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NEVER

NOW

ALWAYS

DESIRINA BOSKOVICH

NEVER NOW ALWAYS
by DESIRINA BOSKOVICH

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Never Now Always

Desirina Boskovich



001
(1010)

 HERE IS A NOW WHERE CARETAKERS COME DOWN.

Sometimes, it happens in the park. Us sisters run and call through blotchy grass and tight-packed earth. We soar on swings with creaking, rasping chains. We streak down the rust-marred slide, descend on jagged bolts and itchy steel.

We jump rope beneath the maple trees.

We dare each other—*Leap from the swing!*—and we sail through the sky like things with wings before crashing on all fours into the faded wood chips.

The trash barrel stinks of rotting candy and swarms with wicked bees.

This now, the sky goes gray, and clouds press in. The fog swirls and the mist subdues.

My sister's hand now slips away. The world is hazy, and then it's not; now me, Lolo, in the dark. The wind lashes my cheeks and whips my hair across bared teeth while the swings shriek in the breeze.

The sound is my terror: metal on metal, clanking chains, the groaning creak, the dying wheeze.

I can't see my hand for the mist. My sister calls my name. I call hers (a name I can't just now recall). Grass crushed by wind. I fall to ground, lie flat against the bark, my cheek to dirt.

The darkness clears, mist recedes, and from foggy nothing steps this Caretaker, the very first I see.

For a moment, it shimmers, like it is resolving into something. It has no ears. It has no mouth; it cannot speak. It possesses eyes alone, sunk into a pale orb of a head.

As the mist clears, I scream. The distant labyrinth is growing, built but incomplete, a skeleton against the sky.

I clench my fingers against my sweat-slick palm, the sticky shadow of my sister's grip.



The memory departed, I'm in the room again. Strapped in a chair I can't decamp. My ankles bound, my wrists secured, my chest braced. The spotlight glaring in my eyes.

Two Caretakers stake out one corner, ahead and to my right. Silent, they observe. I search out their eyes. I see them, they see me, but our gazes can't connect.

The room speaks in its voice. "What happened?"

I always answer. Something bad occurs if I refuse. Just now, I can't remember what. But I know I answer always *or else . . .* or else *something*. That something, it's enough.

I like to please the Voice.

"The Caretakers come."

"For the first time?" The voice is womanish, doctor-sounding, speaking clear and distant, like she's very close and far at once.

"Yes. For the first time."

"How did you feel when you saw one?"

"I feel afraid."

"Did they hurt you?"

"No."

"So why did you feel afraid?"

"I can't find my sister."

"There is no sister. What did it feel like when you were lying with your cheek against the rubber turf?"

It comes over me, like a wave. How I am alone in the park. I remember the springy slack of turf, the soft rubber's earnest smell. How the indentations wobble as my fingers grasp while my heart hammers against the trembling ground.

The bloodless sky rips open with another story.

The Voice asks.

I answer.

The Caretakers watch with dead, dark eyes.



“Gor?” I say.

“Lolo?” says Gor.

I’m above. Gor below. We speak in whispers. It is dark. It is night. We rest in stacked bunks inside our sleeping pod.

“What was before?” I ask, knowing even as I say the words they’re wrong. The words I need aren’t real or are still unknown. This titanic notion waits lodged inside my chest like an air bubble that won’t pop. My thought can’t hatch.

“Before what?” Gor says.

“Before now.”

“Breakfast,” Gor says, first faltering and then bold. “Breakfast.”

There are words that mean time: *before, after, next, yesterday, tomorrow, morning, night*. We’re shaky with such words.

Space, space is simple. We know *left* and *right, up* and *down, in* and *out, above* and *below*. We think in the shape of our dwelling maze.

Time speech is harder. We retain too many holes; we miss too much.

I want to ask things. I can’t recall the words I need. Sometimes, most times, I can’t think what the question is at all.

I contemplate. Is *breakfast* a word for time? No. A word for food. But also time. Food and time, intertwined.

“No,” I contradict. “Not breakfast.”

“Why not? I like breakfast.”

“Because it’s night.”

“Yes. It’s night.”

“Breakfast is morning.” This fact I know pat, got all figured out. But breakfast is only adjacent to the real question and not close at that.

This is what they call, *You’re getting colder*.

“I do like breakfast.”

In darkness, I cast my gaze upward. Guilty for this private eye roll, I lean past my bunk’s edge, inspect Gor upside-down.

At night, the walls glow midnight blue. Other beady, greenish lights flicker *dot-dash* along straight lines. The stillness is a stagnant hush of rustles, whirs, beeps, and breaths, the murmur of rapt children's dreams and all-the-time aloof machines.

"Can I come down, Gor?"

"Yes."

I know him because together we sleep in this bubble—always me above, always him below. I know him; he knows me. I'm Lolo; he's Gor. These facts are also pat.

I crawl from my bunk and climb down the ladder. Creep stealth-like into blankets, ally myself with him. He swaddles me in sheets that stink of clean and breezes me with his own hot breaths. His fingers warm, his toes cold. My back to him, his front to me.

"I mean *before*. More before. Before the bunk. Before the bubble. Before breakfast."

His shrug nudges my shoulder. His laugh tickles moistly at my neck. "I'm sleepy, Lolo. Because it's night."

"We'll sleep," I say. "Soon." *Another word for time is soon.*

"Because it's night."

"I can't remember."

"So sleep," Gor says.

Doing as he recommends, we close eyes, cease whispers, and forget all mystery. We wander into sleep.



Gor, he likes breakfast. Me, I like Gor.

Gor likes me, and all rapt children like breakfast.

We sit in brightness 'round the slick white table while the walls glow yellow for morning times. The children around us are chattering and hushed. They speak of memories and dreams.

