

8-2014

Bombing 12294

Lucosi Ikeem Fuller
Clemson University

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses

Recommended Citation

Fuller, Lucosi Ikeem, "Bombing 12294" (2014). *All Theses*. 2517.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2517

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

BOMBING 12294

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Lucosi Ikeem Fuller
August 2014

Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
Angela Naimou
Brian McGrath

ABSTRACT

“Bombing 12294” is a composite short story that is comprised of prose, drama and poetry. The components come together to form a story that follows a family that is torn apart because of conflicting views about graffiti and the ways in which graffiti is visual art, a form of writing, and vandalism, especially when compared to landscape architecture and automotive design, which are featured in the story to illustrate art forms that are far less versatile and volatile than graffiti, and are completely accepted by the society that condemns graffiti. The format of “Bombing 12294” is an exercise in writing a short story with different rules, which reflects the way graffiti is art that is created using its own rules.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
CHAPTER	
I. SECLUDED BETWEEN CHAINS OF CARS	1
II. IN A CIRCULAR MOTION.	3
III. INFIRM ROOMIES.....	10
IV. EL.....	13
V. GRAVITY, FOR RISING SONS	24
VI. PRELUDE TO EVICTION	26
VII. A TABLE FOR FOUR. A DINNER FOR THREE.....	29
VIII. HEALED ENOUGH TO SPEAK.....	34
IX. INSPIRED BY	39

SECLUDED BETWEEN CHAINS OF CARS

He dropped from the fence that ran alongside the train tracks, a vandal, heavy with a backpack laden with spray cans and acrylic markers. The contents of the backpack shook with every step into the yard. His sneakers sunk into gravel. The ground rattled. The sound was like clattering marbles. He moved cautiously out of the blackness near the fence, emerging into the silvery blue glow emitted from high-standing security lamps. He walked beside short links of train cars, looking for a canvas. He stopped at a car numbered 12294, secluded among chains of cars, just close enough to the fence to allow for an effortless escape.

He popped the cap off a can and pressed the button. Nondescript shapes hissed out of his hand, blotting out the silver metal of the car, covering the windows. Outlines hissed out in darker colors. He dropped an empty can in the gravel, swapping it with a fresh one. He shook the can and sprayed again.

He transformed the nondescript shapes into words. The letters folded into one another and twisted around and through each other. Folds and twists, arrows and curves, sharp edges and soft contours weaved the illusion that the words were being pulled off the side of the car. The words stretched from the bottom of the car to the highest point he could reach, from one side to the other.

The vandal was detailing his words, darkening the lines, shading and touching up the top of every letter with silver gloss for depth, when something inside him pulled him away from his designated canvas. He could feel something tugging at him, a sort of

twisting on the inside, a fluttering in his belly. He abandoned the car and dashed for the fence. He was over the barrier and gone. No sooner had he escaped than a light shone underneath the train cars. A guard hounded around out there, shuffling through the gravel between cars, looking, but not for a particular person or thing. Alone in the night most times, he'd always hoped there wouldn't be anything.

Waving his flashlight to and fro across the ground, shining the light over the gravel, something glistened oddly and caught his eye. He moved the flashlight back, stopping on a spray can. Closer. He found more spray cans and the backpack. Closer still. The fumes from acrylic spray paint lifted his eyes. He shone his light on the side of the car to find the defacement of the vehicle: *Explosives Inside*.

IN A CIRCULAR MOTION

The morning sun painted rainbows in the mist made when spray from pressure washers bounced off train car 12294. The pattering one-cylinder motors muted the world. The Public Works workers wore coveralls, masks and earplugs. They couldn't hear each other. Talking while working was all but useless and harshly frowned upon. Humming made their ears pop. Whistling wouldn't do. The workers' minds were noisy. They planned and imagined everything they'd do in their lives after work while they removed graffiti from the trains. Daydreamers, breathing air that smelled of paint.

Aamil was four days shy of forty-six years old, buffing graffiti off a train with steel wool and sandpaper, a young man's job he began after losing a career he'd enjoyed. He was a landscape architect for private residences until he had a tiff with a most fastidious client that ended in a fallout of insults and a shoving match between Aamil and his boss. Aamil pushed his boss into a cactus-like office plant. He then hurried past a gauntlet of faces stirred by the uproar. All the people he'd gotten to know over the years were staring through glass windows at him as he rushed to the door leading to the stairwell. His boss escaped the grasp of the office plant and stood, shaking his fist at Aamil, scrapes and blood on his forearm. Aamil cried going down the stairs.

Aamil had fallen face-first out of a dream. He immediately pursued something comparable to the career he left. He was confident he'd land on his feet. Leads appeared. He applied and inquired by phone, but the opportunities evaporated before he came close enough to capture one. The days lengthened to weeks. The weeks stretched to

troublesome months. The safety net wasn't so sturdy with bills tailored to the salary he lost. Notices of past-due payments appeared in the mailbox. Aamil was toeing a tightrope.

A lead came up on a government job board. *Public Works/Landscape Architecture Division*. Aamil applied just after midnight. He was interviewed the next day. He was enticed with the nugget of being able to get back to landscape architecture, but for the *county* this time, and on *state* benefits. There was a catch. He needed to excel at a precursory position. The position on the left side of the slash in the title. Aamil took the job, gladly, gratefully, sealing the deal with a firm shake. He finally dismounted from the tightrope he'd walked for the last few months. He landed in a train yard. This was the first day.

Aamil went deaf when the pressure washers powered up. He began scrubbing. His mind went home to his wife. Nadia was awake in the night, sweating and vomiting. He stayed up with her. He rubbed her back and patted her forehead with a cool cloth until she was finished. She accused the mussels she had for dinner.

