

*Hilary Smith*

## **Upstairs**

Das Haus ist ein Stock des Holzes mit Eule Augen.

Dein Augen sind Baumen.

Der Rock von Herbst ist gelb und rot. Wir probieren es an und unser Beinen Scheint und ausdehnung. Weil mein Hand sind frisches ich kann der Himmel spielen.

Sagt Angela: Dein Zimmer kalt werden und dunkle bestimmt.

Ich sehe ihr Gesicht und es ist wenig und weiß.

Sagt Angela: "Du musst dein Herbst verkaufen. Er kann nicht hier stehen. Dein Herbst ist zu laut, zu groß, und zu regnet. Er kann nicht stehen in unser Haus. Nächstes Jahr gehst du vor ein oder Straß. Du kannst nicht hier stehen."

Angela sagt, "Lass mich in ruhe," aber was ist ruhe wenn das ist nicht der Wind in der Fuße von der Herbst? Ich kenne nicht.

Angela sagt: "Woher kommst du?"

Ich sage, "Ich komme aus der Strand. Dort es ist blau und Baumlieb. Ich sehe ein Telefon und ein Eis mit ein Man isst es. Der Herbst wist in der Wasser; er hat wetter Armen und Beinen welches dinn und Rückeln in der Wind ist. Ich verstehe der Man ist ein verkaufer: sein Buch was schreiben in Nummers. Der ist viel Bedeutung in alle er tut."

Angela sagt: "Wasch bitte diese Schüssel. Dein blauen Augen sind nicht genug, zum dieses Hauses zu erhitzen. Dieses nehmgeld."

Der Man von Angela heißt Drew. Er fährt einen roten Wagen und nimmt Brot am Montags. Ich finde Drew ist wie das Ende des Ozeans—breit und leer. Sie essen zusammen in die Kocken. Sie hören wenn ich und der Herbst gehen unten, ich glaube.

Nicht mehr, ich kann nicht mehr.

## **Downstairs**

This house is a piece of wood with owl eyes—this house has wooden eyes—these eyes are owled wood. Autumn's skirts are yellow and red. We try them on and our legs shine and stretch, our tallness tumbles around us in a wind, and because my hands are fresh I can pluck and juggle the sky with its clouds and telephone wires and black clumps of bird.

Angela says, "Your room will stay cold and dark." I see her face and it is small and white like the cap of a pill bottle.

Angela says, "You have to sell that Autumn. It can't stay here. That Autumn is too loud, too big, too wet and rainy. It can't stay in this house. Next year you'll be moving to the next street. You can't stay here either."

Angela dries her hair in the bathroom, using the anti-electrocution plug. She says, "Leave me in peace." But what is peace if it isn't in Autumn's windy feet slipping through the sleeves in our windows?

Angela says, "Where did you just come from?"

"I came from the beach. There it's blue and treelovely. I saw a telephone and a man with the ice cream he was eating. Autumn was in the water—its arms and legs were wet and thin and trembly in the wind when it came out. I believe the man is a salesman—his book was written in numbers. There is meaning in everything he does."

Angela says, "Please wash these bowls. Those blue eyes aren't enough to heat this house. That takes money."

Angela's man is called Drew. He drives a red car and brings us bread on Mondays. I find Drew like the end of the ocean—wide and empty. They eat together in the kitchen. They hear it when Autumn and I go downstairs, I think.

No more, no more of this.

## **And Given A Map Inside Our Heads**

i. Scenario: Facts

You are a group of rag-tag street urchins in London in the 1940s!  
There are six of you, which is a lot to keep track of, six six six.  
DaveEddyJaneMarthaDickLennyPete.  
You have hearts of gold and never-say-die attitudes!

ii. Dialogue (with yourself)

Oi! Whar—weer—ah we gowing?  
Whar ah we gowing Dave?  
Oi'm hahngry. Le's ge' sahm vi''les.  
Oi know whar we cahn foind sahm fesh.  
Ah-ow, Nah-ow! Heah cahm thah bobbies!

iii. Set

[Here is the alleyway.]  
[houses houses houses houses houses houses houses]  
[OK, over here is the church where they get soup.]  
[the bakery where they steal bread is right next to it]  
-----street-----  
---  
[down the street here is ---  
the brothel where Jane ---  
and Martha get hired] ---  
---street-----[POLICE STATION!]

iv.

