

LIGHTS OUT by Melanie Clark

There is no darkness here. At lights out, the light enters the room in sharp filaments: a strip of fluorescence at the bottom of the door; a thin rod that breaks through the curtains. Under the cover of light, the boy curls into a tight ball beneath the sheet. He tries to recall darkness as he used to know it but it belongs to the other place. It has no place here.

A cricket chirrups behind the wall and keeps the boy awake. In the morning, he moves past the line of beds and taps at the thin wall, moving from left to right as he tracks the sound of the cricket. He presses his ear to the wall and hears the voices of men in the room next to his, high pitched, then gone. Through a fist-sized hole in the wall he beckons the cricket with waggling fingers.

He misses the breakfast hour. No one comes to check on him.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

The boy walks along the concrete path with the heat from the mid-morning sun burning through the soles of his plastic sandals. The sun is making a mirage of the demountables. Everything shudders and glitters in the light.

He steps from the path onto the crackling grass and stiffens his arms and legs into iron rods. He has become the alien he'd once seen on Ahmed's television, the day it had rained so much their chores couldn't be done. That day, he had come down with a headache from squinting at the snowy static on the screen but it had been worth it.

The boy moves in slow motion, scanning the alien landscape to make sure he is not imagining the buildings shaking. He is not imagining it. They really are moving.

How far is it to the shopping centre? He knows how to say the words so that the woman at the front of the room will nod and say yes. The word hisses like a snake. The woman's hair is bouncy in the morning, flat and sticky by the afternoon. Still, he wants

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to touch it, to feel if it is wet and springy like the seaweed that clings to tidal pools. He wants to ask her what a shopping centre is, why everyone wants to go there.

The class is full because it is a hot day. The room is by the front perimeter fence and if the louvres are open, a sea breeze blows straight across the room. None of the men look at the woman. They look out to the sea, murmuring sounds that might be words from their own language or an imitation of the words that surround them now.

The boy doesn't look at the sea. It frightens him, because in all the days he was on it, it never grew any smaller, as all things that become familiar should do. And on the last day it grew larger still and swallowed everything.

The boy stares out of the window at the long trees with skins that wrinkle where the trunks meet the branches. The skin is smooth, though. He has felt it. He has rubbed their skins, looked up at the leaves and seen their silver bellies.

The lesson finishes and the men file out slowly. The boy leaves after the men, remembering to shut the door behind him. There are many doors in this place.

Through the louvres he sees a man threading a needle. The boy is momentarily reminded of his mother in the other place, sewing beneath the light of the oil lamp late at night. A group of men cluster around a man who is laid out on a bed. Through the forest of dark limbs the boy sees something he is not meant to see. The man, who is having the thing done to him — to his lips — mews quietly, like a stray kitten. The group comfort the man in lulling tones and clicks of their tongues.

The boy watches television in the lounge for three or four hours. He studies the blonde, big-eyed men and women on the screen. He thinks that beyond these fences people communicate with each other by waving their arms and crying.

The woman comes for him and takes him to her office. She doesn't walk behind him like the others, but by his side. She is one of the soft ones. She speaks to the boy in the slow, comforting tones of a lullaby and looks at him intently, expecting him to understand her. In truth, he understands only some of her words — like mother and

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father, and water. The lilt of her voice is somehow familiar. He looks at her lips and moves his own in silence, tracing hers.

At times, she brushes her fingers against the spine of his fist as he stares at the sky. Her skin is cooler than he remembers human touch to be. It reminds him of his grandmother when she was laid out on the bamboo mat.

Above the woman's head are the posters tacked to the wall with yellowing sticky tape, their edges curling away with the paint. Each time he comes to this room the edges have turned into themselves a little more. The posters have red crosses and green ticks on them and smaller writing he does not understand. He understands, though, that there are many things you can't do in this place and only a few you can.

He has never said a word to the soft woman but he likes to be here with her, in this room that smells of her cigarettes and the mints that she pushes into her cheeks with her tongue. She is the only one here who looks at him. It makes him feel sad, but big at the same time.

Sweat patches bloom beneath her armpits. She sighs and looks out the window. He wonders if she will be his new mother.

The sun is slinking towards the ocean outside the boy's window. He notes how if he slows down his breathing, the sun's movement also slows. He speeds up his breathing and the sun, too, sets quicker. He makes a mental note to study this further tomorrow.

The cricket chirrups from behind the wall again. The boy drags a plastic chair over to the hole in the wall and puts his eye up to its blackness. He wants to make the fist-sized hole a head-sized one, but he understands he will be taken from here if he does that. He must be content with straining his eyes as far left and right as they will go, then back again. The cricket is close, somewhere in the dark night behind the wall. He wills the creature towards him. It doesn't come.

The chimes sound for dinner. He is reluctant to leave but his feet make a decision without him.

