

FICTION

four pieces

THE DAY CLOTHES OF GINEVRA MIN

Kai Kresek

The light of the morning disintegrates everything and Ginevra Min is in pieces—strewn across the floor, hanging precariously from the ceiling fan, and floating limply in the toilet. What’s left of Ginevra is submerged in the lukewarm depths of her mattress, which stinks of smoke and sweat. Her pillow shimmers with scaly silver glitter, leftover from the night before when Ginevra was herself and not this nebulaic disaster.

Ginevra uses her knuckles to wipe the sleep from her eyes; they come away gritty and smudged with black mascara. She stumbles to the bathroom and nearly smacks into herself, but her hips crash against the sink before her forehead hits the mirror hanging above it, and suddenly Ginevra and Ginevra are nose to nose, looking slightly skeptical of one another.

Ginevra’s face is a Picasso; she’s *The Girl Before a Mirror*, painted with thick strokes of smeared red lipstick like an open wound, dramatic bronze powder whose shadows form steep hills and valleys, gold dust that escapes the confines of her lids, and greasy foundation that’s rubbed off in patches to reveal blotched pink skin and constellations of acne scars.

Awakening in such a state is not uncommon for Ginevra; in fact, Saturday mornings are typically reserved for scouring the fallout from the night before. It’s become an almost ritualistic practice, possessing a kind of Zen quality. Despite this, mornings still manage to fill Ginevra with a clinging stickiness in her stomach. This is dread, because it’s daytime and there are rules governing how one should be—clothes one must don to wade through its ceaseless current. Ginevra has saltated in these waters long enough to see the advantages of allowing one’s exterior to fade like

the other smoothed and discolored stones that are tussled alongside her. *It will be okay*, Ginevra reasons, *rebellions can be staged in greyscale—look at La Guernica and try to say otherwise*. She sees how the tides are turning, and someday soon there will be a time when the daylight won’t be devastating.

With the turn of the faucet, the ritual begins, and warm water pours over Ginevra’s face and washes her down the drain. What’s left is a pockmarked floodplain marred by two thick eyebrows and rude eruptions of stubble on the upper lip and lower jaw. Ginevra takes his straight razor and his nearly-empty bottle of Old Spice’s Steel Courage™ shaving gel, and begins the delicate task of pruning.

The suffocating scent of Steel Courage™ wafts up and around Ginevra’s mess of curly black hair and pounds on his temples like it wants inside his head. There’s a matching hair pomade, so Steel Courage™ runs through Ginevra’s hair via his fingers until it clings for dear life onto every curl. The process of dressing is dull; maroon button-up, dark grey slacks, a sensible black belt, and black loafers are donned without ceremony.

When Gene can resign himself to this appearance, he cleans the bathroom by swiping everything into the drawers and picks up his room by haphazardly packing everything into his closet. The sliding doors bulge outwards with the effort of containment and seem to strain against their tracks before finally closing. With these matters settled, Gene licks his lips, straightens his collar, and locks his apartment door behind him as he leaves. What remains of Ginevra watches Gene go from the window, nodding a goodbye with a faint smile that manages to slip between the cracked blinds and drift behind him as he descends down the stairs.

“DUST OF FORGETFULNESS”

Sahar Al-Nima

And so she prays that in twenty years, memories of this time will be reduced to dust and ash. That she won't remember the look of devastation in her husband's eyes or the cold corpse of her father-in-law covered in blood. That she won't remember her daughter's eyes in that fateful night. And so she won't remember eating so much dry pasta and plain rice. That she won't remember any of it. And so she prays she won't. And so she wouldn't. And so she won't and wouldn't. And so what? Must remember to heal. What a ridiculous concept. As if all pain is equal and helps one to grow. As if pain cannot be as crippling as a bullet lodged in the spine, unmoving and yet freezing all that moves. As if pain produces poetry and songs and great literature. Tears and blood and all the world's ugliness are nothing but a side-effect, a necessary evil for a perfectly broken masterpiece that is in pieces, indeed, but nothing of it is mastered. And so she prays she won't remember and so she wouldn't and won't and how is forgetting any of that bad?

