



Sage Cigarettes Magazine

Southern Issue 2020

"For the Culture"

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Letter to my Abuelo

I wish that when I thought of you I only saw your awesome mustache,
Or the way we thought you were so cool
We called you Roberto Cop as kids (because, you know, RoboCop)

I wish I only saw your amazing grace
And the way your congregation still sees you
Because you are sorely missed
But still spoken of so often

I wish I had memories of spending time with you
I wish I had memories of you and grandma together
I wish I had more than pictures
And I wish I could see you the way mommy does
As a powerful force, a Taino warrior
Who protects us even in death

Instead, when I think of you
First it's your big, bushy eyebrows
Which have become a beauty standard in my mind
Then I see my dad and his ego
Who stopped us from seeing you before you were gone
And we had no idea when we came to visit
The first thing we wanted to do was see
Grandma and Grandpa

To be the only grandkids who weren't at the funeral
Is something I still haven't recovered from
And maybe I never will

But I can take solace and comfort
With seeing you in every yellow butterfly



I am...

I am Theseus,
hand outstretched in the dark,
touched on all sides by a lifetime
of bottled bovine breaths
in a cold fear that only
the hunted have known.

I am Twain, tapping my toe, watching
the wilderness above for
the blazing flash I rode in
on to reappear.

I am Vincent,
guzzling a gullet of
yellow acrylic like it was Chardonnay,
like it was a sunset in bloom,
like it was the house at Arles.

I am jack, my mind, splattered,
like chunks of strawberry jam trailing from the tail of a Ford Lincoln.

Ich bein ein Berliner;
I am a jelly doughnut

I am—



Barren Woman

A black-haired woman
with a thin, frail body,
lying naked from head to toe
with a *kashkul* in her hands,
asking for a penny
from those moving around the corridor.

I often dream of aid.

Her hazel green eyes
complement the mole on her neck
while her delicate hands tell me
her mother never involved her in any household chores —
she was always her dear darling.

She was once called kindness
now known as the trace.

Bhopal: The Brimming Heart of India

Here's my hand I know the way. After all, it is my homeland. With many a-curves in history, it has fret and with many a-caves, lakes and forests King Bhoj has set, brimming with snapshot heavens, a fairy foreland — Bhopal, known as the city of lakes, the brimming-beating heart of Madhya Pradesh, the heart of Heart of India.

Sail with me on a little boat, watch the Moon rise silently over the Upper Lake and play hide and seek with the clouds as we do some powwow, about the facts and folklore, about the curves — some sharp and some only apparitions in its long history.

King Bhoj build Bhopal in 11th Century along with the Upper lake, the oldest human-made lake in India upon which our boat babbles on this silent night. There's an old wives' tale, that the king constructed this lake to cure himself of a skin disease.

From our vantage point in this little boat, you can see the cable bridge in the east, its sparkling neon cables casting a reflection in the rippling dark water of the lake. Across the bridge, the upper lake or the Bhojtal, named after the King gives away to the Lower Lake, together known as Bhoj Wetlands. There are many lakes here in Bhopal, criss-crossing the city like blood veins in a human body. In the west stands a 32-foot huge statue — Raja Bhoj standing triumphantly over a pedestal with a sword, overseeing the Bhojtal.

Hold on tight now, my dear, in the history of Bhopal, there came a jarring curve, shocking the whole world. Misery and Death poisoned the blood veins of the city in December 1984. A gas leak incident killing people by the tens of thousands at the night of 2-3 December 1984. A city build and lived-in by kings and queens for thousands of years fell into ruins and became a ghost town.

Most of the people left Bhopal and those who stayed, they inhaled the dangerous air and lived in an eerie atmosphere and when they lay in their beds on those winter-nights they believed every dog in Bhopal was barking at the moon, they listened to it, to the ghosts roaming in the streets of Bhopal and they prayed.

The world has moved on since then, sorrow and terror of 1984 have just become ghosts of the past.

On this lake I once witnessed the most beautiful sunset of my life. It was from this very splendid spot itself, from where now we are now gazing at the radiant Moon hanging in the night sky filled with stars and its silver shadow shimmering in the black rippling water of the lake.

Setting Sun

had swum upon the lake

raging fire beneath the water

it had painted the sky with burning colours

but before it could paint it red

the golden lake washed it at the horizon

candy coloured in the afterglow of sunset

Kin

Previously published in Plainsong, Vol VIII, I summer 1991.

From the window we watched the skunk
mother waddle legless through our lawn,
sniffing each blade, pausing to grub
as small versions of herself followed behind
her tail plume, made jabs at the foliage, trying
to perfect what mother had done.

On the porch, toad emerged like jags
of fieldstone grown legs,
a crooked leg crawl, then splat—
one big mother and four young.
It was not clear why they came.
There was nothing to eat, nothing to do
but mingle in their small congregation.

