

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

*Renee Chen*

### **Seven Minutes before Dawn**

A gunshot echoed from somewhere not far afield, reverberating amid the scream-pervaded air until it came spiraling into the deserted ship cargo we were in. It was then that I first appreciated my dank hiding spot.

"Ismail?"

"Don't move," I nudged Gaber, pinching my brother's arm until his fist was against my right cheek.

"I think they're gone," Gaber continued. From his oddly muffled voice, I could tell that he was breathing through the mouth and covering his nose with the fingers. I mimicked him, but the smell of the carcasses didn't fade.

"You're sure?" I took a deep breath, feeling nauseated.

"I heard the footsteps heading to somewhere in the left," he explained after a long minute of silent listening.

"Alright then." I shifted my hands onto the lid of the wooden cargo and pushed it upward, a centimeter at a time. When a speckle of light danced in and no bullets did, I mumbled a prayer then shoved the entire panel open. That was when I screamed.

A soldier was right in front of us.

His face was pitch-black with gun powder, with his hefty figure leaning towards our cargo. I didn't stop screaming until Gaber yanked me backward.

"Shut up, Ismail!" He almost punched me, but before he could, the man had already picked up his rifle from the ground.

There were a lot about that second I just couldn't explain, even now. I didn't understand why the soldier's instinctive response had been such dramatic, given that I was half his height. And since he couldn't have known that the two of us were Tutsis, the desire to kill that shone from lopsided smile was a frightening mystery to me.

Unfathomably too, my lips were paralyzed when I tried shoving Gaber out of the cargo and yelling at him to run. The only thing I knew for certain, amid the bedlam, when I discerned the man's callous fingers reaching for the trigger, was that I was hearing the last of the thousand gunshots I had heard in the past year.



Reopening my eyes, my instinct was to touch the spot on my brow where the bullet supposedly went through. Instead, I found my skin to be completely unscathed. I grinned.

"Gaber! We're saved! His gun ran out of bullets!"

The moment I uttered the words, I sprang up from the floor. Inexplicably, my voice echoed, as if I was within a massive chamber. I blinked thoughtlessly for a few seconds then turned around.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

The horizon was pitch-black and loomed close to the ground, stretching boundlessly beyond my vision. There were no walls beside me, no cargos, no rifles. Not even a single corpse or pool of blood.

When I shifted my gaze upward, I cried aloud. The sky was flickering, and iridescent cascades of light were gushing down. Strings of beams assembled, forming indistinguishable clouds of shapes. A moment later, a figure emerged from the radiant cluster.

"It can't be..." I stared at the tall-statured man, who looked queerly young in a tan face devoid of any wrinkles, with his hair still pitch-black. Clad in a translucent, immaculate suit, his hands were tucked within his trouser pocket. "My father?"

As I stumbled toward him, a smaller figure suddenly appeared between us- a toddler, who was tottering towards the father. Gingerly, the young man picked the child up and curled his arms around the smooth, caramel-colored cheek of the boy. I stared at the scene for a long while until I sensed some change. Yet, this time, no colors twirled in. Instead, music did.

Someone nearby was singing in a soft and feathery voice- high-pitched but not piercing. I didn't recognize what song was being hummed, but, somehow, I was certain that it was a lullaby.

The toddler seemed convinced of that too, for he ran towards the source of the voice, now, in a steady gait. The delicate music suddenly turned into a golden cascade of light, molded into a tall, elegant lady, with long, silk-like hair swaying against her shoulder.

"My mother," I smiled. Her golden spirit was holding onto the hand of my young self.

That was when I heard a click from the sky above, like a snap of a finger. And before I had reached my parents, a new, silver speckle danced towards the rest of the family. Instantly, I could hear laughter amid the pitch-blackness.

"His name is Gaber." Despite being miles apart, I heard my mother's gentle, snowflake-like voice and watched silently, motionlessly, as my young self tickled my brother's russet-colored chin. Both of them chuckled.

When I heard another snap, the pitch-black sky turned sapphire. There was a sound of gently running water somewhere, and I looked ahead. When I did so, I found Gaber and my young self sitting on the damp soil on the bank of a brook, our feet dangling in the currents. The two of us plunged in and began swimming, racing while splashing water onto each other's faces.

Before I could see who won the race, the sky turned crimson, orange spilling in. Now, my mother was crouched down on the barren soil. Gaber and I were there too, filling our pockets and rags-sewn bags with pieces of shrapnel from the floor.

Each time he spotted one, Gaber's pupils would dilate, gingerly harvesting the infinitesimal piece of metal, as it determined whether we would have a next meal or not.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

As I watched their silhouettes pressed against the sordid soil, I felt an abrupt headache. The ground beneath me began to shake. I fell downwards, expecting to hit hard against the pitch-black floor. Instead, I realized that I was plunging into an abyss, falling with the wind swirling against my face. My hands clenched into fists.

Landing hard on my back, I discerned my father again, but this time, he was draped in an olive-green uniform, with a silvery color sprawling athwart the fringe of his hair. My mother was grasping onto his arm, with Gaber and my teenage self standing beside him silently.

Before I could say my farewell to him, the floor beneath me again splintered apart, sending me downwards. But even with my vision spinning in giddy circles, my senses were entirely conscious, not at all paralyzed. I could hear them again, with more clarity than ever— the gunshots, the screams. The smell of blood and corpses.

In front of me stood my teenage self, clad in a droopy uniform while holding onto the rifle that looked bizarrely oversized in my hands. I closed my eyes, but the picture didn't fade. Instead, I now discerned a body beneath a white blanket, with his tan-colored, scrawny feet protruding out of the cloth's fringe. My mother wrapped her arms around his motionless face, soaking his grey hair in her pearl-like tears.

I turned away and fled, recoiling with nausea rising in my stomach. Yet, the ground before me turned abruptly scorched, sending me springing from the floor. When I realized that the soil was on fire, I heard a sudden cry somewhere behind, a snowflake-like voice melting away...

"Stop this!" I screamed, my face buried in my hands. "Give me back my old life!" I was lying still on the ground, inside the fire blazing the village.

The crimson flames were approaching, and my feet and hands slowly burnt into ashes. My skin was being stripped off, with my scarlet flesh pressed against the soil. But somewhat, it didn't hurt much.



There was a snap, but the arrhythmia of my heart was too slow for me to react. All I could do was lie still on the ground, watching the darkness retreating above me and iridescent light flickering in.

When I finally sat up, I noticed that I was again before Gaber, my father, my mother, and my young self. But somehow, they looked different.

My mother was in a silk dress and my father sitting on a russet-colored chesterfield sofa before a grandfather clock. On the rug were a heap of model cars, unfinished jigsaw puzzle pieces, and even a violin. Gaber was sitting in front of a piano and playing it. For once, I noticed that he was prodigious in music.

With the song dancing throughout the room, I strolled past the marble floor, golden-framed windows, and lace curtains. Yet, my eyes never drifted off the face of Gaber. I was in a trance, pupils fixed on his expression that looked queerly distinct, without the usual blemish of gunpowder and stain of blood. Still, something else about his appearance unsettled me.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Perhaps it was the milk-white color of his face and the way his turquoise irises glittered like zircons, how his blonde, feathery hair swayed whenever he turned his head around. Or was his smile? A lopsided grin of relief and a carefree childhood he never had? A life I could never experience?

Until that moment, I didn't know that a ghost could cry too.