

And when they leave, I watch Chikyu as he sees them out: this man who loves me, this man who was happy to follow me home to the place where I wanted to be, this man so capable of small kindnesses, of sacrifice and compromise. Of love.

After he falls asleep, I stare at the ceiling, listening to the waves and the wind. I can't recall exactly where Sora lives. I know it's one of the old streets at the other side of town, and I can remember the carving of a fish above the door – but which street exactly? I could call him tomorrow, but I already know I won't.

I have carried the idea of him around with me since I first left this town, turned it over in my hand like a smooth, round pebble, allowed distance to edit my memories as though they were letters I rewrote at will in my head. But tonight I will let the idea of him go.

I creep back downstairs with Sora's note folded inside my fist, open the stove door and drop it into the dying flames.

When I climb back into bed I turn over onto my side, towards something more than love, towards the grey curve of Chikyu's broad back, and listen to his steady breathing until I fall asleep.

Transposition

By Youmna Chamieh

In our cousins' house in Baalbek, by the large crucifix above the kitchen shelves, were rows upon rows of children's books forming a varicoloured scale: *Peter and the Catacomb Burglars*, *Lucy and the Wicked Sorceress*, *The Frivers Club* and *The Ivory Statue*. These tiny heroes, ever bound to their enemies with the word 'and', had victory built into their titles. But we didn't envy them; for if a single word could capture the dominant belief of our childhoods, 'and' may well have been it. We loved the house in Baalbek, and yet it oozed the general smell of death, or what we then considered the general smell of death. It came from our grandmother's orange-blossom perfume, which she kept in the bathroom. Over time, our mothers had begun using the flask to override the smell of shit, and to remedy the unfortunate association, our grandmother had sprayed every other room with orange blossom, too. 'Well done,' our fathers had said. 'Now it smells like shit everywhere.' Back then, this unlikely amalgam was our image of death: something nasty, covered up; a veneer of flowery gloss over a chipped, decaying tooth. We did not yet know that death was most itself in plain sight, that the spectacle of death captured its very essence. All we knew, really, was that our favourite part of the house was the striated wooden door on the top floor that led to a small bridge connecting our cousins' house to the neighbours'. For those of us on both sides, there was something magical, almost ritualistic, about traversing that little bridge. Years before, we were told, a single family had occupied both houses; and we revelled in the sense that, together, we were subverting a most elemental idea about how a sum of parts became a whole. The sun shone so powerfully on the bridge's faded grey tiles that they burned our feet if we tried to cross barefooted, so every morning our parents set down

a plastic bucket filled with water by the bridge. We emptied it out whenever we needed to cross, sometimes daring ourselves, together or privately, to touch with our toes the scalding sections the water had not darkened.

The summer the bucket disappeared was the last summer we spent in Baalbek. Then, in the sweaty, uninterrupted ring of Beirut, adolescence and war began. They blended seamlessly, each promptly claiming the motifs the other had tried to produce. Our ice-cream-stained shirts (Gelati Cortina! we'd sung on the basketball-court benches) became the last item we tried to jam inside a bag for Cyprus, or wherever the boat could take us. The stray missile parts dotting our streets, after the bombings, became the currency we traded and compared at lunchtime. We had started collecting them without a word, like a foregone conclusion, as if an ancient wisdom engraved into our bodies had told us: these are common enough to collect, uncommon enough to be worth collecting. Bunkers were at once the shelters where we prayed for daylight and the nightclubs where, seventeen and blanketed with smoke, we sang 'Living on a Prayer' until our voices cracked, euphoric, transcended, for when the key suddenly changed in the halfway point of the third minute, we knew how to lift up, hit those ineffable notes with everything we had. The song had been written for us, living on all the prayers our gods could handle, ever ready for the sudden change of key.

For there had been changes, changes, changes; but what I did not yet understand was that there had never been a change in the singular form, never *the* change, around which all future analyses would orbit, predictable as moons and yet believing themselves, each time, to be the sun.

The change. The change! It was iterative but quick, the shape of London forming on my parents' lips, then mine, until suddenly it had materialised before me in airport blue letters: LONDON. The word itself formed a symmetrical, decisive image – above all, unfamiliar. In Arabic, letters' shapes changed according to their place inside the word, such that London's sharp middle N had looked nothing like its final, rounded N, and that London itself had resembled a three-pronged gate guarding a cavernous basin.

This was what I was thinking about when the stewardess tapped my shoulder.

'Remember: Hyde Park,' she said with a peek-a-boo motion. 'Hyde, like hiding.'

She had the same issue with her eyebrows that my mother had been trying to fix since the barracks bombing of '83, whereby one brow was a smooth, inky arc while the other was a splintered branch, straight at first, then sharply bent.

I met Charles only two months after starting university, on a Tuesday at the cafeteria. He was studying with a group of friends while I sat at the opposite table with Lisa, a redhead from Liverpool who invited me everywhere on the condition that I tell her friends all about, as she called it, my 'saga'.

Charles was broad-shouldered and would have been handsome if not for a tiny chin that receded naturally into his neck. He was eating a tortilla chicken wrap and rolling something gently between his thumb and forefinger as he read. It was the edge of the tortilla, I realised; he had ripped it off. I would later learn that he did this with all foods – sectioning off his favourite part to eat first, in case he got full and couldn't finish. But he always managed to finish.

He caught me looking at him and looked down, then quickly back up, towards my bag of crisps.

'All out of caprese?' he said.

'Out of what?'

'Caprese. You know. Pesto, mozzarella.' He turned to a friend of his. 'What was I telling you, Mitch? This place is a disgrace. One decent meal they have, one, and they run out before Kickers.'

He had a deep voice and spoke quickly, with a British accent I could not yet place. He offered me a cigarette as well as some pointers on the cafeteria. And when he learned that I was new, he mentioned Kickers again.

