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Rows of Lavender
Amber Duivenvoorden

Hani's bed is right under the window at the far left of the room. It is a barred window, covered by a thin, light curtain through which she can see the empty yard, the wired walls around it and the large coils over them, against the clear sky. For a while now, she's been spending those first, early hours watching the ceiling. Mostly the surface is smooth white, but there's a stain that starts from the corner where the walls meet and balloons out, along the edges. It has grown since she arrived here, it's brighter, yellower. It looks like South America now. She remembers it well from her Oxford Atlas, page thirty-five, the map of the world. Ms Becky, the English woman who had come to teach in Mogadishu for some time had given it to her, just before she'd left them. Some of the other kids received books about insects or different kinds of plants and where they grew best and when, but Ms Becky had given her a book about the world. There was all about Europe in it and America and Australia.

Her father said that in Europe they had large houses and gardens with ponds in them, like the photos Ms Becky had shown them, of the greenest grass Hani had ever seen, and pebbles gathered around a pool of water on which floated large, flat leaves and fish whose skin sparkled golden. "I'm going there one day," she had said, pointing at the uneven arrangement between Africa and Asia. "I'm going to have a house with a pond and a lawn and deck chairs to sit on in the sun, like Ms Becky."

She lies on her bed, waiting until the clock at the far end of the room tells her it's ten o'clock. At that time, the queue to the bathroom is shorter and she can have a shower without anyone knocking at the door or calling for her to come out. Zala, an Ethiopian woman in the bunk bed under her, goes with her some days, on other days she curls up in a ball and rocks back and forth, murmuring something incomprehensible. Hani tries stroking her back, asking what is wrong, pulling the bed sheets away from Zala's face, but the woman won't let her. She won't eat either, leaving her plate on the floor until the flies settle on it, flitting back and forth from the rim to the

food. A woman who had travelled with Zala told Hani that she mourns her daughter who was killed by shrapnel during a terrorist attack before they left Libya. She screams late into the night, sometimes prays loudly as she wanders about the room. Hani covers herself up, pulling the sheets over her head and pretends she's heard nothing, thinking about Ms Becky's glossy photos of the smiling children kneeling against the sunflowers by the white fence.

Hani sits up in bed and gathers a small towel, a cardboard box with her toothpaste and brush stuffed inside and a square soap case from the windowsill, all of which were given to her when she arrived at the centre. She climbs down the ladder. Zala isn't in bed. Perhaps it's one of her good days. Hani treads across the room, looking down, avoiding their faces. She can't bear to look at them. It makes her ashamed of who she is, just another number, with the same sallow skin and red eyes, wading through the thick miasma of unwashed bodies. Underwear, faded jeans and diracs hang from one bunk bed to the next, on thin wires which have been tied around the bedposts. Other clothes are fanned out on the floor. Boxes of tampons, scrunched up toothpaste tubes and toothbrushes with frayed bristles lie by the beds. Theirs is one of the best rooms on the B block, B 12, with just 20 women. Some of the others have over a hundred people living in them, most of them unisex.

In the corridor the walls are orange yellow, the colour of her mother's coconut curried corn. Thin steel beams run down the ceiling and towels dangle in doorways. She passes men huddled in circles against the walls, some walking out to the yard. She keeps her face down to the cold, ceramic tiles. Hani has felt their hands on her before, on the small of her back as she was queuing up for food in the canteen, whispering in her ear, in very broken English, what they'd like to do to her. A group of them cornered her once, in the yard as she was staring through the barbed wire at the network of construction and outhouses that bordered the centre. She recognized a couple of them from B14, the room opposite hers. They asked her questions, where she was from, who her parents were, how old she was now. One of the younger ones, whom everyone called Aren and whose front teeth were either missing or fitted with silver caps which made him look like the pirate in Ms Becky's storybook, swept his hand down her side and winked at her. Her mother had warned her about men, they got you into trouble and left you alone, especially when you had nothing to give them. She'd ignored them and moved away towards a group of women. Hani never went out to the yard alone after that.