Keeping track of everything! Keeping track of everything!  
Lalalalalalalalala!

## **The Insides of Furniture**

Ever since she was very young, Faroush has imagined that pressed inside the cushions of sofas and bus seats are the flattened corpses of murdered puppies. She can't sit on the furniture in the livingroom when she visits friends—it freaks her out to think of their desiccated ears crackling, the tough, hardened fur warping under the weight of her ass. Once when she did sit on a couch, someone's foot was under the cushion and it jerked and she thought it was one of the puppies still alive and lurched forward, spilling cranberry juice in a vast theatrical splatter on the carpet that never came out though the host had the steam cleaners in.

It's like she has x-ray vision.

She can see their little torsos with the legs splayed out perfectly symmetrical in the centre of each cushion, the crushed muzzle pointing forwards, the tail a flattened rope at the back. The puppies are usually Schnauzers or terriers or dalmatians. Thinking about this, she realises the impracticality of trying to fit a pitbull into a sofa cushion, even a very small one (or a very big cushion). When people ask her why she won't sit on padded surfaces, she claims it is because of her spine. The same logic as sleeping on a hard bed. To confirm this claim, she makes a point of always sitting up straight as the captain of a little girls' gymnastics team, shoulders rolled back, expression attentive and beaver-eager.

Really, she isn't a particularly eager person, but she always tries to come across that way, which exasperates her teenaged children to no end. At dinner parties before the meal is served and the guests are having drinks in the livingroom she sits pertly on the floor smiling perpetually, nodding interestedly and making dozens of emphatic sounds that barely differ whether the topic of conversation is tulip gardening or the devastation of the current war. Eventually the host always rises and disappears for a moment, then reappears dragging a wooden chair from the dining room and insists—oh, but I'm quite comfortable—that Faroush be seated at the same level as the rest of them.

People who don't know her think it has something to do with being Indian. One of those countries where everybody sits on the floor—or maybe it's a relic of female subservience. Her husband, they notice, never comes close to the carpet unless it's to pick up a bit of cracker that has fallen off his napkin on the journey from the coffee table to his lap. Still, it doesn't make sense: they

still speak with accents, but they aren't *that* Indian. You'd think in a country like this she'd have noticed her rights by now, her equal status.

At first, the other women thought it was because she was an immigrant and found little jobs for her to do in the kitchen to make her feel comfortable and have an opportunity for a chat, just her and the hostess—but once they had her to themselves, they discovered she wasn't as timid and fearful as they had imagined her to be and were offended by it. Now she is still regarded with a bit of pity, but a measure of annoyance has crept into their smiles and she is no longer asked to the kitchen to give her advice on spicing.

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Tonight they are going to a dinner party at his colleague's house, another optometrist, and Hamad comes home from the office a few minutes earlier than usual so he can shower and put on a suit. Faroush is in their bedroom looking through her jewellery box for something to match the red dress she has already put on. He thinks she looks lovely and tells her so. She thanks him, striking a coquettish pose for a second before selecting a gold chain and fastening it around her neck.

Under the hot shower, Hamad reaches for the bottle of anti-dandruff shampoo on the floor and squirts some into his hand. He washes his hair, rinses, and when he steps out of the shower the bathroom is damp with mint-smelling mist. Towel first; then suit, socks, shoes. Presto-change-o.

When he gets downstairs she is in the kitchen sorting out her purse, waiting for him. They spend a moment turning off lights and closing windows. The car is in the driveway; he didn't bring it into the garage because they'd be leaving again so soon. As they turn into the street, both inhale the burnt-lavender summer air and agree that the evening is beautiful.

