niña - a climate novel

1

faster she flys thru slants of golden lyte, ovr a picture perfect view kissin sky crystal bryte. she scales hyer to escape with eyes scannin the land, drinkin in the natural shapes n erthen cliffs so grand. tween channels cut low she soars bryte as a dove beyond hillocs n isles aglow, a rainbow from Heven above. by forces of the moon carried on rythms of tide, into a lake hugged by dunes flows the destiny of time amid a vale wide n sunlit whr the saltwater stirs, evry beautiful inch of it: the world is Hers.

n thr – her prize in syte. sprint quickens to gallop. her prey, startled, reacts – fur ignites in a bolt, gone. but Nyeli is undeterred.

the nimble n noble cat makes for lower ground; Nyeli, insted, goes hye. as a bird, she soars in great strides ovr the swamp.

the unsubmerged top of a pickup truc fashuns the perfect platform to land as she chases the cat further into floatin muc upon island to artifishul island. a transitin boat leeves a wake of foamy green, n Nyeli pounces on its bow b4 flyin off agen. skipper didnt eevn care.

thees urban roadblocs r no hinder, for she is competent n quic – confident n slic – n the cat stands not a chance.

the foothill of the levee approaches, its erthen slope givin way to bare concreet paramount ovr the oshun like a long ded volcano.

the dove turns eegle now, swoops onto the levee n watches her prey runnin below. crouchin, hidden, she peers as fluffy feet trod neerer. yes – yes – the cat is on the scent. food awaits for both. the girl watches as - yes - yes fwip it goes! n a leg is snared by speedin rope, a pyramid of roc crashin loose, the mecanical efishency of her trap laid bare. the bait worked, the cat subdued, n feline will now bcome food. Nyeli, satisfied, stands in triumf, for her famly will eet tnite.

but then, a russle: primate voices bouncin off the wal. n who r thees ppl? she wonders, for no 1 but her frequents this place, no 1 else with her determinashun to chase a meel to the very edge of the swamp.

hed raised, she marvels at the sky above
n follows its green lyte
to the top of the tub
wich keeps the water out
n her famly in.
she clymes the ragged steps
onto the uneevn crest of the seawal
n looks out to the plastic strewn soop beyond.
its awfully hye tday –
water crashin agenst the wal meer feet below
like an annimal thrashin at its cage.
wut if she cud just fly ovr this oshun
or swim away, nevr to return?

the human voices give way to deeper tones, n the diseesed oshun bellows. it seems to speek to her. writhin, it moans like a woonded wale angry at its hunters, its polluters, its pain.

at its farthest reech on the horizon, the seerin bulb approaches its lowest descent in the glitterin emrald sky that twinkles off the algae green sea. glow clouds drift in stately proceshun, pulled by the receedin chariot that sinks ovr steemin saltwater wich has permanently invaded the land: the swamp, her home. eevn in the difracshun of the heet – still well above 100 degrees – Nyeli can discern the shadow of the Cassel afar n her drowned home tween.

cuttin thru the dome ovrhed, criscrossin contrails expel their stains,

n as with the dinosaurs eons b4, she sees the streeks of demise in the sky.

the levee looks worse then evr, its cracs growin into gapin casms like deeply rotten teeth.

aha – for in 1 such crac, the flickerin of a lyte reveels the nature of the voices:

2 men in robes, covered hair n face, fiddlin with sum fancy equipment for the badly neglected barrier. the wir of drills rings out with a puff, n they insert a box into the hole with the winkin red eye of Satan atop.

her curiosity sated, her hunger is not, so she returns in jumps to her catch below – hand for support heer, leep ovr roc thr – n parkours her way down to the stricken n strugglin cat.

"help," it mews, pupils round as peas. its so cute, wite patch on its chest, an eer torn limp from a life of hardship. the poor thing pulls, but her trap is too effective to escape.

she flics out her bag n approaches, crouches down to meet her meel. "hello," she offers, grabbin the hissin annimal n stuffin it face first into the sac. just a quic snip to cut the bond from the nife she always carries wen boom, it blows – thunder! the volcano roars to life, n the world wuz nevr the same.

her instinct is to duc. thats wut life taut her,

as the painful clap reverberates a dozen times. a cloud of grey smoke spews a shower of concreet chunks, n the bag in her hands riggles from within. heet flashes ovr both predator n prey, the feer for their lives mountin inside, giant boulders poundin down the levee n barrelin strait toward em.

she drops the bag in a startle
n the draw opens for her catch to escape.
"good game!" shouts she to the skitterin cat,
n she off in the opposit direcshun.
"see u tmoro!" she declares,
n looks bac at the feline in admirashun
to discover that the land behind her
been bommed by meteors,
only roc n haze to b seen.

dismayed, she returns to a foward gaze, manuverin adeptly ovr the flotsam n bac toward the dry. had the cat survived? at leest it had a chance. but wut wuz this freek accident – or wuz it no accident at all? she seen insurgent exploshuns b4, tho this wuz by far the biggest.

behind her, the blac specter rolls hyer, eclipsin the settin sun.

the shiftin of stone compleet, the seawal still apeers intact, n the oshun safely held in place.

who wud try to break the tub? the girl wonders in horror, for the levee the only reeson they eevn alive. y - y - y??? she asks with her evry thumpin footfall.

at last, she arrives at pavement n can expedite the trek home.

thru the concreet mist behind her, too quiet to b perceeved, sings the lappin sound – bubblin, splashin – of a tiny trickle of water pushin thru a widenin crac in the wal that holds the oshun bac.

n then the sun went down.

2

feet trample ovr soggy ground n Nyeli reeches the end of her run, her slender frame unable to carry her nother haf mile sprint home, so she slows to a walk to catch her ragged breth.

the girl gathers herself neet with dark hands smooth n brown that she runs thru the teel n rose streeks of her defiantly bryte hair. she replaces her blade among her locs n cleens herself presentable for her frens.

in this dilapidated corner of her swampy hood, her community gathers in circles, emergin from their solar slumber into nitetime air now below 100 degrees. "Nyeli!" beckons her neybor, generusly presentin a lit j.
the girl joins the ring n a hurry, still rattled by the feersum blast.
"wuttup Gusty," she sez, fist pound n inhale.
they stand, sholders hunched, heds bowed as the firey paper is passed round the crew.
"just talkin Boss," sez Dord, nother of her frens.
"yall see his new leek?" he chuckles, n nother lafs too. "wichun?"

the Corprit drones buz madninly ovrhed, n Nyeli takes nother hit.

"the sexvid," Dord clarifies, n agen,
"wichun??" they ask.
"with the dog," he sez, "just came out.
they probly watchin rytenow."
he points to a groop of hunched n howlin teens,
their circle aglow with artifishul lyte,
eyes locked on the rapturus scrols
that extend from their rists like limbs
n tell em evrythin they evr need to noe.
silent, they write eechother by tappin
n laf to emselves as they consume the feed.

Nyeli got 2 screens just like em for eech hand, so she wips out her scrol to see the buz. thr it is, a lewd vid of her ceo himself, borkin a dog for all the world to see. "i think Bossman drugged it," Dord sez. "classic!" sum1 rings out, n the lafter continues, the warblin air gettin louder in her eers.

nother guy comes ovr to em, box in hand, n Dord slips him a green note, the worthless Corprit munny with a portrait of Boss next to Jesus Himself, in exchange for a slender cig colored pink for brest cancer awareness. the more Nyeli smokes, the loopier she gets, til her dim nitetime world turns a lilac shade, n the eckoes of cannons return to her mind.

"did yall heer an exploshun just now?" she asks. with a puff of wite, a man sez yes: "probly the bugs agen," he sez. "evryday now." "i saw it," she reveels. "on the tub. big."

they turn. Dord lowers the joint. "who?" "dunno," Nyeli admits. "didnt get to see." "mayb its sum1s Chrismas suprize," sez Krla, among Nyelis oldest n closest frens.

Chrismas. she almost forgot. agen, Chrismas? already? wut to get? how much time left? she dont eevn noe the date anymore.

"hey Krla, u wan go shoppin tmoro?" asks Nyeli.
"no, Tues," she replies, takin a hit. "date tmoro."
"ooooo," say the bois in chorus,
n b4 she can recall wut day the week it eevn is,
Nyeli realizes she gotta go.
"i gotta tell my fam bout the levee," she sez.
leme noe u heer anythin bout who did it."
her frens nod n wave her so long
as she runs the rest the way home alone.

Chrismas, Chrismas, wut to do abt u, she wonders on her trudge thru the swamp. a feryboat gives her a not quite free lift to the edge of the floatin wooden platform that skirts the outside of her soggy bildin.

the ascent to her room is no joke:
10 flytes up from the waterline.
Nyeli been told that 13 wuz unlucky
n that her famly wuz too. so it seems apropriate

that her tragic life wound up whr it did n y it did on floor 13 of a structure partly submarine.

but so wut that her life aint as flashy as the life of the Lords in the Cassel? by the time she passes the 10th floor she aint pinin for the glamorus life defined by such blatant displays of welth. at leest she aint out on the streets or adrift in the sea or wanderin the interior like sum unholy nomad, but is attached to a place with a roof, n sumhow, a home. after all, she still Mercan, n that gotta count for summin, ryte?

but who she kiddin - thats bulshit n she noe it.

the 13th floor at last, n she puffin like mad. down the hall n to the ryte, she arrives n lays into the door 6 familiar raps – 1-2, 1-2 –

to announce her presence to whoevr will answer tday. a heavy latch unlocs, iron groans agenst wood, n the face of Zatara is the first thing she sees. Nyeli extends a fist with her thum aimed up; her sister reciprocates, their digits lockin n their thums pressed together.

Nyeli enters the dim room. behind her, Zatara closes the door n reinforces it with the iron beem that secures it, n they resume their feer of the world outside.

"o thr she is!" booms the chief inspector himself as he rises from a chair in the kitchen. the girl is momentarily stunned by his presence, for he shudnt b checkin in til tmoro. "u heer early," she remarks, as he flashes crooked teeth.

a bois hed pops out behind the bulky body, n his acne scarred cheeks look almost as red as the Corprit collar round his nec. whoevr he is, she nevr seen him b4.

"wuts goin on?" she asks.
"i missed u girls," sez Enri, lookin at the sisters,
"n i wuz in the area."
this is, acourse, a weak explanashun;
as chief inspector, he always in the area.

Nyeli scrunches her face in skepticism;
Zatara dunt react, meerly walks by,
transfixed by the scrol on her rist.
"so u dressed up for us?" Nyeli asks
not sarcasticly, for Enri sports a crimson suit
compleetly unlike his standard Corprit uniform.
"Texco elecshuns in 2 weeks," he smiles.
"i gotta look the part."
"of ceo?" she lafs.
his husky frame shrugs. "it cud happen."

she gives her mother a hug, who still aint risen from her seet – probly aint all day – n she agen looks ovr this yung man in the room.

"we detected a smol erthquake on the levee," Enri reveels at last.

Nyeli swivels round to face him. erthquake??

"probly the detonashun of an alarmist bom.

i wanted to keep yall in the loop.

il let u noe any updates if we get em."

his stoic delivery is almost too effective:

not a crac in his mask, no change in attitude

of pointed brows that neerly meet at his nose,

no tremble of feelin in his furry face.

"whoa whoa," Nyeli exclaims, "wut u meen a" – "as i SED, il give yall updates if we get em." his tangled beerd seems to amplify his voice.

"who cuda done it?" she asks,
puttin a palm on top his hand.
he responds to this n softens.
"wuz it the locusts?"
Enri takes her hand gently off his.
"Texgard," he breethes.
her lips tyten. "the underworld?" she asks.
he nods. "idiots, thinkin meer men
can end The Punishment.
just like ur father," he spits.

truth b told, she dont rember much abt her papi, except the fytin with mami all the time.

Nyeli nods in shame, tryna avoid an argument.

"i nevr liked ur father," declares Enri,
n her efforts were in vain.
"he wuz weak," he sez, "thot he wuz sooo smart,
but his smarts didnt protect his swollen hed
wen i ran my fist into it
the day he led his lil protest."
the girl winces at the thot.
Enri glares. "u noe how that ended."

she looks up at his 6 foot hye face, a body that soars above most in this stunted land. "we get it," sez Nyeli, "he wuz bad." "worse then bad," he continues. "lower then dirt. shud be food for worms."

Nyeli leens in closer. he got neerly a foot on her. "im not him," she reminds him coolly. "u sure bout that?" he sez, judgin her swamp stained clothes.

"u sure look like dirt next to me."
he reeches for her ragged shirt
n brushes the mud off her left brest,
strokin it gently with that look in his eye.
"ya noe," he sez, "mayb id b able to get u sum
better treetment
if u wuz nicer to me." the caress continues.

she smiles n puts her hand to his, rubbin fingertips ovr his thic, massive palm, til she grabs it forcefully n yanks it away. "y dont u b nice to me first," she hisses, "n then il give u wut u want."

his smile collapses to frown.

"scrols out!" he bellows.

Nyeli rolls her eyes n straitens her arms,
but her sister too absorbed to eevn react.

"i sed screens OUT," repeets Enri, louder.
startled out her trance, the teen pouts a noise
n holds out her arms for inspecshun.

Enri procures a forked wand from his belt, n with a button, he takes aim at the girls – their arms magnetize together in a clac, formin a seam at the ends of stiffened screens that unfurl harshly from their rists.

the inspector waves his wishbone down the length of the hardened scrols. the magic wand downloads all the data the girls have collected in the haf dozen days since they saw him last. but wut his wonder takes, it also gives: their screen batts r now compleetly recharged.

as the girls await releese, Enri reviews the incomin data on his own scrol. "dont look like u gettin nuf eyetime," is his grim diagnosis of Nyeli. "u feelin ok?" he takes his blac wishbone to her thum n zaps it at the joint to test her nerves. she frowns harder. "i been a bit busy." "yeah, u been busy, i noe," he italics. "u shud get tested." she rolls her eyes so hard she can feel em almost come loose from her hed.

"im givin u a supply of oxy," he decides.
"i dont want that shit bro," she bites bac.
"its for ur nec too," he sez with warmth.
"o, so u my doctor now?"
abruptly he aims the wand to her nape. zap.
"ow!" she cries. "cut it out."
"ur pain levels are up," he sez, readin his scrol.
"cuz u zapped me, dic!"
"omg i wuz kiddin," he sez earnestly. "relax."

Nyeli folds her nec close to her sholder in a futile attempt to rub it without hands. its tru tho: her nec been hurtin more then usual. she looks at him with genuin pain, beedy eyed, n asks: "can u plz stop." a smile. "20 tabs, then," he sez, pullin out a plastic bottle. "shud last u til Fri." Nyeli frowns skepticly. its like he had this prescripshun from the getgo. "it gon help u," he assures her, pushin a button to disengage the screencufs.

the sisters arms drop unexpectedly, n Nyeli takes a moment to shake em out. Enri places the cylinder in her hands. "i expect em to b gone by then. understood?" his eyeloc is so strong Nyeli gotta avert her gaze from his witherin glare n crooked, spredin grin. "go ahed."

Nyeli, reluctant, pops 2 yello candies in her mouth, swallows without water.

"good girl," he sez, returnin eyes on his scrol.
"meenwile 1 u been spendin too much eyetime lookin at revolushunary propaganda," he notes, shiftin his eyes accusinly at the 2 girls.

Nyeli panics internally. she noe better then to look at the occashunal propaganda the Corprashun lets slip into her feed to monitor the loyalty of the populace. they watchin her evry eye move n she noe it.

she decides to change the subject:
"so u gon introduce us to ur fren?" she asks,
gesturin to the nu guy in the room.
"o, him?" Enri asks. "just an intern. this is Chae."

the kid steps closer. he cant b older then 20, for he still got the feetures of a teen. he nods with respect. "hello," he sez meekly.

Nyeli recognizes him from sumwhr, but whr? she leens foward. "u noe me?" "dont think so." "u will."
Chae smiles as he moves next to her, standin but an inch taller but with skin far, far lyter.
n a hed full of loosly curled brown. "take down my tag," Nyeli tells Chae, n they clac their scrols together for data transfer.

the adolescents talk wile Enri continues conversin with Nyelis mother n her lil brother, who has joined the gatherin. "hows the champ tday?" Enri asks the boi, rubbin the tots lyte n shiny hed. the child, underfed n underdeveloped, babbles a gleeful noise that earns him a pat. Jojo always luvs wen the Corps come to visit.

"how he been?" Enri asks mom of the kid.
"same ol," she utters in reply.
the big man crouches down on his nee
n pulls out a toy from his pants:
a fabulusly spinnin tri lobed piece of plastic.
"wuts that?" Nyeli asks, watchin the exchange.
"keeps his mind sharp," Enri sez,
n places the spinner into the bois palm.
"kid needs stimulashun."
the boi starts the wirrin, n from then on
it nevr stops.

"well, we must b goin," the inspector sez, n rises. Chae, noddin, steps away from beautiful Nyeli n returns sheepishly beside his boss.
"in the name of His Holyness,
1 Corprashun under God,"
Enri recites as he wraps up his work.
"get more screen time."

the men lift the heavy bar to depart. Chae, glancin bac b4 he leeves, smiles 1 last time to Nyeli – il txt u, he mouths.

Nyeli grins slytely, only for her jaw to slac open upon the sound of the door closin shut. her face is frozen in an expreshun of horror: the levee is under attac.

Zatara looks equaly upset: "whrs dinner?"
Nyeli shakes her hed at her lil sis.
"it didnt happen tday," she reports.
arms cross in a knot.
"u let it go agen, didnt u?" the lil sis is pissed.
"il just go on nother hunt," Nyeli sez. "its fine."

her siblin flips her scrol from its cuf on her rist, n it stiffens into holy glowin screen. Nyeli watches as her sister gets absorbed. "unless u wan try," she adds.

Zatara declines with a shake of her hed.

"stop usin ur stupid traps n shoot next time."

her bouncin brother, gleeful with the spinner, stops his play n wimpers at his growlin tummy. gilt pilin up in her hart, Nyeli decides to tell em: "i saw the exploshun on the tub." sister pffs. "thats ur scuse y we eetin dirt tnite?" Nyeli winces just a rinkle.

she joins her mother in the kitchen
n reeches into the pantry for the powder mix
with just nuf calories n vitamins
to sustain her brown body
n no more.
finally mami rises from the wooden seat:
"il fix dinner toite" she speeks "God told me to

"il fix dinner tnite," she speeks. "God told me to." Nyeli looks thru her bleeched golden locs n smiles to see her mother finally out the chair.

"if He sez so," she replies, pullin out the soil. its grey motes dust the sides of the cleer bag like discarded catlitter,

n a puff of stale air erupts from a hole as the sac hits the countertop.

soilnt, its offishul moniker –

soil for short; dirt by most standards.

it is her famlys government rashun,

n its all thats keepin her alive.

"potatos under the sink," she reminds mami – the sink they dont use n nevr wud, unless they wan wash down the dirt with sewage.

mom gets close nuf to her dotter to get a wiff of odor still clingin to Nyelis tydye hair. its not the smell of swamp. "y u smoke that stuff?" mami cries, eyes afire. any happy feels Nyeli enjoyed from her hye flutter away.

"cuz it makes me feel good," she tells her mom.
"u not sposed to feel good. we bein Punished."
Nyeli, hed bowed, nods sadly
n leeves her mom in the kitchen
so she can feel ashamed
in nother part of their tiny home.

she joins Zatara in the siblins bedroom beside the bundle of cables thru their window, thic n wide as tree roots n evry bit as vital to their lives as water n food, for they power their appliances, n those of evry1 who call this wet n crumblin bildin their home. out the window Nyeli can see her neybors apartment a short shimmy away with a 10 story drop onto the doc below.

"wut wuz that all bout?" Nyeli asks her sister ovr n above the noise of her hedfones. "dunno," sis answers honestly. "the propaganda," Nyeli specifies. "u tryna get us purged??"
Zatara brushes it off. "or imprisoned? rly Zara??"
"u noe he just tryna scare us," she sez. "besides, the revolushun got good meems. i cant help it sumtimes." only grumbles from older sis. "lies," she barks. "all lies. n u stop lookin at ur scrol like that."

Zatara takes her eyes off her screen to leer her sister, an uncommon gesture among the yunger generashun. Nyeli looks cross. "wuteva," sez the teen, n flics her rist to curl up her scrol wich zips bac neetly within its magnetic cuf. she then fits on a pair of wide lensed glasses n pushes a button on the side to turn em awake. eyes disapeer behind a torrent of glowin colors,

n Nyeli noes she aint bein lissened to anymore.

probly just as good: that oxy startin to hit. she falls onto the floor with a dramatic thud n feels herself floatin into the green sky. she realizes the pills are awesum, wich helps her rember y she feers em: nobody shud feel this good. we bein Punished.

content to drift, she too unfurls her wonder cuf with a graceful wip of her hand. the smartscreen grows to fit her grip like magic, n its opioid effect takes hold on her brain as sychedelic colors crash down in marvelus cascadin hues, splashin lectricity in her fleshy thotmatter. she, like her sister, is drawn to this digital drug that they make so mindless n easy she can control it with just her eyes.

instantly she is connected to the node
n is pulled into the facestreem.
better, prettier ppl evrywhr:
its like the hol world is gorgeus but her,
n its agonizin to see just
how popular the Lords can b.
this 1 girl with the latest fur coat for winter:
a mink bikini on a yello sand beech
that surely must b a tv set sumwhr,
for no beech in Merca looks like that anymore.
a billion likes on this 1 pic,
yet Nyeli noes no 1 who eevn looks like her:
full lips n broad hips n perfect wite skin
like all the Lords. perfect. perfect n wite.

she wonders, dus livin in the Cassel make u wite, or is that a prerequisit for entry? acourse, her famly wuz nevr wite, but they once lived thr nonetheless.

been a long time since then, evr since her dad. that wuz decades ago already.

mayb on the node she will find sum buz in her feed abt the levee, but within moments of loggin on she already in a flamewar with sum idiot from Ausn ovr the Texcan ceo.

"Gaspard for life!" the crazy sez,
n Nyeli cant help but b enraged.
"15 yeers is too long," she argues. "he gotta go."
"fuc u dipshit."
"suc a bag of dics."
she feeds off the energy: its so easy
to sling insults from behind the screen,
n her oxy laden mind tells her to go further still.
she scrols n scrols deeper into the cesspit,
the facial media marinatin
her anger with evry post.

a buzline grabs her:

"Texgard terrists bom nother pwrplant."
blind to the lies, she clics the link in a red mist
n watches a loopin vid of a bildin with a hole
out wich rises a colum of terrible blac smoke.
the responses pour in by the millions
of anger n patriotic fervor:
"kil the cowards!" sez sum1 who may b a bot;
"deth to TRAITORS" wails nother.
eevn if Nyeli wanted more details, thr aint any,
for the news is just hedlines n pictures.
still she pissed. she wants em traitors ded.

bzzz vibrates her cuf, n a notificashun pops onto her slate: "u aint comment in a wile," reads the txt with the eyes of a cartoon pencil icon starin at her harshly. "reserch shows that anger subsides the more u comment," it splains further. "wud u like sum help?" Nyeli, intrigued by the offer, blinks yes.

the next post on her feed is also abt Texco ceo Erwin Gaspard, who is to retire by the nuyeer, promptin the next wave of political instability as evry1 jockeys for his open posishun. she begins to write a comment.

"i think" – n then she stops.
wut dus she think?
she dont gotta. her screen offers a suggeshun:
"that."
ok, she thinks, n gives it a clic.
nother suggeshun apeers: "he."
sure, y not.
"is" "a" "great" "ceo" "but"
"shud" "b" "tuffer" "on" "refugee" "crisis."

she stops to consider wut she wrote.
tbh, she aint thot abt wut he dus to refugees.
she just kinda thot he got rid em like he shud.
they aint Texcan. they may not eevn b Mercan.
is Gaspard a weak ceo? she didnt think so,
but now she aint sure.
mayb Inspector Enri as his replacement
cud acshully b a good thing.

satisfied, she posts the comment. but y dont she feel any better? the anger still boils; the pill didnt quell it.