Just how?

Her husband is moaning in his sleep when she wakes up some morning. Her surroundings are full of dusty white things. Sheets, bedside table and lamp, mirror, closet. All white. All dusty. Even her husband is covered with dust and whiteness. She says nothing to rouse him because she cannot remember why he is moaning or why she is surrounded by dusty whiteness or why there is a third person in their room. Her daughter, eyes closed and breathing even. Does her daughter know why her husband moans? No, that's silly. She wouldn't.

She reaches over and fumbles for the

mute button on him but finds none.

Quit moaning like you're the only one with trouble. Quit moaning like you're the only one with goddamn pain.

She stumbles out of the dusty whiteness into the narrow wooden corridor, down to the forest beyond and into her cursed kitchen.

Canned soup?

No. No. We'll run out of gas and won't be able to heat it.

Biscuits?

Yes. Lots of those. For the children. Snacks, you know? But also for when we run out of food and gas and cannot cook anymore. Potato chips, too. As many boxes as possible. We won't touch those until the very end. The very, very end.

Flour?

Yes, so we can make bread and other things. As much as you can muster. And lentils and beans.

Should we stalk up on meats?

No. No meats. Needs refrigeration and electricity.

Does that include your flesh?

No. Of course it doesn't. That goes on the list.

She never anticipated which part of it would be most terrifying: death, its voice or its feel. Turned out they're all one and the same. Death needn't be that of the body, after all. And in any case, death was too abstract to worry about when she had the cracked window of the living room to deal with.

Leave it be. You already have X's taped across the thing. It won't fall.

It needs reinforcement.

She tears into the duct tape to add another layer.

This is madness?

Just this?

Food is plain but nobody complains. Why would they? It's all they have. Besides, they've all been through this before. Kind of know the drill. The plainness is not a choice. And the plainer it gets, the more they are in danger of not eating at all.

She rations her intake. Takes small, slow bites. Less rice, the burnt bottom of the stew pot that no one wants. And then discreetly she passes most of the food to her daughter.

Her husband looks at her from across the table. I know what you're doing.

My flesh is on the menu. Get back to your musings.

Lit up candles are as dangerous as the bombs howling outside. One wrong move and they will spill over the floor, rising flames eating the house and everyone in it. Too many children, cousins old and young, all clamoring around lit candles. All clamoring around light. Such a luxury it's become. Much like water and food and air and stepping outside the door. So they clamor around the candles and try to see each other's faces because dark corners have things lurking about in them. No, not things. People. People, big and armed, who spill blood. People who very much exist. They lurk outside and float through the walls, seep into the house and steal warmth before light and light before life.

So her daughter clamors towards the candles to try and see everything, to try and see her mother. She wonders what her daughter might see in her eyes and on her face. Worry? The pathetic excuse of a smile that is more like a grimace? A ghost that fears those very real people? Or the acute awareness that her daughter's fears have surpassed the monsters under the bed and turned towards death itself and perhaps even annihilation?

But perhaps her daughter sees nothing but a smiling mother. Perhaps she sees nothing but the robotic grimace, and the darkness makes it look like a smile, and she and everyone else will believe the grimace to be a smile and fail to see the venom she inhales.

It doesn't matter. None of it does. The only thing that she needs to make sure of is that none of the children gets too close to the candles lest the light stings them.

At some point her husband brought in her dead father-in-law through the doors and stained the kitchen floors. Eyes empty and staring off into an invisible horizon beyond her shoulders, he told her what happened. Something that involved bullets and a soldier or a gang or both when all they were trying to do was buy some food. She couldn't quite focus. Not with the white hairs on her father-in-law's head stained with red and his eyes wide open, staring into the same non-existent point that entranced his son. A distance she wanted to walk and shrivel into and disappear. Not dead. Just gone. Just faded. As if never existed.

