

## *The Other Country*

In the other country, they wander the jungle with wide, empty grins on their faces. They slay orphans for their meals, and they file their teeth into points—the better to rip the flesh from delicate bones. What society they do keep is devoted to building weapons that they use to terrorize us. They attach colorful boxes to balloon strings and send them drifting over to our country, where the small bombs inside them are meant to explode in the hands of our children. But we intercept them and bury these little unopened boxes in the back of the graveyard, where the acres of overturned earth stand as a testament to our constant aggrievement.

Their ultimate wish is to draw all of our countrymen into the jungle and turn them into slaves. For this purpose, they use special machines that bend light waves and cause people from our country to lose their minds. Once they have rendered a countryman completely empty-headed, he will start to scheme his way past the border fence that protects our country from the other country. Sometimes these brainwashed men come at us in broad daylight, and we are required to gun them down so that they are not captured in the jungle and tortured without end.

Since we are so close to the jungle borderland, it is important that we watch ourselves carefully. The machines are pointed at us all the time, and we are chosen specifically for our strength of mind to resist them. There are three of us standing guard: Gik and I stand parallel to the fence, facing each other across a distance of ten paces. Between us lies the locked gate. It has been fifteen years since the gate was last opened. Thick vines wrap around the hinges like monstrous fists. Gaq stands in front of the gate, farther away from us, near the control booth. He faces away from us and the jungle, looking out instead over the rising hills of our country. Gik and I protect the gate and protect each other from the temptations of the light waves emanating from the borderland. Gaq keeps a watchful eye out for countrymen driven mad by the machines who rush at the fence with a desperate madness, like caged tigers. A fourth guard in the control booth, a man named Grot, monitors the many tiny surveillance screens and sometimes snoozes. We rotate through each position over the course of the day, but these are our preferred positions, so we stretch it out longer and are all much happier and calmer during this part of the day.

When I first received this honorable assignment, I thought I felt the machines working on me, so long and arduous did each day feel. I would return home in the dark and collapse on the sleeping mat, too exhausted to eat a meal or kiss my wife. Now the time I pass at home seems to drag on forever, and my time in the borderland collapses into a single daily breath. For this I mostly have Gik to thank. I like to look at Gik. His mind is very strong, so I am at liberty to relax my own mind when we are stationed together. Grot is dense and Gaq is conspiratorial, but Gik is subtle, like me, so when we stand facing each other we can enjoy all the sights in our peripheral vision and not be so concerned about bringing false judgment upon ourselves.

It is a myth that we only have one face. I watch Gik transform in a thousand different ways every day. He is more complex than even he can know. In the early morning, before the chill has dispersed, there are little red circles on his cheeks, like he has been pricked all over with a needle. As the sun rises in the sky, the shadow of his nose falls across his lips like a sundial and swishes across his mouth. Behind him, the tan stucco wall of the control booth changes colors in the morning light, from gray to yellow to pink. As the colors of the wall change, so too does his expression, so that one moment he seems curious, then sleepy, then perhaps cheerful or even wistful. In the noon sun, the wall turns a fiery red against the backs of my eyes, and Gik rises before me like the devil himself. I must *blink blink blink* to see him clearly again. Gik gets distraught when I blink like this. I can see the whites of his eyes swell in fear. This is the only time that his face seems to change in actual fact, and not just in the depths of my imagination. Otherwise, he is as still as a statue, much stiller than I am capable of sustaining with my waggling eyes.

Though I am a devoted husband and father, I like to play a secret game with Gik. I imagine that we once shared a deep, passionate love and that we were forbidden by our families to consummate it. We held on to our love until our deaths, and the gods punished our disloyalty to our families by forcing us to spend eternity staring into each other's eyes in silence, forever held apart. In this game, I try to speak with my eyes, like I am reading the words strung together in my head and imprinting them like carbon paper onto the face held in front of me. I tell Gik the story of my life. I make up fairy tales for him. I recall to him fantasies of the day when we will finally be freed from the shackles of eternity and emerge on the other side of time, to rise up together among the moon and stars. Sometimes when I'm in the middle of a story, Gik's nose will twitch ever so slightly, and I wonder if he feels himself suddenly inside

someone else's fantasy, though it's more likely that he is fighting back a sneeze. It makes my heart jump a little, as if my treasonous imagination has become visible to the world.

We eat our lunches in shifts, sitting by ourselves in the control booth. I stand in the doorway with my lunch in hand, waiting for Grot to find his cap. "It's here, I just had it. I'll be out of your way momentarily!" He shifts in his seat and yanks it out from underneath him. "Oh! Have I got a funny story for you!" Grot holds the crushed cap to his belly and chuckles to himself.

"Yes, what is it?" I rest my lunch box on my thigh.