"LOL OMG" sez nother hedline in the buz, n then a long 1, from the Mercan ceo: "tcawngptw" – a faverit of his, meenin "the crazy aliens wont nevr get past the Wal." n they rly r crazy, tbh. if the numbers are tru, sum 2000 an hour launch emselves at Trumps Wal only to bounce off. stupid migrants. at leest, thats wut she think he meens. the Boss can b very uncleer sumtimes. it myte meen "tru ceos aint wimps. need giant purge to win." this line is 1 he been noen to deploy anytime the citizens scrutinize the bredth of His Holys latest Corprit Purge.

if only he wuz easier to understand, she admits to herself.
but its ok. we noe he smarter then all us, n we probly just too stupid to decifer his Holy words.
either that or he a bumblin idiot like the traitors say.

honestly, dus it matter? not to her.
the buz in her feed is cleverly packaged,
a well coreografed simulashun
of news, life n sentiments
carefully monitored by the Corprit state
n calibrated into a balanced coctail
to pull the maironet lines of the
mesmerized human populace.
rage, feer, hate, rage –
it wuz the well worn news cycle
n it had a nife to her throat
sayin embrace the hate or die,
n she dont die.

the Corpbuz hedlines seem to repeet emselves:
Metropoliance dus this, insurgents bom that;
"latest Trump sexvid reveled" –
typo intact, cuz no 1 cares abt such thigns.
"wut u think bout levee fundin?" asks a pundit.
"i like the levee," sez the politician,
n the crowd goes absolutely nuts.

then a familiar shoc of hair crawls up the screen:

the 4th orange faced iterashun of Mercan leedership in a row addressin Nyeli directly with nother of his famus fireside tweets.

"i wan talk bout deth," sez the dashin hed ceo of the Corprit States of America. by law Nyeli is required to watch the address. the Corps in turn watch her watchin him thru the eyehole at the top of her scrol. "it comes wen its ment to," Bossman preeches. "but thats no scuse to bom a powerplant or shoot a scool full of children."

the frame pulls out to reveel a coffin sized box.

"introducin the self destruct booth,"

Boss Trump sez triumfantly.

"if u no longer wan live, die with dignity."

on the screen, a man enters the box n sits.

the door closes, his vexed face visible thru glass.

Trump pulls an industrial lever,

n the man in the chair seizes

b4 slumpin ovr.

"quic, easy, painless," Boss sez, a twitchin body convulsin behind. "the Homeland cant afford anymore kabooms," he reiterates. "all volunteers for the booth will get accommodashuns for their famlies to relocate to our nu company towns whr they will live glamorus middle class lives with the finest luxuries, includin dishwashers n eevn toiletpaper."

Nyeli is envius of eevn just the idea of havin toiletpaper agen. anywhr away from this dump wud b a releef.

"we get it. life is hard," Trump sez in conclushun. "sumtimes it makes u just wan blow up.

kaboom!
mayb u wan beet ur wife.
mayb u wan shoot up a prescool.
but we have a better solushun: the booth.
free of charge, u get the peece of mind u want
without the big mess. 100 percent success
100 percent of the time,
just like Merca.
so plz, if u gon self destruct,
dont bom a powerplant.
dont shoot ur neibors.
do the booth. ull b glad u did."

now thats a sales pitch. the man winks, then salutes the scarlet eegle on the wal, its talons clasped in revrence: the bird of prayer, as its called, the offishial nashunal symbol along with the flagborne stars n cross.

"greed is great," he recites, then cut to blac.

finally cleer, the transparent scrol reflects her blac face, large n stormy eyes that carry the weit of yeers of stress n abuse she must endure anu evryday. she dunt wan see the sinner starin bac at her, so she taps her screen bac to life, n the nauseatin barrage of color resumes.

Zatara pipes up from behind her glasses: "u see the tweet?" she asks. Nyeli grunts yes. "mayb u shud do the booth," her sister sez, "so the rest us can move the fuc outta heer." Nyeli lafs. "then who gon feed u?" "not u," sez Z, "wich aint nuthin nu."

"MAMI!" shouts Nyeli to the kitchen feet away, "wen that dinner ready??!"
Femi replies: "couple mins. yall can come sit." the sun goin down n they still aint eet tday. she peels herself off the floor, motivated by her belly, totally forgettin she logged online to find info abt the levee.

takin their seets, Zatara is the first to comment on the leenness of the meel. "potatos n dirt?" she asks. "that all we got tday?" "count ur blessins we got anythin," sez mami. the rinkled woman places the paper plates still stained from last nites supper onto the rickety table, plastic forks beside, their prongs fallin off 1 by 1.

from the cabnet, Nyelis grabs her faverit sauce wich she slathers onto a pile of soil on her plate n mixes it together to form a thic, spicy paste.

"1 drop, 2 drop, make ya tung sore," she recites from sum deep memry,

"3 drop, 4, ya gon cry sum more."

"ya gon scare ya tung ryte out ya mouth," mom sez, considerin the brown heep.

"rather that then taste this shit," sez Nyeli, n she grabs a warm potato from the basket.

lil Jojo, the todler brained boi, scrambles in his seet as mami spoons his food. "u sure this is all?" Zatara wynes. "did u chec the bathroom traps?" "i aint checkin for mice rytenow," sez Nyeli. "this dirt already makin me lose my appetite."

mother takes a seet at the 4 foot square table n bows her hed in revrent devoshun.

"Lord, thank u for this bountiful meel," she sez.

Nyeli cant help but roll her eyes.

"life is filled with tragedy n pain, yet its the sun after the storm that brings rainbow beauty.

so shine thru our plyte n show us ur beauty n glory in the mist of the rain.
in Jesus name, amen."

the girls mumble in agreement: "amen."

Nyeli tries to make her prayer herd, but deep within, she struggles to comprehend. she noe she sposed to follow the Lord, to heed His voice like a Good Chrishan, but she asks n He dus not answer. she sez it agen, "amen," n opens herself to the luv of the Lord, strains to heer His words, but He remains evr silent. at this point, she wonderin wut this voice in her mothers hed rly is.

with plastic nife n fork, she devours the dirt.

"God didnt make soilnt," Nyeli chides.

"He wud nevr create summin so unholy."
a stern look from mother.

"but now we gotta eet it," Zara sez,

"cuz u cudnt shoot."

"shhh!" her sister replies – "it ran off
wen it herd the exploshun."
secretly, howevr, Nyeli noes her sister ryte,
as shootin nevr been her thing.

"so now i gotta do it," the yunger girl adds.
"so pray tnite," Femi advises, "for if He wishes,
God will provide for us."

Nyeli looks down at her meeger plate.
"u think God got us thees potatos, mami?"
she asks with a quiver in her voice
that almost betrays their tru provenance:
she had to fuc for em.

"u sayin He aint laid out our path?" mami asks, her eyes alyte with anger, or at leest annoyance. "if He has, then God hates us," Nyeli steems. "bless u, child," her mother sez with a bite. "y wud He Punish us like this?" asks the girl. "ur irrevrence brings us further from His favor."
Nyeli tosses her hands up. "n how can i b revrent in a place as dammed as this?"
mother glares. Zatara n Jojo chomp happily as they watch reality entertainment unfold.
"y u think the Punishment happenin at all?"
mom retorts. "sinners. sinners like u."
"then i gess all Silvanos must b sinners."
"ya dad stained our name," sez mami, "not God."
Nyeli looks at the potatos.
"at leest i put food on the table.
n mayb if u spent less time prayin, u wud too."

mother, fed up with her offspring, reverts to an aincent technique of human child reerin n ends the exchange with a slap. it always ends with a slap, a well placed palm to the jaw to shut her up. y must it always end so? dus she always resist, indefatigable, irreducible, til it can only end in pain? is she rly that annoyin, or is her mother so devoid of answers that the only thing she can do for her dotter is to slap her b4 she gets too smart?

properly shaken, Nyeli rubs her reddenin cheek n finally bacs down. she pierces a plastic tine into brown potato flesh. "we in His hands," mami syes. "all we can do is serve."

Zatara claps quietly. "well done, mom." miffed, Nyeli tosses a flec of dirt at Zara. "we hunt in the mornin," she tells her sis. "lets see if u do any better."
Zatara is unfazed. "ur tummy gon thank me."

speekin of tummy – Nyelis announces itself with a deep groan,

n Femi looks at her hungry child with concern. "look for the lyte, deer," she sez tenderly. "always look for the lyte." its her faverit frase. Nyeli nods in understandin. she noe she must b the candel that lytes the household.

a buz from her cuf, n she gets a txt from her sister, writin her under the table. "dont let jojo get the last potato" it reads, but Nyeli pays no mind. she pokes at her habanero tinged soil porridge soop on her soggy ass plate n wonders if she wud rather starve. but if that wer the case then she myte as well heed Zaras advice to get in the destruct booth, so she eets for the sake of nother tmoro, an idea so indiscernible it may as well b myth. for in survival mode, tday is always the most important day of ur life.

3

stretchin into nite now,
the slurry digestin in her lower bowels,
Nyelis oxy hye is wearin off,
n her attenshun fades with it.
Jojo n her been playin blocs for an hour,
bildin em as tall as they go b4 boom,
fallin almost evry time the lil boi coffs,
wich feels like evry other minute.

bless this miracle lil man, lyter skinned then his siblins n milder thots too, if he got any thots at all. mami sleepin, n he aint sposed to b up this late, so the coffin aint helpin keep the secret. Nyeli reeches for her lung pump with preshus few puffs left. she lets him have it. in, out, in, out – the boi can breeth agen only but for a minute. the asma of this place is omnipresent, inescapable like destiny, all em doomed to have it long as they live whr they do, a hel inescapable, too. the air filter been broke a yeer now; no idea wen the Corps gon bring a replacement. if Enri rly wanted to help yung Jojo he wuda kept the toys n left a pump insted. 6 yeer olds dont need fidget spinners. they need to breethe.

Jojo coos with excitement at Nyelis latest tower, only to noc it down uselessly in a fit of glee, wood scatterin across the cement floor. "ok that 1 wuz ur fault," she sez, n the kid bounces more. in his hype, he runs to collect the pieces, pushin past the low table n nockin ovr their most preshus commodity: life itself. the container of water hits the floor, its lid poppin off in slow moshun, priceless drops escapin freely onto cracked concreet.

Nyeli leeps to her feet like mad – holy fuckin shit no no no no – she runs to the vessel n quicly turns it upryte as Jojo runs circles round the mess.

"Jojo!" Nyeli wisper yells, bringin the boi to a halt. she fysicly ill at the syte of the loss, now less then haf a gallon left, the rest spred hopelessly round her. "FUC!" she allows, rather then bottle up the pain. "fucfucfucfucfuc." sum1 gon b thirsty tmoro.

she wants to screem, but that wud wake mami, n rly, no use cryin ovr spilled water. lookin at Jojo, she syes. "u cant DO that." the boi hangs his hed in shame, teers in his eyes.

this wuz a bad idea. its gettin late. "time for bed," she admits. she brings him to join their mother in the bac bedroom.

she looks at the water on the floor n decides itd b better if no 1 saw. she wipes it up with her rag n will hafta splain whr the water went tmoro.

frustrated, she returns to her room
n plops on the floor next to Zatara,
who browsin facial media on her glasses.
she always wearin em thees days,
the cracked, discarded pair Nyeli picked up
off a street outside the Cassel sum windy mornin.
they had to go to the tec guy in nother bildin
to eevn get em to work.
a pair like theirs is a gadget reserved for Lords,
but now they bcome her sisters hol life.

"wut wuz that all bout?" Zara asks.

"Jojo spilled sum water," Nyeli sez, defeeted.

"y wud u eevn let him play like that?!"
her sister asks. "he sposed to b sleepin."

Nyeli syes. "i wan spend time with him
wile he still yung."

Zatara adjusts herself on the floor.

"he always gon b yung, u noe that."

"but he still gon grow up to b a man sumday."
the teen sis lafs. "n then he gon b a problem
like all the others. he gon b piggish n abusive."

Nyeli sees it difrent. "not if we teech him not to."

Zara waves no. "u think long as we live heer he gon b anythin else? evrythin bout this place makes men assholes."

on sum level, Nyeli noes she ryte. like Enri, n – o yea! – she gotta hit up her clandestin antinode fren.

from the box of papis old stuff,
Nyeli gets the hilariusly thic blac slate
they used to call a fone
n plugs it into the cables snakin thru the window.
decades old, the device is 1 the few
unmonitored by the Corps,
n it got an app to access
the lawless virtual playground – the antinode –
whr she can see if her penpal has responded.

a cesspool of digital lies, she dus find it weird that the algorithmic Corprit media on the node bears no resemblance to the unrestricted wilderness of free speech on the antinode. here, thees dam rebels r able to say wuteva bulshit they want, their tentacles allowed to spred into the minds of the weak n weary, waitin to pounce on the insurrecshun to come. this is zactly y free speech is dangerus, for it breeds traitors n miscreants, n the antinode is the crucible of evil ideas.

Nyeli pulls up a webpage whr revolushun is talked abt like an inevitability among the thousands of outlaws n their circles who run loose in the dark corners of cyberspace. this hidden platform teems with fryteful retoric n feeds of pure alarmist propaganda that she tries to ignore as she navigates to the page whr her penpal

beevafeevaaaaaa used to chat.

that is, til she left.
left home to join the Gard.
the Texgard, acourse, short for Texgarden,
a shadow legion of radicals
who beleeve in plantin a garden of plenty
for all Texcans. wuteva the fuc that meens.

had beevafeeva survived the dangerus jurney to Husn to join the alarmists? Nyelis last txt remains unanswered, n that wuz almost a month ago. "hey" she writes n hits send, "ur program stopped workin."

Nyeli resumes browsin the feeds clogged by the competin thots of wut a proper revolushun shud look like.

1 post describes a prank on a Corprit inspector: they pushed him out a window, haha.

Nyeli wonders if she can apply the same tactic to Enri.

yes, the entire Corprashun is rotten from the Boss down, if u beleeve wut u read. eech thees underground messiahs with eech their thousands of followers trumpetin their own solushun to a very Trumpian problem. traitors, evry 1 of em, Nyeli noes. at leest they got software to evade the Corps.

to her suprize, a blink n a popup message: its the beeva.

"wuts rong?" asks the txt from beyond.

"just had run in with the Corps" Nyeli splains.

"they sed i aint gettin nuf screentime."

Nyeli has used her penpals program for months

to generate false eye trackin data n convince Enri that she is lookin at her scrol, wen rly it curled up tytely round her rist. she gotta fool the Corps if she to have nuf time to hunt.

"try this" beevafeevaaaaaa replies with a link that Nyeli has to open on her scrol. nother time. "i will" she answers. "n thx." "np" sez the not too distant fren. "u in Husn?" Nyeli asks. "yup, made it" "whr?" "salad" she answers, speekin in code, in case the Corps sumhow lissenin. "but WHR" asks Nyeli agen. "cant tell unless u join" sez the radical. ugh.

she clics bac to the larger antinode feed n sees a Texgard propaganda post from their world famus leeder: "Gaspard has failed to fix our levee," sez he, "and Donald Trump will never give Texco the freedom we deserve." wut a bunch of gas, thinks Nyeli.

"i hope u like it thr" she txts her penpal.

"i do" sez beeva, "n u wud too."

Nyeli stares at the words. mayb she wud.

things bein as bad as they r, the ceos in charge
must b at leest partly to blame.

yes, mayb she wud.

"thx agen for the patch. il talk to u soon."

Nyeli logs off n returns the fone to the basket of miscellany from a time so long ago she barely rembers it anymore. in the dark room, the only lyte is from Zaras neon glasses, but the girl herself may b sleep.

Nyeli stretches over a blanket on the hard floor n closes her heavy eyes til the exploshun comes ricoshayin bac n her lids snap open agen. kaboom. who did it? wut wuz this bom n y wuz this bom? the openin salvo in sum conflict she dont wan think abt? the flames already burn, she noe, but mayb they finally reeched her door.

sleep claims her foggy mind,
n she afloat once agen
in sum sorta box driftin thru the swamp.
poundin, poundin, she breaks open the lid
to see a green aurora dancin ovrhed.
she casts her gaze at the sides of the tub,
watchin as it splits in 2,
a jagged crac down the middle.
the waterfall lifts her up
n washes her to desert sand.
the land is dry as flames lic the ground,
n the smoke is so thic it suffocates
the cosmic lyte. the desert grows darker.

but thru the valley in the stricken seawal, sum nu shape, spinnin like a triblade toy: a world of windmills agenst ruby sky with a burnin cinder risin hye. at last, a dreemlike escape, slumber drawin closed the drapes. lollin rollin stolen away,
a footloose top that nevr sway.
blessed r thee, so they say,
who fyte to spin nother day.
the past is ovr, yesterday gone –
she sleeps unbroken past the dawn.
her mind comes to, conshusness on,
n at last she rises with a yawn.
she lifts her hed from whr she lays,
but nuthin to see thru ocular haze.
blink blink blink – o, day in bloom,
golden beems slant into the room.
nother yawn, nother blink –
yup, thats better. agen she can think.

no more sleep, her 1 solace, her faverit state: the 1 she spends most time in, cuz layin down saves energy, n she got none to burn, so best to take a poverty nap til the naw of hunger forces her awake. the fatigue of heet paints her world a drowsy n dreemy place thru wich she struggles to see reality.

she rolls ovr on the floor n spies her sis browsin dicpics like she shoppin for shoes. the teenager is lookin for a hookup n wants advice from her sexually experienced sis. she shows Nyeli the scrol: "wut bout this 1?" she shoves the image of hairy coc n balls ryte infront her sisters broad nose. Nyeli swats the screen away angrily; wayy too early to look at that shit. she rolls her eyes at her 6 yeers yunger sister who nonetheless feels a generashun away. flippin thru dicpics. so juvenile. if only she had to use her vagina for food

sheed noe wut its like to loathe the thot of fallus.

"not that 1," sez the wiser sis.

"ok." Zara obliges with a swipe.

"nah, too smol," judges Nyeli for the next 1.

swipe. "how bout this?"

n she shows the penis to Nyeli agen
who studies its shape carefully.

"nope, diseesed," she concludes.

"huh." Zatara keeps swipin.

"no," sez Nyeli. "no."

"oo, i like this 1," Zara sez of a notably thic dic.

Nyeli scrutinizes it, drawin out her silence
as if serchin for a smol but critical flaw.

"no," she finally answers. "next."

"y not??"

"diseesed," she sez casually.

"how can u tell?"
a flash of nerves. she gotta keep up the charade.

"see heer," she splains, "this crease by the hed?"

Zara nods slowly, unsure.

"thats diseese," she lies.
her lil sis squints. "dam," she sez, n flips agen.

"how bout this?"

"ZARA!" shouts Nyeli, losin her pashence.
"i dont wan look at dics rytenow."

Zatara recoils a bit. "ok. sorry. yikes."

Nyeli emits a big sye. "sumday ull get
as sic of lookin at em as i am," she laments.
"dics?" Zara asks.
"dics n the dics who own em," she answers.
"dont evr give urself to a guy
who looks at u like u a slice of meat.
thats not wut u r."

Zara looks at herself. "wut am i then?" Nyeli rises beside her sister n puts her finger under her chin. "u a woman," she sez tenderly.
"n women deserve more then just dic."
Zatara looks down at her scrol,
the veiny snake starin bac at her with its eye –
not tday, she flics the screen bac into her cuf.

"i thot i wuz dust," sez Zara, thinkin bac to her Chrishan lessons. "u only dust cuz u eetin dust," sez Nyeli.

haf drowzy n full bored, she ready to get the blud flowin sum other way then starin at dicpics: "u ready to hunt?" Zatara flashes a determined look.

Nyeli leeves 1 tiny room for nother to see if mami n Jojo awake yet. nope, mami still dozin, so she takes the stiff towels out the window n runs em under glowin orange tap water, replaces em in the window screen to buffer the Punishin heet that floats in. the moisture evaporates, takin the hot with it.

"hey champ," she wispers, rubbin Jojos curly hed. murky eyes greet her hello.
"time for scool." she fixes the boi a plastic bowl for his soilnt n bottled water brekfast. she wud rather bake the soilnt batter into a more fillin bread, but to turn on the oven wud b deth in this heet.

in ragged ovralls n shorts full of holes,
Nyeli slips into sandals, ready to catch meat,
n not the kind her sister wuz swipin thru.
she n Zara stand at the door to their smol room:
b4 they go on the prowl,
they must pray to the Lord for blessins
n salute the rosary hangin by a nail on the wal.
they recite in unison:

"we pledge devoshun
to Jesus Christ
n the 1 tru God of Merca,
n to the Corprashun
for wich He stands,
1 Empire
under Trump,
unimpeechable,
rags to riches for all.
amen."
Nyeli crosses her arms in revrence,
but is still waitin for the riches
to reward her for her rags.

they affix their facemasks ovr their snouts, n Nyeli lifts the titanic bar from the front door as the 3 siblins depart for the swamp.

merrily they slide down rusted handrails, but by the 3rd floor they realize summin amiss: the drop out the window onto the wooden doc aint quite as formidable as it wuz the day b4. thats odd, Nyeli thinks, but keeps it to herself. no need to worry Jojo b4 class. no use cryin ovr spilled water.

thrs no shortage of feryboats to pic from, but the queshun is findin 1 at a reesonable price. she flags down a man, rickety n old, but reliable for his affordable rates: 1 bj per ride. she sucs him off in full view of her siblins n spits the jelly into the swamp with a gag. they bord the skip n take it to the edge of the dry whr they can walk Jojo the rest the way.

such a speshul boi, with his irregular hed that prevents him from normal Corprit lernin. most bois get their educashun ryte on their rist, the Corps feedin all the lessons they need to noe: the ways n slogans of the Corprit state

piped from their screens n thru their eyes directly into their fertile yung brains. for normal bois, the glow of pixels is irresistible. but her brother is difrent, n so she gets to enjoy thees human moments of walkin him to scool cuz he too slow to lern on his own.

they embark onto the street, ppl covered hed to toe in musty shawls, wet rags ovr their mouths to keep the moisture in n the heetstroke out, for the merc tday is pushin 130. just thr is the old bric scool bildin, n Jojo scampers the rest the way to class alone.

thru the peasoop fog of the swamp Nyeli can make out the flashin neon bilbord of Texco, her glorius company, on a bildin wal, its familiar 5 pointed star beemin brilliantly to advertise its economic dominion ovr any n all who can see it.

the buzzin heet got the weit of a thic blanket, mosquitos flittin abt lookin for a blud meel, but Nyeli n Zatara move too fast for em to bite. amid her urban heet island, Nyeli curses the angry sun, its oppressive flux rainin Punishment ordained from above to clense em of their sins. the police drones circle the yello green sky with a keen eye for blac ppl like her, so she moves with a hint of caushun, cuz the thret can arrive at any moment.

she n Zara pass the tent city
wich at this point holds as many Mercans
as it dus refugees.
Nyeli cant control her enmity toward thees
aliens
who have invaded her land from faraway places,

stricken with such fabricated plytes as "drout" – as if tradin too lil water for too much wud solve all their problems. the settlement is made from shippin containers sawed in haf to form storefronts n shelters, piles of rubbel littered in tween from construcshun projects long abandoned, datin bac to the advent of the swamp, wen investment in the outskirts of Husn wuz no longer a marketable opshun.

on this dry island stand unruly rows of blu tarps, n the sisters see a familiar bob of blac hair: its their cousin Aryn passin thru the camp, eyes stuc on her scrol, acourse, for yungsters dunno how to focus anymore, so they need instrucshun til age 13 wen they finally ready to b Corprit employees. they cross paths, famly fist bump for good luc – nuckels locked, thums together – but no eye contact, cuz that wud b awkward. eyes r sposed to b lookin down. quic as they arrive, they depart.

a troop of bois stand hunched ovr their scrols as they thirstily eye a groop of passin girls.

1 the bois eevn grabs a chic n kisses her, only for her to push him angrily away. she moans with disapproval:
"u noe i dont LIKE wen u do this."
"but u my girlfren," he wimpers.
"il txt u LATER." she leeves in a huff.
Zara watches the exchange with jellusy.
y cant she date like the other kids in Husn?
y cant Nyeli let her b normal?

the older sister watches as well, wonderin wut this world has come to wen girlfrens n boifrens aint allowed to kiss. tween the miragelike heet n the absurdity of evry1 round her, its as if the world has transmuted itself into summin so bizar, such a strange caricature of normal reality that she exists in a perpetual uncanny valley wich defies any sorta lojic or common sense.

down the bloc, ppl riotin in the street for food, water, toiletpaper, their lines snakin past a memoryal on the side of the road, a wite wooden cross inscribed with names lost from sum pointless terrist bom. the city of Husn is a battleground n has been for yeers at this point, eech rogue facshun vyin for control of the crumblin bildins n meltin streets. the poor, too weak to stand, sit in bunches on sandy patches, cracs spreddin in the dirt like fractals thru lifeless ground.

an edifice burns with the fury of revolushun, n Zara wips out her scrol for a selfie – cheez!!! must smile for the facestreem, for reveelin anythin but a perfect, happy life is socially unacceptable. to hide herself, she must select the perfect filter, cuz if the node saw her bare n pimply face she wud self destruct.

the sisters traverse a ledge to the main thorofare wich tday is held by the local surfin gang; tmoro it may b in the hands of sum other seedy groop. thees surfers act the police of the swamp: from their fiberglass bords they keep law n order, but mostly order without regard for law. judge, jury n execushuner,

they command respect from the community in their efforts to keep out the violent Ricans from controllin the main arteries of the city that cut deep into the skirt of markets wich ring the base of the wite Cassel, cuz eevn the swamp depends on the dry economy.

