





Blue Bucket, Swinging

Jan Wiezorek

Be my Saint Sadalberga,
the blest woman of foraging.
Attach your fungi and what-not
to knots of wreaths. I imagine
us breathing together here,

as we journey on to simpleness.
Bees hover the pink bust
faster than a holy vial of missing you.
Give me a dash of a stream—
her long blonde smiles,

his curly hair and pimples,
each looking like white ducks
or stones creating U-shape words:
undertow, upland, usury. Pulled,
we are underneath, until land holds

us upright, beyond sins, the high interest
that surrounds us. I've taken to examine
a stick and find its bulge, its remnant,
woody in its prayer like a bush
of soul's glory summering here.

While theology focuses on goodness,
let human experience release us from dark
to light, and rise that we feel, finally, carefree.
Oblige the sainted self, as she gathers her
damp forest, her blue bucket, swinging.



Raw Beneath My Armour

Asia Ali

I woke up in the middle of the night scratching my skin raw. When my consciousness saturated and realised what was happening, I stopped, groggily looking at my nails and wondering why there was dried blood in them. Then the itching started again and I realised I felt *awful*.

Turning around, I saw my girlfriend, Yana, fast asleep next to me, her relaxed features in harmony with her warm soul. Auburn hair spilled over the pillows in a wavy puddle, and she looked too cute in my pyjamas that were just a bit too small for her. I almost couldn't appreciate the sight though because I had a burning headache and my muscles felt strained. Even lifting my arm to inspect it was difficult because moving sent a cascade of nausea up to my chest, and the pressure behind my eyes made my sight worse.

But I did see that my skin was covered in small red spots, some of them bleeding and crusty and looking generally disgusting. Frowning at them, I prodded one experimentally.

The subsequent eruption of itch compelled me to scratch it to death, even though that only made it sting and bleed more.

I realised I should've woken my doctor girlfriend, but she looked so peaceful, and I was an adult for god's sake. I could deal with my own... acne? No, it definitely wasn't that. Mites?

God, if it was, I should move away from Yana, so I didn't spread them to her. That thought passed slowly through my mind like dripping

treacle, and when the instructions reached my body, half of them got miscommunicated and the other half failed completely. That was how I ended up plummeting to the floor with an unceremonious thud.

“Jen?” Yana asked sleepily. “Did you just fall out of bed?”

Perfect.

“No,” I tried to say casually, but it came out as a mangled cry of pain.

There was an urgent shuffling sound and Yana’s warm face peered around the edge of the bed, a worried crease in her brow, her almond eyes baked with concern. “Jesus Christ,” she muttered, swinging her legs around and joining me on the floor. “My poor baby...”

She did this *all* the time, babying me, diagnosing me with fake ailments, bringing me drinks and freshly cut fruit throughout the day when she had the time, as if a sip of water would cure a desert drought. It was the sweetness that I was allergic to though; the constant digging into my soft spots like the niceties weren’t going to sandpaper me down into a fragile baby bird.

Sure, it’d happened to some extent after being in a relationship with her for a few months now, but there came a point where I had to draw the line, lest I become dependent on the sweet elixir of her nurturing care. I’d worked hard to roughen my skin. I wasn’t keen on losing it.

Now, she scooped me up in her arms and deposited me safely back onto the bed. Looking through my wardrobe, she pulled out one of her own hoodies—I hadn’t stolen it, and no one could prove otherwise. She tried to dump it over my head.

But I dodged her, causing me to wince.

“Jen,” she said soothingly, “it’s okay. This’ll make you feel better.”

I huffed. “I’m fine.”

She gave me an unimpressed look. “You’re quite obviously shivering.”

I looked down at my bare body and realised she was right. Also, I was so fucking cold, maybe I had hypothermia. “Give me that,” I snapped, swiping for the hoodie. My arms were weak though and Yana had to help me into it. She picked out a pair of sweats and helped me get those on too.

“I’m fine now,” I decided, as my head went a bit woozy. The world had been yanked out from under me, like I was on an alien UFO which had malfunctioned drastically. “On second thoughts,” I muttered, my mouth feeling dry and gravelly, “I’m going to be sick...”

If I moved, I would die, but if I *didn’t* move, I would be sick all over myself and my nice sheets and Yana’s cosy hoodie.

Yana dashed out of the room and returned with an old bowl and oh god, thank goodness. Before I could show her any gratitude though, my guts heaved and everything came out, angrily scalding my throat.

Yana sat next to me, rubbing circles on my back and keeping my longer strands of hair out of the way. “It’s alright,” she said softly as I whimpered.

Focusing on her words, letting them wash over me, I tried to remain calm through the waves of nausea and finally, it did stop. She got me a warm flannel and cleaned my mouth. “Drink some water?” she asked, handing me a glass.