"Nusayr ate them, too," Aamil said. "I'll look in on him." He went to his son's room and opened the door. Walking in, he tripped over a video game controller, snatching the cord out of the console. There were clothes scattered on the floor, and boots and sneakers. Nusayr was seventeen years old and couldn't yet mind his own mess. The television showed crude stop-motion animation. Nusayr wasn't in his bed. The window was open.

When the pressure washers shut down for the first break, Aamil's hearing returned. The boss was at his side, holding a stick of string cheese. "If you pick it up a little—a lot," he said, chewing, "we might get this thing cleaned. It's due back in rotation in forty-five minutes. *Hustle up*. And buff in a circular motion. It looks better." The boss went to the van and jotted something on a clipboard.

Aamil assumed the words on the clipboard were a mark against him. He worked through his break. He buffed in a circular motion, glancing toward the van time and again to see the boss looking back at him. *Buff faster*. The pressure washers came back on. Deaf again. Aamil only saw his hands moving in circles. The graffiti faded. The residue ran along the ground. Aamil had exceeded the pace of the rest of the crew to make up ground. He could feel the circles he'd been making in his cramping forearms and through his shoulders. His fingers ached. His breaths came asthmatically. He slowed his pace when he caught up to his coworkers on the opposite end of the car from where he started. He'd drone along in the silence, making monotonous circles with the steel wool. He scrubbed foot after foot of graffiti. He didn't bother trying to decipher it. He only knew he hated buffing. He detested graffiti now, never before being overtly offended, because he had to buff it. His mind left his work to find his wife.

She sat on the edge of the bathtub running water when he came back from Nusayr's room. "It's not the mussels," he said. "Nusayr left through his window."

“He did *not*,” Nadia said, testing the water’s temperature with her hand. She shook water off her fingers and undressed herself. “Did you check downstairs?”

“His door was closed,” Aamil said. “Do you need help?”

“It’s fine,” she said. She dropped her nightgown on the floor. She slipped into the tub, the water still running at her feet. Her hair spread through the water like long black strands of kelp.

Aamil picked up her gown. “He’s gone. I locked the window. When he comes back, he’ll have to wait for me to let him in. I drew the curtains and left the light on so he knows that we know.” He put the gown in the clothes hamper.

“What is it with him? He’s a pain, since Aziz moved out. One thing after another. And his bathroom—*disgusting*. Have you been in there?”

“Almost a man and nothing close to one,” Aamil said. “It’s time for him to go if he won’t respect our house.”

“Maybe if you talk to him,” she said.

“I’ll talk to his headstone after I kill him and have him buried. How do you feel now?”

“My throat burns,” she said, “and my stomach hurts. I’m really nauseous.”

“You said these same things to me when you’d just gotten pregnant with him.”

The pressure washers turned off. The car was done. It would be linked and dragged out of the yard, fit for use. While the workers waited for another car to be pushed in, they took lunch. Aamil heard the workers talking about sandwiches as they peeled

down their mucky coveralls. They all brought sandwiches. Aamil brought leftover masgouf. There was no way to warm it. He sat away from his coworkers and ate his food cold.

The boss came to him. “You’re not eating with the guys. What’s that about?”

Aamil shrugged and said, “They all know each other. They have their thing. I’m new. I don’t have a thing yet.”

“You’ve got to wedge in there. If you don’t deal with them, they’ll deal with each other, and *only* each other.”

“Sir, if I can be honest with you,” Aamil said, “I can’t feel my arms and I’m deathly tired. I can’t stand this work. I didn’t expect this.”

The boss laughed at him. “You’ll get to your architecture soon enough,” he said. “We’ve got you for eighty-nine more days, at least. Grab your stuff and come with me.” The boss escorted Aamil to the van where the other workers were eating. “This,” he said, “is Amos—is that right?”

“Aamil.”

“He says he hates this job. Doesn’t like buffing trains. Can you imagine that?”

One of the workers said, “Nobody likes the trains. It’s better than Wednesday, though.”

“What’s on Wednesday?”

“That’s barnacle day, Emilio.”

“Aamil. *A-A-M-I-L. Ah-mil.* We have to scrape barnacles off the bottoms of ships?”

“Worse. We scrape the nastiest shit out of the sewers. Trash, hair, broken syringes, tampons—you name it. Even fish skins.”

“Fish skins?”

“Used rubbers. Saggy condoms. You know, like fish skins. *F-I-S-H, S-K-I-N-S.*”

Aamil gagged, thinking of the fish he brought for lunch. The boss clapped his hands, a sign that the break was over. “That’s it, guys,” He said. “See? They all hate the trains. I hated the trains when I had to buff them. It gets worse, though. Worse still to not have a job. Decent benefits and the opportunity to do what you came for, if you stick. Tell me now, though.”

“I’m here,” Aamil said, pulling up his coveralls. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be here.” The boss patted him on the back. Aamil went to work. The pressure washers turned on.

Aamil helped Nadia out of the bathtub. She dried off and finally went to sleep. She tossed and turned, but it was better than having no rest at all. Aamil went downstairs to wait for Nusayr. He sank into the couch and put his feet up on the coffee table. 4:47 AM. He wanted to sleep, but he didn’t want to miss his alarm. He couldn’t be late to work on the first day. He made sure to stay in a position that wouldn’t allow him to sleep too deeply. He closed his eyes and drifted.

Seventeen minutes passed. Aamil was roused out of a nightmare that seemed to be years long by the rattling of the knob on the front door. He settled his nerves and shook

the shock out of his body. He turned on the porch light. Nusayr stood there. Aamil opened the door. “You have some nerves coming back to this house.”