Zara notes a hansum yung man with surf moves that dazzle, weildin a sword that flashes solar. "hey" –

but b4 she can eevn speek his name, her older sis yanks her along by the arm. no flirtin tday, thinks Nyeli. they got huntin to do.

yes, joinin a gang meens food security. yes, the gang meens collective safety. but its too hye a cost to pay.

further toward the tub, they trudge, n suddenly thr it is – the feline!

Nyeli spots it first, the wite patch on its chest n the chewed up left eer:
the very same cat from yesterday, n KABANG – it drops to the pavement.

Nyeli looks bac at Zatara to see a smokin gun n smug satisfacshun on the girls face.

the sisters walk ovr to the kil.

"dinner," announces Zara,

n Nyeli nods warily. "ite. good job."
her sis bows in cocky self assuredness:

"thats wut happens wen u shoot."

Nyeli rembers she set nother trap in the area n goes to chec it wile Zara collects her prize. sure nuf, the catch is full – Nyeli holds it up. "o great, a rat," Zara mocs. "hey, food is food." Nyeli stuffs the rodent in the sac.

the wildlife heer aint limited to smol mammals; perched on the hull of an upturned dingy is a famly of brown iguanas, 2 dozen strong, baskin in the infernal sun. they aint usually this far inland, n Nyeli noes summin aint quite ryte.

she considers the shore, the shifted water. "wut tide is it?" she wonders, n Zatara glances at the sun. "3/4." aint hye yet, so y the water up this way?

"lets go home," she tells her lil sis.
"summin rong heer."
"u meen the levee?" asks Zara.
"i meen evrythin. evrythins changed."
the girls peer bac, lookin past swamp,
its grey green water hyer n neerer then evr.

5

aint no queshun: thrs alot more to drink.

Nyeli n Zatara arrive at the busslin doc that rings their bildin, rises n falls with the tide, but it has now obscured the 3rd floor window thats sposed to b their way indoors. from the lil they can see of the floor, its now almost compleetly submerged.

"wuts goin on, Bric?" Nyeli asks a docworker, who removes his hood to expose his bald dome

to the full radiashun of the sun so he can properly greet her with a bow. "gday, mam," he smiles. "y the doc so hye?" she asks. "no idea, mam. they say water comin in." an uneasy gulp. zactly wut she feered. "mayb God decided he had nuf this place," speculates the scraggly elder, n adds: "the Punishment comin for our homes." "is the tub broke?" she asks the gent, but he furrows his face n scrutinizes the seawal. "look ryte to me," he sez. "so how we get inside??" "u gotta either go down or go up."

Nyeli ponders the 4th floor insted n sees docworkers n ganga loadin up supplies via pulley n ladder. suddenly gettin home is a gigantic challenge, encumbered by the limited number of ladders n the men with dics who control em.

Nyeli noes Zara gettin buddy buddy with gangs, specificly the surf gang of Husnites n Galves, the tru Mercans. unlike the skeemin Ricans who control this side of the slum. racism aside, Nyeli too pragmatic to pic sides, n wants Zatara to follow her leed.

thrs still just nuf space to crawl thru a window into the drowned space below, so Nyeli strips naked – tearin off a torn tank top n the rag she calls her shorts – n leeves em n her nife in Zaras mindful hands. she wedges herself tween window n doc n drops into the fludded 3rd floor. she bobs for a sec b4 takin the familiar route past the softly foldin wal encrusted with blac splotches of mold that cling to it in sycedelic swirls n butterfly shapes

n spit poison into the humid miasma. usin her sandals for flippers, Nyeli propels herself to the stairway n crawls out the muc, wipin herself dry.

she goes to the window n calls down to sis:
"we good!" n a thums up.
Zara, balled clothes in hand,
takes aim at Nyeli n throws a lil hye,
but her sister catches em on the way down.
she takes off her clothes too now n sends em up
along with the bags of fresh kil,
then makes the same jurney as Nyeli.

they pass old man Staniel who always in his chair on the 5th floor landin, blankly gazin in a thousand yard stare, face rinkled in confushun. evry now n then he lets out a babble or yawp, but thats the most Nyeli evr heer from him, n she wonders wut goes thru his mind the same way she wonders bout her brother.

by floor 11, they switch to nother stairway so they aint so easily pursued by any1 with malishus bent. but then a flash of metal, n Nyeli is grabbed from behind with a nife at her throat.

"happy holidays," the man sez sinisterly,
n he twists her round to face him.
"not now," Nyeli syes, but this guy dont lissen:
nife agenst skin, he mashes his mouth into hers,
lips so chapped they foul all capacity for pleasure.
annoyed now, Nyeli nees him strait in the sac,
n in his startled dismay
she smacs the nife from his hand with her left
n procures her own blade with her ryte.
"i SED. not. now."

he looks up at her with a dull ache in his groin.

"agh, the fuc woman!" he coffs.

"u gettin coal this yeer," squeeks his voice.

Nyeli shrugs. "it can keep me warm for winter,"

not that heet had evr been in short supply
eevn in the ded of January.

Zara looks on from a distance,
impashent with this inconvenient assault.

"ull need rice evenshully," sez the stricken man,
hands cupped round his balls.

"yea, il hit u up then," answers Nyeli,
n the girls disapeer behind a fold of sheetmetal.

she replaces her trusty nife in her hair, her faithful n constant companion, handy n utile, the perfect wepon: blades leed to woonds, woonds leed to infecshuns, n infecshuns leed to deth. in a place as dirty n toxic as this, breakin skin is sumtimes all it takes to win a fyte.

deeper they traverse into the wild, wicked slum, no lyte but the sparkin lectricity that occashunally jumps from cable to cable wich crisscross the moldy n saggin ceilins.

"thx for havin my bac, Z," Nyeli grumbles. her sis makes a face. "i did have ur bac." "o rly?"
"yea. i new u had it. n like he sed, we gon need rice evenshully."
Nyeli nods grimly. their rice supply gon last only nother week tops.

the corridors stretch narrower, wals packed with rot, refuse strewn abt, loose papers, old discarded appliances: laundry masheens, boxy closets with cords n wires out their bacs. whoevr thees ppl wer who lived heer once must have enjoyed a magical life indeed, for thees devices aint seen power since b4 the big storm from Nyelis yooth, n mayb decades earlier still.

a passin ghost russles at an intersecshun ahed, not the first time she had a brush with a fantom, n Nyeli gotta rub her humid eyes. she sees thees aparishuns at times, ancestors from past eras hauntin the premises – or cud they b angels?

the next syte they stumble upon is decidedly less welcome:
2 teens bonin behind a wet drape on mildew couch. hard to figure how they maintain the mood in this room that smells like literal shit.

Nyeli hangs a left to leed em away from the rottin human corpse she noe lay down the hall, wich may by now been picked cleen by rats, n if not by em then certainly by the cannibals. thank God Himself they aint gotten to that point yet.

the catch in Zaras hands
wont b ready for hours hence,
n the thot of eetin meat makes Nyeli rumble.
"lissen," she sez, turnin to her sister in a halt.
"u bring dinner home. i gotta get a snac."
"if u hungry then come bac with me," sez Zara.
"we got soilnt at home."
Nyeli shakes her hed violently.
"if i eet nuthin but soilnt tween now n dinner i swear im gon expire."

but b4 the sisters can separate, juveniles mob them in yet nother ambush – less covert, more nife first. yello bands on their arms name their affiliashun as surf gang bros. they blockin the way ahed.

at this point Nyeli wonders y her world throws so many challenges her way at once, so bafflin as to b almost unreal, like sum nitemare hallucinashun almost comicly, eevn ficshunally desyned. God rly is tryna flush her from this place, n He pullin the strings rather too obviusly tday, His obstrucshuns pilin up absurdly n inartfully. this sum bulshit ryte heer, she opines to herself of His shoddy handiwork this afternoon.

"hey Roev," greets Zara to 1 of the bois similar to her in age n heit. perhaps they nu recruits in the evr swellin ranks of the criminal community due to risin yooth intrest of late. "sup Z," the boi replies, brandishin the blade in a nonthretenin way. "u ok, u noe that. its ya sista who refuses to join." the males eye Nyeli as they walk closer. fully grown, they wud probly b taller then her, but they still just rail thin adolescents.

"how long u gon play both sides?" the other asks.
"i dont play no sides," Nyeli sez.
"no sides is both sides," accuses Roev,
"so u better pic whr u stand
or u gon get it from both sides."
the bois surround Nyeli, a nife in eech direcshun.
she lafs. "sorry sweety, but we cud take both u
n we wudnt eevn need nifes."
she reeches to Roev for a handshake. "frens?"
he withdraws a step, but she pauses tenderly
n puts her hand on his sholder, givin it a rub.

"see? fren," she assures him.

a blur n a twist later
n the bois arm is renched agenst his bac,
locked close to her in a tremblin knot.
she wips out her own blade –
"unfortunately i do have a nife," she tells him.
"so is ur gang worth more then ur hed?
cuz il cut it off n bring it to my audishun
if u want me to join yall so bad."
the boi sez nuthin; his fren lafs behind him.
Nyeli shoves his quiverin body into the other guy
n grabs Zatara by the bicep. "lets go, sis."
"bye Roev!" Zara sez with a smile, n the 2 depart.

Nyeli aint happy with Roevs words, the implicashun abt Zara bein cool n all. but now aint the time to discuss that. they reech a branch in the path split by slimy conduits n drippin pipes. "u rly goin up?" Zara asks her sister, n Nyeli nods. "b bac soon." "mom gon flip a tit if she find out."

the older sister hangs her hed shamefully.
yea, its sinful to sell her body for food,
but the call of hunger is way too strong tday
to wait to b sated in the Kingdom of Heven.
"God gon b angry at me," Nyeli admits.
Zara just lafs. "quit lyin. u dont beleeve in God."
Nyeli gets defensive. "acourse i do.
but it aint bout Him. its cuz we women."
she grabs her brests. "thees the reason
men make evrythin harder for us.
y u think only women go thru labor?
we do all the dam work."
her sister understands:
she noe Nyeli keepin em alive.

fists locked, thums together,

n the Silvano sisters separate, Zara down the hall for home, Nyeli into the swetty, lawless world above.

the girl ventures past floor 15 – generally considered the threshold from dangerus to flat out dedly – n she gotta tred carefully, stic to the paths she noe.

b4 she reeches the Rican market on floor 20, her potato deeler ambles into her way like a fleshy door closed in her face.

"ohh helloo," he slurs in a tipsy tumble.

"sup," she utters, changin course to avoid him, but the blimp of a man is too large n takes up the entire width of the hall.

"whr goin?" he asks, blockin her advance.

"busy," shies the girl, but he dont relent:

"how bout we get busy?" he proposishuns.

God no, she thinks, n rolls her eyes.

but wait. potatos aint the worst snac.

"ite."

down the passage, they off to his apartment with the rickety bed n the stocpile of spuds. "o," she inquires of the potato lookin man, "u noe anythin bout the levee bein broke?" but he too drunk to respond. insted, he pulls off his pants n dunt eevn wait for Nyeli to take off hers; he finds a suitable hole in her rags to do his dirty work. the assault tday is rather abrasive the stench of his round jungle belly nuf to make any girl dry up for good so she sends her thots to that familiar place neer nuf a minor paradise to provide respite, but not so sweet a dreem to ruin by associashun

with such a nasty n humiliatin act. a blyte on Gods Creashun, she is.

the guy is so drunk n pathetic he falls asleep in the middle of intercorse, n his fat mountain of a body smothers her. she must crawl out carefully so as not to wake the slumberin giant.

but holy shit – an opportunity.
she combs her red n blu pigtails
n massages her pussy bac to life,
then goes strait for the bac room
n grabs not 1 but 2 sacs
from his stash of golden potatos.
she looks round for anythin else edible,
but finds nuthin but taters. taters evrywhr.
content with her haul, she steals away
with a fortune to feed her thru the nuyeer.
mayb God aint give up on her just yet.

6

in their elfin kitchen, Zara skins the cat, n mami, per usual, fills the room with the Word. Femi, like all Corprit citizens, got a screencuf to entertain her from wich the sermons sound. the entire node at her fingertips, n she chooses to stay in her Chrishan bubble. on the scrol, preechers speek of devils n plagues n the sinners like her who deserve em.

"u cookin tday?" Nyeli asks her mother. no, shakes the womans hed, covered in tytely wound nappy hair, short n blac like the resta her.
her tired eyes that seen decades of hardship remain affixed to the screen.
"so wuts the story this time," asks her dotter, "we fastin or just starvin?" she wud appreciate eevn a hint of effort from her parental.

"ya father sent a message," Femi sez quietly. Nyelis cheeks tense up. "thru 1 the wardens. he wants to see u."

the girls hart beets quicker in its cage. y wud she go see him? he aint been round n nevr will agen.

"get Zatara on it," Nyeli offers insted.
Femi looks up at her dotter n syes.
"months now, he been askin, n u still aint go."
Nyeli exhales. "i dont care. its been so long."
"it gon b much longer if u dont go," sez mami.
"im still mad at him," dotter sez. "aint u?"
mom grumbles. "ya father is a... difcult man.
his ambishun always outstripped his ability.
then 1 day he took a step too far
n took the rest us down with him. selfish."

Femi looks round at the miniscule kitchen with the hole in the wal ovr the counter n the rat shit in the corner by the cabnet. no, she still aint forgive him, forgive him for leevin em heer. a far cry from life in the Cassel, way bac wen. but those memries from ago remain, n delyteful times they were. it wuznt all a waste. they wer nevr the perfect couple; papi worked too much n mami prayed too much. n then he wuznt thr. wuznt thr wen Zatara finally came. no, she aint forgive him for that neither.

"so wut u think i shud do?" Nyeli asks. mami looks into her amber irises. "i think u shud go see ya father." the yung woman takes a seet beside.

a pause. "y did he do it?" Nyeli wonders. "y dus anythin happen?" Femi asks. "cuz He made it so. but my gess is, ya dad just didnt care nuf. bout u, bout Zatara, bout me."

Nyeli laments her mother, bum locked in her faverit chair. her social life ended wen they came heer, n by now its been yeers since Femi Silvano has eevn left the confines of their apartment.

"mami, how long u gon sit heer? u gotta get out."
"evenshully," she answers. "if the rivers run ryte."
wich acourse they dont,
aint run ryte in ovr a century.

Femis eyes drop slowly, landin bac on her scrol n the Chrishan preechers that sustain her soul. her mother checked out agen, the girl syes. eevn if she wanted to see her dad, the jurney alone wud dissuade her: he so dam far away, 2 hour trip at low tide, a level the water aint likely to reech evr agen. she already been out tday n the lyte fadin. sheel go tmoro, she concludes.

after dinner, the famly is stuffed,
havin enjoyed annimal proteen insted of powder
n a hol potato for eech em.
exausted, Nyeli scuses herself for the bathroom,
whr they keep their most preshus commodity.
she grabs a jug of water
from under the sink they dont use,

unless they wan shit for days.
its their 2nd to last bottle, already haf empty,
for their rashuns are down to a meer 3 a day,
all potable, but not just for drinkin,
cuz the swamp nasty n so is she.
its her only bathwater,
for wuteva comes out the showerhed
only gon make her filthier.

fuckin Corps, she thinks, only 3 fuckin jugs a day. they tryna kil us? in her frustrashun, she rips the cufs off her rists, cuz she dont want whoevr watchin to see her wile she showerin. cuz fuc em.

she puts a smol supply of water into
the green plastic waterin can
wich controls the flow of the life givin liquid
she bouta squander on cleenin her hair.
a squirt of sanitizer into her palm
wich she works into the roots
of her hair bleeched yello
with streeks of blud red n purple blu
that color her hed in freeky hues.
she adds the water n carefully rubs
the droplets into the furrows in her hair.
she thirsty just thinkin abt it, honestly.

the resta the pail is saved for her body – she rubs more alcohol ovr her shapely bosom n into the dings n nics of scars along her arms b4 rinsin the flith off n down the hole. she tries to save a few drops for her mouth, but the can runs dry b4 she can wash her toes. if only Jojo aint spill so much last nite.

but thr aint time to replace her clothes with slytely less dirty rags b4 she heers a commoshun from out the room. at first she braces, thinkin it myte b a door noc, but the sound of a crash changes her mind, n she runs out to meet the thret.

her siblins r chasin a demon round the kitchen: a dedly mosquito, its long proboscis aimin to inject any number of tropical diseeses to noc em out or end their lives. in a frantic scramble, she reeches for a plate n folds it in haf. she leeps onto the counter to meet the bug whr it flies n chases it into the corner whr SLAP – she ends its evil lil life.

Zara n Jojo look at her n laf.

"nice tits," sez sis, but Nyeli is unamused.

"how that bug get in??"

"rats cut a hole in the screen," Zara reports.

Nyeli glares. "u fix it?" her sister nods yes.

the girl covers herself in rags once agen

n inspects the patch in the window. its sound.

but all the runnin has wore her out, n now she thirstier then evr. she noe thr aint nuf cleen water for her famly to drink til tmoro – drink, u idiot! shouts her body, drink! – so she relents n turns on the tap with the abysmal orange flow that she catches into an old aluminum can with sides worn cleen to silver. she holds her nose n sips, tryin not to think abt wut goin down her throat.

parched no more, its time for rest, so she neels in her room n prays to the Lord. "...n if i die b4 i wake.." but she dunt finish the sinister ryme, n insted bows in ernest appeal.

[&]quot;plz, deer Lord, heer my prayer.

will U gimme the strength to wether tmoro?" she lissens to Heven n comes up empty agen. her hart sinks, her faith strained nother inch. how long can He do this to His children b4 He realizes they dyin? mayb He aint up thr after all, or mayb He rly just messin with her.

she unfolds her hands n lays out on the floor, not losin faith that He up thr judgin her deeds, hers n evry1s
He will deem em worthy of His grace n resq em all from this hel. sumday.

she decides to leeve her scrol off tnite, but applies the Corprit oxy creem to the cronic sore in her thums n forgoes the yello gummies. in fact, she dunt eevn wan b tempted by em, so she empties em out the window n replaces the patched up screen.

Zara lay beside her, glowin frames ovr her eyes.
Nyeli turns: "wut wuz that bout earlier?"
Zatara hmms.
"wut those bois sed in the hall."
"o nuthin. i wuz thinkin of joinin the surf."
she cant see Nyelis jaw go slac.
"u cant do that," sez her older sis, frytened.
"y not? all my frens doin it."
"those gangs aint cool."
but teenagers like Zatara dont rly care.
tho flustered, Nyeli noes she doin
the big sisterly thing to keep her lil siblin safe.

"can i have the glasses tnite?" she asks. Zara frowns. "y..." "cuz u always wearin em n i the 1 who found em in the first place." the yunger girl grunts n powers em off. "heer," she sez, handin em lazily to her side. "thx sis." Nyeli puts em on n taps the side button.

immediately her eyes are assaulted by lyte, transported to a digital world of shape n color poppin out in 3d to sell her things n make her feel insecure. her sockets begin to ache. is this wut Zara looks at all day?

she blinks her way thru the menus n lands on a peeceful vid loop of a virtuality starscape ovr a field of grass. Nyeli stretches onto the floor with content n folds her arms behind her hed as if the concreet below her wuz livin erth.

along the crac in the lens, she counts the stars, n the gentle trickle of a streem unseen lullabies her adrift in digital dramamine. the suns, they dance in her smoky dreems, n gather together into bryte pulsin beems, the green auroras now takin shape in the form of Gods great n Holy face. it apeers He watchin after all, for He cant wait to see em Fall.

7

down she descends thru haunted halls toward the cauldron of soup at the bottom floor. the oshun that gives the swamp its name has defined her slum life long as she lived heer. it seems a fair consequence for the Silvano famly that soon as her father betrayed the Corprashun, they got banished from the Cassel n cast out into the standin water that crashed ashore with the nytemare storm wen Nyeli wuz barely 2 yeers old. it brot Husn to its nees n changed the course of her life, for that storm wuz wen the revolushunary times began, a harbinger of the chaos to come.

as the rain filled the low basin
n it seemed the city wuz to fall,
Nyeli rembers her father helpin her thru
the anxiety her todler brain cudnt help but feel.
"in n out, in n out,
hold my hand n do not pout."
she obliged, n she wuznt afraid anymore.

the storm seemed nevr to stop,
til finally all the water it had brot ashore
flushed past the few remainin bildins
n out to the gurglin sea monster behind the wal.
but it nevr left compleetly,
for the pumps evenshully failed 1 by 1,
n Texco leedership decided nuf wuz nuf
n left the slum to its waterlogged fate.

Husn aint seen a major storm since that day, wich is the cleerest evidence yet for divine intervenshun. but eevn Gods pashence aint eternal, and He noes as Nyeli dus that they ovrdue. He can only spare em for so long.

by the time Nyeli makes it to the bottom, its aparent that not eevn a storm is required to agen turn water into a serius problem: the swamp has claimed nother level, n the doc floats hyer eevn then yesterday.

the poopboats are loadin up the feces from the urinashun n defecashun chutes that collect excrement at the base of the bildin. they the tru heroes of the swamp, the 1s that keep the tub from bein a toilet. but just cuz humans dont releeve emselves in it dunt meen annimals dont consider it just fine. their waste sloshes abt, breedin pathogens n a stinkin miasma that invades the lungs, the net effect so putrid the humans may as well shit in it cuz it probly wudnt make a difrence.

she waits on the platform for a feryman to propel her thru the waves to Corprit prison. a barnacle laden boat bro identifies her n navigates ovr with his sea stained dingy. "i need a ride, Gorgon," she calls to him. "i given u 3 rides this week," he grumbles. he holds out blister encrusted hands, seaweed growin under his fingernails. "u noe i got no munny," she laments. he smiles a harrowin grin, crooked teeth juttin out vishusly, cheeks curled into ballsacs on his face. "a ride for a ride then," he twinkles. she scofs n waves him off she aint sleepin with him agen. "u noe Billow the best skip in the hood," he sez proudly, slappin the fiberglass hull. "wen i evr let ur feet get wet?" Nyeli shakes her hed. "id rather have wet feet then smell ur breth," she jabs.

she sees nother feryman down the doc. releeved, she goes to him insted. "wuts good Nyeli," the old man asks gently. "i need a ride, Zel," she syes. his eyes lyte up with the possibility

of feryin such a luvly yung girl, who he aint spent nuf time with for his likin. "i gotchu," he sez with respect, n she bords.

he navigates the channel at Water Street, its pavement givin way to its namesake inch by inch, day by day. the bow cuts thru the muc, kickin up saltwater that wud get in her eyes n mouth if not for the goggels n mask that all swamprats wear wen they travelin thru the inland lake, lest they wan get pinkeye from an errant globule of swamp spray.

eevn ovr the pungency of the tubwater, this feryman is too much to handle – she gotta plug her nostrils with tyte fingers. Zel catches note of it. "hey, dont disrespect me like that!" he cries. "im doin u a favor."

among swamprats, holdin ur nose at sum1 is the ultimate insult: it meens that eevn ovr all this stink, its u that stands out the most. but like, the girl cant help it; the dude is rly ripe on this steemin day.

"im sorry, but u need a swim," she sez.
Zel nods, embarrassed. "i noe. im sorry too.
i aint had the water for a shower in a wile.
ppl boatin less n less thees days."
"they gon b boatin more soon," she remarks.

they finally make it to dry, n Nyeli fumbles thru her pocket for change. the dude smiles n shakes his hed. "dont worry bout it," he sez. she looks at him with a hartfelt frown. "aw, no, Zel. i noe i got summin."

"dont worry, niña," the man replies,
callin her a name she hardly heers anymore –
a holdovr from those days with papi.

"but next time im chargin a dime," he winks.

she syes. "u a legend," she praises.

"no 1 will evr b a better feryman then u."

"well, thx," he sez genuinely,

"but i didnt wan b the best feryman.

none us got to b wut we wanted to b."

"Trump did," Nyeli sez.

Zel lets out a laf. "n thats wut matters, ryte?

if Trump can, any1 can. he the Great Example."

Nyeli nods in a downward gaze.

"work n b rewarded," she offers,

repeetin a Corprit slogan

programmed into her from yeers of lessons.

"but anyway," she sez, breakin from hypnosis,

"i gotta bolt."

inside the blac slab of a bildin, the armed Corps strip Nyeli bare, confiscatin her nife n eevn her screencufs b4 coffin her out on the other side whr an officer escorts her to the cells.

anxiety mounts with evry step,
cuz its been how many yeers at this point?
3, 4? no, she wuz still teenaged at the time,
so at leest 5 yeers since she seen her old man.
he dont call, he dont write,
mainly cuz he cant: they dont allow it.
he can only requests visits from his famly
wen they aint too busy supportin emselves,
since he aint round to chip in.

