

# Hallelujah

RAYAAN IBTESHAM CHOWDHURY

The bruise looked particularly bad today. Even her dirty blonde hair, that she adjusted every five minutes, couldn't hide it. She looked at me with her puffy blue eyes. She could do this, she could; Sulking through her eyes. Looking at her from the other side of the stream made my heart feel heavy again. Coming to see her at this hour always gave me a cold. The chilly air cut into my tonsils, something I had always had problems with since I was a child.

The stream ran through the heart of the town. You could get a fairly clear view of the other side but at most times of the day; you'd have to strain your voice to talk to someone on the other side. It was the town's main source of water and as long as sunlight permitted it, the women of the town would be crowding along the banks on both sides, getting the water they needed for the day. I was the only male there during daytime. My mother could not make it here with her arthritis. I had swallowed my pride and did my best to blend in with the crowd. Afterwards, I made it a habit to draw water at night. And that's how I met her.

I had tried to be as discreet as possible. Our town was quick to draw strange conclusions. A teenage boy walking to the stream with a bucket in his hand at night couldn't possibly suggest something dark. But my mother had warned me to not be seen and I had never disobeyed her before. The stream was gentler at night. I was done drawing the water and walking back when my eyes first landed on her.

She sure was a sight. The moonlight lit up her dirty blonde hair. I must have looked like quite the idiot that night, staring at her with a bucket of water in my hand, my mouth agape. She was staring at the ground and by the way her head gently shook, I could tell she was sobbing. She finally noticed me. I tried to hide the fact that I had been staring. She must have found my staring amusing. Through the tears that clearly lined her sparkling face, she giggled.

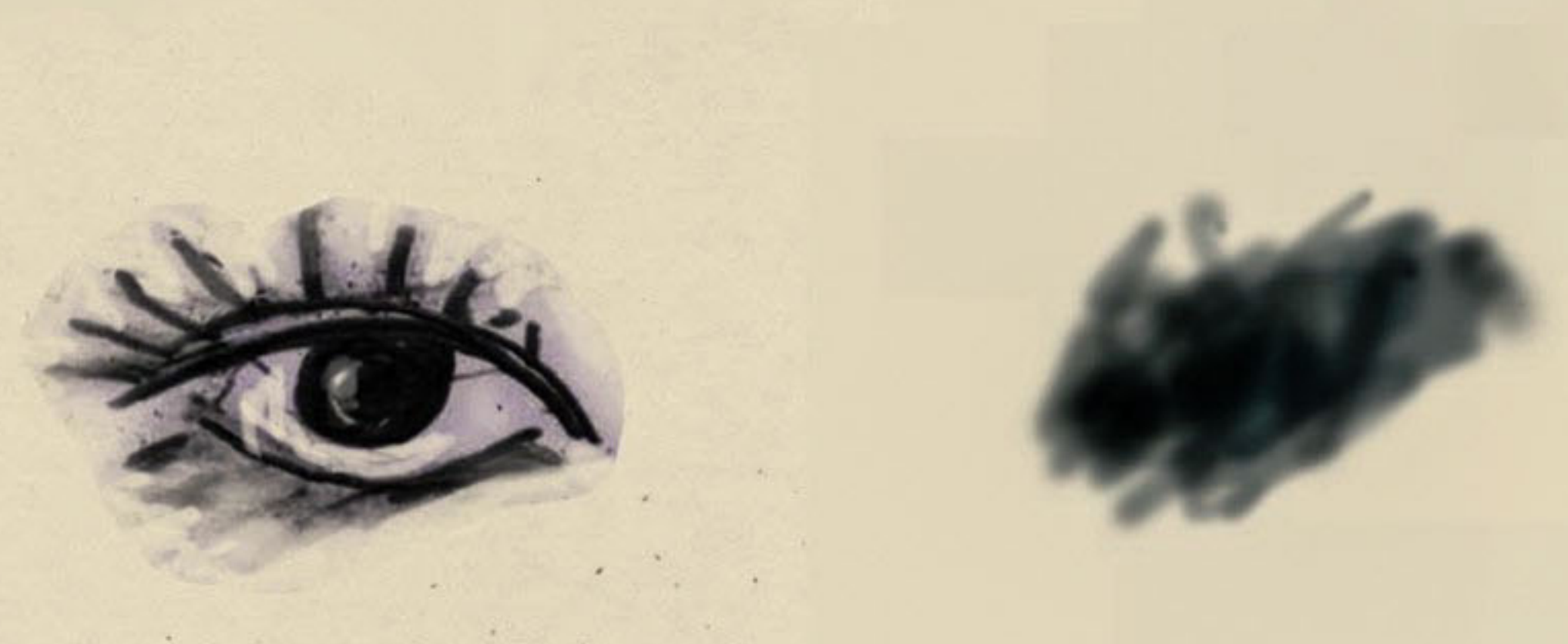
The next night I found myself drawing water very slowly, even letting the bucket slip from my grip. She was there again, sobbing as she had been the night before. Her beautiful blue eyes were puffy again. I wanted to ask her what she had to cry about. Had she been betrayed by a lover? I would never be able to know. I'd have to shout to talk to her. And in the pin drop silence of the night, it would draw the sort of attention neither me nor her needed. She giggled as the bucket fell from my hand. I had to dip into the stream to get it before it drifted off. I made a point to dry myself slowly. She looked at me with eyes that seemed to tell me to drop the act. I obeyed. I sat down and looked at her again. She didn't really look at me but I knew she acknowledged my presence. She would occasionally wash her face. Her pale skin looked silver in the moonlight. But it also looked tired. Far too tired for someone so young.

