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Discards

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Discards

ERIN McKNIGHT

The first hands that sought the mangoes were children's. Soft knuckles surely lingered as fingertips busied themselves with my front door's serpentine motif of peeling paint.

Mothers waited at a distance, plastic grocery bags clenched in sun-swollen hands. My nod was the invitation to step onto the lawn, to release along with the bags' moistened creases presumptions of me as the youngest enlisted wife.

In the tree's sloping shade, harvesting began: women and children plucked, scooped, and dropped ripened mangoes into gaping-mouthed bags.

But in the evenings, when stewing kitchens forced them outdoors, boys and girls swarmed the tree without supervision. T-shirts pulled away from bodies, their cotton bellies bore the fruits' weight and carried pickings to places unspoiled.

Then they stopped coming. From behind my peephole the tree's waxen leaves appeared stripped, the aroma of seasoning fruit camouflaged. After only a few months of living on the base, Guantanamo's barbed boundary had encroached.

I caught her trespassing one afternoon, the branched canopy slicing her into sections of light and shadow. On the ridgeline above us Marines pounded the day into dusk.

She, and the mango cupped in her palm, blushed at me.

"Cravings," she offered with a shrug. "Can you believe I'm still getting them?"

I could have believed anything as I stared at her rounded middle.

When next I saw her she had been pared. Under a beach shelter, she cradled her son. Conversation quilted around us, but the loops of wire yards from our smoking barbeque pits held her attention.

Perhaps she scanned the fence line for defectors who, in pursuit of an American bounty, braved an indiscriminate sowing of land mines. Maybe she imagined the explosives lying in wait, heard the click of metal prongs depressed by a single misplaced foot.

Her baby went missing when the tree stood bare. It was only after flowering that the sharp knock, at odds with a young fist, resounded. The fruit had matured, but the sheet of paper slipped through my door jamb told me no one was looking for mangoes.

Another search planned. Any help appreciated.

Perhaps it was the stirring within that led me to the tree. Grocery bag handles threaded between my bloated fingers, I picked the fruit. Two reddened globes dropped for every one sought, yet I couldn't discard any. Left exposed, only a scattering of kernels would remain.

I drove to her, my offering tumbling across the floorboard. The mangoes bounced as I passed the next khaki-hued tract to be stripped of mines, land betraying no clue of its vicious intent—subversive earth that would offer no yield.

Isle

HUGH BRAMLETT

It is among the ten
where I sit with the sun.
I borrow some thoughts
and watch fingers

of the sea turn pages
of deep, one by one.
Palms lean themselves
In consent, en masse -

as crowned kings
ruling over red pigeons
and busy leagues
of young seagulls,

that pick through
a tingy wash
of foam and shell,
as if to jot their words.