Mother gathered us in the window
to watch these nocturnal goings-on,
the garden residents like visiting kin, admired
for their good sense and unity.

Those long southern evenings
neither skunks nor toads
looked our way.

No matter.

I could turn to mother's long hand on my shoulder.
Our small heads reflected in her wide gold ring

Palimpsest

Previously published in Switched on Gutenberg, 2018

After the funeral I unfurl
the rug my father brought
from India in 1951 —
a dairy farm appears in the middle, facing west,
a pony to the south,
shaggy brown, not bay
not copper, a color
that means he's not there, never was, but here's
the red corn crib, like Dalton's
barn, patchwork quilt
painted on, orange mill, yellow house,
white roof,
green fields, corn
or tangled Sharad grapes, a Gulmohar tree
draped in fiery leaves,
strewn petals of maroon and pink
bower vines where my infant daughter sits
firmly planted among blooms of Shalimar Bagh,
one hand on a Moghul arch,
chalky-white as a Tellico silo

Southern Catholic Mindset

White Catholics in America

Our modern culture is one easily accessed.

It's toasted Wonderbread, Duke's Mayo, Bacon,

Barely any lettuce, and a thick slice of fresh garden tomato.

Sweet tea with ice cubes that clink in a mason jar.

Chicken salad sandwiches and

Clean Lacoste shirts.

Grunge, punk, and Southern Rock

Playing in the house

On a Saturday morning,

While Dad works on the car,

Mom crafts in the living room.

The not-so-distant past is the not-so-distant future.

Let's break from this time,

And travel way way back,

Into the murky depths of ancestry and heritage.

Remember the Celts?

They started near the Danube,

Spread like wildfire, conquering and blending with other cultures.

Your red hair and freckled fair skin belie the truth

Celtic blood in your veins.

You have the shoulders and hips of a warrior,

Wide and Strong.

Ready to take the weight off the shoulders of those who are burdened.

To help to carry the yoke.

Catholic ideas run in my mind, even if I call myself an Agnostic Buddhist.

The Celts didn't believe in identity either.

They believed in peaceful infiltration as well as conquest.

But if you could interview an Immortal Celtic Spirit today,

What would they advise?

"Our people are adventurers.

Greed, hatred, and

delusions our only enemies."

What does my mother say of her enemies?

"Bless their hearts."

maternal

i am a youngest woman
born of a youngest woman
born of a youngest woman.
if you dissected our photo albums
and pulled out a cross section
of each of our faces in the same year,
you will see carbon-copies of
the same youngest woman living in
the same extremity of global distress;
some days i wonder
how to best tell my nainai
that i am still being born.

ouija

there are not enough words
to write my family into existence,
not enough characters on a page
nor lines in an iliad or words in a
dictionary to describe the ways
in which we ebb and flow,
the ways that our conversations
animate out of our chests and
manifest into our ancestors, playing
their histories over and over and over
until they are spoken into reality;
at our reunions, we take panoramas
to capture each and every face,
squeezing on each side into tight margins
to make enough room for the family
whose bodies have long disappeared
but whose stories demand more space
than their breaths were ever granted.

schism

legend has it that, generations ago,
my mother's mother and her people
sliced their skin open over the
naked Earth, packed their blood
into
the weave of the trees' shells, and
grew leaves.
they operate with a steady hand,
an open heart, and plenty of time,
regardless of how many years of
rings
may grow through their core; their
words
move mountains with a single
inflection,
yet with a temperament that could
still a restless sea--
and, by the nature of opposition,
my mother's father was born
blood
straight from volcanic lava and his
heredity
has been nothing but eruptive
ever since. with a presence
heavier than
than the ash that falls, a pristine
layer of
white, in the midst of chaos, they
breathe

oxygen back into the air where
there was
none left to begin with; every
brushstroke
leaves the world a bit more
beautiful
than it had been before, walking
on fire
with a careful tread--
they may not see it, the people
with only a kind smile and a pair
of
freshly-shined work boots to their
name--
they may not understand
that we wear our feet bare as we
work along the earth, so that we
can feel how the tectonic plates
blush
as they ask one another to dance.

This Little Earth

My mother's pandemic life now is documented
in virtual space on the nursing home website
& today everyone is planting seeds in little peat pots.

Mother's pot is empty, the seed packet
unopened on the table, her hands still clean,
her confused gaze squinting at the camera.

She does not know what to do.

All the other elderly people are smiling their dirty hands
proof that their peat-pot-plots will grow.

I want to cry out through this computer screen
I want to tell everyone about the cucumbers
about the tomatoes about the green beans bursting
in Mother's gardens from all her seasons before.