I nodded, sure if I spoke right now, the sound would resemble glass



grinding on stone. After washing away some of that feeling, I shakily handed the glass back to her and collapsed backwards, feeling marginally better.

“I’m fine now,” I repeated.

Yana rolled her eyes. “Jen, do you even know what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” I replied. “Just ate something bad probably.”

She gave another unimpressed look. “You’ve got chickenpox.”

“Oh.”

Yana nodded. “Yep,” she said. “Now, here’s what’s going to happen—”

“Yana, I’m *fine* now,” I insisted. “You can go and... you know, do whatever sad activities that you do when you’re not with me.”

She did not look amused which was weird because I thought I was pretty funny. “Being a doctor is not sad,” she said indignantly, apparently still taking the bait.

“It *is* a little,” I said. “Because doctors are so annoying.”

“Listen here, Jennifer,” Yana replied firmly. “Whether you like it or not, today I’m *your* doctor so—”

“I do *not* like it,” I stated, sticking my tongue out.

“Well, thanks for your irrelevant opinion,” Yana said, unfazed. “Now *listen*—”

“Could you pass me my jeans?” I asked. “I told my grandma I’d go out and get a few things from the grocery store for her in the morning.”

Yana scowled at me. “First of all, no,” she stated. “Second of all, *are you crazy?*”

I gave her the most unhinged look I could muster. “You tell me.”

That made her laugh. I relished the sound, deep and throaty, because god, laughter really was the best medicine (I was aware that wasn’t what it referred to, but obviously whoever had popularised it hadn’t ever heard my girlfriend laugh).

With abruptness, Yana grabbed my hand firmly. I blinked at her, absurdly feeling tears prickle my eyes.

“Oh, no, Jen,” she said gently, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rough with you. I was just stopping you from scratching.”

I quickly nodded, blinking fast. I hadn’t even realised I was doing it. “You weren’t rough,” I said gruffly as Yana kissed my hand. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, you’re not fine, darling,” she whispered, placing small kisses along my wrist that felt divine. “You’re very sick. Now can you please kindly shut up while I tell you how we’re going to deal with this?”

I sighed, my energy failing. “Fine.”

Yana started tucking me into bed, fetching extra blankets, and piling them on too. “We’re going to keep you nice and warm and cosy.”

“You’re trying to entrap me, aren’t you?” I asked playfully.

“Yep,” Yana replied, placing a kiss on my nose, “you’re my prisoner now.”

I groaned dramatically. “You might as well kill me. Even if I survive this, I don’t want to live with the memories of all the stuff you’re gonna do to me.”

Yana smiled. “It *is* gonna be pretty horrific. Like, first of all, you’re going to drink at least a glass of water every hour.”

“The horror!” I cried. “Get me out!”

“The more you struggle, the worse it’ll be,” she taunted, handing me a glass so I could take small sips.

Then she fetched her first aid kit—one I'd repeatedly assured we didn't need to keep in the apartment—and started rummaging through. "Take a couple of these," she ordered, procuring a sheet of rectangular tablets.

"Muscle relaxers?" I joked.

"Itch relievers," Yana replied, smiling. Then she pulled out a tube of ointment. "And this should help soothe your skin too."

"Speaking of my skin," I said, thrusting the stuff back at her, "can you hold these a sec while I scratch myself to death?"

"Jen, *stop*," Yana begged. "It'll make it worse."

I'd never felt frustration like this, where my entire body was jumping, on fire, crawling with itchiness. I managed to stop myself for a couple of seconds, but anything more, I was sure I was going to go mad. "Nope," I decided. "It has to be done."

Yana grabbed hold of my arms again though, so I couldn't.

"Get off me!" I cried, trying to fight against her, but she was strong, and I was weak with sickness.

She looked like she was trying not to laugh, her lips twitching upward. "I'm sorry, Jen," she said genuinely. "You're going to hurt yourself."

"Just ten seconds," I pleaded, the itching turning into a knife attack. "Yana, this is *unbearable*."

She frowned. "I know," she said softly. "The medicine should kick in soon. And I'm going to put the ointment on, okay?"

"You have to let go of me to do that," I challenged.

"Jen," she said seriously. "If you scratch, it's going to take longer to heal, it's going to make you prone to secondary infections especially because your immune system is already weak and it'll scar—"

I usually secretly enjoyed when she bestowed her medical wisdom upon me, talking doctor because it was *hot*, but today, I wasn't having it.

"Blah blah blah," I snapped, annoyed I was being held in place as a prisoner. "All I hear is useless doctory gibberish bullshit. Meanwhile, my skin is *on fire*. So, are you going to help me or not?"

Yana sighed. "Yes," she said. "You better not scratch."

I tried. I really did. But as soon as she let go, my hands dipped straight under my hoodie and oh *wow*, the feeling of relieving the itch was orgasmic (I even made similar noises to prove it).