They put her father-in-law in a room on a bed that did not have white sheets because washing those is hard enough without bloodstain, and where her mother-in-law could cry for her partner till the end of her days. The end of all days.

She looked down at him, then at her mother-in-law, then at her husband, then at herself in the mirror with her wide eyes, then at her daughter lurking in the doorway with one of the older cousins, eyes staring with fascination and fear mixed into their orbs. She watched the blood on her hands and on her husband's shoulders and smeared across her father-in-law's shirt and all over the bed and the sheets and realized that the non-existent distance existed. That they were living in it. That she had already shriveled and faded into it.

Swirls and swirls of dust whirl outside the walls of her house. Raging. Destructive. As if the vengeance of bullets and the rains of blood are not enough torment for their city and their spite-filled country. Now, dust heaves its sighs upon their roof, ignores the closed doors and sealed tight windows. Cares not for lack of water or coughing children. It sits atop every green plant that was not yet destroyed and clouds every patch of blue sky that was already filled with smoke and soot and the distinct smell of death. It slaps against the glassy windows and wooden doors and seeps through cracks she didn't realize were in their walls and in their lives. And it piles and piles and piles until she hears its crunch beneath her feet as she enters the merciless kitchen and tastes it on her breath along with the venom in the air. Until it coats the white counters and sticks to the yellowing walls. Until she has to wash the rice over and over and over again with water that barely exists because dust in the air is more than enough and they needn't that in their food. It blows and swirls and rises and falls until everything, everything is white and nothing, nothing is clean.

She looks through the pantry and imagines the house bursting into flames. Imagines a bomb falling into the garden and going off. It would take down the dead grass first, then the fountain in the patio would burst into pieces, then the wall separating her husband, her daughter, and she from the rest of the world would be blasted. The bed would turn to pieces, fire would lick at the bedsheets. Flames would lavish the wood with deadly kisses so it burns and breaks and turns to ashes. Then slowly—no, quickly, destruction would breed more destruction—and the room next to hers would fall apart and the corridor would spread fire and devastation everywhere and into everything. And when the blast that would take too long but happen too quickly ended, they would all be gone, turned to skulls or remains of skin or

blood slick against ash that once was a chair or a table.

She hopes that happens before they finish the last of the rice and pasta.

There was a night when she woke up from not-sleep to her husband ushering her out and their daughter out of the room and into the narrow, wooden corridor. He kept muttering something about the shooting being in their neighborhood, said something about it being too close. Just as he was speaking she heard the window behind him crack and a loud bang threw their closed door wide open. She took hold of her daughter's hand and rushed into the corridor, finding her brother and sister-in-law as well as her husband's parents filing into the narrow space. The wood offered safety, or the illusion of such; the glassy windows endangered too much. She tucked her daughter closer to her, the bullets and bombs outside whining and shrieking and screaming at each other. It didn't matter who died. Someone must die. If not right now, then tomorrow. Of hunger. Or of a stupid stray bullet. Or of an unforgiving bomb and its flames.

She held her daughter tighter to her, and wiped her tears away.

But it will not be me. I will not leave you.

And so all she remembers is that time when all she inhaled was dust and ash. All she remembers is the look of devastation in her husband's eyes and the cold corpse of her father-in-law covered in blood. All she remembers is her daughter's eyes in that fateful night. All she remembers is the taste of dry pasta and plain rice. And so she remembers all of it. And she prays she could forget. She must forget to heal. But she couldn't and she won't and she wouldn't. Sometimes pain is as crippling as a bullet lodged in the spine, unmoving and freezing all that moves. Sometimes pain cannot produce poetry and songs and great literature, and tears and blood and

all the world's ugliness are for naught.
Sometimes there are no masterpieces, just
broken pieces that no one knows how to put
back together. And so she won't forget and
won't heal and won't breathe clean air.
And so she will remember everything like a
broken record. And so that broken record
will be the only thing that can fix itself
so it can play again and again and again.