I want the person behind the camera to get it right
against that barren table with the still-sealed seed packet,
the empty dirt ready for planting. *We are farmers!*
I want to shout *Doing the work of the world!*

& I want to ask you, Mother, how you could ever wilt
to be so small & I want to tell everyone that you are a work horse
hoeing, weeding, harvesting, freezing and canning these seeds
so tiny & so huge outliving you in your frailty in your history.

Your glance at the camera pleads with me to help you plant
the mums in October, the geraniums in May. Your muddled
shrug calls forth a truce in me now the work of the world
is germinating in you, sprouting & blooming in me &

I see you through this glass screen the most beautiful person I have ever seen
your eyes filled with the blossoms of yellow summer squash
climbing upwards on the vines of July.

Grapevines

She planted them to climb every structure on the farm,
they crawled across the barn, the chicken coop and house,
allowing my mother and aunts to open the bedroom
window, reach out and pluck the purple fruit.

Great grandmother made her wine during prohibition,
gave my ten-year-old mother sips of the rich merlot
in the cellar surrounded by the scent of harvested potatoes
and apples mingled with oak, rows of canned green
beans, corn and jelly lining the shelves

and grandmother's laughter rising up from the
damp darkness. Everyone said she was crazy
but turns out she was just tipsy is how my
mother described her.

The more she drank, the more she talked of half-siblings,
unwed mothers and other secrets, and whatever she said
in the cellar stayed there, fermenting
with the forbidden juice.

Where I Came From

"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's star."

William Wordsworth

"Go back where you came from," he said,
and I looked at the ground beneath my feet.

I did not think he meant South Carolina.

"Here?" I wondered. "Does he mean here?"

I emerged from this earth like a buzzard rock,
and my cells are stardust and oceans and light.

It is not time for me to go back where I came from.

I want to live long enough to vote one more time.

"Go back where you came from," he said,
and I logged onto the Internet like a college student.

"Who am I? Where am I from?" I asked.

"My Ancestral DNA Analysis," it said, and I clicked.

A sage observed it is incorrect to claim one land as home
when we are as diverse as all the words Rumi spoke.

And let us not forget our Neanderthal and Denisovan kin.

"Go back where you came from," he said,
meaning anywhere but here, this ground, Virginia.

But where could I go if I got exiled for speaking out?

Deciding would be like choosing between two children
or cutting off my nose to spite my face.

England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany, Sweden,
Senegambia, the Congo, Southeast Asia, East Africa, Spain —

maybe these places need me, but so does this country
my many ancestors fought over, against each other,
one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all
(the one torn from the arms of some of my ancestors
who are so hallowed I do not deserve to speak their name).
“Go back where you came from,” he said.
“How do I get back there from here?” I asked.
Spreading myself that thin would be genetically impossible,
as complicated as decolonization or the color of skin.
I am here and only here and only me and never anybody else,
my soul my life’s star rising between sleep and forgetting
as I navigate in a body as frighteningly white as white
in a nation where anybody who does not look like me
is as vulnerable as some of my ancestors were, and then some

Mahogany Warrior

Mahogany warrior, don't you drop your spear on the ground, don't you drop your shield on the ground, don't you take your armour off.

I know your tired honey, it's a tough world out there.

Criticism, labels, bullshit, racism, injustice, trauma, emotional, mental and physical abuse.

But you are stronger than that, you are better than that. All that weight weighing down on your

broad shoulders, it's okay to let go sometimes baby. It's okay to show emotion, it's okay to shed

tears.

IT'S OKAY. Rest your heavy head on mine, and inhale or that stress of this world... And exhale

and release all that hurt you have inside and let that hurt flow from your big brown eyes.

We got you Mahogany Warrior.

The Sticks

Black pines don't grow here;
They say their wood is harder,
Old growth with whirling patterns
Spinning so tight together that
When I force a nail into the wood,
The only thing that splits is me.

Semi-trucks stop on the street
With loads of fresh lumber,
Yellow pines, soft to the touch;
He promises each will still stand
Twenty to thirty years,
It's pressure-treated, just in case.

But when the cathedral in Paris
Burned up into the sky,
Only stone was left behind,
Stone and a golden cross —
But there are no trees left
Big enough to become a crucifix.

All the trees in America grow in rows,
Straight like the beams of the cross;
Walk for days and see nothing but pines.
Once, I walked to the next town over.
I stopped beside a burned-out church
The pastor burying an empty gas can.

My Mother

Well, ey, oh, my Mother locked herself in the bathroom again.

She's back, no money, no liquor, drinking isopropyl again.

The bitch is outside my room, scratching my door, calling me a pussy again.

She's crashing her Camaro and getting a new one again.

I can't take this shit, I run away, I come back, when will it end?

Well, ey, oh, I slashed her brand new tires like the doctor slashed my umbilical cord.