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**Recollection: Faroush Tells Hamad About the Dogs Shortly After They Are Married.**

*“But here, we can look in every cushion if you like, to set your mind at ease. No dogs.”*

*He leads her by the hand to the livingroom of their newly-bought house, where the sofas- and-armchair set his parents bought them as a wedding present look symmetrical and pleasantly aristocratic. Kneeling on the carpet he pulls the seat cushion from the armchair, turns it on its side and unzips it in what startles Faroush as a clinical fashion. He peels back the cover. Unfortunately, Hamad is unfamiliar with the insides of furniture—he expected there to be raw stuffing he could paw through, proving to Faroush the absence of cadavers, but it's much more complicated than that. These are quality sofas, and there is a second, ununzippable skin of fabric sealing the padded, interior.*

*“Well I guess I could slice it open.” He fingers the scalpel in his breast pocket, next to the flashlight and ballpoint pen.*

*“Don't be silly, Hamad,” she says, knowing that she is the one with the silly fears and wishing she hadn't brought it up, she is a child whimpering on the sidewalk whom the sympathetic attentions of strangers makes cry harder—*

*She tells him it's imaginary. Like when your older sister tells you gulab jamun is made of mashed worms and you know it's not made of mashed worms but you still see them there, still feel a sick dread when you pass the kitchen after school and see it jiggling on the counter, waiting for supper.*

*She tells him it's like that.*

*They leave the cushion unzipped—*

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Sometimes when she's not careful her mind tiptoes to the edges of things and she has to order it back sharply before it goes to where the tangleweeds are. She calls them the tangleweeds because they snag the fear like burrs and tease it out further and further, it's like a spool of thread caught in twigs, she needs to pick it out fast and reel it in. Keep it contained.

“What about beds?” taunt the tangleweeds. “What about—”  
“No.” “Whata—” “No!” “The seats of the car!” “NO!”

She makes a fist and bites her knuckle, concentrating on the sensation.

“What's wrong?” says Hamad.

“Did I leave the light on in the kitchen?”

“No, I checked.”

Faroush relaxes. The address to which they are going—the Conrads' place—is a grand white house overlooking the lake. There are vineyards on either side of the road which are green and

glowing in the clear evening light. Hamad stretches and groans pleasurablely.

“What do you say, Faroush, would you like to live out here?”

He says that every time they drive in the country. Still disengaging the tangleweeds, Faroush answers in absentminded superlatives, hopes they arrive soon so she can get out of the car. Even though there are no dead puppies—stop thinking about it, Faroush—stop—

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The evening is fine so the guests at the Conrads' are enjoying salmon and whole wheat crackers on the outside patio, framed by stiff, waxenly colourful birds of paradise, hydrangeas and bright pink cosmos. Blue and still, the swimming pool illuminated by underwater lights looks like modern art. When their son was in his teens and having house parties, someone always ended up in that pool along with several bottles. Sometimes it was the bottles first, sometimes the someone. Once fished out, someone's clothing peeled like labels. The labels on the bottles clung like wet clothing or floated off and got stuck in the filter.

It is unlikely that this will happen tonight.

The Conrads are both doctors, he an optometrist, she a dermatologist. Since they've hired a caterer, neither has to be in the kitchen, so both are outside enjoying the company and a glass of champagne.

It is all glass-tinkly, pleasant talk-murmur, almost-cool breeze on the bare arms of the women, when Faroush and Hamad arrive and park at the end of a line of cars in the long country driveway.

Dr. Conrad (she) is entertaining a crowd with a story about spraining her ankle in a spectacular black-diamond ski wipeout up in Mt. Tremblant over Christmas, and her husband is listening quietly to his long-time friend from medical school whose wife has just died of a brain aneurism. They stand in the semi-privacy by the gurgling fountain under the dining room window. He puts a hand on his friend's shoulder, nods. The party is going well.

When they approach the house, Faroush is relieved to see that everyone is outside where the furniture is wrought-iron and the seats covered only by simple, chic, handcrafted rag rugs in forest green. She feels pretty, suddenly lightheaded at this unexpected

relief from the livingroom, the perversely domestic cemetery of it—off the hook! It makes her uncharacteristically gleeful.

Both Conrads excuse themselves to greet the new arrivals.

“Hamad, Faroush, welcome! Did you find it OK?”