"sum1 heer to see u," sez the Corp, approachin a dim, meeger cell with a meeger man curled up inside. Nyeli stands stooped at the bars, her spine sloped to face downward at the scrol wich typicly owns her attenshun.

Alvaro sees the shape of his dotter agenst the grey outline of wal n is on his feet in a flash, takin haltin steps to meet her. steppin into the lyte at the doorway, Nyeli notes the creases in his face wich have grown longer n deeper then evr. "no trics, Al," sez the Corp, n wen he outta syte, the caged man speeks:

"que Dios te bendiga, mi niña," he breethes, n reeches for her thru the prison bars, for he lost hope he wud see her agen.

Nyeli frowns. "u noe i dont speek that shit," comes her bitter n cynical reply.

tremblin hands droop, n his expreshun deflates. "we used to talk in Spanish all the time," he reminds her. "that wuz longgg ago," she sez, "nother life."

she looks into his sad, tired eyes, the same eyes she sees in her mother, n tries to rember the last time she herd her fathers native tung, for Spanish is quite illegal to utter in the Corprit States of America, n she is no traitor, not like him.

"take my hands," her father beckons, his slyte accent seemin to have grown thicker then she rembers it from bac in the day wen the Corprashun pressured him to hide it. reluctantly, she puts her palms in his. "wut have i always told u
is the most important thing?" he asks.

Nyeli breethes deep with a hint of exasperashun,
havin been taut this lesson since she wuz smol,
not that she wuz evr convinced he rly ment it.

"familia," she answers.

"thats ryte, familia." his eyes glow
n a smile curls under his greyin mustash.

"u r mi niña, n u will always b mine."

she takes bac her hands.

"y must u lecture bout this now," she groans.

"cuz evrythin i done been for u."

"is that y u spent my childhood behind bars insted of bein thr for us, with us?"
her seethin remark cuts ryte into his chest, n he can feel summin snap in his hart.

"its time i show u y," he wispers,

"y i wanted so badly to see u."

"it dunt matter y anymore," she retaliates.

startled by herself, she lowers her hed in shame,
but her anger is too great to contain.

"u wuz gone too long," the girl confesses,
the pain manifest as a drop down her cheek.

havin an inch on her in heit, she looks up to him in nuthin more then the most literal sense.

"i nevr wanted to b gone at all."

"well u shuda thot bout that b4," she scolds.

"u had a choice, either follow Gods path or go ur own way.

u chose rong, n our FAMILIA had to pay."

"thats not tru, mi niña, n u noe it."

"i noe God hates us," she snarls,

"n hates Silvanos above all

cuz the wicked thing u did.

n now we gotta live in the swamp

n endure the wrath of Gods Punishment

to clense the world of sinners like u."

he noes he shudnt, but he cant resist a chuckle as he shakes his hed disapprovinly.

"b nice if it wer that simple, wudnt it?" he asks.

"God didnt do this to us. but i noe who did.

n i can show u."

she considers him thru the bars,
his dark, curly hair, thic silver stash.

it is the cross tween his dark n mamis blac
that made Nyeli such a beautiful shade of brown.

"its time for u to open the letter. u old nuf."

"wut letter?"
he blinks. "THE letter, the 1 i gave u.
the 1 i left with ur mother b4 i landed heer."
she shrugs blankly.

"did u keep the letter??" his eyes pop with feer.

"i dunno, papi! that wuz almost 20 yeers ago."

"but u sed u had it last time i saw u!"
she serches her mind for a clue;
she pretty sure she noes wut he talkin abt.

"u gotta have that letter," he sez despritly.

"mi niña, u wuz sposed to keep it."

"calm down," she hushes.

"i think we still got it sumwhr."

"o plz, mi niña, i need u to open it," he begs.

"i need u to open it n bring it ryte bac.
do u heer me? ryte bac."

Nyeli shakes her hed. 1 visit wuz gruellin nuf.

"i cant imagine wut such a letter wud say
to make up for decades of lost time," she wynes.

"then go find out for urself," he dares.

"trust me. its our only chance to b familia agen."

she frowns eevn harder. "wut makes u think i eevn want us to b familia now? we had our 1 chance to b a famly, n u blew it. u left me wen i wuz 6 yeers old. u dont eevn noe me anymore." Alvaro hangs his hed low, as low as hers. "thrs nevr just 1 chance," his voice quavers. "as long as im heer n u heer, thrs still a chance. bring me that letter," he commands, "n our familia can have nother chance."

8

nother chance. nother chance. the words ring in the yung womans hed – familia. nother chance, nother chance for familia.

she got familia, she resolves. n her dad aint part of it.

rap, rap rap – rap, rap rap –
creekin iron, the sound of a latch;
her sister greets her at the hatch.
lost behind glowin eyes, she daps mindlessly,
n already Nyeli sees an unwelcome shape –
the broad, square body of Enri Silvano
n his teen sidekic Chae
hangin round mami in the kitchen agen,
as if this the only stop on their inspecshun route.

"aha, thr she is," the brutish man sez with more mirth then she comfterble with. "didnt we just do this?" she blinks. "y u bac?" "is that how u greet ur uncle?" Enri asks, n approaches her to claim a hug. wich aint normal, by the way; they dont typicly just like hug eechother hello, so y he decides to do it now, Nyeli cant fathom, but she allows it anyway cuz sayin no to guys in power is hard, n its a minor conceshun to make if it meens he gon b in a better mood.

"lucky u, u get to see me twice this week.
thrice, acshully, with inspecshun in the mornin."
"wow, u so good at ur job!" she proclaims.
"is that y u still inspector after all thees yeers?"
the slimy grin on his face slumps into annoyance.
like all company inspectors,
his skin is fairer then most,
tho still considerably darker then other Corps.

"acshully, i wuz just tellin ur mother heer that they considerin me for Texco ceo," he boasts. "il b reportin to Boss Trump himself. we got a meetin tnite. dont we, Chae?" the lanky yung man nods absently in his shadow. "gess u wont have time to visit this dump anymore," she sez. "dont forget who got u this dump," he reminds. "bless the Boss he wuz bein benevolent wen i made the case yall still deserved a roof."

a coff n a wail from the bac bedroom, n Femi rises to chec up on her son. "wut Jojo doin home?" Nyeli asks. "the boi sic," sez mami, disapeerin down the hall. sic? sic?? plz God no.

"u took off ur cuf last nite," Enri booms. "illegal."
"i wuz showerin. i didnt want u to see me."
he smiles n steps neerer. "nuthin i aint seen b4."
he raises his hand agen for her,
but she steps briskly outta reech.
"that lil stunt cost u ur next shower," he decides.
"u cant reduce our water rashuns!" she fumes,
her hands on her hips. "company policy."
Enri gets ryte up in her face:
"i dont give a dam bout company policy,"

declares the next ceo of Texco.

"yall a house of traitors, n i decide wut u get.
if u want ur shower bac, weel negoshiate later,"
he sez with speshul emfasis on negoshiate.
it turns her stomac wen he hangs on that word.
aparently only sex will earn her sanitashun.

"i dunno u wan negoshiate with me after not showerin for 2 weeks," she responds. "but il trade u my showers if u get us ac." "u dont have brand approval for an aircondishuner at this time." a rote reply, strait from the company handbook. suddenly he finds policy quite acceptable.

"this aint no JOKE, bro," she growls.

"we company employees n we got rytes."

"yaint employees if yaint earn income," he sez.

"but mom went to the hospital last heet wave.

she qualifies for a waiver!"

he lafs at the thot. "sure, waiver, no problem.

takes 3 months to process."

in the swelter, her blud begins to boil.

"by spring we all b ded of the cook!" she pleeds.

her tone shorts sum fuse in his ape mind.
"u think that matters?!" he erupts.
"i cant give yall any spehul treetment.
u noe ur caste. yaint allowed aircondishuners."
"but thats STUPID!" she screems,
causin Chae in the corner to wince,
n eevn Zara in their bedroom
raises her glasses at the sound
b4 gettin bored after like 0.5 seconds.
"thats how its written!" Enri shouts
to match Nyelis energy.

in this case, it IS how its written – by law, in fact, for Texco banned use of acs outside the Husn Skycassel

evr since the excess consumpshun in the slums ovrwhelmed the lectric grid n the capital went without power for 5 days in a 120 degree furnace.

Nyeli rembers that dedly heet wave, for she been without a reliable aircondishuner evr since the slums power supply wuz divorced from the Cassel, segregated n dilapidated. for the benefit of all, they must go without cool, lest they destroy the lectricity agen. such noble sacrifices they pesants must make. its thees kinds of reparashuns, the Corps say, that will earn em favor with God in the Afterlife.

but it dus make her wonder:
if God wanted His children to support eechother,
y in livin dus He favor the Lords in the Cassel
who cant eevn seem to spare a dime
for hungry ppl in the swamp,
let alone water or lectricity?
no, they keep it for emselves in their wite tower
wile the poor ppl wilt on the streets.

"i noe its hard to remain ryteus," lectures Enri,
"but we must rember Romans 13:
obey the laws of the Corprashun
cuz they been ordained by God Himself."
"at leest get us nu filters," Nyeli asks.
"they comin!" he sez. "thees things take time."
"its been months!" she counters.
"i thot the Corprashun wuz sposed to b efishent.
y aint it workin? ur employees dyin."

in uncommon defiance of Corprit devoshun, she removes her bonds from her rists n places em beside Enri in a smol act of rebelion. a quiet but urgent alarm wails from Enris belt, feedin a rage in his hart. but he holds bac. she looks deep into his eyes, frownin, hurtin. "wen im ceo, things gon b difrent," he promises, n reeches for his wand to cancel the sound. he clutches her scrols n replaces em gently round the thin arms of his neece. "n the only reeson i got upset bout the screencuf is cuz im worried bout ur safety." his eyes soften. "u live in a dangerus place. u dont wan b without the protecshun of the Corps." cuz the Corps totally have a reputashun for that.

a buz from his side, n he distracted by his slate, so Nyeli pulls out a sac of soilnt from the cabnet n nods Chae a charminly casual "sup." "not much, off work til the meetin tnite," he sez in a voice not fully deepened with age. she mixes powder with the remainin water n slurps quicly to not dwell on the taste of salty dehydrated proteen.

the glow shuttin off, Enri grumbles.

"i cant beleeve we eevn subsidize
thees bags of dirt for swamprats," he hisses.

"ryte, Rondon?" he sez,
callin Chae his last name.

"fuckin leeches. dont eevn have jobs.
how can u call urselves Texcan
if yaint eevn
productive employees.
mayb u SHUD starve."
the fury bottled up uncorks in a rampage,
so he flips open his nife n slashes
the bag of soil
that spills into a pile on the cement.

Nyeli is so utterly dismayed she feels it as a blow to her gut. "thats haf our rashun u IDIOT!!!" she wails. "it wuz an accident," Enri shrugs. "sorry."

"sir!" calls Chae, n his boss swivels hed to consider his intern with wild eyes.
"i think u shud relax," Chae sez firmly.
"and y u think that, boi?!"
Chae bows, buyin a sliver of time to concoct an acceptable reeson.
"soilnt use is tied to ur Chrismas bonus. the more unspent in inventory, the bigger ur chec gon b."
Enri straitens up, deferrin to his interns sound economic advice.
"quite ryte," he agrees. "i been trainin u well."

Nyeli mouths a thank u to Chae for admonishin the senseless waste. "y u act nice only sumtimes," she asks, wen the resta the time u a huge asshole?" her uncle stops to think. he noes anger gettin the best of him as it dus dam neer evry1 nowadays but just the thot of her callin him out on it makes him sumhow angrier, so he grabs her by the arm n wispers: "cuz thats wut God wrote. He intended me to b this way. n He luvs us so much He gotta b firm with us wen we bein bad. our famly did bad, n i gotta make sure evry1 thinks im punishin u for it. cuz thats divine justice, n its the only kind i deel. but nevr forget i do evrythin in my power to protect u too." he releeses her n strides across the room.

"ok," she deadpans, rubbin her arm.
"u can still b nicer."
acourse she ryte, but he
too proud to say sorry;

this is just who he is – spiteful, a born sinner, like all humanity.
but all can b forgiven if
he works hard nuf for Holy Trump.
lissen to his word, n he will noe
the Word of God.
"im just doin wut Our Trump commands,"
sez Enri, "for he is the messenger of God."

wich brings him bac to y
he eevn intruded in the first place.
"u noe, i came to tell u summin, not yell at u."
"then stop," Nyeli pleeds, n Enri finally disarms.

"the levee been breeched," he grimly affirms.

"u late!" she sez. "we all noe the waters risin."

"we aint sure whr it gon stop," he adds.

"if it gets too hye, we may hafta consider..."

- Nyeli looks up
"...evacuashun."

her jaw goes slac at the syllables that isolated meen lil, but in totality r uttered in such a way as to say its the end of the world n u noe it.

"i had to tell u soon as i cud. we lookin into it."

stonefaced, her eyes wander off to his side, her mind twistin into knots tryna beleeve it aint tru.

"thats y we meetin with Trump later," the big man splains, "but i promise il look after u no matter wut."

Nyeli nods blankly, detached. "thx for the speshul treetment," she weezes.

a moment of awkward silence. she lifts her arms:

"so u gon recharge my batts?"
Enri frowns. "u r famly," he sez lytely.
a flic of his wand n WAM –
her cufs r glued together infront her,
scrols stiffly magnetized in the middle.
he quicly passes his wishbone down their length.

"so who did it?" Nyeli asks, n Enris face goes hot. "we still dunno. God works in mysterius ways."

the woopin sound of Jojo coffin in moms room prompts all em to go see.

Nyeli walks in, arms still restrained, n thr in the bed, Jojo hacs away.

Enri rubs the childs dome gingerly, the boi smiles.

"he sic, mami?" Nyeli asks.

"just a coff," answers Femi.

"whrs his spinner?" demands Enri,
first to Femi n then her dotter.

"he lost it goin to scool," Nyeli reveels, tho rly
she chucked the dam thing out the window.
so Enri reeches into his bac pocket
n procures a nu 1 – as if all he carries
is his blac wand n extra spinners –
n leeves the toy in Jojos flem covered hands.

"thr u go, bud," he sez with nother noogie,
n Jojos face alytes with joy.
the child babbles a squeeky "yayyy!!"
n the incessant spinnin begins anu.

"next week, il b gettin him his first gun," Enri sez, for in Corprit America, evry employee gets a gun. "wut u meen a gun?" Nyeli gasps. "he only 6." "yea, so?" asks Enri. "he legal at 5. ovr in Shel they got rid the age limit compleetly." "we aint live in Shel," Nyeli insists. "he dont need no gun." "its his ryte, so lets see wut he thinks," sez Enri

as he crouches down beside the bed.

"wut u think, Jojo, u want a gun?"

Jojo, spinnin merrily, nods an exuberant affirm.

Femi watches in disapointment,
tired eyes cast downward.

"good boi," sez Enri, n rises to depart.
he cashually flics his wand, releesin Nyeli at last.

on his way, he notes the bottle in Nyelis room n grabs the empty plastic with a finger. "u went thru thees fast!" he exclaims positively. Nyeli snatches it away. "yea, well, they p great. i cudnt stop poppin." he smiles. "u feelin ok?" she shrugs. "i meen yea, i luv drugs so." he pulls out the wishbone n zaps her arm to grab a cemical readin of her blud. "OW." "good, cuz that much oxy wuda killed a normal person, so unless u sum sorta superhero im gon assume u sold ur pills on the market, wich is a Corprit offense." she smiles n brings her nose to his. "acourse im a superhero, dipshit. how u think i survive a place like this?"

she turns round to bag up the pile of brown sand in the kitchen. Enri moshuns to Chae n makes for the door. il txt u, Nyeli mouths to the boi on his way out. he nods n departs, metal clankin shut behind.

a messy kitchen is the perfect distracshun from her papis request that she find the letter. the dust cleered, a sharp pain shakes her gut. yup, she new this wuz comin – the consequence of drinkin the tap.

she rushes to the bathroom n draws the curtin, squats her brown booty ovr the hole in the floor

whr the shit n piss go down.
thrs no point in checkin if sum1 on a hyer floor
is usin the same chute at the same time,
cuz its too dark to see cleer to the top level,
n lookin up wud put her face at risk
of catchin sum1 elses fallin feces.
thr probly aint eevn a poopboat waitin down thr,
n her waste just collectin in the evr risin swamp.
out come the chunks in painful contracshuns,
n the lyte in the room blinks n cuts out suddenly,
so she left poopin alone in the dark.

the curtin wips bac n Zatara walks in, her hedfones keepin noise out n her glasses keepin reality out.

"Zara!!!!" screems Nyeli, rousin the zombie from her trance.

"o shit, sorry," her sister sez quite literally. she turns round only to step on the smol handcrank generator that she accidentally dragged across the apartment with her wen she rose from her room, totally forgettin she wuz plugged in.

"oops," she sez casually, n plugs the cable bac into the grid, restorin illuminashun to Nyelis diarrea situashun.

the agony ovr, n scarcely sparin a thot to whrevr it is her ordeel has landed,
Nyeli squirts a palmful of sanitizer,
dabs it onto her butthole
n wipes dry the seerin sting of the gel with a rag.
thats nother thing she misses from the Cassel:
that marvelus invenshun called soap.
sum toiletpaper wud b nice too.

she joins her sis in their room n grabs her by the glasses: "bathrooms urs." she pulls em off her sisters face as she leeves n puts the hedset ovr her own eyes. Zatara been scrollin the facestreem filtered selfies that dance in endless parade, eech image sayin louder then the last: "im prettier then u, wich meens im better then u." eevn tho they all fuckin fakes, too scared to eevn look at emselves without sum stupid face filter hidin their ugly ass adolescent faces. Nyeli feels bad for her sis in a way, cuz at leest she herself is old nuf not to bother with scrollin facial media all the time. who wants to spend hours eech day judgin evry1, n urself worst of all? its impossible for a girl not to feel insecure wen evry1 on the node is livin a better lookin life.

"gimme!" comes her sisters gratin voice, her greed for the glasses bcomin so irritatin that Nyeli wishes she n her sister had been twins for a chance to have suffocated her in the womb. but Nyeli dunt stir, sendin the signal that its now her time to plug in.

blink, blink, next menu, blink –
Corprit propaganda works its mind meltin magic.
the algorithm feeds her a vid from the buz
n drops her ryte onto the market streets of Husn.
protesters shout n strike for essenshul goods
til BOOM – n the entire virtual world round her
goes dark with smoke.
the insurgent bom killed 48 tday,
n she sees the bodies emerge from the soot
drenched in rivers of red.

the blud in her own, still hol body pumps faster in disquietude, n the hateful feels she harbors for thees sinners grows evr nastier within her. wut good is it to kil innocent ppl?
but this is evryday now –
its just the way its written.
Merca is under attac from within,
n her Corprit trainin compels her
to defend her company, eevn if her company
dont seem intrested in defendin her.
no, she aint given up on Merca yet.
not yet.
no.

the shot cuts to the Corps on the scene, n cuts agen to a wal bearin the red eegle n seel, as Nyeli finds herself in a virtual room with Donald Trump 4 himself.

"dont let thees alarmists stop u from comin to work," sez the Boss. the flag of the Corprit States of America hangs proudly from the ceilin, its wite cross ringed by the 6 subsidiary stars agenst a field of blu n barred by 13 stripes of red n wite that represent the members of the Corprit Bord.

the Boss walks to the hed of the confrence table whr suited men sit behind him in perfect frame. "the Homeland needs u. i need u. wen promoshuns r ovr, a nu age of law n order will end the senseless slauter n bring greatness to Merca agen."

Trump flashes his signature businessman grin n synes off with the Corprit motto: "greed is great!" he Trumpets, n the camras go silent. nuthin more to see.

"we got the shot," sez the director, n the room detonates into argument. Trump, for his part, relaxes his posture now that the node aint eyein him.
he can let his Bord argue for a minute
as long as its behind closed doors.
but outwardly n to his followers
he must project unity n strength,
for if eevn a word wer to get out that
the Corprashun aint as united as it used to b,
it wud empower evry lunatic with a gun –
yes, mayb eevn the 5 yeer olds –
to vie for a slice of his diminishin control.

the annual summit is off to a typical start, with nobody seein eye to eye n blame tossed round as fingers fly. "we gotta move em sumwhr," sez Erwin Gaspard, the lame duc Texcan leeder more then content to tap outta responsbility at this moment of crisis. "we talked bout this," sez the Donald, "n weel talk more later, now we doin the buz."

the camraman resumes his posishun n the director moshuns Trump bac to his marks. "evry1 hush! n 3, 2, 1." a point.

Holy Trump spreds his arms wide. "aint this a sad revolushun?" he roars. "just lissen to their leeder!"

the broadcast cuts to grainy footage of an alarmist spoutin words to make Nyeli mad.

"Now is the time to give your life for freedom!" shouts the sycotic named Nidas, the dangerus terrist in charge of Texgard.

agen Nyeli is thrown into the confrence room.

"y he sound like that?" Trump asks the viewer.

"NOW IS THE TIME

TO GIVE UR LIFE FOR FREEDUM," he mocs.

"he always sound like he got dic in his mouth.

is this the kinda faggot God wants us to follow?"

the ceos behind him shake their heds no.

"God hates sinners," sez Boss, parrotin nother fundamental motto of Corprit control. "we will find thees alarmists n drown em. u have my word."

cut to commershul – n look, its an ad for soap. way to rub it in. literally.

Nyeli lifts the glasses from her eyes n sees Zatara lookin out the window. she eyein a yung lad on the surf who regularly paddles in circles round the swamp, patrolin the waters with the rest his gang frens. she feels alot safer noin he lookin out for em.

"hey hansum!" she calls below,
n the bronze skinned boi waves to his maiden
now only 8 stories above.
Zara aint lern his name yet,
but she noe that wenevr she sees him
she feels that lectricity inside.
she dreems of the day she can hookup with him,
his surfer body dank in the stench of manhood.
he 1 the few ppl who met her in person first,
without the face filter she wears on the node
to hide her nose too big, her zits too numerus.

Nyeli plugs bac into virtuality
n swims agen in the digital simulacra,
flittin from program to program.
the vr buz is so engrossin, so visceral,
she dunt realize its pure filmmakin n nuthin else,
with no more connecshun to the real
then those morons who think
man can change the wether.
she just accepts it as the genuin account,

cuz truth is in the eye of God, n God desyned the Corprashun, n wuteva the Corps feed her, she eets.

now she watchin sum reality sitcom:
caracters cooped in a house, fysical violence
the only meens to solve their problems,
n the crowd goes absolutely fuckin wild.
she seeted in the row of a faux theater,
n wen she turns her hed, she can see the avatars
of her neerby neybors in receedin balconies.
1 em is her fren Krla. she opens a chat:

"hey, u busy?"

"obv not if im watchin this."

"lol word. u wan smoke up later?"

"hellll yaaaa" n a thums up.

Nyeli, bored by the fistfyte b4 her, flips the channel once more to a relaxin scene of a natural space in a quiet, old growth forest sumwhr that cud nevr exist on Erth tday. birds greet her eers with bryte songs n a settin sun sheds calmin lyte across a jade sky. the prerecorded loop is only 45 seconds long, but the simulashun is convincin nuf to activate a primal instinct in her mammal brain that this is the place she truly belongs.

she thinks abt that cat she devoured last nite, the 1 she originally let free, n how she wishes she cud b that cat – at leest up to the point it got shot. how candidly it loped thru the swamp with not a worry for gangs or levees, just doin wut we all do: makin our way to the next meel.

"u watchin that tree stuff agen?" Zara asks,

shatterin the immersive illushun. "u so ew. y u do that? so borin."

a coff from the next room, n Nyeli has had nuf. "heer u go," she sez, handin the specs to Zara, n she rises to chec on her lil brother. he busy barkin up sum wite fluid, n Nyeli startin to think this aint no asma attac. she fixes him a cup of real water, wich he takes in dispirited sips. but the coff lingers.

she looks at her mother, who lissenin to – wut else?? – sum preecher on her scrol. "wut u think?" she asks mom, n Femi syes. "i keep prayin. nuthin changed." Nyeli nods. "il take him."

she apeers in the doorframe to tell Zara.

"Jojo coffin too much. he need help."

Zatara slips into sandals without lookin,

n Nyeli makes faces at her incandescent lenses.
the teen finally logs off wen Jojo is ready to go,

n watches Nyeli depart the room
without pausin to pray the rosary for good luc.

"wubout God?" asks the girl, n Nyeli looks bac.
tbh, she kinda pissed at God rytenow.