Don't look at me like that? She broke my heart long before I cut hers. I'm not the villain nor the hero; just mommy's little fucking zero.

She makes me so sick I could fucking puke, like she does when I'm holding her hair back from the toilet. And every other thing I've done for her while she was drunk and didn't give a fuck.

I blame her and she blames me. I didn't ask to be born, but that shit is so goddamned trite it makes me wanna stab my eyes out with golden pins.

There's a certain flow and rhythm to the trauma she puts me through. It all makes sense within the context of the story she's trying to tell.

I never mattered. I was nothing more than a bargaining tool: a shitty reflection that eventually talked back.

I didn't give a shit no matter what she did. Maybe the problem is my apathy? She smoked meth, she snorted coke, she drank her way to the moon and back. She indebted herself on clothes, dogs, horses, cars, anything and everything and doesn't keep them for long. As a child she lied about my cracked head, she cut my penis with her nail, she seperated my shoulder, tearing me away from my dad. I think she shot my eye with an air rifle, she said it was an accident. By the way she never gave me lunch money, so I went to school with an empty tummy.

She's done much and more. My first bully was *her*.

This was just a taste. I'm proud to be Native, but our generations are starting to waste.

Oh shit, my bad, I'm sorry! Did I rant about my Mother again





Hanboks and Moccasins

He met her at some American diner that reeked of burger grease and dying nostalgia. The kind of place where the past was being sold for a profit. He hated everything from the Art Deco designs. To the colorized photos of dead celebrities and vintage cars. Though, she didn't mind the retro aesthetic as much.

Set on the table between them were two large shoe boxes.

For the last ten minutes, they were in the middle of a conversation. A conversation he was having a hard time focusing on. His withdrawnness was thanks to the smooth and shiny ceramic tiling everywhere. The contrasting black and white squares compounded with the ring-ding from a revolving door. Continuously distracting for his epilepsy. Like something out of a sci-fi dystopia where men carried concealed rayguns and drove flying '55 thunderbirds . . .

"Hey Austin!" She raised her voice, but not with aggression, to snap his attention back to

her. "Are you ready?"

He didn't respond right away. What had caught his drifting mind now was a ding from the revolving door . . .and the person that followed that ding; A pregnant lady in a white maternity dress. Most people would hardly notice she was carrying if it were not for her hands placed over the baby bump that looked like a tiny white elephant.

He jerked his head back to look at her. "Ready for what?"

"Ready to swap the shoeboxes? I figure we do it now before the food arrives."

Realization dawned, she took a deep breath and a gulp from her mug. "Ready as I'll ever be."

They swapped the shoeboxes and lifted the lids.

With the lid lifted his eyes fell upon the daintiest looking hanbok he'd ever seen.

She, of course, would be looking at miniature regalia and moccasins.

He picked up a striking yellow garment. It came with a dark blue skirt decorated with red flower petal images. When he moved the hanbok the skirt followed, flowing with graceful curves. At the bottom of the now empty shoebox was an old photograph of Yoon in the hanbok.

"My adopted mother got the hanbok from my birth mother. The Women who fostered me as a baby in Seoul taught my adoptive mother how to tie an ot-ogreum. I remember how frustrated she was with me that I kept untying the coat strings that formed the bow. I thought it was a fun game."

"The skirt is gorgeous. I like the pattern."

"The patterns and colors separate the nobility from the lower classes. Brighter colors for nobility and duller for the poor."

"Dang, I didn't know any of that. What does hanbok mean?" She laughed at that.

"You're asking the wrong person. Korean clothing, I think? I could be wrong. And the shoes I wore are Gomusin."

"Do you know what the shoes in my box are?"

"Yes? They're little baby moccasins. And the picture is of a little baby you in the little baby moccasins. I adore it."

"A moccasin-type varies between the many diverse Indigenous tribes. People grossly generalize it as sewn Indian footwear with any tribal design. The word comes from the Powhatan language. And stuck because white colonizers had contact with them first. The subtle difference in the soles and seams identify tribes from one another."

"Your baby moccasins look hand-sewed."

"My mom made them for me. his being an intensive and sacred process. Regalia is often

commissioned by those close to the wearer. She used deer hide and learned from library books on how to get the u-shape above the toe. Then she added the beadwork, quillwork, painted designs, and fringes to the moccasins."

"Did you dance in the regalia?"

"Yeah, my mother has it on an old VHS somewhere. I did it for several elders."

"My anthropology professor actually brought up Klamath and Modoc Natives recently."

"What do they have to say?"

She stopped analyzing the moccasins in her hands. Setting them back in the box to answer. "They brought up the sandals found at Fort Rock Cave dating to about 10,000 years of old. That would make the sandals of your ancestors the oldest dated footwear in the world. Ethnographers documented all the three tribes you're connected to using them. Klamath, Modoc, and Paiute."