Nusayr pulled off his hooded sweatshirt and tossed it on the porch. He vomited on Aamil’s feet. He fell on his knees across the threshold and vomited again in the vestibule. When Nusayr was finished, Aamil helped him up to his bathroom and had him take a lukewarm shower. He went downstairs to clean the mess. The vestibule reeked of stomach acid and rotting mussels. He wiped the vomit with Nusayr’s sweatshirt. It smelled like a familiar chemical, like something he’d worn a mask to use in the garage. The sweatshirt smelled like paint.

INFIRM ROOMIES

At the Hamid house, NADIA sleeps, soundly. Finally. The time is nearing noon. The sun shines on her face through slits in the blinds, stirring her awake. She sits up and slides gingerly out of bed. She walks slowly to the bathroom and uses the toilet. She washes her hands and brushes her teeth. There is a robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door. She puts it on. She walks to NUSAYR's room. She finds him sprawled out in bed, wearing a tee-shirt and athletic shorts. NADIA shakes him. He shifts, but doesn't wake. She shakes him more forcefully. He lifts his head to look at her.

NADIA: Why aren't you at school?

NUSAYR: Sick.

NADIA: *You're not sick.* You went through your window.

NUSAYR: I'm sick. I threw up.

NADIA: Did you see your father before he left this morning? He was up all night looking after me, and he waited for you.

NUSAYR: I saw him. What'd he say he'd do when he saw me?

NADIA: Well, what did he do when he saw you?

NUSAYR: I was sick. He didn't do anything.

NADIA: Where were you last night?

NUSAYR: Not here.

NADIA: You haven't been here with us for a long time. You come in from school, or wherever you've been all day, and lock yourself in this room. It's like solitary confinement, *and you like it this way.*

NADIA *rubs her forehead, wrinkling her face with her fingers.*

NUSAYR: What's to come out for? Ever since the thing last year, you interrogate me any time I'm with you longer than five minutes.

NADIA: The *thing last year* was shoplifting and probation. I'm right to interrogate you, but I'm not even there right now. I'm asking about your well-being. If I'm questioning you, it's because it's become necessary. It's especially necessary now that I know you're sneaking out at night. I can't figure out what to do with you.

NUSAYR: You don't have to figure it out. Dad's probably already decided something to do with me. He just hasn't said anything to you.

NADIA: He doesn't know. You're taking us into uncharted territory. Aziz was never this difficult.

NUSAYR: Oh—*every time!* Your greatest achievement. The whole world praises you for bringing us Aziz. *Excellent work*, once again. You always come after me with what Aziz was and what he's doing because what are *you* doing? What have you done, Mom? This is why I shut myself in here, to avoid hearing how I'm not like him from a person who's even less like him. You didn't go to college to become an expert at anything. You're here all day, living it up on Dad's shoulders and priding yourself on what Aziz is doing. I wish you'd just go find something constructive to do and get out of my room!

NADIA: You are out of your mind!

NUSAYR: *I'm not.* I just want you out of my face and out of my room!

(NADIA leaves the room in tears. NUSAYR slams the door. He reaches under his bed and pulls out a large sketchbook with a black pen clipped to it. He flips through, pausing to look at things he'd drawn in the past, until he arrives at a blank page. He looks out of the window for a moment, uncaps the pen, and draws an angry, unforgiving thing.)

EL

The four-car train glided into the station, squeaking to a stop. The double-doors of 12294 slid open, releasing crowds of people. The car still showed hints of vandalism on its side. The crowd waiting on the platform pushed through the doors, dissipating into individual faces, one person and another. The people in informal attire had been interchangeable on the platform, but now there was a young bald man in a gray suit and a wide purple tie and an older graying man in a pinstriped navy-blue suit with a thin, red tie. A fat thirty-something man in a too-tightly-fitting sweat suit took up two seats. He listened to a cassette player and mumbled the words of a song, annoyingly. A pretty young woman with green eyes and crimson hair sat near the door. She wore a skirt that showed a scar on her knee and read a book called *Cane*.

The doors closed with an airy, sliding noise. The locking mechanism clicked. The train pulled out. The seated passengers steadied themselves so they wouldn't brush against one another. The standing passengers gripped the railing inside the car so they wouldn't fall. Once the train had gotten to a good pace, the passengers relaxed. A phone rang. The ringtone was a hip hop song that came through in treble, a consequence of the phone's small speakers. The song was quickly cut short. "Good afternoon, mom."

"Aziz," Nadia said, "are you busy?"

"Not for the rest of the day. I'm on the el, going home. You don't sound too good. Your voice is rough."

"I was sick last night. Seafood."

“You’re not allergic, though.”

“I think I had bad mussels.”

“You need anything? I can bring you something and hang out for a while. And why are you talking so low?”

“Your brother,” Nadia said, “I don’t know what to do with him. He’s the worst worry since you left home.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“He’s changed, like from black to white. He climbed out of his window last night.”

“What in the world?”

“And he yelled at me, just a few minutes ago. He kicked me out of his room. *He kicked me out of a room in my own house.*”

“Hold on—why is he even at home? It’s *noon-ish*. He should be at school.”

“He ate the mussels, too.”

“Where was he last night? When did he come in?”

“He said he was out walking. *Walking*—do you believe that? He never said when he came home. He said he saw your father. He left for work at six this morning.”

“That’s a little early for his kind of work, right?”

“I thought so, too. He’ll tell me about it when he comes in.”