"Hey, *no*," Yana whined. "Jen, look, you're bleeding now."

"Worth it," I sighed, an insatiable feeling taking over me. So, when Yana took my hands again and tied them to the headboard with a firm bandage, I really couldn't blame her.

She'd done this before, *many* times, but this was not a situation I was enjoying.

“Fuck you, Yana Choudry. When I get better, I’m going to kick your ass. You’re going to be sorry you ever messed with me. I swear, if you don’t let me go *right now*... *Oh*, that feels nice.”

Yana gave me an exasperated smile, as she continued to slather the cool ointment.

“If I let you go now,” Yana said after she was finished, “can I trust you to be good?”

“I’m not a child,” I snapped. “Don’t think I won’t...”

“Yes?” Yana prompted as she untied the bandages holding me in place.

“Don’t think I won’t do something you won’t like,” I finished.

Yana nodded, stroking the sticky hair out of my eyes. “Yeah, I’m kind of used to that after this morning,” she told me.

I leaned into her touch. “Good,” I stated. “There won’t be as much complaining then.”

Yana sighed and held me into a warm cuddle. Despite my qualms, I couldn’t help sinking into it. Maybe if the landing was this soft, it was okay to show how raw I was underneath my armour.

“You are the worst patient ever,” Yana whispered playfully.

I smiled, feeling my lids growing heavier and my conscious starting to drift. “Don’t worry. You got there in the end.”





Earthbound Constellations

Karen Zhao

Even the stars envy streetlights,
how they gather in clusters,
close enough to touch each other,
humming softly above the roads,
singing songs about highs and lows
like earthbound constellations.

The stars are too far to see our faces,
too distant to hear the way our laughter sounds
through the warmth of electricity.
Yet they watch, jealous,
of how we made our own sky.

And still they blink in silence,
as if trying to remember what closeness feels like,
as if light alone could bridge the space
between wanting and having.

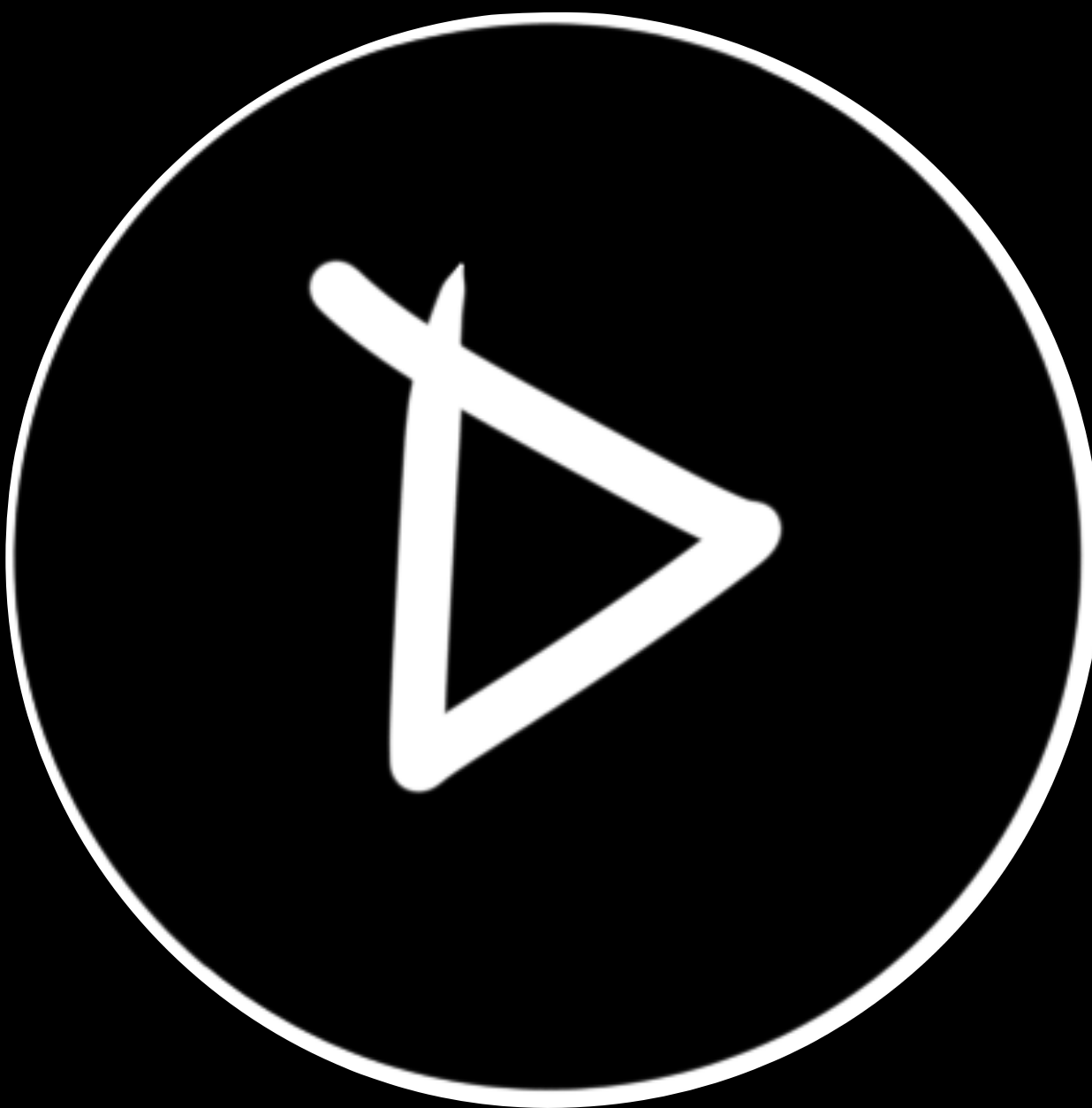
Down here, the night is never truly dark,
stitched together with wires and waiting hands,
with footsteps that echo under manmade moons
that never learned how to fade.