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The tins in the *bain marie* flare beneath the hot lamps. They are full of oily colours. He has tried these foods before but they taste of earth and bark, and milk that has been left in the sun too long. Instead he slides his tray to the end of the line, to the last tin before the tapioca pudding. He piles his plate high with sauceless vegetables. There are carrots shaped like flowers, little yellow teeth and green pearls, all mixed together. Their skins are dry, sometimes shrivelled, but they are sweet and delicious.

He sits down at a vacant table. The table to his left is also empty. It is where the men with thick beards usually sit. He is sorting his vegetables into their colour groups when a man from his village comes to sit with him.

‘Where are the men with beards, today?’ the boy asks. ‘It is very quiet.’

The man looks around him and says, ‘They are on a hunger strike. To protest against the government.’

The boy doesn’t understand the word ‘protest’. Instead he remembers the time this man fixed his family’s transistor radio.

‘Those men should try the carrots. They are like sweets. They will like those,’ the boy says.

The man laughs, shakes his head.

‘It is not like that,’ he says. He ruffles the boy’s hair. His fingers feel warm and calloused.

The cricket has begun to stir at odd times. The boy has given it a name but told no one. When the men leave the room to sit on the plastic chairs outside and smoke, he whispers the cricket’s name to himself. The boy begins to chip away at the wall, hoping that if he moves slowly no one will notice that the wound is growing.

The boy sits on a patch of burnt grass. A group of men beckon him over *alla-alla-alla*. He moves tentatively towards the circle of chairs, brushing the crisp grass from his shorts. They pull him into the circle, jostle his limbs and ruffle his clothes, baring their black teeth at him, laughing. They motion for him to sit. He squats and watches them play a game with pebbles. When he thinks it is safe to do so, he backs out of the circle and returns to his patch of grass to push the ants into formation with a twig.

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The white shirts are moving more beds into his room. They push the new cots up against the wall and drag the old beds closer to one another. They dress each mattress in a rubber mat and two thin grey sheets and leave the room silently, without noticing the boy or the growing hole in the wall.

That night, the room is full of unfamiliar men and their strange new sounds. They whimper and gurgle and snore, and keep the boy awake. He listens for the cricket, but no sound comes from behind the wall.

He wakes in the morning before the other men have roused, with the sheets wet beneath him. It is two more days until laundry day. As he changes out of his nightclothes he spies the cricket from the corner of his eye, motionless on the wall above one of the new beds. The boy moves quickly. He wraps his nightshirt around his hand and walks across the room. A man is asleep directly below the cricket. The boy stops by the cot, breathes slowly, poised. His body is taut, as it used to be in the moments before he speared a fish. He strikes. The sleeping man does not wake. The boy is a hunter once again.

He hides the cricket under his bed beneath a white, plastic cup and watches it until his belly has warmed the cool concrete. The boy checks for movement and sound. At acceptable intervals, he lifts the cup to confirm the cricket is still alive.

When he is confident the cricket has adapted to his temporary surrounds, he sits on the edge of his bed, where it is still dry. He tries to think of a permanent home for Anpu but there are no secret places here. He looks around the room to make sure no one is watching, and he silently mouths Anpu's name. The men will be waking soon.

The soft lady has gone. She has been replaced by a softer one, whose stomach spills out over the sides of her chair. She has orange hair, pulled back from her face in wet ropes. Her scalp glows between the orange strands.

She speaks at him in English. She shows him a card with a family on it — a white man and woman with two children. The girl on the card has a red triangle for a dress. The soft lady points at him. Points at the card. Points at him again. He looks to see if the mother on the card has orange hair. She does not.

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The lady's pencil squeaks across the page in her notebook. The boy looks through the louvres at the clouds, moving fast.

The boy carefully folds his hand around a star-shaped carrot, drags it slowly across the table and secretes it into the pocket of his shorts. He watches the television in glances between hurried mouthfuls and uses mind control to keep his legs from jiggling nervously, so that his contraband is not squashed.

He walks carefully back to his room with a protective hand hovering over his pocket. Once there, he bends down to check on the cup. No sound comes from beneath it but the cup is exactly where he left it this morning: safe and undetected.

When he is sure he is alone, he carefully lifts one side of the cup and says *hello my friend*, quietly. He slips the carrot close to Anpu's mouth and puts the rim down to give the cricket privacy.

He wakes every hour or so during the night to check on Anpu. The cricket has not eaten the carrot. The boy puts a drop of water on to his finger and holds it aloft until a single droplet breaks from his skin and falls to the floor next to the insect.

Anpu has not spoken for three days. The skin of the carrot is peeling away in a papery layer, untouched. The boy prods the cricket gently. Sometimes a leg will move slightly, at other times, there is no perceptible movement at all. The white shirts will come to his room tomorrow to mop the floors. Still, the boy cannot think of a place to hide Anpu.

The boy looks at the hole in the wall. He knows what he must do. He lifts Anpu onto a tissue and says goodbye. He closes the tissue gently over the cricket and squeezes until he hears the faint crack of armour and feels the creature's warmth spread out between his fingers.

It is three hours until lights out.