The train ran across a slight bump on the tracks. The people standing shifted in their stances and gripped the rails. Aziz touched eyes with the red-haired woman. They

smiled at one another. “Have you seen Nusayr’s interim grades and report cards? Anything from school?”

Nadia said, “*That’s the thing*. His grades are *perfect*. He doesn’t act out in class. He’s just strange at home. He’s in his room doing who knows what. We only see him when he’s hungry.”

“Hey—maybe I’ll come around dinnertime,” Aziz said. “I need to feed the dog and do some stuff at home. I’ll call Nusayr and see what I can get out of him. Get some rest, Mom.” Aziz hung up the phone.

The sun bounced off the buildings into the train car through the windows across from him. The glare shone in his eyes, heightening the brown to gold. Aziz dialed Nusayr’s number. No answer. He put the phone down and looked up to see the sunlight glistening in the hair of the woman reading the book. Her curls had taken on different tempers of copper that glowed against her face.

Aziz dialed again. “Mr. Perfect,” Nusayr answered.

“What’s this *Mr. Perfect* shit? What’s up with you? Mom just called.”

“*Here we go*. I’m not in the mood.”

“You think *I’m* in the mood? You think I feel like hearing *Nusayr’s in jail* and *Nusayr’s sneaking out at night* and *Nusayr’s doing this and that*?”

“*You* used to do it, too,” said Nusayr. “That’s what they don’t know.”

“They don’t know because *I* didn’t get caught. You can’t even come up with something better to say than you were out walking.”

“Fuck you, dude,” said Nusayr. “All I ever hear is about what *you’re* doing. Aziz graduated from college with honors. Look at Aziz—he’s designing cars. Aziz has a nice place in the city. Today it was Aziz never put us through this shit. I’m at the top of my class in school. *You* weren’t. They don’t care. All the trouble I get in is because I like to bomb shit, just...like...you. *And you quit.*”

“I quit because I was over it. That’s what people do. Motherfuckers turn eighteen, they go to college or they work.”

“Good thing I’m not eighteen yet,” said Nusayr.

“You won’t live to see eighteen,” Aziz said, “if you don’t get your shit together. You can’t spend your whole life getting your shit up on walls. You’ll go to jail or get buried in court fines. And dad’ll kill you for talking to mom like that. *I’ll* kill you.”

“Do it today, then,” Nusayr said. “You’re all geek chic now. You left your balls in your last spray can.”

“*I’m not mom,*” Aziz said. “I’ll kick your little ass. I want you to go in there and apologize to her.”

“Yeah—want in one hand and shit in your other one...” Nusayr hung up the phone.

Aziz glanced around the train. Some of the passengers were looking at him, the only rider who’d been on the phone, speaking sweetly one moment and talking roughly just minutes later. Discomfited, he turned to the red-haired woman, wondering if she’d been listening. She was into her book. He observed her for a while, catching the changes in her facial expressions. She’d lift an eyebrow, or both, and turn a page. She’d bite her

lip or stretch her eyes. She'd scowl at the book, wrinkling the bridge of her nose. Aziz was intrigued.

The train decelerated as it approached the next station. The red-haired woman laid her book in her lap and moved her bag closer to her side to protect it from someone who might try to snatch it and run. The train stopped. The standing people crowded the door. The sitting people who were exiting stood in the aisle. The doors opened and the people shuffled out. A man wearing a backpack bumped the red-haired woman's leg as he passed, knocking her book into the floor. Aziz picked the book up and held it until the crowd had pushed through to the platform. He went to the opposite side of the train and sat beside the red-haired woman. He handed her the book and said, "I apologize for the guy who bumped you. He left his manners at home. He lost your page."

The woman smiled and nodded at him. She slid the book into her bag. The people on the platform filed into the train. Aziz didn't bother acknowledging their presence, even when someone stepped on his foot on the way to a seat. He wouldn't be distracted.

"I see you're reading *Cane*," Aziz said. "If you'd like, I'll offer my thoughts on the reliance of light and darkness on each other, even in their opposition, in 'Blood-Burning Moon.'"

She frowned at him. Aziz's face took on a concerned countenance. Maybe he said too much too quickly. She may not have read "Blood-Burning Moon." Maybe he sat too close. He slid away from her, still looking at her, waiting for her words.

The doors closed on the train. Locked. The train pulled away from the station. The movement didn't get Aziz to break his gaze. Their eyes were fixed on each other.

The train increased speed. She looked like she wanted to tell him something. It was the look of someone who'd been hurt. An elderly man across the aisle coughed loudly, and repeatedly. The red-haired woman wore the look of someone who didn't have long to live. Aziz touched her arm.

She pulled her hair back, hooking it behind her ear. She wore a hearing aid. Aziz saw the reddening in her cheeks. He shook his head to her, attempting to tell her not to worry about it. He reached for her wrist and turned her hand palm-up. He pulled a pen out of his pocket and wrote on her hand. *TEXT ME:421-1204 ☺*

He held her hand for a moment and then he turned her palm upward again to make sure the dampness in his hand didn't smear the writing. It was legible. When he looked up at her face, the blush had bleached out of her cheeks. Much of the anxiety had left her mind.

She pulled a small tablet computer out of her bag and typed into it. Aziz's phone sounded. "You've an aquiline nose."

Aziz responded, "Thank you, I think."

Her phone vibrated. She typed, "It's a strong-looking nose. It's a handsome feature."

Aziz typed, "Thank you. I'm Aziz. Nice to meet you. You know, if you hadn't sent me a message, I would've kept writing on your hand, and then I would've written on your forearm."

"And then I would've slapped your face," she typed. "I'm Echo."

"Seriously?"