THE SECRET STUDY

Cesar Iza Castillo

The winds of fate often leave us bereft of our possessions, and my family found itself in such a precarious position during the autumn of '85. Circumstances beyond Father's control—and certainly anyone else's—saw him lose his job, his own father's ancestral home, and a majority of his belongings in quick succession. Desperate to provide for his family, he sold what little was left and purchased a battered house up on the mountain. I knew not his plans then, and can barely conceive of them now, yet I assumed he sought work as a logger.

Regardless, Mother, Obadiah and I were left to leave our town in shame and depart towards our new, secluded home. The "Unlucky Galloways" they would call us, all the while taunting and jeering.

It took a long coach ride, followed by a short hike up the mountain, to reach our house. It stood atop a hill, as eerily out of place as a lighthouse in a valley. There were no trees around for a mile, but the forest at the base of the hill was thick and enveloping. Mother had looked pale on our journey and had vomited numerous times. I attributed such happenings to the motion sickness—after all, I felt quite faint myself.

The house itself was no great thing, but once the fire got going it seemed cozy enough. Two rooms were all we had, one for me and Obadiah and the other for Mother. Father had sent notice that he would join us soon, after his training had concluded. I was not keen on leaving Mother alone, but she insisted, and by then I knew better than to argue with her.

The first few nights were drearily uneventful. I contemplated how quickly I would grow accustomed to this new home. Already the halls seemed quaint to me, whereas they had been dark and gloomy on my arrival.

Mother spent much time by herself in her bedroom, bedridden. She would not get up save when she was sick, and the house

carried the sound of her retching all the way to my room. Obadiah, in all his child-like innocence, questioned her sickness, but I assured him that she had been like this once before, and thereafter her belly had swollen with him. Excited at the prospect of a new member of the family, Obadiah could hardly contain himself. Still, I asked that he let Mother rest for now. Her face had grown gaunt and sickly, and I secretly worried for her.

The days on the hill were long and boring, but Obadiah and I kept ourselves busy. On the third day, we went out to hunt for meat, as I hoped the taste of it would help Mother recover. We scouted the forest for many miles, yet oddly enough could find no game. Our traps had been fruitless as well. Although we searched for hours, all we returned with were a few roots and berries. After that, the days rolled slowly by.

I remember distinctly how horrid things became on the fifth day. How could I not? For as long as I live, those night-terrors shall be etched in my psyche.

It was in the middle of the fifth night that I first heard the murmurs. They aroused me, but no matter how closely I would listen, I could not make them out. At first, I assumed my brother was muttering in his sleep, for night-terrors plagued him, but a quick examination revealed him to be sound asleep.

As I gazed upon him, I heard the whispers again, slightly more distinct, and so I turned and left the room. I walked in the direction I believed the whispers came from, which led me down the stairs and into the living room. At last I could hear the whisper more clearly, but for all my years of studying I could not understand a single word. They seemed more like garbled, tangled mutterings than any human language.

I mustered my courage and croaked the words, "Is there anyone out there?"

As soon as I spoke, the house fell silent, and the whispers quieted. The silence hung like a dark cloud over me. For a while I stood in the dark, listening. I began to think I was sleep-walking, but remained out there, trying to hear the whispers again. Alas, the silence persisted, and I returned to my bed.

On the sixth day, clouds rolled over the hills and surrounded our house in a misty fog. Obadiah grew slightly unnerved at the sight, but I soothed him with my words. As going out to hunt was not an option given the fog, the three of us sat around the fireplace trying to warm our feet. Mother told us tales of Father and his cryptic work down at the University. She said he had grown gaunt as of late, and he barely slept anymore.

"T'was that damn'd book," she said suddenly. When I tried to coax more information out of her, she grew silent and averted her eyes. Knowing her too well, I understood she had nothing more to say.

The three of us snuggled up near the warmth of the fire, and one by one sleep took us. As my head began to feel heavy with the weight of sleep, I thought I heard muttering. I could not make out the words, and despite my best attempts at remaining awake, sleep wrapped its shadowy tendrils around me.