We move beneath them without thinking,
carrying our stories through intersections and corners,
where every glow has a purpose,
and every flicker knows a name.

The stars remain unchanged,
but we do not.
We learn to gather,
to stand near enough to be seen,
to become a kind of light, quietly keen.

And if they are jealous,
it is not of light,
but of how easily we learned
to be close.





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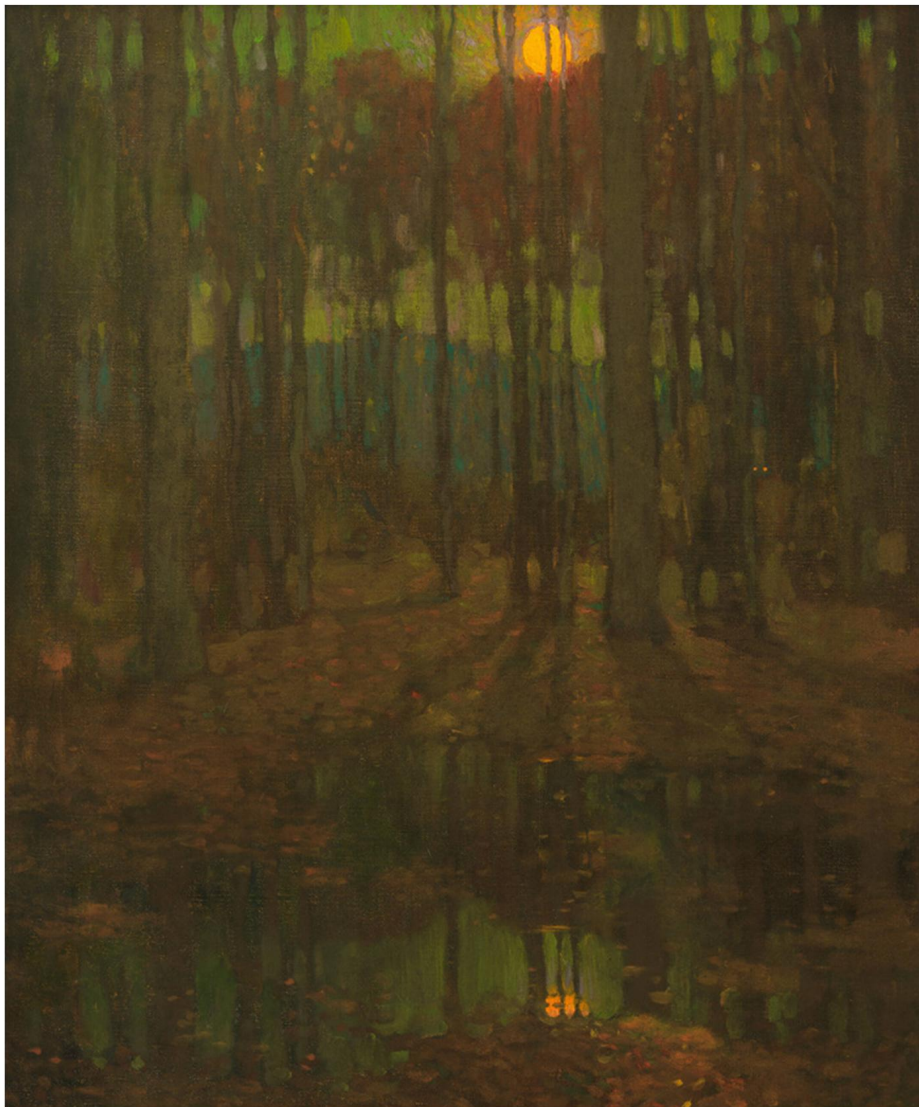
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