"I know," she typed. "Isn't that mean of my mom? One of the goddesses of singing and making poems. I don't even have a voice. What a gut punch."

"She couldn't have known when she named you."

"Oh, she knew of the probability, certainly," Echo typed. Her origin was parents who were both born deaf. They told her they chose that name because sound was something they'd never had, and then they had her, and they were hopeful for her. She wished she wasn't named so ironically. She'd always been bothered by people's expressions when they learned that she was a deaf girl who had such a name. She typed, "My parents are so good to me, despite that minor blunder. Would you believe I've never been yelled at in my life?"

"I'd say you've had it pretty good, then," Aziz said.

"From where you're standing, it seems that way." She clarified that it wasn't that she wanted to be screamed at all the time, but being disallowed the opportunity to hear the anger in someone's voice and feel it flying at her at such high volume, sucked out a part of being alive.

The train hit a bump in the tracks. They both felt it underneath them. Echo flinched and stiffened in her seat. Aziz noticed her apprehension. "You don't ride often, do you?"

"This," Echo typed, "is only the fourth time. I'm not used to it." She was from a small town in southeastern Indiana where the only trains were rumbling, graffiti-splashed cargo trains that people didn't ride. They were crushed by them, a couple of people every year, toddling along the train trestles, lonely and drunk,

their minds swirling and ears ringing so loudly they couldn't tell the train horns from the alcohol. The elevated trains made her unsteady. She confessed to Aziz that she was still riding only because she missed her stop at the station just before the one where he came on the train. "I was reading my book, not paying attention. I'm on my way around again. This is the longest I've ever been on."

"My stop is the next one. I have a car. I could drive you. And you could meet my dog."

"You're trying to take me home to your mom already?"

"My mom," Aziz typed, "is not a three-legged dog named Trip."

"You're as bad at naming as my mom."

"Well, I got my dog from the Humane Society," Aziz typed. He told her the dog stood out among the other puppies because he was so energetic. Aziz said the dog was the best in the kennel at selling himself. He chased his tail and tried to bite it off when he caught it. He rolled all over in his pen. The other dogs were walking lazily around. They were unremarkable to the point where Aziz disregarded Trip's missing hind leg. "He doesn't have to lift a leg to piss on a tree."

"So you're all dressed up," Echo said. "What do you do? I'll bet you hang on the train trying to make moves on all the unsuspecting handicapped girls."

"I draw cars."

"What kind of job is that to have? You sell drawings of cars? Like sketches or posters?"

"No, crazy. All the cars you see," Aziz typed, looking up from his phone to see her watching him peck away at his screen, "were drawn by somebody. I'm one of those people. I'm a...*car*chitect."

"That," Echo typed, "is not a word."

"No shit. Really, Merriam-Webster?"

"So are you a big deal?"

"No. Drawing cars is actually one of the most meaningless jobs in the world. Does the look of a car really matter? Essentially, they all function the same."

"OK," Echo said. "Prove it doesn't really matter. You offered me a ride. What kind of car do you drive?"

"You'll laugh when I tell you."

"I'm sure you'll laugh at me as soon as you hear me laugh," Echo said. "You'll probably tell me it sounds strange."

"I drive a 1989 Honda Civic," said Aziz. "Two-door hatchback." The car belonged to his father. Aziz was taught to drive in it. He lost his virginity in it. He crashed it. He had the car rebuilt to factory condition. The engine was replaced. The transmission. The exhaust system. He had the interior torn out and replaced, as if it had just rolled off the assembly line, except he had a smart car's dash and console installed.

"It's a futuristic old tortoise."

"Wow. You really don't care what a car looks like."

"It's the function," Aziz typed. Most people care about the look, but you don't see them turning down buses and trains because they don't look a certain way.

"This train doesn't look special," he typed, "but it's fine, right?"

"You're weird."

"How's that weird? You texted me less than ten minutes after meeting me," typed Aziz, "And now I have your number. How weird are *you* to invite a could-be stalker into your life so easily?"

"Do your parents know you're such a menace?"

"Well, they didn't used to know," typed Aziz, "I suspect they'll find out soon enough."

The train slowed abruptly as it came to a ninety-degree bend in the track. The passengers felt the tension underneath the train as the brakes engaged the wheels. The brakes squealed loudly. Echo grabbed the rail beside her seat. Aziz knew the bend. He'd ridden through it so many times on the way to his apartment after work. He knew the pull of the bend and the tension. He always anticipated it. He'd never felt it like this. He was yanked into the turn instead of pulled as the train hugged the tracks. He held Echo's hand. She squeezed his hand. Her nails dug into his palms.

The standing passengers held onto the rails tightly. Some sat in the aisles, feeling safer close to the floor. Their faces wrinkled and stretched with panic. Aziz and Echo looked out the window across the aisle to see the lead car and part of the second going around the bend. Sharp. The train was *L*-shaped, even with the track, moving slower than it had been on the straightaway, but faster than it should've been in a curve of such an angle. The train churned through the bend, and then there was a heavy metallic snap that

jolted everyone inside the car. Aziz pulled Echo into him. She buried her face into his chest. The train shook, aligning with the beating of their hearts. Echo, always with silence in her life, thought she could hear the clattering underneath the train car as its momentum took it off the tracks. Aziz heard the sound of gravity taking the train car down...

GRAVITY, FOR RISING SONS

All rise...

Fall.

The teachers have been tinkering
with miniature solar systems assembled by their own hands,
tinkering with our moons, our stars, our sons,
putting their heads in the clouds.

It hurts to come back to the earth without wings.

Rise,

like souls

that have, in death, broken away from the ones whose names
have not been marked for paradise.