"I've seen those at a museum once with my grandmother. I also learned what made a Paiute shoe a Paiute shoe. Tule reeds, sage bark, and sometimes they stuffed dry grass in them.

This was to keep them insulated from the icy marshlands where they walked. And —"

"I love you!" She interrupted.

"And I love you." He repeated while reaching over the table to hold her hand.

Her brown eyes looked into his, they'd done countless times before. "Can you picture a child

from us in a hanbok and moccasins?"

"I can after this."

"So can I. It's almost bringing me to tears"

"Remember that I'm with you no matter what."

"Thank you. I know that."

"Have you made your decision?" He gripped her hand tighter. Embracing the answer that would decide the future of their relationship. Sweat dripped from his palms onto hers like nervous raindrops.

"I have. I'm going forward with terminating the pregnancy. It's just not the right time and with my history of endometriosis —"

"Say no more." He brought her hand forward to her and kissed the top. Then let go.

"Let's do this together. One step at a time." He closed the lid on her hanbok box. She then closed the lid on his moccasins. They set them underneath the table.

Curated Concrete

Previously Published

When you leave a city, no one bothers to tell you when your childhood home is torn down to make room for a new, better building. One with elevators and fire escapes. When you visit, you just walk through new streets, new people, skyscrapers you used to think were only possible in dreams. But if you stretch your fingers out to the sky, you can still cover the glass windows with a single finger tip.

In the neighborhood you grew up in, there is one building standing, not yet demolished to make way for a modern apartment complex. It sways with the wind, bamboo framework barely held together by crumbling concrete. It is an island in an ocean of planned rubble. It is midday and the sun shines upon it like a spotlight.

Inside is the ghost of a woman you once knew, when you lived here. She has aged and so have you, but you still drink afternoon tea together, reminisce about little boys and girls playing in mosquito-ridden courtyards. You have lived ten years without speaking your mother tongue,

and there is a part of you that never wants to leave this little shack.

But you are being eaten alive by gnats, and your hair is going frizzy, and your skin is sticky from sweat and water vapor and jasmine tea. This woman, who has seen more change in her world than you ever will, smiles at you, puts her hands, soft and furrowed with age, onto yours. She gives you a blessing, then sends you off with a bag of garden-grown fruit.

When you leave a city, you will never not miss the sunsets. Once upon a time, you were there and could grasp each falling ray. Once upon a time you could've stayed, lived every day

and learned every new neighborhood name. But there is a white picket fence fourteen hours and an ocean away that you will return to. You think about your son who will never see the city like you have. He will see a testament to human industrialism in development while you will see your grandmother's floating hands in every old lady selling vegetables on the sidewalk.

Grief gives you a suffocating embrace during the red-eye back home. Let another ten years pass, let yourself forget the taste of jasmine tea, cover old memories with a blackened tarp.

A city is only curated concrete



Taking Care

Previously published in The Quilliad Issue 9, Oct 2017

The suburban yards were reverting back into the forest. The Tams' burgeoning oak tree shed its leaves, scattering orange, red and yellow, coming to land and rot in my backyard. I watched them flutter and spiral as I sat in my Muskoka chair, taking a few minutes to enjoy the breeze.

The roof of the Tams' house had a large hole in it, and the raccoons came and went, their black eyes examining me as I examined them. The house of my other former neighbours, the Lakanis, had its windows boarded up, though to what purpose, I don't know. There was no one left to do any looting. The houses in the Beaches neighbourhood, once so expensive, now settled in some stage of decomposition, their owners long since absconded, or dead.

I slung the shot-gun over my shoulder and headed back into the house. After closing the sliding door, I locked it and replaced both broom handles, wedging them in the track between the door and wall. I hadn't been attacked in years, but I could never be too careful. I propped the shot-gun against the wall beside the door.

I headed down to the basement, sat down on the stool beside my mother's metal-frame bed, and dipped the wash cloth into the bucket, wringing out the excess water. Picking up one of

my mother's shriveled arms, the skin pale and thin, I ran the cloth over it, taking care to avoid her snapping teeth. The restraints rubbed a raw ring around her wrists and ankles.

She may never die. Or she may be already dead. But every day, I come down to the basement and wash her and feed her congee or winter melon soup. I use an over-sized spoon since my hands are clumsy from wearing rubber gloves. In case she does manage to get in a bite, I pray they will be enough to prevent her from breaking the skin.

A brochure from the Toronto Public Health, the corners yellowed and curled with age, lay on the floor, next to my King James Bible. I glanced over it, although I have already read it many times before, what little good it has done for me and my family.

Because the natural reservoir host of D780 virus has not yet been identified, the manner in which the virus first appears in a human at the start of an outbreak is

unknown. However, researchers believe that the first patient became infected through contact with an infected animal.