"A rabbit, a hen, and an ox are walking down the road together. They have been traveling for days. They're all very tired and hungry, but none will be the first to admit they would like to take a rest. So they keep walking. The hen says, 'The sun feels so good on my beak!' The rabbit says, 'And the breeze feels so nice going through my long ears!' The ox says...oh, what does the ox say?" Grot sticks out his lip and looks up at the ceiling. "Oh, I forgot it again. Well, I'll tell you tomorrow. Enjoy your lunch!" As he shuffles through the door he gives another little laugh. "It is very funny, I assure you! Tomorrow you'll hear it!"

In the booth I sit looking out the window above the video monitors, across the undisturbed landscape of the borderland in the opposite direction of our gate. There is a wide area of cleared brush leading up to the fence, and the jungle presses in on the other side, like a woman's hair swept from her brow with a ribbon. The fence extends beyond the horizon and is dotted here and there with guard stations like our own. I stare and chew, saving all the energy of my mind for when I am back on duty and need to distract myself from my sore feet. Lunchtime feels like punishment to me. Even though my duties require silence, I am always in the presence of my countrymen during the day, and at night and on Saturdays I am never alone for even a minute. There is always someone nearby to talk with, eat with, rest with, a child or an old relative or friend. The only time I recall being alone prior to this assignment was when my mother would punish me for acting up by sending me to the coop, where I was meant to crouch in the corner and stare at the wall. Instead, I often snuck a hen inside with me and chased it in circles, slapping its beak between my hands each time it clucked.

My mother was on the other side of the borderland when the final separation was announced. She had traveled to her sister's village to trade her baskets, and she did not come back. At first, my father told me that she would return soon, on the strength of her love for us. Then he began to insist that she was being kept prisoner by the other country.

After many years of waiting, his breath turned sour and he began to call her Mother Traitor. “Perhaps Mother Traitor is too fat to walk now. She can only roll on her side to the outhouse and back.” It had become a treasonous act to mention the people we lost in the separation, but I did not forget her. When I am bored with pretending about Gik, I think about my mother. I used to conjure her as a beautiful woman, with skin as clear as wet lacquer and a soft, wide lap, but I eventually gave up remembering her body in order to hold on to the other memories more tightly. Even when she punished me, I was bound to her in love, like a small fish suspended in the turbulent embrace of the seaweed.

As I was finishing my lunch, I heard a commotion outside. In the video monitor, I could see Gaq, Gik, and Grot huddled near the gate. They were completely out of formation—a serious infraction—but there was no one else present, which meant the fence had not been breached. I fastened the clasp on my lunch box with a satisfying click, and almost like a response, a loud POP! POP! came from outside. I scrambled out of the booth and ran to the fence where Gik and Grot crouched, staring at the ground, while Gaq paced behind them. Gaq’s gun quivered in his fist, and he glared unseeing at the high hills.

A dog lay bleeding on the other side of the gate, its paw stretched across a bare place it had managed to scratch away underneath the wire. Its fur was patchy, the beast was starved, and now the bullet in its stomach had opened a pathway for its insides to leak out. It had come from the other country, spent who-knows-how-long in the eternal stretch of land mines and jungle, to die a worthless death. I felt chastened by the sight, and I screamed at Gaq, “Is *this* your enemy?”

Without looking up, Gik wrapped a gentle hand around my wrist. “Come, remember who your countrymen are. It’s just a sick dog. It’s not important,” he said.

The dog’s eye was still open and seemed to be searching the sky for the sun. I made a gesture, then dropped my hand to my thigh. “But what if he had a message for us? What if he had something to tell us about the other side?”

“Listen to you! I didn’t know we had a fantasist among us!” Gaq paused in his nervous pacing to search my face, like he was gathering details to include in his citizen’s report. I turned away.

Grot straightened up and stretched his plump arms in the air. “It’s really going to start stinking soon!” he said with finality before ambling off.

Gaq nudged my shoulder with the warm muzzle of the gun until I met his eyes. “We don’t need anything from the other country,” he

said firmly. “Not their dogs, not their messages. Remember yourself, countryman.” He strode off, holstering his gun. Gik stood with a sigh, slapped me on the back in a friendly way, and retreated a few paces back to his position.

I glanced back at the dog but quickly dropped my gaze. I had never seen anything, person or otherwise, come from that side. In my secret heart I believed it was the pure evil of the jungle—not us, not the fence—that separated our country from the other country. But does this starving dog prove otherwise? What does it mean that something limp and ragged, without courage or the will of love, can make it this far while other creatures cannot?

No, there must be something more out there in the borderland. In the darkest night of my mind, I see my mother struggling toward me through the vines, her face slashed and bleeding. As she approaches me, like Icarus she begins to burn. She burns like water being dried away at the hearth, her body shedding layers behind her as she continues forward. But she does continue forward. Now she is half her own size, now a small fraction, and now in a little puff she is gone completely, there in the middle of the jungle, on her way to me.