Tehnuka about 2300 words

Abscission

by Tehnuka

Rathi loved the new growth, when fresh green shot from her skin and unfolded into the air. It meant the winter was ending. Her leaves kept her warm and dry in spring showers while everyone else huddled under umbrellas, side-eyeing her.

Then came the buds. They weren't as comfortable to move in, but at least they were colourful. A glowing yellow in her childhood, soft blue at home in the countryside, and furious pink once, out of season, when she happened to be visiting her parents' homeland.

She blossomed flame orange the summer after she moved across the world to Cambridge, where the strange looks grew fiercer. Other women shaved their skin and dressed in tank tops to sunbathe. They avoided her when the petals unfurled and her flowers expanded to the size of saucers. When the pollen began dropping they whispered about contagion, her flatmate started sneezing, and she decided she had to go back. At home, her mother would sweep up her fallen colours with love and scatter them in the garden.

Her supervisor wouldn't sign the form.

'You're doing well enough here. You just need to focus on your work.'

He was kind but Rathi knew he was worried that if she left, she wouldn't come back.

She trudged down the road from her office, cowering under tourists' wide-eyed stares and raised phone cameras, to sit under a paper mulberry tree in the Botanical Gardens and contemplate her own cracked mobile. Calling home to talk about it would only upset her family. When the flowers first opened, she'd sent a picture of herself in full bloom with her bike by the river, a smile plastered on her face and the sun in her eyes. That was on her

birthday, and the friend who accompanied her on the ride to Ely gifted her a potted gerbera that joined them for the 50-mile round trip, bouncing in her handlebar basket as they cycled over gravel trails.

Her parents marvelled at how tropical she appeared in the photo, commenting that her growth resembled the ever-present hibiscus of their childhoods. They'd never understood how she grew, but treated her seasonal changes with bewildered respect. When she finally, reluctantly, left home, they'd said, 'We're so proud of you.'

The birthday card they sent had a photo of her as a golden-flowered baby in their backyard, playing with her sister, who used to make garlands of her shed blossoms.

What did it matter what she saw in strangers' eyes? She wasn't some wilting fairy-tale girl. She had people who loved her, albeit far away. She had vegetation for armour and skin as thick as bark. She looked down at her soft brown arms amid her foliage, white drying cracks etched across them, leaves quivering in the summer breeze.

As thin as bark.

Still, she couldn't stay here and take root. If she'd had that ability, Rathi might never have left home. She waited, waving away the occasional curious wasp, and returned to work only when a cyclist rode past ringing a large bell to warn that the gardens were closing. At the office, she waited again until nightfall to walk home so that no one else would see her. It seemed a long way over uneven paving stones and worn cobbles. She'd contemplated taking the scissors to her legs for the first time in her life, so she could ride her bike again without catching on the chain, but it was a slippery slope to stripping her foliage completely. She was stronger than that, wasn't she? So what if she had to secrete a roll of toilet paper in her bag and covertly wipe pollen from the department floor?

'Gold dust,' joked her officemate, though she couldn't tell if it was meant with humour or with malice.

#

While the other graduate students held picnics on the greens and commons, took punts out to Grantchester, or sweltered in the office, Rathi hid in her room with her laptop, leaning out the window when no one was in the garden to catch the last of the evening sun. On the night she'd first seen the flat, she'd been pleased to learn the tiny box room faced north. It was only after moving in that she remembered she was on the other side of the equator now, where north meant darkness.

Her flowers shrivelled and fell rapidly this year despite the lingering summer warmth, leaving pale, drooping sepals. She painstakingly twisted the largest ones off so she could cover up with long sleeves and baggy trousers, and avoided leaving the house except for hasty groceries, or to feed her officemate's cat and empty the litterbox. She barely noticed the tiny static-like shocks as she removed each remnant flower, but she missed the wind brushing through fresh petals. The nodes of her leaves began their usual late summer itch. The other students in her group were overseas at a conference together. She'd claimed there was too much work to do. And there was, yet she found herself staring, blank, at her computer screen, clicking refresh on her email, playing solitaire, or link-surfing.

Wikipedia told her that '**Abscission** (from Latin *ab*, "away", and *scindere*, "to cut") is the shedding of various parts of an organism, such as a plant dropping a leaf, fruit, flower, or seed. In zoology, abscission is the intentional shedding of a body part, such as the shedding of a claw, husk, or the autotomy of a tail to evade a predator.'

She decided that the strange dried-up lumps where she'd missed a calyx or two would absciss on their own. They were hideous, but her skin was peeling already from all the pinching and pulling. She slathered herself with coconut oil and went back to rewriting her literature review, or at least leaving it open on her monitor and scrolling through it intermittently.

#

In autumn, when the undergraduates returned, she noticed the lumps had swollen a little, pushing out of the calyces into hard, chestnut-coloured rounds. Her first thought was of her middle school teacher, who'd died after being diagnosed with melanoma. But this couldn't be anything serious, could it? Stress did strange things to hormones.

She started buying dried beans instead of canned and replaced fresh tomatoes with paste from a squeezable metal tube, so that she could afford to turn down supervision requests. The looks on the street were enough; the undergraduates whispering about her would be too much.

Her own supervisor sent another email:

hi r, how's progress? we should meet..