When an infection does occur in humans, the virus can be spread in several ways to others. D780 is spread through direct contact (through broken skin or mucous membranes in, for example, the eyes, nose, or mouth).

IF YOU KNOW OF ANYONE BITTEN, ISOLATE THE PATIENT AND CALL
THE TORONTO PUBLIC HEALTH IMMEDIATELY.

I know I should have called the number on the brochure when she was first infected. But I saw what they did to my father and sister. The men in the Hazmat suits came and took them away, and I never saw them again. Later, I found out they had burned the bodies.

"Mom," I said as she writhed in the restraints, "everything's going to be okay."

But really, I didn't know.

She gave no sign she recognized me, her eyes an opaque white, whiter than when she had cataracts. I still spoke to her, although she could no longer speak. Only strangled sounds came from her throat. She reminded me of my grandmother who used to live with us until she passed. She couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Hakka, but somehow we always understood each other. She would hold my hands, kiss my cheeks, and her skin smelled of Tiger Balm. She would make steamed buns and fold countless wontons. I would help her — a spoonful of ground meat in the centre of the wonton wrap, fold the wrap in half, dab water on one corner so it would stick to the other corner. Repeat until all the wontons were made then boil them in soup.

Over the years, my grandmother developed dementia and needed constant care. My mother looked after her without complaint, washing her emaciated body, coaxing spoons of congee into her mouth. "A daughter's duty," my mother used to say. "A burden of love."

Any day now, the scientists will come up with a cure. For nine years, they have been saying this. Any day now.

"Believe in God," my mother had begged me, after she had been bitten. "Pray for me."

I look after her as she did for me when I was child, and I have my memories to sustain me.

When I was young, my parents used to take me to Wasaga Beach. We'd eat fried chicken, our fingers oily from the grease, and dessert was cubed pieces of ripe watermelon from a Tupperware container. My sister and I would play in the shallow waves. This was years before the virus emerged from the jungle and shrouded the earth. Before D780, when the water was blue, the sand warm, and the air was bright and clean.

No Ordinary Man

Heinrich Strömier was no ordinary man. His blond hair and crystal blue eyes would have endeared him to the Fatherland during the Second World War. But that would be in a different century. The Franco-Prussian War was his family's immediate concern. In a desperate and, ultimately futile, attempt to shield his family from the horrors of war, Heinrich's father uprooted them from their German home and emigrated to England. He set up shop in the East End of London and, in a period of peace, Heinrich was born.

Although poorly-educated, Heinrich was a quick-witted, intelligent young man. One of eleven children, he soon learned how to look after himself and his younger siblings. That would stand him in good stead in later life. At his stall on the Black Horse Road in Walthamstow, he spoke the local lingo in his own peculiar accent and sold "whatever anybody wanted", earning himself both a good reputation and a fair living.

His good looks and jovial charm meant that he was never short of a partner at the Friday night dances but his fancy was taken was Emily Carter, a robust young girl of Irish descent, with a round face and deep green eyes. Her family had been in London for many generations. Although they were firmly established in the East End, they remained fiercely proud of their ancestry and never forgot their immigrant roots. As such, they welcomed a fellow foreigner into their midst and were happy to accept his proposal of marriage to their daughter. In keeping with their Celtic heritage, they partied hard at the wedding, even as the storm clouds of the Great War began to gather over Europe.

Heinrich and his new bride settled into a two-up, two-down rented house in Hamilton Road, E17. Typical of the time, it had no running hot water, an outside toilet and a dolly tub and mangle in the yard but they loved their new home. He continued to work at the market, she grew vegetables in their tiny, triangular garden and they thought about starting a family.

Meanwhile, in a faraway country, Archduke Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated. "The war to end all wars" was about to begin.

In Britain, trouble was in the air. Heinrich was not one to panic. This, too, would work to his advantage in the future. He reassured his anxious wife and watched the political situation carefully. He was already formulating a plan when his hand was forced by sudden, unprovoked bouts of "Jerry bashing" that erupted in the local community. Two of his brothers received severe beatings at the hands of these zealous vigilantes. Even Emily, who was well known and liked in the neighbourhood, began to receive both insults and even threats for being married to a "Hun." Heinrich decided that it was time to launch his pre-emptive strike.

On the eve of war with Germany, he joined the British Army.

The establishment regarded him with deep suspicion at his enlistment. As the great-grandson of a German Baron, his papers were checked thoroughly. When found to be in order, the military subjected to a particularly rigorous medical, in the hope of finding some other reason to reject him. His great physical fitness provided no excuse for his exclusion. The army pondered the situation. Eager volunteers, convinced that "it will all be over by Christmas," were enlisting in large numbers. But the establishment guessed otherwise. They were going to need as much cannon-fodder as they could muster. A German in their ranks could be quite useful in the long run. If he made it to the long run. Heinrich was signed up by the British Army and his progress monitored.

