as I always do, with my father, and the journey of reaching this room. I know that this is not what he expected to hear, my collection of short stories that seem to surface whenever men ask me what has happened.

The silence elbows its way around the room. I am giving him time to take in all the information that he has just heard. His face is one that screams out its thoughts: “shit, this is not how I expected my morning to go”, it says. I wanted to tell him that he looks just like my father, and how sure of it I am, that he lives in a little frame next to my bed. Instead, I look back up at him, perhaps indicating that I am now out of the spell that lead to twenty minutes of my life story. I clear my throat. He removes his glasses and puts one arm of the frame into his mouth. We both wait, quietly.

“This is more common than you think,” he starts, leaning forward with this elbow on this thigh, a fist gently resting under his chin. He tilts his head to the side in a move that is meant to indicate a candid and informal conversation. I am annoyed at my inability to stop analysing him. I want to write, to compartmentalise this moment.

“Your scan didn’t raise any concerns,” he continues, “the ovaries are fine and there is no reason as to why you shouldn’t be able to have a successful pregnancy with only about a twenty percent chance of this occurring again, which is perfectly normal for your age,” he leans back into the chair, which means that we are now back to being more formal with one another.

“Do you have any further questions?”, he asks me, and reaches for the hand sanitiser on his desk for the third time, making sure that even his clean is clean. I quite enjoy sitting here with him, it’s the closest I’ll get to loving; being able to talk about your emotions with a man who you have just spread your legs for.

What if I told you that the only thing I ever loved about my body was its ability to introduce me to someone I can love? A man or a child, anything, is better than being asked to love myself.

I tell him that I don’t have any further questions and leave the room without shaking his hand, a relief for us both.

I was once told that I was searching for my father through all the men that I, let’s say, loved, but I just think that growing up in Europe means that the smell of death is no longer that of rotting limbs but instead hand sanitiser and stained clothes, where peeing in a cup with your knickers around your ankles reminds you that everything that comes from you is warm, at first. At times, I confuse my unresolved feelings towards my father for that of my long-lost country. What’s the difference between the two, anyway? They interchange in my thoughts.

Somalia stubbornly refuses to let me forget that, at first chance, I fled, and now I speak to her with a broken tongue; my mere existence reminding her that others raised her little girl. His little girl. You, see? Don't write this down. There is no Somalia for me to run away to, no daddy to sink my teeth into. Instead, all I can do is replace state-issued clothes for recognisable brands in hope that I can wipe the refugee smudge from the folds of my body. Smothering myself with lavender instead of myrrh so that, I too, can smell familiar and accounted for. Soon I will be forced to go back home, to my paper home, they say, as Britain begins to close her borders and uproot all of us vegetables and vagabonds. You see, I write away the inconsolable fear that I am no different from the women in the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. And so, I take out a pen and pad and I begin to write: the sky peels above me like ripe oranges...