'It's this informal get-together that we host every Tuesday,' he said. 'Mostly poli-sci students, some law...'

'Poli-sci?'

He took a drag from his cigarette, his eyes briefly stopping somewhere between my cross pendant and my breasts. 'Political science.'

'Oh,' I said. 'I'm on the Engineering track.'

'Well, that's no problem. Everyone's welcome.'

'I don't know much about politics.'

I did not want to go, but I was curious how worthy I seemed, on first impression, of being convinced.

'Don't have to. I mean, even Mitch and me, you think we were always so informed?' He shook his head. 'I wouldn't even call us "politics" guys, really. It's more about values. Choice, you know? The idea that all individuals have the God-given right to choose between good and evil.'

I wondered if he'd meant to say duty, God-given duty, but I didn't ask. We were silent a minute while we finished our cigarettes.

'Tell you what,' he said finally. 'I'll be walking directly from the Law building, so I can come pick you up. Where will you be?'

'The Engineering building.'

Kickers was only as informal as a get-together with nametags could be. In the right-hand corner, leaning onto a pack of Best Brown Ale, Mitch and Charles were bringing nuance to the notion of a truly secular society. Charles' opinions suited Mitch better; I suspected he was their originator. Eventually, having looped around the room twice and clarified neither secularism nor society, Charles decided there was not much left to do but to point to my nametag.

'Yaz – no, yes. Yaz?'

'It's short for Yasmine,' I said.

'Well, mine'll give you less trouble.' He stuck out his chest and pointed. 'Charles. Short for Charlemagne.' I laughed despite myself. 'With a few more private estates than he had.'

Hope arose in me. I knew I could grow to like someone funny.

'You know what's fascinating about Charlemagne?' he went on. 'The man is remembered as a warrior. Right? Father of Europe.' He paused to open his beer, then set his gaze somewhere behind me. 'But perhaps his biggest achievement was how he deepened spiritual life – ecclesiastical property, liturgical practices, that sort of thing. Then again, he did condemn pagans to death, which was not great...'

'Are you sure?'

That seemed to catch him by surprise, as if he'd suddenly remembered my presence. A smile formed at the edge of his mouth. It pleased me. Maybe that was all I needed: someone to wait while my irony foraged for its syntax. 'How radical of you'; 'A true humanitarian'; 'Spare the pagans? Now you really have gone too far.'

Charles put down his drink and watched me for a moment, as though evaluating me for a part in a play. Then he said that a group of them, Mitch and others, were going to karaoke that Saturday, and I should come. I said I couldn't with exams coming up, to which he responded that singing enhanced the brain. With my singing, I said, the only thing I'd be enhancing was his desire never to see me again.

'You afraid you'll do something you'll regret?'

'I can't regret anything, because I won't go.'

But I went. Over the next few weeks, Charles and I engaged in a courtship whose locales progressed from the long pond in Clapham Common, near my sublet, to his parents' duplex in Chelsea. Years later, when we married, my parents flew in from Beirut. They trailed each other through church all weekend, two lost birds whose necks swivelled left and right in unison until they finally flew home.

Often after the wedding, chopping cabbage or waiting for my change, it would occur to me that had Charles not ripped off the end of his chicken wrap that Tuesday, my entire life would have been different. It was usually not long before the next sentence thrust itself upon me: I never loved Charles, never even liked him. The only way to soothe myself when this happened was to draw up a picture of myself as a mud-stained refugee, an asylum-seeker with tattered clothes. How could I have refused the refuge of Charles' deep voice, the asylum of his kingly name?

But I knew this story was false. And sometimes, when the summer heat stroked my cheeks with particular softness, I would allow the sweeter, truer one to caramelize: that to test myself out on Charles that year – to picture the twinkle of my eyes locked on his, the relief of my hands kneading his hair, to stoke then extinguish his laughter at will – must have been a pleasure so complete that, even now, it could only properly be called love.

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My Algebra II notebook contained the proofs, all the proofs that I had crafted myself in the image of his desire. Once it had become clear that we would be studying side by side, I had spent one meticulous night sprinkling each page with chaotic doodles capturing all the energy my life could leak into his.

Spiralling words, wedged inside a cyclic graph:

'A tree's root system is VERY extensive.'

A married couple, all smiles at the top of a page:

WIFE: Maybe I'll hang myself and bring the whole ceiling down onto our children, squashing them, only to accidentally tear the noose and emerge unscathed on the Ground Floor!

HUSBAND: Maybe I'll jump off the roof and keep my wallet in my pocket, leaving our children to starve, only to suddenly connect with God and find out that I really can fly!

A prisoner behind bars: 'Finally, some alone time.'

I had no idea where all these sequences of words had come from. As far as I was concerned, the only true thing in that notebook was a struggle, about midway through, to solve an equation. For two interminable pages, I inverted terms, simplified fractions, only to return to the starting point. The stubborn x could only end up as itself on one side of the line or the negative copy of itself on the other. Either way, there was no difference; I never solved it, retrieved it from that endless transposition into a final identity.

Examining these pages on a quiet night, I would see something almost beautiful in the struggle; how certain motifs recurred every couple of lines, steady as beats – threes, fours; a certain arrangement, travelling between parentheses, multiplied then divided; sixes and eights. They formed something like a rhythm, in which the nature of each element ultimately mattered less than the downward push, the inevitable motion of the given equation. It reminded me of hearing 'Living on a Prayer' on the radio after Beirut, how the song propelled itself forward. Every time the key change approached, I hesitated, my hand hovering by the knob, ready to scratch the rhythm out into static. I hesitated until the very last moment, when Bon Jovi sang, when that's all that you've got, convinced my voice would not remember where to go, only to find it was already there. □