The changing seasons made drawing water at night harder. I had always been frail since I was a child and the chilly winds were not kind to me. I don't know if she could tell but the fact that I had a scarf on by the last week of September probably gave her an idea. I had started noticing the bruises on her body by the third night. I had initially been shy to look at her anywhere other than her face. On some nights there wouldn't be any bruises. She would still cry. On some nights the bruises would be worse. She would still cry. Me looking at her sob was the one constant.

I felt guilty about being the knight who's armour did not really shine. She would look at me with eyes that asked for me to be more than just someone who would look at her cry. I didn't know how I could do that. Could I speak up? Ask her name? I felt frightened of that for some reason. May be I wouldn't like her voice. I don't know. In my mind, I did not want to spoil the image of the weeping angel whose company I would silently enjoy every night.

One night in Midsummer, she stopped coming. I waited for her the next night. She did not come again. I sat in my old position on the bank, drawing water as slowly as I could. She suddenly appeared. She was laughing. She was happy. She walked by the stream without noticing me. She seemed to point a finger in my face and call out to me for not helping her. Had I played a role in her happiness? I'll never know.

I gathered the bucket and walked home.



## Broken chalk

NICOLE MOONSTONE

My chalk had snapped in two.  
Two clean pieces, so much cleaner  
Than my grades will ever be.  
Sometimes I wonder why I exist. Why  
I am such a failure in the essence  
Of my being as I stand, head bowed,  
In front of the couple who never deserved me.  
Never deserved the anger I cause, the disappointment  
That I am far from perfect -- only human.  
Too small and young and silly.  
Flawed; like my broken chalk.

My chalk has crooked edges. Always had.  
Do whole chalks even exist?  
They show perfect chalks on the telly but  
They lie. They say we're free. We're never free.  
My daddy's got no parents. He's got no one to  
Tell him to wash the dishes or clean or cook  
Or scrub or all the things I do.  
But he listens to the bottle. He hates it.  
But he listens. He begs. He cries. He screams.  
But he listens. And when the bottle is dry, he screams  
Even louder and breaks it. I guess  
Those shards of glasses have scraped my chalk  
Like they scraped the breath out of Mommy.

My chalk has worn thin.  
One day I won't have one anymore.  
But, oh! I wish I could care. I am too tired to care.  
Tired of piling red bricks on my tiny head  
Tired of the hunger that growls within me.  
Tired of dreaming of letters. Of learning.  
Tired of breaking bricks and scraping my fingers.  
My world is now the hammer, the brick and my hands.  
Nothing else matters, or will matter for a long time.  
Nothing, not even my tiny chalk.

My chalk is no longer a chalk.  
All the rubble and bombs have reduced it to sand.  
White sand. Did you know you can still paint with it?  
Write letters on the ground. Play hopscotch. Just like when  
Everything was ok and Father was alive.  
At least when our house was a house.  
Sometimes I wonder if my chalk is all I have.  
Powder. White powder. But it blows away with the wind.  
Just like everything else here.  
Everything will run out. Even my grinded chalk.