At first, the rest of his battalion was openly hostile to him. They perceived him as the enemy in their midst, a spy who would steal secrets then shoot them in their sleep. But Heinrich was not easily intimidated. He persisted and passed his basic training with flying colours. He maintained his friendly manner and, gradually, his comrades began to warm to his easy charm. Eventually, they even accepted him as their sergeant when his instinctive leadership led to his promotion.

As a German in the British army, Heinrich Strömier was no ordinary soldier and he soon found himself in no ordinary situation. Finding that he was the highest ranking officer left in his squad, he surveyed the scene with carefully-concealed horror; the conditions, the combat, the complete carnage. A total contrast to the jolly "play up, play up and play the game" ethos of the recruitment office. Nobody had ever seen anything like this before; the flies, the lice, the stench of the sewers, trenches that ran with blood and the sound of grown men screaming for their mothers as they died. Unaware of their seventeen day life expectancy, Heinrich's men, like thousands of others, were forced to swallow their disbelief and settle into trench existence in the hope that it would all be over soon. For most of them, it was.

They learned to live with the rats and the rations and, in time, even became deaf to "the shrill, demented choir of wailing shells." Of all the degrees of deprivation, the most difficult day-to-day danger was the mud. It oozed and sucked and seeped into every aspect of every day; restricting mobility, rotting living flesh and, as the weather grew colder, freezing toes clean off. Heinrich, who didn't escape this particular curse, later told stories of men cracking off their boots to find that they had left lumps of their feet behind. Was slow consumption by gangrene or septicemia preferable to a quick bullet in the skull?

And in the middle of it all, there was No Man's Land. A soaking desert, bare except for the skeletal coils of wire and the skeletal fragments of those caught upon them. The pieces of men cut down by "the stuttering rifle's rapid rattle" or blown apart by mines. The rotting

remains of "The Glorious Dead."

And beyond that, the enemy. The faceless, soulless, amorphous mass of the German Army. Heinrich Strömier's uncles? Cousins? Nephews?

Severely compromised by all these things, survival was still basically dependent upon fresh water. The problem was access. Having been cut off by an enemy pincer manoeuvre, water had to be retrieved from a nearby lake-across No Man's Land.

Heinrich waited for the freezing darkness to fall. He sat and smoked and watched as the ever-changing faces of the youths in his charge prepared themselves for the long hours ahead. As well as significant damage to his feet, he had sustained several other injuries. He had suffered shrapnel wounds and bullet nicks and one particular time, a stone, kicked up by a stray bullet, hit him squarely in the forehead. The whole of the top of his head went numb and, for a moment, he was convinced that it had been blown right off. Wary of the "third light" superstition, on more than one occasion, when an standing right next to him was cut dead by a sniper's bullet as they shared a cigarette. But, he mused, for some reason, he was still here. He smiled as he recalled his father telling him that "If you were born to hang, you'd never be shot."

He lit another cigarette and pulled a filthy envelope from his pocket. He unfolded it carefully and read, once again, the latest news from Emily. She was now working in the local munitions factory, supporting the war effort. But nobody on the factory floor ever spoke to the "Hun-lover." In fact, when she emerged from behind their front door to run the gauntlet to the local shop, no more than twenty yards away, people she had known all her life would appear and pelt her with stones. Apparently, no longer was all fair in love and war. It wasn't just those on the front line who suffered.

Heinrich sighed, refolded the letter and put it back into his pocket. As the light faded, he strapped the water keg to his back and prepared to venture out under cover of darkness. He put one foot on the ladder and stopped. Several times he had stood there, waiting for the whistle; the order from some ancient general tucked up safely miles behind the front line, casually sending a whole generation to their doom. Lions led by donkeys, indeed.

Heinrich slid on his belly across the icy mud. He manoeuvred his way around the stagnant pools of his fallen comrades until his searching fingers found fresh water. He drank deeply then loosened the keg from his back and let it fill. When it was heavy, he slung it back across his shoulders and slid around to face the way he had come, trying to orientate himself in the total blackness.

It was quiet tonight, he thought as he made his way back..

In that split second, a flare went up and suddenly, starkly, the wilderness of No Man's Land was brightly lit. A surprising number of live bodies were out, scavenging among the dead. But their skin was as pale and their eyes as wide as the lifeless faces around them, frozen in the glare. The air was filled with shouts and screams as both sides opened fire. Bullets whizzed and thudded while bodies hurtled around.

Heinrich got up onto his hands and knees and scrabbled through the chaos. He found himself both deafened and flattened by a shell landing nearby. Dazed, he slowly realized that he wasn't actually dead, although his surroundings resembled a passable impression of Hell. As the flare faded, he slipped and skidded towards the trench in front of him and fell over the edge with a groan of gratitude.