"He aint comin this time," she frowns.

the doc round the bildin has floated up to floor 5, n its busier then Nyeli evr seen it, boats cloggin the lanes on both sides of the slum. at the dry, now so distant it can barely b resolved, clouds of dust kic up in exploshuns on the streets that ecko like cannonfire off the tub wals. its an urban war zone ovr thr that frankly she dont wan experience rytenow. Nyeli blows a guy happy ryte on the doc in exchange for a feryride to shore.

"they tryna take down Trump," Nyeli tells Jojo as the detonashuns grow louder n neerer. she wonders how the radical alarmists can sustain their tactics wen they blow emselves up with such regularity.

they arrive at the hospital wich looks more like triage with eech visit, choked with soljers n civilians gettin limbs sewn up or sawed off.

Jojo is indifrent to all this, so content is he to b twirlin his toy tween fidgety fingers.

"he cant breethe," she tells the nurse, n they quicly get brot to the doctor. the lytes blink in fryteful bursts, n the masheen that feeds Jojo lifesavin gas cuts out now n then with the faulty lectricity. the screen on the wal comes bac to life n resumes its broadcast of a Trump rally.

"da!" coos Jojo thru the nebulizer, promptin Nyeli to see wut he meens. on the screen, Enri stands beside the Boss, banners wavin abt with the ridiculus slogan #drowntehsinners – cuz aparently teh Corprit budget too smol to reprint a pennant with a typo.

"a job well done," Trump speeks glowinly, n Jojo starts to clap from his seet. their uncle claimin the spotlyte next to Boss himself – well, its kinda cool, honestly.

acourse, its impossible to noe its fact or ficshun. wud Trump rly shoot a video with Enri just to praise him for bein an inspector?

he wud hafta crawl out his Boss Bunker n interact with the real world agen. unlikely. Enri cant b the only 1 up for promoshun, n this cud b just nother of his manufactured vids shot on a soundstage sumwhr far away. he may b pumpin out a dozen of thees a week for candidates all ovr Merca, for all she noe. its impossible to tell either way: such is the seamlessness of image manipulashun. anythin the Corps wan make real no matter how absurd they can, n they do. the vids all look alike: glossy, clinical, agreeable, n Nyeli, as with all employees of this company town called Husn, is condishuned to obey her eyes no matter how blatantly obvius the lies.

"Husn gon undergo a major change," Trump sez, "n this wicked n adulterus generashun will fall into the faithful hands of Enri Silvano." the canned applause deafens the room.

she gets led to nother room whr lil Aryn lay,

her face mottled grey with ash n bruises from sum wayward, indiscriminate blast. they greet with the famly dap, thums together, n Nyeli caresses her hed. "u ok Aryn?" the girl coffs a stifled affirmashun, n takes a moment for tender eye contact.

the power cuts out agen. this time it dunt return.

Nyeli gets close to the 10 yeer olds face. "i luv u." "i luv u too," the girl repeets bac.

she returns to chec on Jojo n Zara, n the power, mercifully, is restored. "this gon take nother hour," sez the nurse. Nyeli faces her sister. "i gotta go meet my fren." "il go hunt," Zara offers. they turn to their lil bro. "Jojo, we b bac soon." the bois eyes go somber. "promise."

out on the street, the battle has migrated to nother corner of the dry. who noes who eevn fytin, wether gangs or rebels or wut. looks like the water has come closer then b4, for the surfers r just down the bloc. Zara watches with amusement as 1 em takes a bacpac from a migratin famly of Ricans who may b fleein the same tent city their cousin called home just yesterday.

"dont think bout em," Nyeli sez.
"they a bunch of stealin prics."
"like us," sez Zara thotfully. "like u."
Nyeli recalls the potatos she grabbed
from that fat hairy fuc. "its called survival, Z.
we gotta out steal the stealers."

the sisters join a proceshun of refugees marchin in a caravan toward hyer ground with

nuthin but the rags on their malnurished bacs. they of uniformly low heit, like all swamprats, cuz soilnt aint desyned to make u grow. at leest they travel as famlies, unlike the surf gang, mostly made of yung bois whos parents wer taken by heroin. but tday Zara cant keep her eyes off em, n Nyeli gotta ask, "so u gon hunt or hang out with ur ganga frens?" "wut u think?" Zara sez, foldin her arms. "il b bac to pic up Jojo. u do wuteva u gon do."

Nyeli looks cross. "Zara, if u join the surf bros, ima hafta join the Ricans. n u noe
Ricans n surfs cant live under the same roof."
Zatara scofs at the thret n pushes her way past.
"yea, i noe," she sez, "n dont tell me wut to do."
the girl waves at 1 the surfers
who she joins beside him on his bord,
n Nyeli, evr so slytely hartbroken,
leeves her sister to her own decishuns
n ventures deeper into the core of the sinkin city.

9

Krla spots Nyelis yello wite hair from afar n waves her fren ovr to join her in a smoke. wirrin ovr the avenues r the dedly Corprit drones in greater numbers then Nyeli has evr seen. but the cemicals course thru her thotmatter n her smoky mind modulates the angry buz of their engines into a gently warblin hum.

nother firework sparks meer blocs away, terrists feedin off the revolushunary sentiment

that blooms as in the patriots of the past, n Nyeli wonders wether she shud b out rytenow. "u noe who lit that 1?" Krla asks, smokin a hit. Nyeli shrugs. "surfs? locusts? dus it matter?" Krla exhales. "nah, wuz a Rican bom," she sez, "i noe the sound." she passes her fren the joint.

Nyeli smiles at her old fishin partner as she takes the paper from her brown hands. "u the only Rican i like," she sez haf jokinly.

Krla returns the smile. "u full of gas."

"its tru! yaint a murderin theef like the rest em." a cackle of lafter. "n wut, yaint a theef too?"

Nyeli passes off the j. "i sed MURDERIN theef."

Krla pats her bod. "hey, im heer, aint i?

not all Ricans b murderin theeves, ya racist."

Nyeli considers her fren, her bacground – who noes wen her famly decided nuf wuz nuf? at sum point they left home like all the others, fuelin the Rican diaspora that started as their island got conquered by imperial oshun. in that sense, they like kin:

2 darkskinned girls runnin from the waves, livin the semi aquatic slum life among the ruins of their former civilizashun.

they used to go cormorant fishin beyond the seawal, bac wen thr wer fish to eet whos bodies wernt poisoned with merc, n bac wen thr used to b cormorants, or any birds bigger then a pigeon. that wuz a great adolescence, b4 the starvin times of tday, bac wen, yea, the drug market wuz hotter, n the blac market seedier, but at leest Texco fed its ppl, its employees retainin sum semblance of happy.

speekin of merc, its ovr 30 tday -

130.

the first time in Texcan history its been this hot in December, let alone the week b4 the Holy holiday. no wite Chrismas this yeer, thats for sure, altho mayb they can make do with a wet 1.

a squad of Ricans hussles by, guns in hand, n 1 em pauses to catch a puff from Krla. "give em hell for us, Dvn," she sez, slappin 5. "u settin off more fireworks?" Nyeli asks him, n his chest swells. "we takin bac Sunnyside tday. we got nowhr else to go."

Nyeli coffs out wite smoke. "u nuts."
"look round, woman," sez Dvn,
"the world is endin n our ppl dyin,
n the Corps aint doin shit bout it.
u noe we next. u better start actin like
ur life on the line, cuz it is."
he takes 1 final drag b4 rejoinin his frens
fytin for livin space in a crowded n drownin town.

she gets it, she dus – but she dunt wan give up on Texco just yet. the helpless like her need summin to cling to, a dreem to flee the nitemare of reality.

the joint burned thru, they pop into a store – the dolla store, naturally, the only kinda store in their hood that dunt sell burgers n fries. they wander the aisles of cheep plastic garbage, haf it already broken on the shelves, n Nyeli rembers: she still gotta get Chrismas gifts. "lets suss out the blac market," she decides, the market for blac ppl like her, not privileged nuf to own nice things legally.

out in the dayblind streets, Nyeli can make out the ghost of a bildin thru the smolderin haze: into the green sky pokes the wite Skycassel, a monolithic slab for the rich to live in comfort as saviors of humanity, their boundless consumpshun foundashunal to the Holy Corprit filosofy: God rewards the rich.

poor ppl poor cuz they
too lazy for company jobs,
n evry1 noes sloth is a dedly sin.
thus their Punishment: humanity didnt
grow fast nuf
cuz pesants like her dragged evry1 down;
they took too much n gave too lil,
so the dogma goes.

Nyeli sez as much to Krla,
n her fren looks at her dumfounded –
"y u beleeve that bulshit?" she asks.
"wut u meen bulshit?" sez Nyeli, n adds
"Dvn ryte, we need to look round:
thr no room for us rats anymore,
wich is y we live down heer, n not up thr."
she points at the beemin pinnacle.
"we cant do nuthin from down heer," Nyeli syes.

"girl, u better stop with that," sez Krla,
"or ima start thinkin u wite." she puts her hand
on her frens sholder. "u also need to look round.
we famly heer, n famly can get thru anythin
if we just stic together."
Nyeli smiles, but thrs that word agen: famly.
"r u related to me?" she asks seriusly.
"i meen, probly," sez Krla, "the way we make
the same Trump jokes. u see his hair tday?"
Nyeli lafs. "yea, like he put the wig on bacward."
the girls howl in delyte.
a soft hand lands on Nyelis skin.
"see?" sez Krla. "u need to luv whr u at.
just cuz we poor dont meen we powerless."

they trod deeper into the market hood, shanties with canvas roofs filled with goods that Nyeli n Krla have no munny for. the word "Jesus" is carved into the sidewalk from sum century long ago, trampled ovr endlessly without any due respect. "God is watchin u" read the Texco banners hung throut Husn, the omnipresent 5 pointed stars on eech their ends, camras trained on the ground flankin the sides.

the sliver of middle class that still exists makes this jungle their home, walkin crosseyed behind vr lenses with parasols to protect em from the dedly sun n torrenshul downpours that cud wash em away.

just as they pass a cratered area of ground – marked off by tape long since shredded, bom fragments still littered abt, a shard bearin the distinctive Corprit colors of red, wite n blu – KABANG goes nother shell, n an entire edifice collapses into the street.

Nyeli n Krla duc behind a tree for cover as they witness the riotus scene unfold. its the Texcan milisha, the gun totin patriots who noe the company been ovrrun by Trumps Corprit bulshit. the insurgents wield stubbly guns in candy colors barely distinguished from childrens toys – altho tecnicly children allowed to carry em now – minus the fact that they so lethal. the ease with wich revolushunaries can print em makes the firearm model so ubiquitus, for out in the swamp its easier to find a gun then a meel.

the Corps emerge from the carnage

to face the mob, plastic deth wonders in hand, the warrin sides pointin barrels at their respective foes, n the girls watch em all go boom.

Nyeli braces agenst the treetrunk
n notes summin curius abt the bark:
it got a ridge like a seam of plastic,
an almost imperceptible lip under her hand,
n she runs her fingertips across this ripple
wich confirms it aint wood.
she nocs gently agenst this faker
n it returns a hollow vibrashun. she frowns.
just whr will the absurdity end?
its like the only way to interpret the universe
is to accept that its patterns defy common sense.

"ok, u ryte, this place goin to hel," Krla agrees.

Nyeli looks bac at the urban war zone.

a gaggle of teens approaches the fyte,
scrols unfurled, snappin selfies by burnin rubbel.
just as quicly, they resume their landlocked gaze,
to live their lifetimes with eyes downturned,
the world round em barely reality.

"i thot Husn WUZ hel," Nyeli responds in the most casual of tones.

"if this aint hel, i dont wan noe wut is."

Krla spits out a laf. "Arzona," she sez, refrencin the aincent name of a Mercan territory that now comprises Hes company.

"they got it real ruf. ruffer then us."

"in the burbs?" asks Nyeli.

Krla nods. "i heer they hungrier then we."

"but they get to starve in houses," sez Nyeli with a hint of earnest envy.

"i wud think if anythin they thirsty."

casualties mount b4 em, body upon bluddy body. "God is ryte to hate us," Nyeli thinks out loud

as she watches the soljers fall. "i hate us too." but it aint their fault. its their extreem world that pushes thees ppl to the brink. the sayin abt desprit times nevr been truer.

"u noe, i wuz thinkin of joinin em," Krla admits.
"who, the milisha?"
"milisha, Texgard, 1 em," she splains.
"the garden foke?" Nyeli asks. "ew, y em?"
Krla shrugs. "3 ppl on my floor joined this week.
u noe Tyruna? she went."
"yea, n u noe yaint nevr gon see her agen,"
sez Nyeli, not inaccurately.
"aparently their leeder Nidas is rly cool
n got good ideas for reformin Texco."
"a bunch of gas," Nyeli steems.
"its probly sum creepy sex cult."

drama encroachin, the girls split for safer ground. "lets go to the Cassel," Nyeli sez.
Krla stops in her tracs. "u tryna self destruct?" the girl nods with a smile. "who aint?"

cleerer now, the aparishun comes into releef, its muscular wals apeerin to wave in the heet. yup, the Husn Skycassel – painted a once uniform shade of bryte wite, now splotched n muted by the extreem wether that batters its sides yeer after yeer, like God tryna smite em down from their tower or testin to see if they worthy nuf to last.

yea yea, she sposed to open that letter ovr wich papi made such a fuss, but this excurshun is only a minor delay compared to the decades that he been away. after all, Chrismas only comes once a yeer, n famly always comes first.

the bespectacled villagers in thees wooly streets

coexist alongside tourists from other subsidiary companies, perhaps Konoco or Exon, who travel from welthy places to see the Texco capital. for Husn, they say, is better then evr, n attracts ppl curius to see the next stage of civilizashun: an enclosed concreet Cassel jabbin into the sky.

the girls neer the dark of the enormus bildin, eclipsed by the gargantuan CSA flag torn n tattered on a windswept corner. the market is a dense, reekin place crammed into the shadows of the structure. Nyeli got her hand springloaded on her nife in case any1 pops out to suprize em. Chrismas shoppin is in full swing, zactly how the Corprashun desyned it, for evry1 noes the best way to quell the anxiety n depreshun of modern life is with a heavy prescripshun of consumpshun.

Chrismas takes on a deeper meenin in the CSA, havin bcum the offishul nashunal holiday followin the hostile takeovr of the Corprashun by the Chrishans who had nuf of the sinful ways of the state. it wuz the Chrismas Eve Hurricane dubbed Superstorm Niño, for Baby Jesus himself, that heralded the return of moisture from above that, if it dont come in torrents, dont come at all, bringin an end to the first megadrout to last more then a generashun.

it wuz thus a nashunal day of resilience for the steadily more impoverished n increasinly conservative populashun, n it wuz dubbed a Chrismas miracle, a favorable syne that wickedness been purged n society had turned suffishently Chrishan to wage militant revolushun agenst the old state that led to the bluddiest war in Mercan history n evenshully landed her father in prison. wut a storm it wuz, so lastin in yung Nyelis syche that the sound of rain still makes her uneasy.

the sun continues to pound on her brow, so they duc into a shanty sellin the latest fashun. Krla notes an appealin tanktop with holes so big her boobs cud hang out. the rags they call clothes aint acshully rags at all; its just cool to wear fabric full of holes.

further into the skirt city they go, careful to avoid any single place for too long, for the synes plastered round r cleer: "NO STANDIN. VIOLATORS WILL B EXECUTED." but the girls noe to evade any Corps they find, cuz the rednecs wont hesitate to loc em away usin their hyely biased legal algorithms to determine their inarguable gilt like comparin skin tones agenst a color swatch. eevn venturin this far inland is risky for her caste, as the bilbords dont hesitate to remind her: the animashuns flashin on the Cassel wals depict blac ppl like em with full eyes danglin from computer drawn gallows with the warnin in wite txt: "God hates sinners."

this is y poor ppl like em bear the mark of Cain, cuz they aint the good consumers
God intended em to b.
insted, with no munny to call their own,
they forced to leech, to snatch.
no wonder He curses her with hardship,
makes her life so tuff. cuz she blac.
n thus God hates her n all like her.

"look at em all," sez Nyeli,
n Krla can see she meens the welthy tourists
with useless Corprit bills linin their pockets,
twin portraits of Boss Trump n Holy Jesus
smilin upon them from inside their wallets,
6 shoppin bags to eech of their arms,
burdened like human clothin racs.
"jellus?" she asks, n Nyeli smirks yes.
"y cant we b like em?"
Krla shrugs. "wipipo better at consumpshun."
but the duo can consume with the best of em,
cuz they been playin this game for yeers.

they enter Bilmil Bodega –

1 the 4 corner stores round the monolith –
since Nyeli noes Bilmil on a.. personal level.
the shop extends quite a ways bac,
in fact into the Cassel behind:
the key to her gettin wut she came for.
they poke inside, Bilmil behind the desk.

"sup Bil," Nyeli waves, n he replies a casual nod.
"wuts good girl." his silver eerrings glint at her.
"mind if we look round?" she asks,
n Bilmil smiles. "yea, u noe i got u."
Nyeli blows him a kiss thx, n the girls
hed in thru the chip aisle
to the fridges in the bac whr the tea is kept.
they pass the frenly feline named Tab
who calls this shop his home.
he rubs his face hello,
the 1 cat Nyeli cud nevr kil for food.

they slip down the ladder by the bac wal n land in the store stocroom, surrounded by a cathedral of boxes packed with dry n shelf stable goods. so much dam food, Nyeli thinks. she wishes she cud take it all, altho that much sodium wud honestly kil her.

regardless, its not y she heer. she aint come to steal from the gatekeeper that let her in. no, she wants bigger. the Cassel.

the girls noe wut to do.

Krla, mindful n pashent, to stand watch
wile Nyeli goes into the corridor
that connects to the resta the bildin.
from thr its on her to find summin n come bac.
10 minutes.
if Nyeli aint return, Krla cant stic round to wait.
but they can keep tabs thru their scrols,
n Krla will tell her if she spots any danger.

the threshold to the interior of the Cassel always comes as a shoc to Nyeli, the chilly air takin her breth away. had she forgotten wut its like to experience aircondishunin? thees ppl live in dam ice boxes. the maze b4 her is extensive, howevr, n once thru the door, she keeps a hand firm on the wal as she snakes along within.

by now she lost count how many times they pulled off this heist, n she always gets a shot of adrenaline on evry thrillin excurshun. danger lurks in this dim basement, but not once has she dared venture to the hyer floors, whr Lords walk the opulent halls of wite n shit on luxurius porcelin thrones, whr the Texco Company Bord projects its influence to evry corner of the mytey Mercan southwest.

she heddin to an oft visited place: the inventory room of Husn Gifts,

the biggest tourist trap in the skirt market. their warehouse is filled with lil trinkets, but 1 in particular, she lookin for.

evadin a passerby, she slips in the freit entrance n lands in the middle of a warehouse of drawers. pencils. magnets. statuettes. ballcaps. but whr – lyters, forks? napkins, cards – o, thank u Jesus – the soap. she nabs 2 travel size bottles, smol nuf to hide under her armpits if need b.

a russle from behind turns her round, but whoevr they r they aint heer yet. so she splits for the door, snatchin a pen on the way out that she slips tween pigtails alongside her nife.

a hand along the wal bac to safety, n Nyeli almost encounters a guy by the exit. she sees Krla with a finger ovr her lips, wavin her hand to move aside. Nyeli takes the hint in the nic of time as 2 Corps, red scarves on their necs, pass by.

soap clenched in fists, Nyeli makes a break for the ladder, via wich Krla scrambles first. Nyeli flies up silent as an owl, n their heist wuz a minor success. no diamond jewels or nuthin, but any kinda detergent is worth its weit in gold, n who wudnt wan b cleen for Chrismas? after all, nuthin sez i luv u like soap.

thank God she aint got caut by anyone, for wut she just did cud get her hung. gess He did come with tday after all. its triumfs like this that make her feel momentarily invincible, like she a god herself. cuz yea, the world kinda shitty, n she got a sorta fatalistic understandin that she gon die like evry1 else sumday, but she myte as well make the most of life wile she can, for surrenderin to despair is surrenderin to deth, n things can always get better. they cant get much worse.

like the pacifist unshakably dedicated to peece, eevn as the brutal police state dus evrythin it can to break her, Nyeli adheers to her ardent, defiant attitude shaped from decades of bein delt shit hands.

but tday aint a shit hand. tday her hands got soap.

Nyeli pumps the air with her fist as they pass Bilmil on the way out. he raises his fist too. "lata hatas," he hollas, n not eevn 3 steps down the street a Corp steps ryte infront em, his blac wishbone slappin agenst his palm.

"wut we have heer?" sez the ball of a man as he rolls down to consider the girls. "swamprats?" he gesses, but Nyeli shakes no. "we from Eastwood," Nyeli lies, til the Corp grabs her shirt at the nape n scans the collar with a beep of his wand. "the brand this quarter is Hermes. lets see... holy shit! is this a Guchi? yo" – the witeguy releeses her n busts into lafter. "yoooo. i aint seen 1 thees in like – cant rember how many yeers," he cries.

to prove it, he rolls up his fashunably torn sleeve to look bac at the long line of brands on his skin, badges he wears like sacred memries of service, havin survived on thees streets for 8 brands now. most Corps lucky to see eevn haf as many holy scars on their arms b4 the toll of the job claims their life, wether from sum angry employee with a nife lookin to stab the first Corp they lay eyes on or just from droppin exausted to the ground n expirin in the impossible heet.

1, 2, 3, he counts his brands, n ovr his bicep he finds Guchi, 6 brands bac. "that too funny.." Nyelis amber eyes shudder uneasily as he roars louder. "o, Jesus, thats nuts. nuts yo. but no. no u cant b heer. u gotta leeve immediately."

he seizes her hand n feels plastic in her fist.

"i see," he sez, eyes growin dark
as he plucs the soap out her grip.
she bows her hed n surrenders the other, too.

"this is unacceptable," he utters.

"plz officer? its just a smol bottle."
she flashes him her puppy eyes.

"u dont have BRAND approval to b heer, miss,"
the man booms. "get out.
get fuc outta heer Canaanintes."
he shoos em away with his wand,
eeger for the chance to use it as a baton.
insted, he puts the soap in his bac pocket,
uncommon restraint for police in Merca.

havin run sevral blocs, the girls pause for breth. Nyeli is properly deflated in evry sense – she cud just imagine the smell of that soap; she cuda washed her colored pigtails for once, insted of just focusin on the roots n her scalp. but nope. now all she got is a pen. sye. big sye. still! not nuthin.

but wut a fuckin dic that Corp wuz, as if Nyeli need a dam brand to own soap. fuckin stupid ass Holy Corprit Bulshit. but mayb thats just Chrishan economics: do wuteva u want in the name of God n no 1 will stop u or prove u rong! cuz thats the way its written.

they make for home finally,
the sky chariot drawin neerer the horizon.
out in the shadowy streets, Nyeli notes
thr acshully fewer wipipo then evr.
this trubbles her, for the welthy class
keeps em fed, stocs the swamp with game,
pays the taxes that pay for soilnt.
she condishuned to beleeve she can b 1 em too,
ascend the ladder bac into that freez air world,
cuz this is Merca n Mercans can b anythin,
n if she wants to b a shinin wite Lord
livin in the Husn Skycassel –
no 1 gon stop her from it. not eevn the Corps.
so whr the rich gone? they movin out?
or the brown ppl movin in?

o, look – omg! a red penny on the ground.
Krla snatches it zealusly: "Mcd?" she asks.
the girls duc into the offishul Corprit restaurant
adorned with yello arched halos
n the famus scarlet haired clown motif
of Jesuses faverit jester, Mcd.
the penny gets em eech a sweet treet:
milk n wipped creem. they slurp delishus gulps,
the most dairy they seen in a month.

Krla browses her scrol, a message from a fren: "walefall."

"wut?" Nyeli asks.

"walefall!" Krla repeets, showin Nyeli the screen on her rist. "lets go."

the girls emerge into pale eevnin green to the beech whr the enormus annimal lays. a community of scavengers has already apeered round the still breethin sea mammal. they hack into its blubbery flesh – the first walefall in yeers! – cuz eevn 1 wale can feed a hood for a week. such caloric releef comes as the wale itself is unable to eet from a stomac tied in knots with plastic. easy to see y: but a mile into the oshun roam the plasberg communities, entire villages founded upon floatin rafts of garbage pushed lazily by waves.

from this vantage, Nyeli paralyzes at the syte of just how much the tub water has risen compared to the algae covered sea beyond. not a Corpboat anywhr to b seen tryna figure out y the water goin up. its bcomin all too cleer to her now that the levee bilt in a haste sum decades past – the 1 defense agenst oblivion for her – is well n truly failin, n her hol life bouta change.

"we gotta go home," she tells her fren.

10

clatterin weels tumble ovr split pavement as a woman pushes her todlers out the muc.