Fall,

like all others.

The others point their fingers from their hearts into the world
and stone their mothers.

Rise,

like their mothers,
swollen and worn,

bleeding and ashamed,

threadbare and torn.

Fall,

like their mothers' sentinels,

coming down on wispy soles,

settling softly, leaving unprinted ground. Protectors.

Everything that goes up,

remember,

must come down.

We raise our children for forthcoming burial,

with star-tossed wishes that they survive their comings and goings.

We hope they best what we have done,

by weaving better tales than we have told.

We wilt. They bloom. We can only pray for beauty.

PRELUDE TO EVICTION

Aamil opened the front door. The vestibule still smelled like something sweet and sickly. He kicked his damp and filthy shoes off and then he pulled off his socks with a back-ache grunt. He was sore all over from the constant buffing. He dragged himself upstairs to the bedroom where Nadia lay across the foot of the bed. She watched a documentary about the self-preservation ploys of squids.

“Aamil,” she said, “you smell like a caveman. How was the job?”

“I hadn’t worked like that since I was a much younger man,” he said. “Carpentry with my father was the invention of the devil. This ranks with that.”

“What kind of architecture have you been doing to come home like this?” Nadia muted the television.

“I’m no architect. I buffed graffiti off trains today,” Aamil said. “I’ll do that until I die or until my ninety-day trial run is over. I’m not sure which will come first.”

“Don’t go back,” Nadia said. “There’s something else for you. Something you want to do. You can find something else.”

“I talked to the boss. I expressed my concerns.” Aamil took off his shirt and slid out of his pants. “I’m not going to quit. I ate cold fish today. No microwaves on the train yard. But I won’t quit. How do you feel now?”

“I’m fine. I’m not sick anymore.”

Aamil went in the bathroom and turned on the shower. “I’m glad you feel better. I had a nightmare this morning. Nusayr woke me out of it.”

“*That boy,*” Nadia said.

“I was on a ship,” Aamil said. “I was the captain. Come with me into the bathroom and I’ll tell you more.” Nadia followed him and sat on the vanity while he climbed into the shower. He spoke over the hiss of the water. “So I was the captain. The water was rough. And there were mermaids or some aquatic creatures with human features. They kept flying out of the water, snatching up members of my crew, just swooping them off the deck and into the water they’d go, screaming for me to save them. I tried to fight the creatures off and I tried rope to pull my crewmembers back on the ship. The creatures attacked me and I retreated. And then they all pulled at the ship, and it was going down. I tried everything I could to keep the ship floating, but I was helpless. The mermaids pulled and pulled. And I came to my senses to the sound of Nusayr pulling at the door. I woke up with this peculiar sinking feeling.”

“You don’t suppose you’ll find anything deeper than you just had a weird dream and that’s all, do you?”

“No. I’ve had the wind taken out of my sails today, though, with Nusayr and the job. What is Nusayr doing now?”

“He’s quiet. We’ll climb that mountain at dinner,” Nadia said. “Aziz is coming home.”

“Good,” Aamil said. “He’s been away for a couple weeks now.”

“Shower and rest,” Nadia said. “I’ll work on dinner. Suggestions?”

“Anything, except what we ate last night.”

Aamil climbed in the shower. He scrubbed the day's work off his skin, the sweat of it. He let the water heat the soreness and stiffness out of his muscles. His back ached. He sat down in the tub and closed his eyes. The water hit his face and ran down his body. Aamil thought of Nusayr. He taught the left-handed boy to write his letters and then his name. He told him that the oddest thing about writing with his left hand was that he wouldn't be able to see what he'd written until after he'd removed his hand from the page.

Could it be that the same oddness of left-handed writing would work with Nusayr, as a person? Nusayr *was* an off hand. Perhaps, Aamil didn't need to watch his son more closely. He didn't need to monitor his cell phone, his computer. He didn't need to inquire as to his whereabouts. He could let go. Push him out. He may not be able to really see his son until he moved him out of the way to see what the boy could make of his life. And maybe his son would finally appreciate his life after flailing about in the real world where he could climb out of a window at night any time he'd like and come back to find a stranger climbing out with his things. A caged animal can only grow to a certain size. There's nothing to be done for it, except to release it. It's gone as far as it can be taken. It would have to take itself the rest of the way. Nusayr would have to go.

A TABLE FOR FOUR. A DINNER FOR THREE

Music plays downstairs in the Hamid home, softly plucked strings and windy flutes. Music to relax. NADIA sets the dinner table. She has made a spicy stew that AZIZ has always loved, and new potatoes that NUSAYR and AAMIL enjoy. She pours tea in four cups and drops in slices of lemon. AAMIL comes downstairs and sits at the table facing the television, turned off. They wait for AZIZ and NUSAYR.

AAMIL: This house smells delicious.

NADIA: I've tasted the food. It's very good.

AAMIL: When is Aziz coming?

NADIA: It's early—only just before five o'clock. He'll be here.

AAMIL: Have you called the bad seed?

NADIA: *Don't call him that.* I don't know what the matter is with him, but he's *not* a bad child.

AAMIL: I'll call him down.

NUSAYR (*coming down the stairs before he is summoned*): I'm already here.

AAMIL: Take a seat. Tell me about things.

NUSAYR: What's to tell?

NADIA *drops stew into AAMIL's bowl and then NUSAYR's bowl.*

AAMIL: I'll tell you about my day and then you can tell me about your night. Started a new job, as you know. It was torture. I didn't draw environment layouts. I

scrubbed graffiti off a train car. It's one of the worst things I've ever done in life.

What do you think of that?