He caught his breath and looked up — straight into the wide blue eyes of a German sergeant.

He froze. The sergeant stared. The men around him darted anxious looks at each other and then at their rifles that were facing out towards the enemy lines. The sergeant reached for his pistol.

Heinrich leapt to his feet. "Nicht schießen! Ich bin Deutscher. Ich bin einer von euch!" (Do not shoot! I am a German. I am one of you!)

The shocked sergeant paused, disorientated by his mother tongue falling from the mouth of this "Tommy." In that crucial moment of confusion, Heinrich scrambled up the ladder and tore off across the mud, back to the British front line. Bullets began zipping past him as he ran. He fell to the ground, head first, as one skimmed up his spine. He felt the wetness seeping through his coat.

The young girl listened, mesmerized, as the tale was retold. She had seen the old man's feet, mutilated by the mud. But, despite this, and now being in his ninth decade, he continued to wheel his barrow to the Black Horse Road market every weekend, joking with women thirty years younger than himself, calling them "Mum".

He and his wife eventually had two sons; they lost one to a brain tumour, nursing him through the screaming agony of the days before powerful, palliative drugs were affordable. Although deeply distressed, Heinrich was well used to suffering. Nowadays, he cared for the increasingly frail but still smiling Emily, continued to grow vegetables in their tiny triangular garden and, occasionally, told his tales to the next generation, lest they forget.

The young girl absorbed the story silently, gazing in wonder as the old man turned his back to her, lifted his jumper and showed her the silver scar that topped his sharp spine.

Change

Sometimes words get stuck in my brain and jingle behind my eyes until I extract them and form them into stories. New words picked up from other places join them, like ingredient lists on the back of packaging most people just throw out, not even pausing to look at perfect phrases like 'wild red rice' or 'cooked brown barley.' Whoever wrote that ingredient list was a poet, even if they didn't know it, and I should know, because I have one desperately trying to get out through my fingertips.

Silver flashed. The snow bordering the sidewalk melted back. A 1991 Jefferson head nickel lay abandoned in the mud. I picked it up with frozen fingers and rubbed off grit. So much more than the usual penny.

The last time I met my grandfather before he died, his brain was already dilapidated, thoughts lost deep inside. He sat in his blue recliner, sucking on pieces of Dove white chocolate and repeating the same story every half hour. He and his father went down to Green's shop and got ice cream, three dips for six cents. One penny more than I found on the ground. Pocket change, the kind that falls in silence.

The silver coin stole the warmth of blood returning to my fingertips. It used to be valuable. It still could be if someone redeemed it. Its worth: exactly five hundredths of a dollar, almost three dips of ice cream.

I let the coin jingle into my coat pocket. How many stories passed on student feet? What would it say if it could write instead of only dreaming?

My grandfather worked in numbers, delving through accounts, seeking out misplaced pennies and nickels, forcing books to balance. He loved giving and sharing. He was the first in his family to earn a degree. He collected elephants, hundreds of them. He left behind a wife, four Children, six grandchildren and a legacy of generosity written into those around him.

Years of service barely scratched my nickel. Bartered and exchanged countless times, perpetually passing from person to person. The coin remained almost identical to its past, newly minted self. The writing standing up from its silver surface still shouted out, "five cents!" Meaning something different to everyone who used it or held it in their hands, wondering what to do with all the little round things they received in exchange for paper.

I can still remember a few of my grandfather's stories, the ones he told before the chant of age took over. "Don't get old," he repeated. The grownups laughed and I wondered how to hold on to childhood. Metal is more resilient than personality.

In 1991 the US In God We Trust government determined that specific collection of silver minerals would forever and always be worth five hundredths of a dollar. An interesting thought since that dollar is only paper, and the nickel, one twentieth of its value, will probably last longer.

Some things change and some things stay the same.



Owd' Mahs-sider's

Peter Dick's Pee, Boss's Jack,
Custard Peggy & Tummy Madcat.
Mailie's Charlie, Smiler, Peggy's Nick,
Owd Muff, Sweet & Baylam's Dick.
Buskin, Pop, Owd Bet, Tummy Slender,
Rice Puddin, Music, Bluey & Bender.
Wild Bill, Miriam's John, Pee Reet, Pigtamer,
Wirelegs, Will Tag, Chippy Bob & Sailmekker.
Donkey Jem, Owd Saut, Jakie Tite,
Sally Dobber, Stockins John & Jinny Site.
Rigby's Ails's John, Prickley,
Dick o'Sutton's Will's Bob

Author's Note: 'Owd Mahs-siders' is a list poem that uses actual nicknames of members of a remote fishing community circa 1870.



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Moses Ojo is a young Nigerian artist enthusiast.

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