At the toilets' entrance lies a pool of water, with floating clumps of thick, dark hair spreading over the uneven tiles. There's a line of women at the sink, some brushing their teeth or washing their faces, some fixing their hijabs or diracs as they stare at the mirrors. Hani walks around the puddle of water and goes to her usual shower cubicle at the far end of the room. It's always vacant around this time. She likes it best because there's a small niche built into the wall where she can leave her things

while she showers. Hani places the towel over the door and locks it. She removes her shash and dirac and folds them, then puts a hand over her braids. Some of the curls around the top of her head have come loose and stand up, over the latticed hair. She needs to ask for a new shampoo, maybe they'll give it to her by the end of the week and she can redo the braids. As she showers, Hani thinks of the village Snowhill where Ms Becky is from. It has fields of lavender, with dark purple rows that sometimes match the sky and in winter disappear under the snow which falls everywhere, over the church and cemetery, in the gardens and ponds. Once her asylum application has been accepted, she'll get a travel document. Then she can move away from Malta, up to Italy and then maybe even to England. Hani doesn't know much about this island or its people, only what she's heard the women in her room say, something about protests in their capital, red and white flags and cardboard placards with Illegal Not Welcome and Malta is Ours in thick, black marker. Hani listens when they speak, without saying anything.

No one here talks about their own stories, what it was like, leaving their families behind, crossing the waters in the dinghy, watching people die on the boat, thrown into the sea. Those are too painful. Hani left her village at dawn, as her mother was getting ready for Bakaara Market where she worked pushing carts of wheat and beans or washing clothes for customers. Her father was ill in bed. The coughing fits hadn't stopped for days and the night before, he was spitting blood. Before leaving, Hani took his hand in hers and swept the sweat off his brow. He was shivering and Hani pulled the sheepskin up to his neck. He murmured her name as she kissed the top of his head, small and bony like a rock. Hani knew they'd never meet again.

Her mother stood in the doorway, pulling the shash over the top of her forehead, covering all the greying hairs that sprouted along the edges. There wasn't much to say. The street was stilled in a thin, red dust which rose around them from the potholes and city structures beyond. She watched it move in waves over the myrrh trees and rectangular huts. Her mother's eyes looked back at her like currants, dark and dry. She left without saying goodbye. Hani watched her walk away, her baati trailing behind her, the silver flowers at the hem catching the early morning light.

Her parents are distant memories now, as is Mogadishu and her home, uunsi burning in her mother's white clay censer after dinner, the woody aroma filling the hut as they washed plates in the metal basin and stacked them on the wooden shelf her father had built over the mud stove, the children playing football in the streets, the girls she'd grown up with, most of whom had married and had children of their own, the market, wooden sticks everywhere, holding large rolls of tarpaulin, baskets of sesame, sorghum and corn, suitcases, belts, sunhats, diracs, wine red with gold swirls, leafy green with sequins, heaped on carts under umbrellas.

She has a clear image of the K5 after the attack, people kneeling in the piles of stone and wood, crying out names, the burning cars and trucks, the smoke bulging out over the rooftops for days. When the bomb went off, her mother was taking a cart filled with food to a client, on a street near the Safari Hotel. She had carried on, like normal, dragging the cart over the potholes while women and men rushed past her. Later that day she had told Hani never to mourn her if something should happen. The pain of loss had no significance and that's how she preferred it to be. Yet she had arranged for Hani to leave, had paid a couple, who had family in Libya and were also looking to find work in Europe, to take care of her daughter. Through the journey to Tripoli, the woman, Bilan, had ignored her, her eyes darting in her niqab, from Hani to the road, burrowing her face in her husband's chest when it got darker, as they journeyed from truck to truck, crossing Somaliland, Ethiopia and Sudan. Her husband Maxamed was quiet most of the time, his eyes fixed ahead, as though he was seeing something in the sky. He asked Hani what she would do in Europe, where she would go and she told him about the lavender fields and Ms Becky, that she would find her. Maxamed had nodded and smiled, turning to his wife to whisper something in her ear.

The mornings were the worst, the heat raced through the land, Hani's body felt stiff, her dirac's sleeves weighed heavily on her arms, the cotton irritated her skin. When the food and water ran out, they had to wait until they arrived at the next village, which was sometimes hours away. For days, all Hani saw was sand, stretching along with the sky, thin blue over a golden, caramel plane that never seemed to end.