[&]quot;home wile we still can."

the advancin oshun has claimed haf a mile, n Krla must admit: "this place goin Florda fast." Nyeli gulps in agony. "b like the Galves soon. displaced. formin gangs just to make it to tmoro."

its acshully easier then evr to find a boat home since so many boats runnin bac n forth already, bringin evry fare they can onto hyer ground – rly any ground.

Nyeli n Krla watch this exodus in dismay as wake upon wake shakes their craft from skips loaded up with famlies speedin by. most em have nuthin but eechother.

the doc round the slum is gagged with bodies, ppl carryin wut lil they can n tradin it for a 1 way ticket to land.

Nyeli recognizes a famly of 4 from down the hall. she n her kids await a taxi. price: her silver chain that she worn since her bf died yeers ago.

"Rayna, wuts goin on?" Nyeli asks in a fryte.

"wuts goin on? its time to go is wuts goin on."

finally a fery with 3 seets opens up.

the yungest can go in her lap.

"they tryna evict us," Rayna sez, loadin the dingy.

"EVICT?" Nyeli cries. evicshun is deth.

Rayna nods. "aint lettin no Corps move me.

we gettin the f out." the famly steps into the skip

n they leeve home for the last time.

aint eevn a hint of sentiment abt it either.

"good luc!" Rayna shouts ovr the sloshin bath.

Nyeli turns to Krla n mouths a silent fuuuuuuccc.. thrs good precedent for her to dred a Corprit evicshun: wen they finally evacuated Nuorlens, the populace wuz nevr seen agen. still no 1 noes whr they put the populashun, wether the relocashun succeeded or failed.

it wuznt a story Nyeli hoped to lern the end of.

they get inside thru the 6th floor window
n the girls must fyte the sheer flow of humans
workin their way downstairs to the doc
n out this Godforsaken place.
a weepin sound now
comin from further inside
in the community meetin room: a gatherin.
neither of the girls been prior notified of it,
thrown together impromptu as the day wore on
n the full scale of the crisis wuz made manifest.

they spy a smol horde thru the doorframe as Nyeli n Krla step inside at this rare convergence of the slum community in all its forms – yung, old, Rican, surf – in the midst of decidin their collective fate.

"girls, come in," welcomes Anel, their older neybor from floor 9. they quietly take seets as discushun resumes round the blinkin bulb in the middle of the room.

"we still need a plan if it boils into rebelion," sez Zohar, the deep voiced milisha leeder n the arcitect of tdays marketplace attacs. "who cares bout the rebelion!" shouts a man. "u shud if u goin to the mainland," Zohar sez, as if the slum wuz now sum remote island without connecshun to Husn at all. he splains: "thats whr the fyte is. n its only a matter of time b4 the revolushun begins n we all at risk."

Nyeli taps out a message on her scrol to Chae the intern. mayb if they can meet up she can ask him if he noes wuts goin on. but her screen is flashin red with low batt – wtf, y low batt? didnt Enri come earli – o. that fucker. he drained her battry, didnt he? God dammit. n this intern aint quic to respond.

"but the movers ryte," sez an elder woman,
"the next storm cud wipe us out for good."
"quit eetin dessert first!" calls a man,
condemnin her for wallowin in the pessimism
of not expectin to live much longer,
so u tryna eet dessert first
cuz life is short n u noe it.
"i aint eetin nuthin!" the woman fires bac,
n judgin from her skeletal frame, it probly tru.
"i heer thrs already a spinner out thr!" she cries.
"they say it just cat 1, nbd," sez the man.
"no big deel, sir?! who this they? THEY the 1s
who sed same thing bout Supstorm Niño,
nbd. but we been wet evr since."

Anel stands in support of her stance:
"the next storm will b the end of this place
n yall noe it.
quit hidin from the truth. we cant stay heer."
the bucklin pillars that hold up Nyelis home
r crumblin faster b4 her eyes
as ppl agree with Anels words:
time to gtfo.
the murmurs grow louder
as a decishun seems neer.
Nyeli cant bear to take it.

"now hold up my dudes," sez she to the room, n all voices go silent.
"first of all, my uncle meetin with Trump himself tday to secure the releef we need." they hang on her words. she is Nyeli Silvano, the golden child, the neece of the chief inspector, the 1 who plays frenly with all, n thrfor the hart of the slum: thus her delicate balancin act,

straddlin the line tween ganga n milisha, community n individual, loyalty to all n none, deftly crafted to maintain favor in evry1s eyes; she got no enemies in the room, so they all lissen.

"we cant leeve yet," she pleeds.

"we gotta hold our ground."

the thot comes as releef to many who noe that if any1 got the power to take care of their sitch, its Enrique Silvano.

"wut ground? how long u want us to wait?"
Anel asks, but Nyeli dont falter.
"i aint askin u to wait. im sayin
if those Corps come for our home,
we make em fix our seawal first."
o, ok, make the Corps.
sure, now Anel gets it. ryte.
"n if they refuse?" she asks.
Nyeli clenches a fist. "then we kic em out."

a rumble breaks out among the neybors, wich soon escalates into shoutin. "do we eevn noe who did this??" sum1 asks ovr the bedlam, n quiets the room as they await an answer.

"i herd it wuz the Ricans!" calls 1,
but Rican ganga Jaer aint havin that.
"fuc u, it wuznt us!" he yells.
"if anythin, it probly milisha cowards."
but Zohar steps into the spazzin lyte to face him.
"o, totally, u got us.
tell me, y wud we bom our own home agen?"
Jaer gets neerer him.
"yall been tryna oust us Ricans
evr since we arrived. mayb yall figured
this wuz the best way to do it."
Zohar grabs the man by the chest

as still more ppl offer their theories.

"mayb it wuz the Metli," sez nother.

"i herd it wuz Texgard," sum1 sez, n Nyeli nods, this linin up with Enris comments earlier. she got no reeson – at leest not yet – to assume he wud b rong abt that. the accusashuns hurl, n for a moment it looks like civil war is offishully begun, but Nyeli bridges the gulf b4 its too late:

"YALL, CHILL THE FUC OUT!!" she wails.

Zohar n Jaer stop their squabble as Nyeli pulls the 2 em apart. "u guys n u guys," she sez sharply, "yall gotta cut the shit. we need our guns pointed at the Corps, not eechother."

the men look at 1 other in mutual agreement, for tday cant b the day they fyte. suddenly it looks like calm can been acheeved n a path thru the storm charted. "she ryte," sez Jaer. "if the Corps try kickin us out we gon stand firm til they leeve." a woop from the middle of the room is followed by a smatterin of applause. Nyeli, feers allayed, rejoieces in this smol success that her community may fyte nother day.

"this gets bac to wut i wuz sayin tho," sez Zohar, "bout the revolushun. we all noe its comin. the milisha ready. our guy with Texgard sez they got a big move planned now that the levee broke. we gotta react wen the moment comes, or else we all gon b food for the Corps." he looks to Jaer, who nods in solidarity.

Nyeli, witnessin the birth of this alliance

ponders the theory of rage that bilds in society evry 50 yeers, a cycle of social unrest that reeches its apex with calculatin regularity, combustin into a firestorm, ash in its wake creative destrucshun, the chance to rebild anu. in Merca, the rage nevr seems to have quieted from the last 50 yeer cycle. its just been 1 long, monotonus slog, heet n anger the dominant social mood neybors who grew to loathe the meer thot of coexistance, the community fabric torn into a pile of ribbons ovr desert sand. but despite the pervasive negativity, it feels as tho anger is agen on the upswing, that sum percolatin malaise bouta reech a boil like magma gatherin under a mountaintop, the pressure surgin by the minute, ready to burst in a creshendo.

n – o wow, look at that –
into the room walks Enri, ryte on cue,
scrunched in a frown, feet stampin like cymbals
as the hol room turns to the chief inspector.
"sorry im late," he sez to the groop.
"we didnt invite u!" yells Anel.
"i cudnt resist," he shrugs.
"it looked like too much fun."

"is it tru u meetin with Boss?" sum1 asks.

"yes, in a few hours," Enri replies.

"but it aint lookin good."

Nyeli, teers wellin, moves b4 him.

"wut u meen aint lookin good?" she quavers.

"Nyeli..." he sez, softenin, reechin for her.

she moves bac b4 he can tuch.

he straitens his suit. "the Corprashun is plannin an end to organized control of the swamp" –

gasps break out among the neybors –

"n surrendurin it to the sea," he finishes.

at leest 1 person begins to sob.

"noo.." Nyeli groans, voice fadin.

"thrs no munny for this," Enri splains.

"evacuashun is a far cheeper alternative."

"u meen EVICSHUN!" Zohar shouts,
but Enri got no pashence for it.

"u lucky i aint thrown ur ass in jail," he seethes,
but the milisha leeder dunt budge.

"Our Trump has made up his mind," Enri sez,

"n thrs very lil else i can say to change it."

"then stand agenst him!" pleeds Jaer,
"tell him u wont let him move us!"
but Enri just shakes his hed.
"u gotta b jokin, u sic fuc,"
barks Zohar in Enris beerded face.
"this bout ur stupid promoshun, aint it?"
but Enri grabs him by the nec n shuts him up.

"we aint goin," sez Nyeli, meetin his eyes,
"n if yaint helpin then u better get goin."
Enri releeses Zohar onto the floor.
"Nyeli, plz," he implores –
"all yall need to get ready to leeve."
"no!" the girl shouts. "u gotta help us.
thats wut u say do. so fuckin help us!"
"wut! wut u want??" he asks despritly.
"Trump sposed to b good at bildin wals!"
Nyeli sez. "so make him rebild our wal."
"it aint that simple," Enri sez,
but none em r heerin him.

"is it tru thrs a storm in the Gulf?" asks Anel. Enri nods slytely. "just a baby storm," n the entire room groans in exasperashun. "u fuckin KIDDIN?? n yaint eevn tell us??!" shouts a woman, holdin up her scrol. "i dont see no spinner alert, so wut gives!" "if u gon abandon us," Nyeli bellows – the entire slum behind her on it – "then get the fuc out. but we stayin ryte heer." Krla lets out a woop, frens n neybors eckoin, n milisha men line up behind her, arms crossed. the rowdy response takes Enri so abac that he reeches for his holster instinctively, n suddenly evry1 shuts their mouths.

he beholds the yung woman hunched b4 him in the blinkin lyte n removes his hand from his waist. stand down. but his eyes still red with fury. "HAVE IT UR WAY," he blasts, n he storms out the room in a huf. only Enri Silvano cud out yell evry1 in the hood.

Nyeli, frozen for a moment, turns to the crowd, n the corners of her mouth curl into a grin. "wooo!" sum1 calls, the room applaudin as ppl laf in giddy excitement for havin finally shown Enri wuts wut.

but if anythin, the sitch is worse then they thot, for it sounds like hope for resq is approachin nil, n a storm is bearin down.

"wether sez 36 hours to landfall," reports Anel

"wether sez 36 hours to landfall," reports Anel as she reads from her scrol. the toc is clickin. the ppl look at eechother to read the mood, n it apeers rather grim indeed.

"if any1 must go, then go," announces Zohar, "but the rest us will b heer to the end."

conclushun reeched, the community heds bac to the floors n rooms they still call home as they eech decide wether to stay or go.

Krla comes up behind Nyeli
n lays a hand on her neybors bac.

"i just wan tell u that wuz rly hot," she sez,

causin Nyeli to blush. "thx for bein thr, K." "no prob." the frens hug goodbye. "il txt u."

Nyeli watches her go, n catches up to her neybor who lives on the other side of floor 13. "hey Kiana," she sez; the woman stops. "Nyeli," she wispers, her eyes holdin water. "u noe wut u gon do?" asks the girl. Kiana sniffles. "i lived in this bildin for decades," the elder splains. "i raised my son heer. my roots heer. this my home, n i aint leevin." the woman snivels a smile to Nyeli n departs for a hyer floor. it takes a moment for the girl to smile bac, but only cuz she realizes that if Kiana stayin, mayb her hol floor will decide to stay, n then the next floor, n then all em. it may not b so bad after all. no, mayb not.

finally a buz on her rist, n its Chae: "i can meet u in 30."

she begins the ascent to her apartment, all the wile thinkin wut wud she do if they had to leeve home. whr to go? Shel?
no, thats 1 the lesser companies, just sum opioid den of addicted wite trash. Exon?
whr insted of orange, the faucets drip oil? hel the fuc no.
she Texcan to the bone.
her papis famly lived heer 1 way or nother for centuries, she been told.

but the sound of gunfire on floor 11 draws her curiosity to the shootin range whr the ganga train.

except this time it looks like
evry yung woman n man
tied to the squalor of the slum
is lined up to get guns n join the fyte.
surfers n Ricans standin beside eechother
dolin out wepons to any1 with strength to grip.
the more recless take aim down the hall n fire,
the girls n bois geerin up
to take on the Corps,
the most heavily militarized
police force in the world.

"who u think gon b ceo?" wonders 1.

"mayb Symon," thinks Jaer,
name checkin a facial media superstar
with a followin of revolushunary alarmists
that he hypnotizes on the antinode
to rally his troops round his starpower.

"nah, Nidas all the way," sez a boi probly age 9,
carelessly pointin his pink gun in evry direcshun.
"i heer he got a million followers."
thrs literally thousands of thees wud b traitors
spewin revolushunary retoric on the antinode,
tryna weponize their cults of personality
to bend the future round their orbit.

a shot rings out –
a narrow miss for sum yung girl,
n Nyeli realizes her presence
in a room full of teenagers with guns
aint bode well for her life expectancy.
but the syte of it aches her hart,
all her frens scramblin for pistols.
not too long ago this wuz
a community of hardened hope,
but the hope dried up
n those times long gone.
revolushun. seems to b the only move.

amid the pap pap of wepons fire

she sees the facshuns armed n ready, nashun rise agenst nashun – kingdom agenst kingdom – n she rembers her Holy Corprit trainin of the famines n pestilence n erthquakes to follow: it rly is the end of all things. the world drawin darker, its time for the monsters to emerge – n then the sun went down.

11

"i cant hang long," sez Chae, as Nyeli fixes herself a potato soilnt sammich possibly the saddest of her regular dinners, but nonetheless a fillin 1. "wuts the deel with the tub?" she asks him as she bites into lumpy bread. the syte makes him smile endeerinly. "that used to b my faverit lunch," he recalls. she stops chewin to look at her sammich. "rly?" she sez, mouth full. "thats depressin." she scrunches her face in disgust. "it wuz the 1 thing we cud afford," he splains. "cudnt get pnutbutter cuz of my allergy, so we had dirty potato sammies insted." "i have bout 10 thees a week," she sez. "me too," he snorts. "reminds me my ma." "u must not get paid much in the Corps," she sez. Chaes cheeks get hot. "o, i aint paid yet. i still just an intern."

but he more then that; he like her: he calls the slum home just as she, livin on a lower floor of an ajacent bildin. they passed eechother in the shadows b4, but Nyeli has to frown on his betrayal of sidin with Corps ovr community.

"howd u get to b a Corp?" she wonders, n they sit down together at her kitchen table. "part of their local outreech," he splains. "they lookin for ppl with roots in the swamp." "so u can convince us to move?" she bristles, n Chae gotta think for a sec. cuz like. mayb. "lissen, i aint chill with things either," he sez in a wisper yell, neither defensive nor defeeted. "this hol thing sucs. but im stuc just like u."

Nyeli chews carefully on this. he may just b the rare kinda Corp she can trust.

"hey," she breethes. "u wan do summin?" thrs a glint in her wide honey eyes that Chae reads perfectly. he looks round n makes an uncertain face as he considers a crowded apartment, with Zara home too, no less. talk abt awkward.

"follow me." she leeds him out to a nook on floor 14, an old laundry room whr the clothes that once littered the floor long been scooped cleen by looters. no 1 goes thr now but her n a few others who furnished it with a smol mattress, tucked behind old washin masheens for those occashuns wen they need privacy n nobody can host. behind a haf torn curtin the yung cuple disapeers, n Nyeli takes the opportunity to win the trust of this Corp named Chae inside access, in a way. so she seduces him with her tits n they fornicate quicly in the lyteless room

as passin ghosts enjoy the show.

Chae exhales in deep satisfacshun n puts his arms affecshunately round her. disturbed by his lac of restraint, Nyeli lifts her hed from the mattress n starts feelin for her rags. "so who attacked the tub?" she asks agen. Chae shakes his hed in the dark. "still cant rule any1 out," he sez. Nyeli snaps, seizes his throat, pushin him deep into the mattress springs. "thats fuckin gas," she growls as he shakes his hed in gaggin breths. her hands releese. had to keep him on alert. plus that wuz kinda thrillin. "wubout the storm. gon b bad?" he sits up now. "i herd its cat 1. shud b fine." "but thats bulshit, the levee fuckin broke." she drops frustrated beside him. syeeeee. they fuckin doomed.

"Texgard," Chae sez to break the silence. "they myta done it." Nyeli rubs her hed. "thr gon b a revolushun," she noe.

a long silence.

"u think those rebels ryte?" she asks earnestly.
"how shud i noe?" he sez. "i just do wut im told."
she frowns. "yea, thats 1 our nashunal mottos,
just do wut ur told.
but u evr ask urself y the world so shitty?"
Chae scratches his scalp. "yea, i ask myself,
but i nevr get an answer cuz i noe nuthin bout it.
my gess is, the Corps ryte: its all up to God.
He hates us for bein bad."
she stares at the darkness whr his face hides.
"we bein bad rytenow," she sez,

runnin a delicate finger ovr his nipple.
"God wants us to b bad.
y wud he hate us for that?"
Chae agen dunt have an answer.

"the rebels gainin ground," he shares,
"n thats just the lil gunfytes.

Texgard is big. if they struc in ful force –
shit, i dunno we b ready."

Chae cant see the look of suprize on her face.
the Corps cud acshully fall?
this rly is a nu world.
"we wudnt b able to keep law n order."
"fuc law n order," Nyeli spits. "we need justice."
"yea we do," he agrees, "but i dont think
the Gard gon b the 1s to deel it."

he wraps his arms round her supple waist, agen makin her squirm with his undue affecshun.

without warnin
the screencufs on his rists unfurl
n fly together,
trappin Nyeli in a hug
as the room alytes in digital shine.
the girl panics, thinkin its Enri,
but a vid starts playin,
Corprit trainin blarin in her face.
Chae swipes his thum to mute it.
"hang on, gotta watch this," he sez,
smilin innocently. "its my homework."
she wiggles awkwardly out the embrace
n rolls her eyes as she falls bac.

he gotta unmute n watch unblinkingly, cuz the eye atop his scrol watchin him to ensure he attentive to the lesson. "the topic tday is science," declares the vaguely British voiceovr. "once upon a time, ppl thot that all human beins wer born with the same potenshul. but that assumpshun wuz rong. recent genetic breakthrus have reveeled the limitashuns of many varieties n cultures from evry corner of the map. with centuries of data to draw from, the lessons of history r cleer: it is the Chrishan society that is the most stable, productive, civilized. Chrishan capitalism is the only way foward for humanity. under the guidin hand of Our Holy Trump, Mercans tday live lives that r longer, more ryteus n more profitable then evr b4. thx to recent alien cracdowns, Our Trump keeps the less capable out our hoods

n at this point the recordin cuts to a new voice recitin Chaes CSA serial number, 1479323 –

n will continue to protect us from thees

n punish any syne of disobedience.

dangerus foren populashuns

u, Corprit employee" -

"r essenshul to that process," sez the narrator.

"if u work hard, u will b rewarded,
n u too can defend ur fellow Mercans
from thees terrists,
rapists
n drug deelers
that prowl the streets of this great nashun."
Chae mouths along with thees last sevral lines,
havin watched this very same video
3 times this week for rote memrizashun.

the screen goes blank, his cufs demagnetized.

"n i thot scool wuz bad," Nyeli groans.
"like i sed, i aint crazy bout this shit," sez Chae.

the pair get dressed n stand ready to depart. "u noe thrs a gatherin tnite," she reminds him. "yea, but u noe i cant go. got that meetin." "the Trump meetin?" she asks. "yup, The Man himself." "dam." "i meen, i wont b in the room. il b round." "i herd a rumor Trump been locked in Boss Safe since the Witehouse fludded with shit from hye tide at his last rally." Chae lafs. "that wuz tru til tday," he sez, "but i can confirm Bossman in Husn, cuz earlier i had to handle his luggage." "u wut!" she chirps. "yea, saw him come out the limo too." "thats so crazy. u like famus now." "no, u noe wut crazy," he sez, "is the combo on his luggage." Nyeli chuckles. "wut, like 6969 or summin?" lol. "no." he smiles invitingly. "1 2

3 4 5."

Nyeli bursts out laffin. "i shuda fuckin gessed." "yea. i heer he sets that for all his passwords." "omg. wut the fuccc. how he still like eevn alive. he rly is simple, aint he?" Chae nods. "wonder y God put him in charge." a scof. "i dout He did." her smile twinkles at him.

the moment is broken by a volley of faint n indiscernible shouts eckoin thru the slum as ppl grab their shit n hed for the hills. havin done wut they came to do, n Chae already on the verge of late, they part ways with a bear hug.
"il let u noe how it goes," he sez.
she nods stiffly. "do wut u can, n so will i."

12

wen clouds rub together n polarize,
the inevitable result is a violent flash –
the discharge of a bryte wite bolt,
a spark for a pile of kindlin
that goes up like a Calfornia forest.
flare after flare, fire upon fire,
the room is ablaze in heet driven fury,
chief executive agenst chief executive,
men with lumberjac beerds, crazy in their eyes
n colonizashun in their blud,
more in the biz to expand their personal power
then anythin to do with the wellbein of ppl.

evry1 got sum horror to bring to the table:
Konoco ceo Myers Ward,
master of Mercas northern coast,
complains of too much water
n not a drop to drink,
for the lakes have all gone sour,
Eerie in particular coated in neon green,
an anoxic event that killed evry last organism
wich swam those once sparklin waters.
in effect, the lake has risen to its name
as the corpses of fish that suffocated to deth
bob n jounce with the waves.

Raymond Tiller, ceo of Exon –

Mercas most profitable, powerful company –
got more land to manage then anywhr but Texco,
wile the yeelds of Applashan coal seams dwindle

n the flash fluds nevr seem to receed.

out in Hes, whr ceo Theonys Wepler swets, the ground has turned to flame n Corprit munny no longer flows to firehoses, so his company must fyte the Hel on their own. his face is a shade of apoplectic crimson, or mayb its just a dire sunburn; hard to tell.

but at leest he got land to burn, unlike Contnental ceo Kyle Lucas, whr his slice of North Merca is vanishin faster then Antartica, for the entire aincent land of Florda is no longer drawn on the map.

yes, eevn Shel in the Northwest is smothered with tics n crop bustin beetles that fuel the nashunal famine.

evry corner of the country reels from the heet, but no company seems more on the brink then Texco, the crisis havin bloomed so far that its capital n most populus city is in the throes of impromptu evacuashun.

Enri Silvano is 1 of 3 Texco representatives jockeyin for ascenshun to the throne now that ceo Gaspard steppin down. it is his rivals he must look better then in the eyes of Holy Trump if he is to secure his long deserved promoshun. he eevn brot along his dotin manservant Chae Rondon, the boi, to demonstrate his devoshun to Husn n the company that projects its power from it. he hopes the message is cleer: the Corprit state wont push Texco round. Chae, nervus n unprepared for the affair, stands agenst the wal, no seet at the table.

at last the secret service enters the room: "all rise for His Holyness," announces a man. the bickerin halts as the officers stand in a perfunctory show of respect as a vertical coffin rolls into the confrence room. a hiss of pressure unleeshed, puff - wite air evaporates n the lid swings open. out the glowin purple lyte emerges the Boss himself clad in blac suit n red tie, hair on ryte this time, yoothful face burnt oranger then evr. the wal of a man breethes in greedily, eyelids peelin bac to reveel blu orbs. eevn the crystal screens on the wals seem to tremble at his Bosslike presence.

"ur tie, sir," notes 1 his aides, n Trump looks down absently. a horrible brown stain extends its length, possibly soy sauce from lunch. he lafs. "a tremendus meel," he glees as his servant hands him a fresh tie to replace his soiled silken bib.

Trump moves to the hed of the room as the beerded witemen resume their seets. "how the negoshiashuns?" he asks, affixin the nu tie round his nec to cover the stain below. now he wearin 2. "better now u heer," endeers Enri. Brad Madox, his chief competitor for Texco ceo, flashes him a dirty look. Enri smiles bac. "great," sez His Holyness, "lets heer."

"we wuz just sayin how Texco shud pony up for more drout releef," sez Logan Wyat of Shel. Enri cackles. "n y shud we give u munny wen we drownin by the migrant boatload?"
Logan stands, outta disrespect now:
"u can rise above the fluds in ur wite tower,"
he sez, "but we cant run from our own dry land."