NUSAYR: Why'd you keep doing the work if it was torture? Isn't that masochism in a sense?

AAMIL: I do it because I have a family who needs it, not that every member of the family is appreciative of what I do. What would *you* do?

NUSAYR: Something else. The rules are so flimsy and you're stiff against them. It doesn't make much sense, if you ask me. If the rules bend, you bend with them.

AAMIL: You don't think much of rules, and it's obvious, considering the night you had. Where were you?

NUSAYR: I wasn't here.

NADIA: It's time to tell us.

AAMIL: It doesn't matter, really, what he tells us. He's shown that he's not trustworthy time and again. He could say anything. That doesn't matter one way or another, either. A boy who comes and goes as he pleases has become a man. Men don't live with their fathers and mothers. You should learn from your brother.

NUSAYR: I've learned all kinds of things from your perfect son. *You* 've got a lot to learn. Where is Mr. Perfect, by the way? Oh—he'll show up at the appropriate time to shine his immaculate light on this family.

NADIA: What do you have against Aziz? He hasn't done anything to you.

NUSAYR: It's not even him! It's *you* and *you*. Since he left, you've picked at me and tried to shape my life after his. I don't like architecture or design, or anything you

want me to be. I don't need the university. I don't know what I'll do, but I will *not* do that. I'm not Aziz's shitty clone.

AAMIL: Watch your mouth in this house. When you're out of your window, you can say what you want. You probably do already.

NUSAYR: You don't know anything about what I do. You don't even know about Aziz.

Did you know he used to call himself *Zee-Zee Bottom*.

NADIA: What does that even mean?

NUSAYR: You want to know where I was last night?

(NUSAYR runs upstairs to his room and digs out two piles of sketchbooks from under his bed. He returns to the dinner table and drops them on the dinner table, in front of AAMIL and NADIA.)

I write graffiti. I'm a *vandal*. Mr. Perfect, the college graduate and car designer, taught me how to do it. These are our books, his here and mine there. And you wonder why he draws cars so damned well.

AAMIL and NADIA flip through the sketchbooks.

NADIA: You could've told me. You don't trust me? All this trouble. We could've signed you up for apprenticeships at the museum for the arts. Anything to keep you from this.

NUSAYR: No, I don't trust you. I don't need an apprenticeship. You don't understand the point.

NADIA: There are laws, though. You could go to jail. And climbing bridges and buildings—you could fall. This will stop. It's too dangerous. It's illegal. You will not do this.

AAMIL: I can't stand it. I've scrubbed this all day. It's trash. It has no place in the world.

NUSAYR: This is why I've been hiding this stuff under the bed. It's why I lock myself in my room. I knew you wouldn't understand it. I knew you'd try to take it from me. You *won't* take it.

AAMIL: Then you'll have to leave, if you won't quit. You'll leave this house tonight.

NADIA: Both of you, please, calm down.

AAMIL: I've said all I need to say to the vandal here. I'm finished with dinner.

NADIA looks at the art in the sketchbooks closely. She flips through the pages of one sketchbook after another, tracing the pictures, trying to figure them out. She is drawn to them. AAMIL leaves the dinner table and goes to the living room. He turns on the television. NUSAYR stands in the kitchen.

NADIA: These are beautiful. Amazing, really. Look at them. Is there another way?

AAMIL: I've seen it closer than I've ever wanted to. There's nothing to be done for him. If he wants to keep up his vandalism, after what I've done today, then he has to get out.

(AAMIL changes the channel to the news. The broadcast is a report of an accident involving a crowded elevated train. The end of the train jumped the tracks. Two cars fell into the street. 12270 and 12294. NADIA listens to the broadcast. The conductor took on a curve at a speed too high to maintain control. NADIA lays down the sketchbook she is

looking at and approaches the television. The television says that there have been deaths.)

NADIA: Aziz rode the train today. Call your brother!

(AAMIL and NADIA watch and wait as NUSAYR dials. Four. Two. One. One. Two. Zero. Four. Ring.....Ring.....Ring.....Voicemail. NUSAYR dials again. Voicemail. On the television, a red-haired woman with blood streaming from her nose is crying. Her arm is secured in a sling. Paramedics help her up into an ambulance. The camera zooms in to show that the ambulance is already occupied by a man with a bandage on his head and a thick plume of curly black hair. AZIZ. The Hamids leave the house, headed for the city's general hospital.)

HEALED ENOUGH TO SPEAK

The grass had grown high at the Hamid house some four months after the train crash. The Hamid's had been too busy to mow the lawn. Nusayr came into the house wearing a backpack. He held the door for Aziz, who hobbled into the vestibule, steadying himself with a hand against the wall. Aziz's face was permanently scarred. The bones in his jaw, orbital bone and cheekbone were broken during the wreck. His right leg was weaker than his left because his hip and thigh bone were snapped. He was a man held together by metal rods and pins. Aziz refused a crutch, walker, or cane, citing his dog. He made his way to the couch and sat across from Nadia, who was reading a play called *Arcadia* with her feet up on the coffee table.

Aamil sat at his desk with a lamp showering light down on him. He was working with a protractor and a drafting pencil. He had a Pink Pearl eraser between his pursed lips. He was drafting a garden walk for a community center that would feature an attractive path winding between patches of food crops for the people in the area. The design seemed sterile. He erased something he plotted and looked over his glasses to see his sons coming through the door.

Graffiti sketches that Aziz and Nusayr had drawn were framed and hanging on the walls in places that had been taken by paintings done by anonymous artists. Nusayr kept the door open. He looked outside and patted his thigh loudly.