As they crossed the Libya-Sudan border, they passed men in khaki uniforms with green caps, some leaning against the backs of jeeps, swinging their legs over the ground, others playing around with the rifles, pressing the muzzle into their cheeks, pretending to pull the trigger. She watched, as their driver, a short man with a thick beard that looked odd against his polished skin, handed a white package to one of the soldiers. Then they hurtled on.

Hani dries and dresses quickly. Most of the women at the sinks across the cubicles have left. She goes to the one in the middle and takes her toothbrush and toothpaste out of the long cardboard box that is now torn at the sides and damp everywhere. She presses the blue paste over the worn bristles and rinses it before brushing her back teeth. At home they made stick brushes from aday branches, cutting the twigs into thinner rods and pounding one end with a mallet. At first the toothbrush had made her gums bleed. Now she's got used to it, she moves the handle up and down over her teeth, bows her head to the white ceramic sink to spit and cups her hand under the stream of cold water.

Hani feels a prickle at the back of her neck, quick and sharp, like an electrical surge. She looks up in the mirror to see a dark, smiling face, next to hers, silver flashing where teeth should be. For a

second there, in the fluorescent light of the tube that stretches over the mirrors, she can't distinguish their faces, they appear the same; wide, red eyes from the dust in the yard, sunken skin, giving way under their cheeks, the bones around the eyes standing out like covered rocks in the bright glare.

A hand closes around her wrist, the bones in the fingers hurt her. She tries to shake it off, push away. She feels her mouth open. A low, rising wail comes out, like the one on the dinghy when they threw the little boy's body into the sea, and she watched the back of his head bobbing on the waves like a buoy, until she could no longer see it. The man they call Aren puts his hand on Hani's shoulders and turns her around the room. The tiles are streaked black and damp, all the women have left. In the doorway, where the puddle of water festers in the uneven floor, are the group of men who had cornered her in the yard. They stand there, leaning against the frame, their arms crossed, not saying anything.

On the dinghy, everyone sat quietly while the boy shouted that he had seen the mami wata, rising over the seas, with the snake curling around her neck. No one said anything as his cries grew louder, as he stood up, pointing at the still, grey sky. No one said anything as a man leapt up, from the corner of the raft and struck the boy on his temple.

Hani thinks of the boy now, as Aren claps the palm of his hand on her mouth and pushes her to the floor. Whatever will happen to her can't be worse than that. She feels her lips rise against his skin but the sound is muffled and slow, like she's shouting underwater. He pins her arms down, holding them in fists against her chest.

"Why you no talk me?" he breathes. The smell in his mouth is acrid, like burnt garlic. She turns her face to the side, to the white cubicle doors, most of which are wide open. She can see the toilets, a sheet of toilet paper hangs down one of the seats. "You scared?" Hani feels his thumb press against her forehead and slide upwards to her hairline, until it stops, just under her shash.

The boy collapsed with the impact of the man's fist. He sank against Maxamed's back and lay moaning on the floor of the raft, in the small space between people's legs, curled up like a snail, his little arms and legs twitching, his eyes shut. The man who hit him said they had to get rid of him. The mami wati was upon them and she had cursed the boy. No one said anything, but they knew he had to go. There was no one to mourn the boy, no mother, or sister to hold his little body, to kiss his limbs, the top of his head, his eyelids. No one to say his name, no one knew it. Hani wondered how he had got on the boat, perhaps a relative was coming later, after they'd saved up more money, perhaps they could only pay for him. Hani traced a finger along his cheek and recited a dua she knew from childhood. The boy was still moving when they threw him out, making strange, low

sounds. Water sprayed on her face and shawl as the body hit the still surface. For months after that, Hani dreamt of a mother who wandered about every block in the detention centre, grabbing people by their wrists, calling out a boy's name that she never remembered when she woke up.

The men at the door are talking loudly, in a language she doesn't understand. She feels Aren's grip loosen around her arms, his thumb leaves her hairline. The weight on her legs lifts.