"yet u use all the water," blames Theonys,
"n tap our rivers til they nuthin but canyons."
the man refers to the once mytey Colrado,
swept away by desert wind. he turns to Trump.
"Hes aint supportin any budget for next yeer
til Shel stops sifonin moisture out our streems."

Trump lafs tactlessly at their squabblin.

"we 1 Corprashun," he reminds the Bord of 13, but Theo disagrees: "it dont feel that way."

"quit actin like we have any control," sez Trump, channelin the Holy Corprit filosofy: man cant change the wether.

"God will see to the swift end of our plagues wen we earn it."

his words r so naively Trumpian in sentiment, yet sed with such sinceer convictshun that the entire Corprit Bord gotta roll their eyes.

"u gon leeve it up to God to resettle my ppl too?" Enri thunders, n eevn the blud red eegle on the wal shivers. Trump, aghast, straitens his ties. "too expensive, no munny for that," he sez, "but investors r respondin to the idea of a much cheeper n profitable solushun." his grin is sumhow wider then his face, n it seems to say: u dont have a choice, n u fired if u think otherwise.

acourse, fired is wut they do to all ppl who defect from the Word of Trump, n the power generated gets piped directly to the Corprit Throne: the Bosses gold toilet upon wich his Holy Ass shits, boastin 64 water massage settings, cuz who needs toiletpaper wen u got a biday?

Brad Madox decides to insert his thots.

"Konoco rejected 50,000 refugees this yeer," sez he. "they shud take em."

Enri nods almost imperceptibly so as not to apeer too much in consort with the man currently favored to gain the chair.

"Konoco gon close its borders compleetly if u keep talkin like that," sez Mr. Ward. Enris fist slams loud. "we cant live with this. 50,000 aint eevn a blip. we need sumwhr to put em ALL."

tiny Trump hands clasp together. he leens in. "the current strategy is goin well nuf," sez Boss. "no, its NOT," Enri stresses.
"we gon have a uprisin if we dont move em."

Ward stands: "i got uprisins of my own to quell." at this point they myte as well all stand.

Chae, strugglin to remain still, feels a growin sense of enmity as he lissens to thees wipipo decidin the future of his city.

"if things go Florda, we can always use the nucular opshun,"
n the entire room looks at Donald Trump 4, who just suggested aimin Mercas agein nukes at its 2nd most populus metropolis.
"thats how u gon manage my ppl?" asks Enri, "with fire n fury?"
Chaes hart is practicly bustin out its cage.

Trump lafs despicably. "this is Gaspards falt," passin blame to the lame duc ceo who aint eevn present to defend himself.

"aint evrythin?" agrees Brad.
"shuttup, Madox," sez Enri,
"n lets heer wut Boss gotta say."

Trump stands with a shrug, turns to face the bird of prayer. "he let the resistance fester too long," Boss splains. "n lettin slide their smol victories wuz the rong approach. he thot if he let those alarmists bom the powerplants, it wud turn turn the ppl agenst em. as usual, that aint been the case, n now i gotta come in to cleen up the mess."

Enri gives a duh face at this not nu analysis that his Boss only now startin to understand. "but we have ways to deel with rebels," he adds. "ryte, Silvano?" blu eyes flash at Enri n at his intern standin behind.

a buz rings out from the man, n Trump checs his cuf. its for him. the room stares in silence as the lenses in Bossmans eyes flare alive, n he starts noddin uneasily.

"yea, me neither," sez Donald.
he nods harder.

"we got the Domain on it."
as he lissens to the response ovr the call,
Trumps face takes on an infinite stare,
his mouth slowly fallin agape
til the lyte in his lenses goes dark.

his ceos r waitin on him.

"ahem" – he tugs on his suit.

"n?" asks Enri, impashent.

"i just herd from the Syndicate," sez Trump,

"n they want u all to noe they aint happy

with wut sum ppl have said tnite."
he looks at Enri in particular.
"they made it cleer that they will not put up
with nother Mercan war,
espeshully with the WEA actin up."

Brad scofs. "o plz. Whole Erthers aint a thret." Trump nods. "the democratists r too soft to challenge us now." "how u noe that?" Enri asks. "n dont say the Domain." Trump remains tytelipped. "for all we noe, Metli bommed my levee." Boss waves his hand thru the air. "the Metro aint interfeered in a decade."

Enri scofs for all to heer.

"that, Sir, is a load of gas. Metli probly got more agents in Husn then we got Corps."

eyebrows clyme an orange forhed. "o rly! gess u must b pretty close to thees secret agents to noe they callin ur city their home."

"i dont hafta noe em; i heer bout ppl joinin em. thees aint bulshit stories, they facts.

quit deliberately avoidin this truth."

Trump dunt care. "if the WEA wan fyte" – pronounced "we," btw – "they gon b the wuz." "heer heer," shouts Logan Wyat, n the room erupts in retorical applause to affirm His Holyness for his curage n promise to wipe out the democratists at long last.

"meetin adjurned!" Trump proclaims on a wim, the moment feelin apropriate to end on a note of triumf as the cheers boom louder.

Enri, evr the grump, frowns in refusal

to join in this intemperate n undeserved ritual, eevn as Brad Madox claps louder. "thank u, thank u," sez Trump, bowin. "excellent work tday."

makin way past the table n out the door, he grabs Enri by the sholder n wispers in his eer: "lets talk."

Enri, acrimony in his eyes, follows behind n moshuns Chae to join. "this bcumin more trubble then its worth," utters the inspector to his yung assistant.

they follow the Boss n his escorts to a golden door that he halts em at. "u wait heer," Trump sez, n the gate slams.

a mizrable sye from Enri. Chae pulls him close. "is it tru the storms gettin worse?" asks the boi thru dark n beedy eyes. his master nods. "still only cat 2. nuthin to worry bout." "y aint u put alert in the Corpbuz??" Enri shushs him, checkin the door uneasily. "cuz Husn on edge nuf already. dont need ppl freekin out bout a raincloud."

Chae, enraged, keeps his words to himself.
but they wuda gone summin like:
fuckin fuc piece of fuckin shit fuc,
n then sum kickin in the groin,
then he wud b thrown in the self destruct booth.

Enri shakes his hed. "ive tried so hard,"
he confides, "tried so hard to protect the swamp
n wuts left of my famly in particular."
to now, he been ruthless to that end –
eevn approved his traitor brothers request
to b transferred to a prison
closer to Femi n the kids –

but eevn he must bow to the force of nature, n it seems to b deprivin him his power to do anythin for em anymore.

"Holy Trump wanted em all ded," he splains, "after Alvaros insurrecshun. i cudnt let it b."
Chae nods considerately, his brown curls bouncin languidly in the still air.
"but no more. i may hafta trim the fat. its time to cut loose wut holdin me bac, n its the swamp.
all em. him."
a deep red hatred manifests on Enris face as the man dwells on his brothers misdeeds.
"wen im ceo, all traitors will face the booth. thr will b no more tolerance for resistance n no more 2nd chances."

the door opens behind him n a suit moshuns Enri in past the verge, slammin the door in Chaes face.

Trump awaits behind his oaken desk, pointin to a lavender cushion in the opposit seet. Enri complies in silence, n with his ass down, he riggles loudly in the seet b4 sittin up poised.

"have u got ur ranks under control?" asks Boss.
"i heer u had to fire sevral underlings
in this difcult transishun."
Enri frowns thru his beerd. "literally," he rues,
recallin the bludshed of recent weeks,
pyres for the piles of bodies.
"far too much chaos for promoshun season,"
caushuns Trump. "use ur purges sparinly."
"u meen like u?" Enri barbs, "cuz i lost count."

the fat man rises from his cathedra. his profile is much wider in person then on tv. "ceo Silvano," Trump singsongs with a sneer, "zactly wut we feered 20 yeers ago.
thr r those among the Bord who still
associate ur name with trechery."
"then help me bring order to this," Enri asks.
"endorse my bid n crown me ceo.
do that, n the rest will fall into line."
the Boss growls from sum sinister instinct.
"if not," adds Enri, "u gon find Texco
eevn more likely to turn agenst u."

"careful, Silvano," sez Trump, arms crossed.
"im into the idea of u runnin Texco –
altho u a lil too dark for my taste."
his eyes scan ovr Enris lyte bronze body.
"il have a better idea of my decishun
after the Holidays," sez Boss.
"if u dont do it soon," Enri pleeds,
"Husn gon tear itself apart."
"im afraid that aint my problem to solve,"
sez Trump. "u wan leed? show me u can."

Enri rumbles. "n u wonder y ur popularity among Texcans slips by the day." he takes to his feet to meet His Holyness. "Husn is stewin in revolushunary sentiment, n its all directed at u. the street clashes worsen by the hour. if the city revolts in mass, Husn gon bcome the biggest problem of ur career."

all Trump can do is smile.

"with a man like u at the helm,
at leest il noe zactly who to blame if it dus."

Boss reclines comfterbly into his throne, his Holy Agents flankin his sides. he smiles that trademark grin, a slit across orange skin more harrowin then the evil in his azure eyes. "til next time, Enri Silvano," he hails,

n snaps his servants to escort the man out. "go bac to ur tannin booth, ur Hyeness," sez Enri, n the men in wite robes escort him away.

wite lil children enter the room
to take pics with their irradiated dad.
without so much as greetin the tots,
Trump pulls out his scrol n starts takin selfies.
"daddy, aint u sposed b workin?" asks the boi,
the eldest n future Boss of the Corprashun.
"this is workin, Donny," sez his father.
"we gotta put on a good face for our ppl.
its all in the presentashun, kids. say cheez."

the children smile uncomfterbly as a spark flashes their eyes blind.

"2 more," sez Donald 4, n Donald 5 wimpers the trademark Trump Pout. "i dont wanna, daddy!" he wails, but the Boss neels down to face him. "u exist for me," he sez sternly. "thats the only reeson i put u heer. so smile."

more fake grins glow with the flash, n Trump, satisfied, tweets it out to Merca. he starts browsin the vids on his feed, revelin in his online popularity, eech portrait of his golden face amassin millions n millions of likes. yes, he gorgeus n he noes it.

on his scrol, nother ad of his, brash n bombastic as he proclaims the Mercan government to b smoler n more efishent then evr b4 – n it is. run by 13 witemen in a bordroom,

his vanity quenched, his kids r dragged out

it has reeched peak political efishency.

by the ranks of wite robed Holy Agents, n the blac coffin is rolled in. loosenin his ties, Trump ensconces himself in neon purple lyte as the casket closes round him. now he bac to work.

13

speekers loud to split her eers, a thumpin bass n fatter rythm, the words he sez induce her teers, n Nyeli considers joinin with him. a hol keg to kic tnite will quell the mania of the day; if only they cud all take flyte to sum unfindable hideaway, escape the swamp n Husn too b4 they drown in waves of foam, or find sum tunnel to pass thru to flee the place that they call home.

the troops r tired – nuf trainin for tday; time to unwind with a drink n a joint. Nyeli bobs her hed with Blish as he raps louder the injustice they face. his hair hangs in a brunet cascade, so long n in such offense to Corprit gender standards he wud b forced to cut it if a Corp evr saw him.

Krla passes off the fire, n Nyeli takes a well deserved drag. "cheers," she sez, raisin the j, handin it bac to Krla who hits it just as hard. a long n billowin wisp exits her mouth – "daaaamm, Metro got sum good shit," she sez, compliment in the sepratists on the golden coast for growin sum magnificently potent pot.

bodies hunched ovr the lytes on their rists, posin n postin from evry inch of the room, the den of theeves applauds the first act, n Blish takes his seet beside Nyeli, booz in hand.

"u up!" he sez,
but Nyeli dont wan b up.

"i aint got a song in me tnite," she sez,
n sum1 cries an "aw wut!"
but she only performs on rare occashuns
wen the crowd smoler, the stagefryte less seveer.
tnite it feels like the hol bildin –
or whoevr left in it –
crammed into the community space.
all except Zatara; she gone
to hang with her surf frens.

Blish scrunches his nose. "well come on, u gotta give us summin."

Nyeli just shrugs.
"at leest do a kegstand!"
n he gets a few woops for the idea. she smiles.
"i nevr say no to gettin more fucked up!"
she exclaims. the entire room sez "aaeeeyyyy!!!"

hauled into the air by Blish n Krla, she chugs the joose in frantic gulps, its chunky n sour flavor brewed ryte upstairs, for 30 seconds, 40, n they cheerin louder now, 50 – dam, a minute!

"ok hun," sez Krla, concerned. "u can stop now." Nyeli savors the drink for just a moment more b4 she spits the hose out her mouth, n the crowd goes bonkers as she stands agen. o God she gotta burp – n its force rocs strait to the bildin foundashun now buried under 100 feet of swamp.

the music grows louder sumhow, raps strait from the rebel underground, cultural propaganda n catchy as hell, streemed from the antinode to fill the hall with Corprit resentment. evry1 lissens. it pumps em up. like religion, they enraptured by the profetic meenin of the message comin strait from Nidas, Mr. Texgard himself.

voices fall away
her body starts to sway
yea, she drunk af already
n the cannabis aint helpin her stand any straiter.
at leest she in good company
cuz she
it aint like shee the only 1 this crossfaded
burp agen, Jesus
thrs noo way she ggion –
goin
to last the entire the nite.

more singin dancin rappin
Krla takes the stage n blets out
belts out a ryme
Nyeli can barely heer tho
her mind gone so distant
vishun dubble
vishun dubble
wut time it is now?
howmenny mor ours leff
til the
STORM
comes?
the keg almost dun
achin hed throb

papi
o papi –
y u gotta go
papi?
n she realize she gotta find that thing
if it eevn still exist....

but she got a song now she found it, it wuz thr in her hart cant leeve the party without 1 final song for the ages if thr anymore ages to come so she hobbles upryte n they cheer on their golden child who they took in wen she so yung n now all grown.

"my papi used to tell me," she splains, recallin a childhood tale -"i dont rember it all, but the end goes like" n she cleers her throat to sing -"then came the men in yello who grabbed their guns n aimed. so calm n cool n mellow, they stood up to the flames. the villagers moved bac as horror further crept, but the firefyters attacked n the trees no longer wept. their resq now begun, the firemen stood tall n unloaded their cannons til the heroes saved em all."

divine force must have possessed her, for in her inebriashun, she stumbled not, n a pang of hope shuddered thru the crowd that they may yet find sum savior to put out their fires.

applause applause, n Nyeli resumes her seet, for her legs have lil enthusiasm left.

the drunken bliss streches into morn, n the entire slum purges emselves of their mutual pain. hugs n kisses later – yea, Nyeli eevn embraces that guy she hooked up with 1 nite n kinda liked, but he nevr txted bac – n the community, not disbanded, nonetheless must depart, say goodnite, for tmoro – the tempest.

Nyeli drags herself to her door n nocs. after sum minutes, the latch finally opens, n mami makes a nasty face of judgment. but lyten up mom, it wuz just a party, n the dotter stumbles inside.

"whrs Zatara?" asks Femi, but Nyeli just burps out a shrug. shakin her hed, her mom returns to bed, but Nyeli gotta find that thing. its probly in the basket with all his old shit. she fishes thru the bin of curios n finds the simple green envelope emblazoned with 1 word: "niña" written in wut she presumes is her fathers hand. 17 yeers since she got this letter, passed into mamis hands by papis fren dam, wuteva his name wuz with instrucshuns not to open til she turn 25.

y 25, no idea; y the letter, no idea; but papi wud tell her from behind bars to nevr lose it, so she didnt.

he sez its time to open it – she ready, 2 yeers early. her erratic finger rips the paper to free the long awaited message.

the card is simple, wite, no words on the outside, but a tiny plastic square taped to the front. she opens the fold drunkenly. within, words scribbled in haste: "mi niña, u may nevr forgive ur father for evrythin i done or understand y i did wut i did. but the hour is later then i evr wanted u to noe. so I kept the truth in heer for the day wen u wuz ready to understand wut it meens." her shiftin eyes grow moist, for the only words left r "I luv u forevr mi niña."

havin read the note, she sniffs, tries to hold bac the teer but it falls anyway, so she flips the letter closed to see the tiny card affixed to the front. "512 ZB" reads the print in tiny letters, n it looks to b the standard size for the slot in papis old fone. she always wondered wut that lil slit wuz for.

she rummages for the smol blac tablet,

powers it on n puts the data card in.
the device processes its nu input
n displays a folder: "Mainframe."
she taps it open, n a thousand nu folders
explode onto the screen
like an accordion file bustin open.
the most recent is neer the top –
"Silvano, A" –
so she peers inside,
n the first thing she sees is a map,
or more accurately a model
of the Corprit Empire.
its colored in splotches of
orange, red, purple n blac,
n got the words "projecshun 50 yrs."

but the next image – wait, this aint no model. that looks almost like her dad – yea, it must be: same broad nose, same brown eyes, tho alot less tired. its her father as a child posin with sum man who holds his hand in sum bryte place, like a market but filled with food, food she nevr eevn seen b4. she draws the screen closer n aims the fone in difrent angles to see evry corner of the historical image. she realizes its a 360 view of this impossibly distant moment in time.

curius, she grabs the vr glasses
that Zara left behind for once
n tries transferrin the picture for viewin.
the connecshun works, n a decades old fone
pairs with the much more modern lenses,
cuz the fundamentals of all Corprit software
aint changed in a generashun,
not since the Chrishans outlawed codin
as a form of Devil worship.

awed, she looks round in vr,
dropped into the middle of this store –
this wonder! –
gleemin with postmodernity,
aisle upon aisle of delicius things to eet
in colors of all kinds n shapes:
fruits, vegetables, nuts,
cans, boxes, bottles,
n in the center of it, her dad n his dad
posin for a picture they decided to take
for sum uncertain reeson,
mayb so she cud find it 1 day.

is this how they lived?
so lush n glamorus,
so large n greedy.
eevn the ppl look better,
well fed like the Lords in the Cassel.
this must date bac b4 the famine. b4 the Fog.

the cracked ryte lens is only a minor distracshun, but it belies the image a certain authenticity n reminds her that wut she sees is unreal, a truth no longer tru, existin only as dots on a screen on a sinkin ship in the middle of the oshun.

she flips to the next image –
o my God, its her,
its her n him.
n mami thr too,
belly swelled with sister inside.
they all standin tyte,
their luv holdin em like glue,
beemin faces, espeshully hers,
with lips covered in drippy wite
n a meltin cone of summin wet in her hand.
is that – wait, is that... icecreem?
my God, that wuz nother life,

n icecreem wuz the treet of dreems. they outside sumwhr, a park it looks like, trees – real trees!? – n they stand in their shadow.

she dont recall this memry or this place.
her eyes r too focused on her own toothy smile n papis happy face n mamis summer dress to look past the leeves n notice the cleer blu sky above.

in lookin at the image, so cleer yet so unreal, she struggles to flash bac, for the further she sifts her drunken mind, the more her records turn up blank. the hallucinatory effect of Corprit media stimulashun creates an evr immediate present that locs her into a perpetual now with no connecshun remainin to the then. the world depicted in this foto no longer exists n may as well nevr have existed, for its impreshun on her is gone. n how dus she noe the pixels b4 her r anymore accurate then her recall? mayb the image is a clever forgery planted by the many competin forces of evil workin to deceeve her n make her lose her way.

her hed hurts,
n this picture aint wut she needs rytenow.
the glasses shut off,
n so too her mind;
afloat in the swamp agen.
but with mother.

n father.
n sum glissenin beed
that rolls from his cheek.
the lyte it catches reflects at her
n transfixes her,
for in it is the oshun,
n within it, the future.

the view expands, the city now in view, n so too the country beyond:
the plains, mountains,
hol continents,
a blu marble spinnin in space.
til a hideus yello stain spills into the air,
encirclin the orb like a shroud
befouled into orange
then red,
purple,
blac –
gone.

the future. its finally heer.

14

by the time she wakes,
her mother n brother already arisen,
n so too her sister, returned from a nite
of surf gang mischief.
but the glarin omishun
is the 1 face she dont wan see,
but mayb the most important face
to assure her of tmoro, tday:
Enri.
inspecshun sceduled for 10 ocloc,

n he nevr been late in 16 yeers, but tday he musta slept in; either that or summin dark has happened. Nyeli asks her fam if he already come, but for once they seen no syne of him. worried, she txts Chae a simple "wuts goin on" to no immediate reply.

she makes herself a porridge of dirt n rembers the horrors of yesterday. the vr recreashun of the past is a foggy, neer forgotten memry, but the excurshun to land is all too lucid, as well as the slauter she witnessed from behind the tree that rang hollow on her noc.

Zara is chewin her own sad n sandy soop, frames in their ryteful place, n Nyeli sits slurpin beside her.

"so did u noe the trees plastic?" she asks.

Zatara barely stirs, remainin in vr.

"wut u meen?" the teen asks, haf bored.

"like the trees outside," Nyeli sez,

"in the street." she points out the window noin full well her sister cant see.

"they made of plastic." her sister chews her stew. "yea," she drones.

"wut u meen yea?? wen they get plastic?"

Zara grimaces. "they always been that way."

"wut!" Nyeli squawks. "u insane. no they aint!"

she serches the recesses of her memry – come to think of it, wen WUZ the last time she eevn tuched a tree? musta been bac b4 the drama, wen she still lived in the Cassel, cuz since movin to the slum she aint had time to interact with nature.

"well, mayb," Nyeli admits,
n she looks to her mother,
who also in the kitchen, lissenin to her scrol.
"did u noe the trees plastic?" she asks,
n Femi too hardly reacts.
"God made the trees, child.
only He noes how he made em."
Nyeli looks at her mother stupefied
by this sudo spiritual bulshit.
she presses fingers painfully to her eyes.

its gettin late, n as promised, she will return to prison with the card. dad been waitin long nuf, n thrs a spinner that she gotta brace for. she places her trusty nife in the box in her room, cuz prison security will take it if she brings it, n heds once more to the doc.

the feryman this mornin got a long, pointed, bryte green beerd,

1 the few not askin for munny as he floats the masses to dry land.
blac clouds gather in the sky
n the swamp is alive with noise
as the throngs desert, a skeleton crew remainin.

its odd Husn aint seen a major hurricane since that howlin storm of her yooth, as if God Himself been savin em, if only to unleesh all the pent up fury at once. but wen sinnin is the only way to put food on the table, can she rly b blamed for His anger?

a buz from her rist, n its Chae: "i need to talk to u." then nother txt: "abt the bildin."

the breez is kickin up too,

n the sky begins to flicker,
like the simulashun of life is glitchin
n the cracs in her reality startin to apeer.
already the plastic trees keelin ovr in the wind,
n her world seems so manufactured,
populated with copies, fakers that evoke the real.
the miragelike parody that is her life
dunt seem genuin nuf to b tru anymore,
n she cant eevn discern the wether,
for the air has turned thic n yello.

36 hours til landfall, she thot, but it looks to b alot less, the Corpbuz downplayin the danger yet agen. perhaps thr wuz no time to warn her of the rapid intensificashun, this monster that spun itself into birth, a wirlpool wipped up from a boilin cauldron, or sum curse conjured by a grand sorcerer of the hevens to remake Nyelis world.

the gale blows up a wave of swamp that washes a scrap of plastic into their skip. it apeers to b a nife, a disposable nife, made to service a single meel for a single human eeten who noes how long ago. anxius, she slips the dagger into her tydye hair as they pull up to the shore now shifted a short walk from prison.

Alvaro is positively hysterical by the time he face to face with her agen. "wut happened!!!!" he cries. "wut took u so long?? i sed ryte bac!" Nyeli, apathetic, shrugs. "yea well, ryte bac wuz just now," she sez. "i had shit to do."

her father paces in his cell.

"do u realize how late it is?" his voice quavers.
her screencufs with security, she dus the math.

"umm. like 11:30?" she gesses.

"no no no no no," he panics, hands on his hed.

"no, this aint good."

Nyeli gettin nervus. "wut u want??" she snaps.
"i got the card." she pulls it out for him,
specifically the data chip.
Alvaro marvels at the tiny device,
so miniscule in size, so maximum in importance.
releef washes ovr him.
but a sudden surge n CLAP –
the power cuts out.

the Silvanos, in the dark, recoil defensively, their vishun rendered useless by the storm. "holy shit," Nyeli scrambles, "i gotta get home!" but Alvaro shouts "no!" n his dotter stops in her tracs. "no, u cant go," he pleeds. "gimme ur hands." she heers him reechin thru the bars for her, n with nowhr else to go, she joins her palms in his to share a moment of singularity.

"i luv u, mi niña," he wispers.

n she noe if she cud see his face
she wud beleeve it.
but dus she still luv him?

n more importantly, luv him nuf to admit it?
she dunt hafta find out,
cuz a swingin beem of lyte cuts thru the blac
n ovr to their tender display.