Later, I came to in my own bed, uncovered and half-asleep. I had no memory of getting myself there, and so assumed someone had carried me here. It dawned on me then that little Obi could not bear my weight, and Mother was far too sickly to have done so. I jerked awake, and looked for my brother in his bed, but could not find him there.

I realized that I could once again hear faint whispers, only this time there was a rhythm to them. The whispers wove and turned, slowly quickening their pace. Once again, they seemed like incomprehensible ramblings, maddened mutterings in an archaic language.

I followed the whispers as they grew in intensity, and they led me into the living room. The blankets we had used lay strewn there, but there was no sight of Obadiah or Mother.

In that moment, I almost yelped when I saw a door that had not been there before. It was crooked and old, much older than the rest of the house. The door was engraved with strange, twisting symbols.

By now my mind was aflame with fear, but all reason be damned some strange thought compelled me to go forth. My quivering hand turned the knob, slowly, and the door creaked open.

Ahead of me was a hallway lit with the strangest lights I had seen thus far. The room was tinged with a putrid green as if all the light was somehow rotting. There were three doors, and only one remained open. Each had a circular window on it, yet the ones on the shut doors were opaque whereas the other was not.

The whispers seemed to grow in intensity the farther I walked down the hallway. At the end of it there was what looked like a study, with bookshelves on either side and an antique desk in the middle. I eyed the books that lay there, and realized that although some were in English, a few had been written in languages I did not know. An eerie one caught my eye, as its back looked dark and sinister, and I saw Arabic calligraphy etched into the cover.

It was from this moment onward that a second sound entered the cacophony of the whispers. It was a sinister slither, weaving its way through the silence towards me. I felt rumbling under my feet, as if a gargantuan serpent were traversing every inch of the hallowed room, all around me.

In a panic, I darted my gaze around, still alone in the room. Some wicked thought guided me back toward the hallway and to the opaque window, and when I peeked inside I near fainted from horror. The closer I got to it, the clearer it became. Inside I saw little Obi, strewn around the floor in an unfathomable manner. Suffice to say, limbs were not where they should have been, and the walls had been splattered with blood. Retching, I took a step back when another grim thought took hold of me.

I felt as if I was commanded to look at the second window; no matter how much I resisted, my body felt

obliged to do so. The whispers were now pounding at my ears, and although I could not make out what they said in full I managed to listen to some garbled words, "f°y_hal,*,*_~a-__f:t 'á_g_ñ/gèb." The inhumanness of it struck a chord in my heart and sent my brain into a terrified frenzy. There was no need to look into the second window to know what was there, yet my horrified brain did so. My heart dropped.

Immediately I shrieked and moved back, but on the reflection of the now clear window I saw what can only be described as a tendril—purple and hideous and ungodly—thrashing about behind me. With great force, something picked me up from my neck, and with greater force still, the horrifying thing smashed me against the door.

I came to, later, strewn on the cold grass in front of the house. As best I could, I stood and rushed towards my home, yet no notice of the door could I discern, as if it had never been there before. Missing also were my brother and Mother, and no amount of shouting and grieving did ever bring them back to me.

From Father I have not heard since, and so do drearily suspect, that some malicious bargain had taken place that night...

THE NATURE OF WATER:

A PARABLE IN FIVE PARTS

Kira Altman

I met a traveler at the end of a winding road. He carried a sack made of cloth and held a robe made of silk above his head. I was surprised to see him at the end of such a winding road with only a sack cloth and the sun for company. I told him as much. He looked at me from beneath the silk robe that was streaked with dust from the road and he told me he had been searching.

For what? What could you hope to find here, at the end of a winding road?

For water.

I laughed and pointed to a well that lay some three miles behind him. He shook his weary head. *No. I do not want to drink. I want knowledge, I want to understand. I have traveled far from my home to discover all that I may about the nature of water so that it may no longer be a mystery to me.*

I cautioned him—it is impossible to capture all that water is within the mind of man. He persisted, and eventually I agreed to show this traveler all that I knew about the nature of water. We set off past the end of the winding road together, the traveler humming softly to himself.

