



GREY AREA

DEREK OWUSU

Siren's rush led his mother adrift—so, he thought, a cigarette would never touch waxy lips. But we witness, substance diffusing in the shallow fluidity of his thoughts, that he would say to her, eyes reflecting her spirit, "Carrying cigarettes is easier than carrying change when it's time to give to people without homes."

Where he is and would remain, the only conversations carried out were on the smoke and nicotine high of fiend coloured tips, awaiting pleas, diminishing with time, as he began the same journey—toes on cracked, rubble ruins towards the cold where she lay, thinking of her hand as it sways, limp as she rests, Fuseli painting pictures on her chest.

He pushes off the deck chair, broken, a mouth trying to close on him with his will. A few steps and still, facing the door, behind him, he hears June over the soft summer exhale of suppressed gale. "Hello, dear." Without turning, eyes still on the communal room, hopes to step into, he whispers, stifles himself to say, "Hi, mum. I miss you."

"I know, dear, she says. "You left me," he says.

She picks up what he stubbed out and blows the remaining ash off the tip, fingers slick with drying jelly, face to face with her desire for calm that was always spreading its peace, a long farewell repeatedly spat from her son's teeth.

His back still to her.

She takes a few steps towards him, stops close enough to graze the straightened curls now reaching for her. She wraps her arm around him and rests her palm just below his chest.

"Breathe," she says.

He takes a breath in and out, rising then deflating, anticipating and awakening.

"No," she says, "Diaphragm, dear. Fill yourself and then let it go. Fill yourself and let it go."



Plumbing in Armilla (from the series Dwelling) ~ Steph Hartop

He fills his stomach, breathes in, then waits, bloated with weight.
Damp, consoling rhythm held hands in place, no time to let go, he stands there, still, but knows, knows she's no longer behind him.

He walks, crosses the threshold and closes the door.

“Mate,” a patient asks, says. He’s sat with both elbows sliding up and down the table. “Fancy a game of black jack? Missing a few cards but should have a decent game.”

“Sure,” the reply. “Let me shuffle, though. You fancy a cigarette before we start?”

Derek Owusu is an award-winning writer and poet from North London. He discovered his passion for literature while studying exercise science at university. Unable to afford a change of degree, he began reading voraciously and sneaking into English Literature lectures at the University of Manchester. Owusu has written poetry and short stories for the BBC and ITV and regularly features on literary prize judging panels. In 2019, Owusu collated, edited, and contributed to the anthology *SAFE: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space*. His first novel *That Reminds Me* (Merky Books) won the Desmond Elliott Prize for debut fiction. In 2020, Owusu was one of the founding members of the Black Writers Guild.

Steph Hartop is an artist based in London. She received her BA in Fine Art & History of Art from Goldsmiths. Her work has appeared in exhibitions at Kunsthal Charlottenberg, Copenhagen; Bodega, New York; and screened at Göteborg Film Festival, Sweden.

Plumbing in Armilla is one of a series of tintype photographs featured in full on stillpointmag.org.

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