“Hellooooo Aimée,” Faroush greet Dr. Conrad, whom she has only met once before, enfolding her in an incense-smelling hug.

There are introductions, the offering of canapés.

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Faroush has had four glasses of wine. The sun has gone down and the sky is a deepening purple but there are tiki torches in the garden for light and surprisingly few mosquitoes for this time of year and it's too nice an evening to go inside—the caterers are busy cleaning up and Dr. Conrad would rather not use the immaculate livingroom if she can avoid it, save Angela a vacuum—so the ones who remain are still outside and the barearmed women have silk wraps or a husband's jacket around their shoulders. The Hos who have young children left at 10:30, followed by the Razinskis at 11:00, and the remaining guests sit in one comfortable circle, having sparse, friendly conversations and listening to the crickets, feeling too full and wine-warmed to go anywhere, though the drinking stopped over an hour ago.

Faroush is not part of a conversation, which doesn't matter too much because it's late and dim and her apartness isn't exposed as it would be under livingroom lights. Hamad is sitting across the circle next to Dr. Conrad and his widower friend, who are conferring again, but now they both smile a bit.

Faroush stands and squeezes out from between the patio chairs. Nobody notices her teeter through the sliding door—the motion-activated porch light comes on momentarily, the only eye to detect her—and she is enveloped by the warm house. Behind a closed door to the left, the kitchen is bright with clean plates and the soft music of the two caterers scouring springform pans with iron wool in the hot, soapy sink water.

Faroush wonders where the bathroom is.

The dark tortoise-shell tiled hall stretches ahead of her, leading to the front hall where mirrors flank the mahogany front door. She doesn't like to see her tipsy reflection from this distance—dark dress, who is this, dark warm tippy-minded from wine, she doesn't want to walk with her clicking sandals across that tortoise-shell floor. She has to be silent.

There is a blank space  
then her hand is on the crystal doorknob of the livingroom  
door

foot—the sandal is gone—landing in the carpet which is  
surprisingly deep like bath water

surprisingly hot—  
hand on the naked wallpaper feels rude, groping for the light  
switch, she thinks she found it but it's an electrical socket—why is  
it up here so high?—her fingers descend a few more centimetres  
and meet the floor.

There must have been a moment when she crouched.

It's not the wine now. Maybe it is.

butts something firm and fabric

the sofa—

something in her mouth. Never known it from this position

her face planted in its pattern of flowers and embroidered deer, too  
dark to see it though.

Faroush inhales heavily, noise squashed against the  
upholstery, and her lungs are filled with the thick, unmistakeable  
odour of dog.

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Aimée Conrad rises to go thank the caterers before they leave. On  
her way inside she notices that the door to the livingroom is open.  
As she closes it, she glances through one of its many panes of glass  
and sees Faroush kneeling before the sofa. Just before the door  
meets the frame, she reverses the motion and pulls it open again.

“Faroush?”

Aimée steps into the room without turning on the light.

The other woman sits up suddenly and beams at Aimée like  
a children's librarian, a smile as impenetrable as a grocery-store  
flyer.

“I think Hamad's ready to head home. Though if he's not  
careful, Amir will keep him talking all night.”

She can't ask “why are you here.” And now it's too late to  
acknowledge or make any statement about the oddity of her guest's  
position. That Indian woman is smiling too brightly, but Aimée's  
not sure whether or not she's drunk. She is about to speak again  
when the sliding door swishes open and someone steps in from the  
patio. It's Hamad.

“Have you seen Faroush? I think we should be heading  
home.”

The night breeze is decidedly cool now and floods the house like a stranger. Outside, there is scraping of chairs as the last of the guests make motions to leave.

Faroush scrambles to her feet and Hamad steps forward to put an arm around her. Her body is rigid with terror which he mistakes for chilliness and he rubs her bristling forearm to warm it as the hostess smiles on.

“Got cool all of a sudden, didn’t it,” says Aimée.

“It’s fresh,” says Faroush.

They both agree.

**Hilary Smith's** work has appeared in Deep South 2006, as well as in more other places than we can mention.