The Stream

The stream is where water must first be introduced. Softly flowing, careful not to disturb the small patches of wildflowers growing along its banks, the stream winked a gentle welcome to the traveler as we arrived after many days of travel.

He bent low to the ground and greeted the water. It murmured a reply that was lost to the other noises of the forest and continued politely moving out of the way of the many rocks that interrupted its steady path deep into the ground.

The stream faded to the background with the ease of long practice. It was unassuming. It was quietly beautiful.

The Waterfall

I next brought the traveler to the waterfall—water's favorite form to take in all the world. A low shelf of rock supported an ever-flowing sheet that shimmered in the sunlight and playfully splashed the traveler's cloak. Mischievous and unpredictable, the water seemed to laugh as it fell and crashed into the lively pool beneath. It put on a marvelous show for us, and the traveler spent long hours teasing it and playing under the falls. He was captivated.

It is always so. Those who visit the waterfall could stay forever, mesmerized by the song the ever-flowing water creates. It loves visitors—it plays and exchanges witty banter long into the afternoon.

A forlorn expression appears on the traveler's face as we walk away. The playful splashing continued to ring in our ears long after the falls are out of view.

The Lake

After some time, I found it appropriate to show the traveler the lake, as he mentioned to me that he heard rumors of water healing the souls of men long ago. The calm, deep waters reveal little but suggest much. It is cool to the touch.

Solemnity entered the traveler's movements, for he could sense immense power contained between the shores where ancient trees took root. The traveler deftly fashioned a small wooden boat from one such tree and drifted to the middle of the lake.

After floating for a time, he began to speak—he hardly noticed as the words started tumbling out of his mouth. He spoke of his life, of his troubles and his woes. The lake listened deeply, carefully absorbing every word into its unreadable waters. This lake is old and has seen many

things. It is a sacred place of mysteries and curiosity and questions without answers.

The surface of the lake alternately revealed a clear view to the rocky bottom, and then nothing at all with the subtle changes of the light.

The Beach

All this I had shown to the traveler, and I asked him if he was satisfied with what he had discovered. He formally shook his head no, and so it was that I had no choice but to bring him to the beach.

I was hesitant to show him this last form of water, for the shore can be dangerous. Only one who is experienced with all types of water can risk the large and unpredictable waves, and all those who are unwary of the dangers are inevitably caught in the chilling undertow. The beach is where water is the most vulnerable, for even water hardly knows where it ends and the shore begins.

But the traveler had grown quite accustomed to the intricacies of water, and so it was that I stood anxiously behind him as he cautiously approached the vast sea. He explored the motion of the waves and registered the pull of the tide and together we watched the sun set over the water, sending dazzling colors rippling across the endless surface. He dug his feet in the wet sand and let the foam cautiously approach him and kiss his toes.

They existed together like that for a time as the sun continued to set and tears filled the traveler's eyes. He sagely told me the sight is beautiful and vast and he feels that he finally understands the nature of water, looking over the entirety of the ocean.

He watched the thin line of horizon where sea and sky met until the light faded. Then, he shouldered his pack, paid me two silver coins, and returned to the land, whistling a meandering tune all the while.

The Cliff

There is a place unbeknownst to the

traveler. A secret, hidden place that has been long forgotten by the minds of men. This place does not have a role in any tale or quest or noble song. It is a place of terrible power, for it is where all of the water of this world was born, and it is where all of the water will return. The waters here are raw and primal and they roil, crashing against a sheer cliff face in an endless screaming echo.

I stand at the edge of the cliff and peer into the void, my ears filled with the fury of the waves, and I shiver with the burden of hidden knowledge. I think of the traveler, attempting to capture all that water is and will ever represent by one look at the ocean. I think of how water itself has been trying to understand everything that it is, and I think of how little even it knows. It calls to me with a spray of foam, water pounding the rock below my feet. How long I remain there, I do not know.