Trip hopped across the threshold, sniffing around the entrance. He pulled Echo behind him. She kneeled and unhooked the leash from Trip's collar. The dog ran through

the house, sniffing and licking Nadia's feet and legs and then pawing at Aamil's legs. Aamil patted the dog's head and pushed him down. The dog ran into the kitchen. Aamil squirted sanitizer on his hands, rubbed them dry, and went back to work.

Nadia laid her book down. She hugged and kissed Aziz and Nusayr. She then hugged Echo. They were going to cook together tonight. Something peppery. She led Echo into the kitchen by the hand. Echo mussed Aziz's hair as she passed him. Aamil stopped plotting, smiled and waved at Echo on the way through the house.

Nusayr went to Aamil and observed his work over his shoulder. He said, "That line there needs a little straightening. Your eyes are getting worse. Maybe you were better off buffing trains."

Aamil said, "You're so kind." Aamil erased the uneven line and tossed the eraser at Nusayr. "But they're phasing out that job, thanks to you. How'd you do today?"

"Painted a couple of buses. I asked about the public pools."

"They won't permit that," Aamil said, straightening the line. "I told you already. The lifeguards won't be able to see if someone's at the bottom of the pool with paint in the way."

"Well, they can only let me do it or shoot me down. They said they'd let me know."

Aziz said, "Tell him about the other thing."

"What's the other thing," asked Aamil. He took his glasses off and laid them on his desk. He leaned back in his chair to look at Nusayr, who was grinning. Aamil twirled the protractor. "Let's have it."

“Got another job,” Nusayr said.

Aamil said, “You’re quitting on me? I begged for your job and you’re done after a month. I thought you loved graffiti. You’re doing it for good money now. What’s better than that?”

“*His* job,” Nusayr said, pointing to Aziz, “is better than that.”

“Well, his degree lets him do what he does,” Aamil said. “You haven’t even graduated high school.”

Aziz said, “He’s got a pretty sharp eye for cars, believe it or not.” A few weeks after the crash crumbled his body, Aziz was churning out original designs. His bosses believed they’d hired a prodigy. The truth was that when Aziz had healed enough to speak, and felt anxious enough about missing work, he asked Nusayr to draw cars in his place, until he was able to work again. He told Nusayr he would pay. Nusayr refused the money. He was working for the city already. His father had convinced his boss to create a job for Nusayr painting graffiti art on trains and designated public property, beautifying the city. Nusayr didn’t need the money. He had his own. He did the work.

Nusayr sketched the cars brilliantly and prolifically. He was *too* good. Aziz would have the designs mailed to his bosses and they would call and leave voicemails to accept the designs most times. Often, they complimented the fresh approach he’d taken.

When Aziz recovered to the point of returning to the job, he decided to take Nusayr into his first meeting. He felt that his bosses should see the face behind the latest string of drawings. They couldn’t believe the truth. They were initially disappointed in Aziz, but they understood his need to hire a ghost. They weren’t fools, though. Here was

an opportunity to employ two designers with diverse, but marvelous styles. “So they applauded me,” Aziz said. “Then they threatened me. They shook my hand and bumped me to luxury designs. This guy’s got my spot in sports cars. No college. No formal training. Nothing but graffiti.”

A smile spread over Aamil’s face. He stood and shook Nusayr’s hand. “How is it that you two have destroyed the city at night while your mother and I were sleeping, lied to our faces, and still turned out better than anyone you know? How is that?”

“Well,” said Aziz, “we’d give the nod to parenting, but you and mom are tremendously bad at that, so—”

“Nadia,” Aamil called. “Come hear what Nusayr has gotten into now.”

Nadia came to Aamil’s desk. Echo stood behind her. “What did you do now?”

“He’s been lying to us again,” Aamil said. “He hasn’t changed, and we can celebrate it. Nusayr is a car designer now. These two work together.”

Nadia hugged Nusayr strongly and kissed him. He felt her pride in the intensity of the embrace. When she let go of him, she was crying. She grabbed Echo by the wrist and lightly slapped the back of her hand. She whispered, “You could’ve told me.”

Nusayr said, “You always want somebody to tell you something. Let it come to you every now and again. There’s more to this, though.”

Aziz pushed himself up off the couch. His body ached, still mending. The metal inside him tingled. He toddled over to Echo. He said, “Life has been crazy. A train had to fall on me so we could have this.” She held his hand and held him steady. He talked slowly so she could read his lips. She’d been reading his lips since he started talking

again. “You’ve been incredible to me—*amazing*,” he said. “And you’re just about as good-looking as I am.” She nudged him. Nadia rolled her eyes. Aziz stuck his hand in his pocket and fished out a ring that had *Your Narcissus* engraved on the inside. “So there’s that. The only reason I’m giving you this ring is because it won’t fit anywhere on Trip.” Aziz kissed Echo and slid the ring onto her finger. Echo hugged Aziz. Nusayr, Nadia and Aamil applauded. Trip ran into the room, barking at the sound. Aziz petted him behind his ears to calm him.

The players aligned at the edge of the stage and bowed. The lights dimmed above them until they disappeared in the darkness. The curtains came together to end the scene.

INSPIRED BY:

Bomb It. Dir. Jon Reiss. Antidote Films, Flying Cow Productions, 2007. Film.

Infamy. Dir. Doug Pray. 1171 Production Group, Paladin Entertainment, QD3
Entertainment, 2005. Film.

Stoppard, Tom. *Arcadia*. New York. Faber and Faber, 1993. Print.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. 1923. Print.

Williams, Saul. , *Said the Shotgun to the Head*. New York. MTV Books, Pocket Books,
2003. Print.