"powers out, miss," sez the idiot Corp, like she aint noe this already? "im afraid ur safety is at risk," he continues. "stand bac, Silvano."
heedin his order, father n dotter retreet a step
as the officer pulls open the bars
n waves Nyeli inside.
"ull b safe in heer for now," sez the red,
but Nyeli is havin none it.
"hel the fuc no!" she blurts. "i aint gettin in thr."
the Corp pulls out his wepon
n aims it at the source of resistance.
"u gon do wut i say," he fumes,
"or u gon get thrown in the swamp."
that acshully is a pretty dedly thret;
after all, an infecshun from that water cud kil.

"let her go," Alvaro implores,
but the officer aint budgin.
panicked, Nyeli bolts bac the way she came,
but the man runs after her, closin swiftly
til he reeches for her top with a grab
n drags her bac to her fathers cell.
Nyeli, bereft of opshuns, relents
n allows the Corps to claim her
as the officer slams shut the bars behind.
"we b bac soon as the storm passes,"
sez the man, n he zips off down the hall,
leevin the Silvanos in the sunless cell.

she cant b heer. she cant.

"niña," begins Alvaro,
only to b cut off by Nyelis strident "DONT!"
as she sits angrily, stuc with her dad in jail.

"niña, did u read the letter?" he asks, n he intuits Nyelis noddin. "n now yunstan?" "i understand 1 thing," she hisses, "that yaint Mercan nuf to b my dad. nevr wer. thats y u heer. cuz u did an unforgivable thing."

Alvargo grimaces. "im a patriot," he asserts.

"thats y i had to put an end to the madness, stand up to the Chrishan Corprit bulshit b4 they let Husn drown."
"Husn gon drown tday," she sez, defeeted, n they can heer the wind howlin outside.
"bcuz i cudnt stop em," he sez.
"bcuz i failed."

Nyeli stands uneasily as the rain rages louder. "this cant b this cant b.." she stammers. "niña, the storm is out thr n we in heer. u must accept it without sadness or feer." but his words dont reassure her, n she begins sobbin into her hands. "but papi, we bout to lose our home!" she cries.

he shepherds her to the hard bench seet n puts his arm round his dotter.

"i rember the moment i first new we wer gon lose our home.
it wuz wen i saw the projecshuns in my lab the day i wrote u that letter."
she sniffles. "i think i saw that," she recalls, "but i have no idea wut it meens."

"it meens this," sez Alvaro, "this storm."

the sobbin stops, but the cacofony continues.

"i didnt let feer get the best of me," he sez.

"after i stopped greevin, i realized i cud still act.
the game wuznt ovr yet.
so i prepped a Hail Mary
n i planted the seeds of a movement
that has germinated all this time
so the revolushun cud b reborn
like a garden eruptin from the ground."
Nyeli brushes his arm off.

"i dont wan heer this rytenow," she wynes.

the howlin is like a jet engine roarin by, n father n dotter sit wordlessly in the inky blac as the world crashes down round em, outta view. she anxius, she terrified, n acshully, without her scrol on her rist, a lil bored.

"how did u survive in heer
all thees yeers?" she wonders.
her dad chuckles a pained laf.
"this nuthin compared to the Dungeon."
Nyeli is confused. "scuse me, Dungeon?"
Alvaro rolls up his shirt
n runs her fingertips ovr his bac,
ovr the deeply grooved scars of torture
that wer part of his daily routine for a decade.
turns out the Holy Punishment nuthin but a lash.

"i thot i hated the Corps," she thinks, "but u RLY must hate em." Alvaro shakes his hed. "i aint angry, just disapointed."

she nods. "papi," she asks, haltin,
"wut wuz that place in the picture?"
"wich picture?"
"the 1 on the card, u wuz in a store."
he syes. "that wuz long ago," he rembers,
"b4 the Crash. we wer yung then."
"wut u meen?"

he takes a deep breth.

"the world wuznt always this bleek.
b4 the starvin times, b4 the yello rain,
it wuz acshully pretty nice."
he refers to the famine,
wen the air itself rained poison
n salted the fields til they dried up.
but the sky stopped its hateful cryin
n the ground yeelded fruit agen,
wut they hoped wuz the end of their trubble.
n so he begins the tale

of how evrythin changed.
"bac wen grass wuz green n the sky blu."

"the fuc u talkin bout?" she asks.

"sky blu, whr wuz this?"

"this wuz heer," he sez.

"this wuz home. u dont rember this?"
she blinks invisibly. wut the hel, blu sky?
she taxes her memry to the limit –
no, she dont recall no blu sky.

"wen did this happen?" she asks.

"u wuda been bout 4 yeers old," he estimates.

she thinks harder. did she forget the sky had been blu? come to think of it, wen wuz the last time she eevn rly looked at the sky? thr wuz that sunset ovr the levee, but she dont make it a point to look into the flamin hevens very often to notice the details of wut color it is or wuz. in fact, she travels at nite wen she can.

in fact, she travels at nite wen she can. but she cant hunt at nite. she aint a cat.

"i new this wud happen," he sez,
"new ud forget as time went on."
in disbeleef, she asks the obvius queshun:
"wut happened?"
"pollushun," he sez. "climate change."
just heerin the syllables in her eers
prompts sum programmed revulshun
from within her Corprit controlled hed.
"thrs ur mistake," she growls, "beleevin that bs."

a grimace. this aint a debate he wants rytenow.
"my only mistake wuz beleevin
Merca cud change,
accept her power to end the pollushun.
but wen the Corps captured me, all they cud say

wuz that man cant change the wether."
"OBVIUSLY," Nyeli shouts in response.
"we so tiny compared to Gods creashun.
only He decides our fate.
so He gave us the Punishment."
"we made the Punishment, mi niña."
"yea. cuz we didnt repent."

he pinches his eyebrows. this aint goin nowhr. "this is wut the Corps do to u," he sez, "they rob ur history from u. its how they control u. they take those memries n scatter em."

it dus make her uneasy to think she had nevr eevn herd thees things b4. "y u nevr tell me bout that time?" she inquires of her father. "cuz i nevr had the time," he sez with sorrow, "n i didnt want u to wonder y u didnt get to live it. or mayb i wuz afraid ud think i wuz lyin, like it wuz all sum fairy tale. mayb i didnt wan face the fact that the world i once new now seems as improbable as magic. but in all this time, aint u asked urself y things got this way?"

n acourse she had asked, but the answer, she has come to understand, is like askin y water is wet: it just is. y it is matters not; God made it so.

"no," she finally answers. "God forbade man from eetin from the tree of nowlege." "ayyayaee," he moans, eyes big with anger. "God gave us intellect for a reeson, n thats reeson. but the Corps taut u otherwise. they divided u from the natural world n fed u brain candy thru their screens."
"i dont do reeson," sez the girl.
"u did nuf that for me."
he shakes his hed, incredulus.
"i thot i raised u to ask queshuns.
wut happened?"
she crosses her arms.
"u didnt raise me. thats wut happened."

down the hall, a bangin noise agenst the bars as an inmate starts to lose his cool, n the stress clymes hyer now.

"well now u noe," sez papi.
"thr wuz a blu sky once.
but the Corprashun dont want u to noe it,
cuz they firmly written the past out the present."
Nyeli looks at him in the dark.
"ur old world is ded n buried," she sez.
"thrs none it left."
"u think so?" he asks. "funny, cuz im still heer."
she syes heavily. "it dont matter now.
God turned his bac on us," she avers.
but he puts his hand on her sholder.
"no, mankind turned his bac on Him."

a sharp sound cuts ovr the clamor, n Alvaro noes zactly wut it meens. he rises. "curve?" wispers a voice from beyond the bars. "keelin," answers Alvaro, n a square, imposin shape apeers in the dim. the men shake hands as Nyeli squints to see.

"status report," her father demands quietly.

"we all set downstairs," sez the guy,

"but i cant find Sixo. he aint in his cell."

Alvaro gulps audibly. no time to b shorthanded.

"then weel hafta improvise," he sez.

he turns to Nyeli. "mi niña, we must go."

"go, like break out?" she asks, standin.

"go like break out," he confirms.

"we have a plan. but i need u to come with us." she bacs away. "o hel no. i aint joinin u in nother revolushun. they gon shoot us on syte." "then u gon drown in this cage," he sez, "cuz the water out thr risin n the Corps aint gon care wut happens in heer."

her eyes go feerful. "but papi", she sez, n he softens at his dotters distressed tone. the howl of the wind grows, n she realizes its true, so she admits it: "im afraid." he brings her in with a warm embrace, n they roc slowly from foot to foot.

"yo sé, mi niña," he wispers. "thrs plenty to feer. but we need to b brave, need to b smart. thats how we survive the storm."
"is that how u plan on changin the wether?" she asks sarcasticly. "bein brave n smart? u think u gon outsmart God?"
Alvaro squeezes tyter. "God didnt do this. but if u come with me, il show u who did, n then we can walk Gods path together."

feer turns to anger, n she pulls bac in anguish.

"i dunno wut path God laid for me," she cries,

"but if its anythin like urs, im stayin ryte heer."

"as if u have a say in wut

God got in store for u?" he asks.

"i noe wut ur path is. u r mi niña. u always will b
the most important person in the world."

she smiles genuinely at the thot,
eevn tho she noe it aint tru.

"u got the card?" he asks. Nyeli feels in her pocket for the device. "yup," she states, n her papi smiles. "do u trust me?" the girl stands uncertain for a sec. she syes. "yup." he holds out a hand, n she accepts it. together, they turn bac to the bars.

"ready Zel?" he sez to his accomplice. the man nods curtly, procurin a wishbone. with a gentle tuch, the magnetic loc releeses.

Alvaro, 17 yeers behind bars, at last heeves em open. now his plan is in moshun, n so is he. "run!" he directs, Nyeli in hand, n they hang a left into the darkness.

Zel holds down the releese button on the wand as the trio dash by the rows of inmates, openin their locs n settin the criminals free. the inmate rebelion is underway.

Corps respond quicly as felons flud the halls, shootin blindly down the hallway – n the prisoners start hittin the floor.

"faster!" Zel cals to the Silvanos behind as bullets wir past their eers.

the wailin chaos is unnavigable without eyes, n a massive officer steps out from a door with no time for Alvaro to dodge. collishun – a painful 1 – n the guy grabs Alvaro by the throat. "well well," sez the Corp, thirsty for blud.

Nyeli, thinkin fast, pounces on the man holdin her dad hostage n pulls em to the ground as shots wiz by above. the 3 em struggle, n Nyeli reeches for her hair to grab the blade that she rembers too late she left in her room at home, wich meens she cant hold her own agenst this fit n fed Corprit cop. but the rigidity in her colored hair reminds her she aint compleetly unarmed: the plastic nife from the swamp. its still thr.

hysteric, she grabs it with her free hand n brings it down ryte onto the mans hed. the blunt end of the instrument jabs cleen into his eye n thru the thotmatter beyond. a screem is cut short, his elefant arms go limp, n the opportunity affords for their escape. finally, after all the yeers of abuse by the Corps, Nyeli gets retribushun by murderin 1.

they rejoin Zel in the mad dash downstairs – down 1 flyte, 2, the riot upstairs makin its way down too, the inmates ovrwelmin their oppressors. but the ground floor is fluddin already, summin Alvaro n Zel had not anticipated. Sixo wuz their designated diver, without whom they cannot get to the door releese.

they thrash their way to the seeled exit abandoned by the Corps, too preocupied by insurrecshun to man the now underwater security desks. "mi niña," sez Alvaro, "can u swim?" swimmin aint rly a pastime for the swamp ppl, cuz doin so wud b takin a dive in raw sewage, n they wet nuf from humidity already.

he points to the desk behind wich is a ladder to a sunken floor of the bildin.

Nyeli shakes her hed. "no papi," she sez, n the thot of makin it this far only to b trapped drives her into a panic.

this is it, she feers, end of story.

"niña," he sez calmly,
"rember wut i used to tell u?
in n out," he intones, "in n out,
hold my hand n do not pout."
she repeets the mantra in her hed,
n the cool feel of her fathers hand
gives her the clarity to regulate her breth.
the panic subsides
as the waters rise,
n she understands wut she must do.

"whr is it?" she asks, n Alvaro looks to Zel.
"a red lever," the man sez, "on the bac wal."
without hesitashun, she holds her breth
n plunges into the pool,
propellin herself thru the hole in the floor
to the wal with the protrudin arm.
thru the saltwater she can heer
the muffled sound of gunfire
that draws closer to the lobby floor.

with full myte, she pulls the lever up,
n a sound follows of metal groanin above.
she kics herself to the surface
n is immediately swept bac to the staircase
by a wave of crashin water
that sunamis thru the opened gate.
it takes Alvaro n Zel too, n his wishbone wand
gets torn loose by the savage current.

above, the bullets neer – same with the screems.

the waterlevel havin equalized,
Nyeli sloshes her way foward
alongside her father n his fren.
bludthirsty Corps n prisoners close behind,
they escape into the swamp

as the sky flashes blu round em.
a howlin so loud u cant think –
they have seconds to make the next move.

the shore is impossibly far,
n the oshun has arrived at their doorstep.
but neerby, the green beerded feryman
still got a seaworthy boat. he passin by
in his fyte agenst the feroshus surf.
"help!!!" Nyeli shouts, tho her voice
is no match for the roar of the storm.
but the sound of gunshots behind em is loud,
n the skipper looks to identify whr the danger is.
he spies Nyeli flailin, ppl swimmin toward him,
n remarkably he changes course to meet em.
he pulls alongside n tosses em a line
n reels em in like fish on a hook.

they flop onto the dec, gaspin for breth, the rain comin down in sheets. the rickety craft neerly founders in the tumult. "help me drain it!" sez skipper, passin a bucket, n Zel franticly begins to bail out the boat.

the survivin inmates spill asea in bunches as the green beerded man throttles away b4 the castaways can get close nuf to reech their red hands ovr the gunwales. "u owe me a favor!" he shouts to Nyeli, not keen on givin her nother free ride. "fuc later, fery now!" she cries, n the man nods reluctantly. "only cuz this myte b the 1," he conceeds.

n indeed it is, for wut started as a crac in the heroic concreet wal suddenly bursts open like Gibraltar, the yeers of fatigue n neglect givin way, n the oshun rushes thru in a flud of Zanclean proporshuns. the enormus wal of water pulverizes the neerest bildins to dust, n Nyeli, horrified, strains to locate her home, but the rainfall is much too dense.

"lets go!" orders her father,
n the helmsman shifts into full throttle
toward the evr receedin shoreline.
but the massive wave is gainin, closin in,
n Nyeli noes they aint gon make it –
but Alvaro aint sure –
the gap is closin, solid ground in syte,
hungry sunami rollin ryte behind.
"go to Webster!" Alvaro shouts,
wich the feryman heeds, a slyte adjustment.

astern, the Corprit prison succums to the violent, swirlin oshun, n all Alvaros inmates who he gotten to noe ovr the yeers, who helped orcestrate their escape n who he helped set free tday, r swept away by angel wings to Heven.

by sum miracle, Nyeli is proven rong, n the feeble craft grounds itself along the Webster Street pavement. Zel n Alvaro disembark with a hop.

"r u crazy?!" Nyeli screems.
they nevr gon survive on foot;
she got a much better shot in the boat.
"Nyeli lets GO!" her father commands.
"i aint goin with u!" she sez.
"i goin bac to mami."
"thrs no TIME for this! i aint gon let u go."
Nyeli is stedfast. "i dont need ur permishun to protect my famly," she insists.

but he plucs her ryte out the skip anyway n forces his insolent dotter onto the street. "go!" Alvaro squaks, n Zel leeds the way with the wal of risin sea meer blocs away. "heer!" the man howls at a hatch in the sidewalk. he fiddles despritly with the loc as the roadway disapeers behind em.

at last it comes undone –
the metal ingress swings open,
n he scrambles into the hole in the ground.
Alvaro holds open the doors,
but its too late – the water has arrived.
Nyeli scurries down the ladder,
but her father –
whom she barely eevn new –
has always been ready to give his life for her,
n as the wave crashes toward him,
he dives in at the final moment,
drawin the doors closed behind him
as the blast of the sunami
tears thru the street ovrhed,
lickin cleen evrythin in its path.

dustin off his elderly frame, he looks himself ovr. that wuznt the plan, but it worked.

the preshure of the water ovrhed forces itself thru the smol gaps n cracs in the lid, n the tunnel they in begins to fill. "this way," sez Zel, n the 3 em hed foward in the damp darkness, the sound of liquid splashin behind. Nyeli wonders aloud wut this corridor is, so odd n snakelike, so uneevn n twisted, but she is answered with silence. "ite then," she sez, realizin she wont find out.

they stumble along til they reech a checpoint: a lyte in the corridor manned by an armed gard

who stands b4 a closed round door.

Zel walks up to the beefy figure,
who demands in a low voice: "password."

"daybreak," wispers Zel,
n the man smiles. "welcome bac," he sez.
they shake hands briskly.

"we cant stay heer," Zel sez, pointin behind him.
"the levee failed n this hol tunnel gon flud."

the man dont move, but brings a finger to his eer n starts speekin: "3 frenlies at D4, parcel among." he reeches for a door n reveels the next chamber: a simple room with long tubes of lyte on the wals.

Zel looks beyond the threshold.

"u cant stay heer," he reiterates. "for real."

"i stay til im told otherwise," the gard replies,

"wich is zactly wut yall bout to do in heer."

he gestures into the room, n they obey.

the door shuts locked behind em,
n so they wait.

a minute passes, then 2 more.

"so wuz this ur plan??" Nyeli asks the men who brot her heer. "no," sez Zel. "the plan didnt include u." "so i can go then?" she asks, til a noise tips her off that sum1 approaches.

a side door swings open n 2 eyes apeer on the other side. they draw closer, into the lyte, n a dark brown face manifests feeture by feeture: first the nose, chiseled n sharp, a hoop ring thru the nostril; then the lips, full n round, presumably hidin many secrets; n finally shinin green eyes with an air of divinity abt em. his beerd is scruffy, but his scalp is bald, n 2 sharp spikes pierce his eerlobes. behind him emerges a witewoman with firm, square cheeks n strait brown hair.

Alvaro steps foward slowly, respectfully, n the man b4 him smirks. the gentlemen embrace in a bro ish hug, n Nyeli is left wonderin wtf goin on. "im proud of u," Alvaro sez to him like the man Nyelis brother or summin.

"You're late," sez the guy. "Not what I'd expect from the man who can see the future."
"not my fault. traffic wuz terrible."
the man smiles.
"but u noe wut they say," papi begins,
"better late then" –
the man raises a hand. "Don't even go there.
You know there's such a thing as too late."
"tru," Alvaro agrees.
"So we better get moving."
"hold on," sez the elder Silvano.
"we took on a passenger." he moshuns behind.

the man peers ovr Alvaros sholder to consider the girl who now steps closer, as skeptical of him as he of her.
"I see," he breethes, movin to her considerately. "Encantado," he sez in a slyte bow. "Pleasure." his soft jade eyes assure her only modestly. "sup," she answers, wavin bashfully, affordin him the amount of trust she gives to any male she nevr met b4: none at all. after all, history had taut her even soft eyed men can rape as well as any1 with a pric.

"What's your name, girl?" the man asks

in his rich, velvety voice.

"woman," she corrects sternly, "woman."

"Woman," the man eckoes. "Woman what?"

Nyeli scofs. "i aint a girl,

n i aint tellin u my name."

the dark man nods. "Good, then we won't

waste any time with introductions."

he turns to Alvaro n draws him in close.

"Why is she here?" he wispers.

"we had no choice," he sez. "plans went awry."

"Do you have the data?"

Alvaro winks as he pats his pocket. "good to go."

"But what about her?" the man asks.

"She can't come."

Nyeli at this point steps foward.

"im doin just fine without yall, thanks," she sez.

"im just gon go bac home anyway."

Alvaro turns abruptly. "u cant go bac now.

ull b swept out to sea or worse."

"u meen end up bac heer?" she barbs.

her father glowers witherinly.

"im not losin u! if u go out thr, il just bring u bac."

"but papiiiii," Nyeli wynes, fakin a pout.

"i aint 6 yeers old anymore. il b fine. mami wont."

the strange man looks on impashently.

"What is this?" he snaps. "There's no time.

Alvaro, we have to get to the Garden."
he turns to hed bac out the door he came.

"Nidas, wait!" calls papi,
n Nyelis eyes grow to grapefruits.

"Nidas?!?" she asks, alarmed.

"u gotta promise sheel b ok," sez Alvaro,
"or this is whr we part ways."

"Nidas from the underworld??" Nyeli asks louder,
but the men aint payin attenshun.
she frowns at the dilemma as he considers
the yung n vulnerable woman b4 him.

"papi, plz tell me this aint a terrist." she grabs her father by the arm, but he shakes it loose n meets Nidas in the face.
"promise me now," he demands.

Nidas nods curtly, then looks bac at the feerful expreshun on the girls face. "I'll do it, but only because we can't do this without you." Alvaro snickers. "bulshit. u already have wut u need from me. ull do it cuz u a good person."

the stranger turns his gaze toward the smooth amber of Nyelis eyes. "Yes, I'm Nidas," sez his deep, lectric voice. "Most wanted man in America." his extended hand goes unreturned. "i noe u," she sez. "u the man who tryna bring down my country." Nidas nods. no point in arguin with that. "Now everybody follow me," he commands thru gritted teeth. "The hour is late."

15

the wet n wild tunnels, organic in their shape, r quicly fillin with water from the sunami. but a hike up a ladder to nother level of pipes, n they on much surer, dryer footin. the hazardus path of doors n switches leeds em to the basement of sum vacant bildin deep in hart of Husns skirt city, that decayin ring of collapsin structures whr the markets set up shop.

in thees, the lowest levels of this edifice, the groop passes thru rudimentary security scans n begins ascendin to a yet hyer floor.

Alvaro smiles proudly as he looks at the ceilings, the wals, rooms, evry corner of the space, ppl in evry chair doin sum job, pluggin in howevr they can. that seed he planted so many yeers bac has germinated into a true garden, growin underground all this time, waitin for the rain to make it sprout. finally the flowers bouta bloom. he runs a finger along the corridor wal n exclaims, "wow, its better than i imagined!" Nidas smiles a prideful grin. "I tried to tell you."

they reech the 3rd floor down from the soggy street above, n Nidas pushes open the doors that leed to the hart of their operashun. ppl sittin at desks, behind screens, ppl lookin at maps of city streets, ppl writin, readin, drawin, skeemin – rebels. rebels evrywhr.

"Attention everyone!" Nidas calls,
n his floc all turn to their savior.
"I'd like to introduce you
to the reason all of us are here today."
they crane their necs to see the man to his side.
"A generation ago, a man had a vision
for a movement to fight for tomorrow.
He was locked away for his radical view
that the executive board of Texco
should represent the people of Texco.
But the ground he laid and soil he left us
cultivated our Garden community.
He is the forebear of our mission
and the key to our success. My friends,

Alvaro Silvano has returned home."

Nidas moshuns Alvaro closer
as the entire staff rises from their seets
n begins cheerin wildly
for the arcitect of their movement.
Nyeli watches from behind, dumfounded
that thees ppl she nevr seen b4
thunder insashiably for her father
like they have sum genuin relashunship to him.

a hard hand comes down on her sholder, n a muscular gard yanks her bacward. her screem of protest is muffled by the screems of the rebel dozens honored to b in the presence of her papi.

as she dragged off to the door,
Alvaro cleers his throat n waves down the noise.
"thank u for bein heer. im sorry i wuznt til now."
"WAIT!" Nyeli begs, wrestlin in the mans arms,
n the bouncer stops to let her heer
wut her father gotta say.

Nidases hart swells as the elder Silvano speeks: "i nevr thot this wud grow to b wut it is tday, but i spose it wuz inevitable that it did, bcuz u all noe just how important it is to do the difcult work of fixin our city. together, we can save tmoro, tday." not noin wut else to add, Alvaro rubs his nec n looks to Nidas for a syne. satisfied, the terrist leeder starts a vigorus clap, n the entire room follows suit, louder. "thank u all," Alvaro sez finally.

he turns bac to whr he had stood n sees Nyeli captive in the arms of the gard. b4 she can call out, the man hauls her away, n her pryin hands aint nuf to break the loc he has ovr her body. her pained eyes make contact with her fathers.

confused, he scrambles to meet her.

"wuts goin on?!" he frets ovr the applause.

Nidas grabs his arm n wispers:

"We can't have her here.

She hasn't been vetted.

She could nuke the whole operation."

powerless to stop it, Alvaro accepts it.

"il find u!" he shouts to his dotter, strugglin fruitlessly as she gets pulled away. the effort futile, she just gives in, relentin to her fate with an exasperated frown. "yea ryte," she sez, arms crossed, feet draggin. a crash, n the door is shut. captive –

Read the rest <u>here</u>.