Hani clenches her fists and continues to stare at the smudged tiles and the toilet with the paper hanging down it, nearly meeting the floor. "I see you soon," he says.

She lies there for some time, breathing carefully, just like she had when the people in the white gowns, with the masks over their mouths, had stood over her as she rolled her fingertip in the black pad and later onto the yellow card with the number they'd given her, scribbled in pencil at the top. A thick, harsh voice suddenly echoes through the room.

"What happened? Why you lying down?" She sits up slowly. A pain thumps down her temple as her eyes settle on the officer who's standing just where the men were a few moments before. Fat spills between the gaps of his blue buttoned shirt as he stands sideways in the doorway, his belly touching the door's frame. "You feel sick?" He wheezes, looking her up and down. "Filkas better you go lie down."

Hani gets up. "The men," she stutters. "They..." Her voice trails. She sees the boy's head bobbing on the calm water, his body sinking, a speck in all that depth and length, his thin arms and legs, twitching on the floor, a fish struggling for life. And the mother in her dreams, a mad woman, looking everywhere, her eyes moving like black worms.

She shakes her head as the officer moves away from the doorway, calling out to two men loitering in the corridor to go to the yard. Hani walks back down the corridor, her head down, her eyes closed. She thinks of Ms Becky and her wide smile, the Oxford Atlas on page thirty-five, pointing out the countries by the fire with her father, his thin dark fingers tracing the page in the flickering light as frankincense filled the hut. Perhaps those hands no longer exist. She feels a bulge rise in her throat, tears come quickly. She doesn't try to stop them. A tap comes on her arm. Zala skips in front of her, her smile so broad Hani can see all her yellow teeth.

"I see my daughter. She come today. In other block. I see her at breakfast."

Zala puts an arm around Hani. "Is wet here," she says, her hand pressing on her damp back. They continue to walk to B 12. "So pretty my daughter, eleven now, in month January. We celebrate. You come too Hani, meet her."

They arrive in the room. Most of the women have gone out into the yard, the ones who have stayed are in their beds. Hani climbs the small ladder leading up to her bed and curls up over the sheets, staring out into the yard at the other refugees moving in lines. She can hear Zala giggle beneath her, telling another woman that she has seen her daughter. As she watches the outhouses and cranes, hazy in the dust that swells over the barbed wire and yard, Hani wonders about this island, Malta, what else she will see when she gets out. So far she's known the sea that borders it, deep and thick and rough, threatening to swallow her up, the people on the boat that rescued them, white suits reaching their wrists and ankles, their faces hidden behind blue masks that ended just below the eyes, thick rubber gloves chafing against her skin as they checked to see if she was carrying anything illegal. And the woman in the room that swam in bright white light, her long, golden nails clicking against the desk like coins, as she asked Hani why she'd left Somalia, why she was here now, without any identification. On the ride to the detention centre, crammed at the back of the van, her face pressed against the window, she saw construction sites, rows of doors and balconies, the back of houses and roundabouts. But nothing else.

She thinks of the men in the doorway, of Aren and the thick smell of burnt garlic. She can still feel his grip on the top of her shoulders, his pressure on her legs. She can't tell anyone. No one will listen or believe it. They'll say she's causing trouble and has to stay in detention. They do anything to keep you in. That much she knows.

No one helped the boy, not even her. No one even protested. They just watched and waited as his body sank and the boat drifted away. She cuts the thought up in little pieces, like a paper she no longer needs and swallows it up like the sea. Now, in her mind, there's the garden with Ms Becky in it, stooping down to cut the weeds in one of her long, flowery skirts, her blonde hair tied back as she concentrates, like when she swayed across the blackboard, writing long sentences. One day Hani too will have a garden like that, in a town like Snowhill with the dark purple rows of lavender that sometimes match the sky and in winter disappear under the snow which falls everywhere.

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Amber Duivenvoorden is Maltese and studying for a PhD in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University. She is currently working on a collection of short stories set in Malta. Her practice-based research examines the development of the Maltese 'outlawed figure' navigating a postcolonial society through a collection of short stories that range from the 1950s to contemporary times.