She archived it without replying, so it wouldn't watch her from the inbox, and answered her parents' question about a good time to call with a photo of the chickpea curry she'd made.

Looks delicious, they wrote back.

#

The brown spheres expanded and reddened, and she ran her fingers over their smooth surfaces. One, under her arm, amid her now rust-coloured autumn leaves, she yanked off and buried under rotting cauliflower greens in the compost heap after it grew so large that she couldn't put her baggiest shirt on. The short stem—the pedicel, she recalled—tightened into her flesh as she stood in the garden and turned it once, twice, each time sending an electric jolt up her arm that spread across her chest and her back, and radiated up to her neck. When the contorted pedicel still wouldn't break, she tugged until it tore free and flung the round thing amongst the food scraps. She tied a long sock around the resulting gash until it stopped

bleeding, and watched the other, at her right wrist, anxiously. It got in the way of typing, of cooking, of everything.

By the time it softened, the college grounds were littered with apples, and she knew what was sapping her energy.

After dark, she manoeuvred her puffy jacket on over her lumpy arm, brushed sticky cobwebs from her bike and pumped its tyres, and cycled to the Archaeology Department in the frost wearing only one glove, pausing to blow steamy air onto her right hand.

‘But who pollinated you?’ asked her officemate when she showed off the fruit.

‘There must be someone else like me here!’ She felt her face warm. ‘Someone who had the same type of flower, and at the same time.’

‘They must be as reclusive as you, or you would have seen them. You didn’t, did you? They must have had flowers with stamens. Or did you have both pistils and stamens on yours? What if they got some of your pollen as well?’

She scrolled through her phone and zoomed in on the photo by the river, the sole record of her orange blossom, but the resolution was too low and the screen too spiderwebbed with chipped glass to see more than the shape of the petals. She hadn’t thought about what the flowers were. ‘I’ve never fruited before, not that I remember. I didn’t think I could.’

‘You could ask your parents if you ever have. When you had different flowers, the yellow ones in your birthday card.’

‘No. I don’t want to tell them yet.’ Her parents wouldn’t like it. And Rathi wanted to savour the knowledge that there was another flowering person somewhere. Not just ‘somewhere’, but so close by. Perhaps another student, who’d arrived this same year, new and now changing as fast as she was. What if they had borne fruit, too? Her fruit, just like she had theirs?

But what if it wasn't someone she had anything in common with, or someone her own age?

What if it was a passing tourist who had returned to the other side of the world, never to know about her?

'Trees with orange flowers,' she typed, wondering if an image search would reveal more about the flowers they might have shared, then stopped. What if it wasn't another person, only a tree?

'What if it was all you?' asked her officemate then. 'What if you can self-pollinate?'

Rathi shrugged at her colleague and at the churning in her stomach. She closed the browser and worked in silence until the early hours of the morning when, in the hope of sating her supervisor, she sent him a carefully shaded and labelled figure of nothing-data. It almost certainly wouldn't deter him, though it might prompt another invitation to meet in his overflowing office that was for books and papers more than for people.

She regretted her cold fingers on the ride home. They remained rough from when she'd stripped away the sepals, and weak, like the rest of her, when she squeezed on the brakes to stop uphill on the slick road, teetering to a halt. The dawn fog diffused the red lights as she waited at the empty intersection for them to change, casting a glow over the smooth round at her wrist.

That afternoon the ripened fruit, with a *snick*, rolled away and bounced on the carpet as she got out of bed. She wrapped it carefully in the toilet paper that remained on the floor from hay fever season, then put it in the bottom of the wardrobe, next to her dusty running shoes and a rose-patterned sari folded in a plastic bag.

#

After two days burrowed under her duvet, sending cheerful messages home and inhaling the sweetening aroma from the tissue-swaddled fruit, she waited until everyone was out and took it to the kitchen, along with her laptop and the now-withered gerbera in its purple pot.

She emailed her supervisor to ask if they could meet next week and shut down the computer before it could tempt her into procrastination.

Then she uprooted the brittle remnants of her gerbera. Her housemate was allergic to it and, shut in her dim room for much of the summer, it had lost the battle for survival. She dumped it in the kitchen waste bin.

Next, she found the serrated knife with its black handle melted from the time someone had left it in a frying pan. The dents made it easier to keep hold. She cupped the fruit in one hand while she sawed into it with the other. Sprays of scented juice reached her nose and began to trickle over her fingers as the blade crunched deeper. Out in the open, it didn't smell so sickly but gave off a more subtle fragrance of jasmine and lychees.

Inside, it was as orange as those flowers had been. Three round seeds nestled in the centre, shining black and hidden amongst fibrous strands.

Maybe somewhere else, someone else was sitting in front of a fruit that she had helped to create.

Or maybe this was the only fruit she would ever ripen.

Rathi thought about taking a photo, then decided firmly against it. She wiped off the table with the toilet paper and tossed that aside. One by one, she untangled each black seed gently from its stringy cradle and pushed it with a fingertip into the purple pot, which she fed with a dribble of tap water from the kitchen sink. Would the compost be ready? If not, she needed to make a trip to the big supermarket for potting mix tonight. The gerberas might have exhausted the soil in their last throes.

The pot, with its hidden future, went on the sunny windowsill. She washed off juice and fingernail-dirt and returned with clean hands to the table where her fruit, glistening on the damp wood, awaited her.