Some children have shared recollections, and through eager theories, they contrive a fable. But there are those whose remembrances are their own alone. When they try to weave a tale, the others look away, hurt and confused, until all fall silent and the thread wends back to lore that's shared.

I don't speak my visions. I am Lolo, and I listen only, forever and always,

canny and quiet . . . like the forest deer. (The image comes unbidden, born from somewhere: fragile, bright-eyed creature, brooding in the brush.)

The Voice calls, one by one, the number of each rapt child. Our numbers are etched into our thoughts like a tattoo within the skin. When we hear our number, we cannot help but move. By this passcode to our thoughts and limbs, we jerk instinctively to life. Like an electric tingle that teaches, but this one feels good. Like I like to please the Voice, I like to come when my number is called.

(Our names are different. Our names are our own, birthed from some primal place like a whimper in the night.)

I walk to my cubby and press my fingers to the door. The glass slides open, and inside is the three-part tray, the fodder always three different lurid colors.

Gor gets extra. Gor is always hungry.

Gor smacks his lips and licks his sticky fingers while children theorize how the labyrinth was built especially for us in the skeleton of a passed-away world. After my remembrance yesterday, I know the truth. But I do not say a word. I hold it, I touch it, I turn it over, I clutch it close to my chest like a stolen, precious thing.

It is hard to hear of others' dreams.

The Caretakers stand motionless at the four corners, eyes like black marbles with swiveling scope. They do not eat. Their presence is a darkness. We fear them, but they have been with us always, and we need them, too.

The Voice pronounces my number for lab mission. I abandon my deconstructed morsels, quite resistible. (Sometimes the food changes shape or color as we try to eat. I'm not sure what it is.) Anyway, all hunger is forgotten in my rising panic of memory duty. I'm afraid to remember and more afraid of all I do not know.

The Voice is my mistress. My number is my ruler. I come when it calls.



I'm in the room.

The Caretakers point silently at the chair where I take in times past. I am Lolo, a rapt child, and obedient, I sit. I rest my feet upon the ledge, my wrists upon the ridge, and the chair binds me fast in tethers like slithering snakes, what the Voice calls my safety restraints.

This chair is warm and tender. I am molded in its grip. It shifts for me and

almost sucks me in. It's almost like there's no chair there? I'm comfortable but cannot move an inch.

Then the Caretakers sidle close. Their raspy robes scratch the edges of my hands. Their damp cool fingers almost touch my cheeks as they check my chains. They smell of mushrooms and soil after rain.

These descriptions are from times past. The labyrinth holds no such odors, no soggy sights, no dripping sounds. These eerie fragments rise from memories I cannot reach—all forgotten but the body's sense of things.

One Caretaker pushes a science cart near me, laden with instruments of trials. I watch trembling as they choose a syringe, fill it, tap the needle's dripping point. One moves close, the other at my other side. I cannot move. I squeeze my eyes tight shut. I feel it pierce against my neck, the queasy liquid glugging in. For an instant, their potion stings and burns.

I am altered. The room swivels and shifts.

Roused and impaired, I submit to this story of another now.



This time, I'm in some foreign city, unbeknownst to me until now. Walls like mazes, gray and concrete; streets of cobbled stone. Burnt out wrecks of metal. Barbed wire rolling, like tumbleweeds in breeze.

This sound makes me afraid: the rasping metal burs, scratching against the stone.

All is light and noise and wind. My thin scrap of dress is torn, dirty, bloodied, and whipping in the gale. Indistinctly, there's roaring overhead. Then the wail of sirens, a shriek that rises and falls like a wobbling wheel; it rises and falls, but never ends. A voice chants endless warning static over broken speakers.

I look up into the narrow space of sky between two towers. There, in pale white sky, I see their ships, black silhouettes. Shaped like saucers. Shaped like cigars. Shaped like snowflakes.

I stand, buffeted by breeze, almost falling, and brace my palm against the building near. The rough of granite scratches palms.

I look around, quite panicked. My sister was just here.

We were together. And now she's gone.

I turn in slow rotation and frantic, call her name. A name I can't remember.

A name I can't know. Nor can I even hear myself above the roar and shriek and wind and the endless warning voice. So her name remains unknown.

As I move in slow ballet, calling all directions, I stop dead still. There in the alley is a rushing flood, and it flows so fast toward me, a river of swirling, churning blood.

I stumble back. I can't outpace it, so I stand there as it overcomes, and on it flows. I am here, to my ankles in blood.

And now, above the other sounds, I hear the shrills of screaming kids.

This idea comes from somewhere—I don't know where.

I bend and bow down low. I dip my finger in the pool of blood. I draw one stroke against the granite wall. And then another. I'm writing a message: *I love you. I'll find you. I'll see you in Paris.*

Somehow, my vision pulls back—perhaps, I'm caught in the wave of blood—and I see the wall is the size of the world: a million messages, penned and scrawled in desperate longing by every sister and brother and forlorn cousin. This endless wall is filled with infinite graffiti to those who forget or are forgotten.

I won't forget.

I won't forget.

Then, coming toward me, the Harvesters. More clanking, rasping metal. They hulk and splash and pace inexorably toward me, to take me apart, to swallow the useful parts, to spit out the rest. I'm backing up, I'm backing up. It's not enough. The arm of the Harvester reaches to pin me. I understand the source of blood.



The room again.

I'm hoarse from screams. My back is wet from pooling sweat.

I'm holding this to me: this feel of writing, my fingertip's wet journey . . . how blood and body come together to leave words behind. I didn't know I knew such things.

If I could move, I'd pinch myself and secure the memory in pain. Instead, I grit my teeth against forgetting, grind my jaw to force back loss. I strive to hold—in the muscles of my wrists and the space behind my eyes. I hold the

feeling. How it felt to form those words, how I used my gesture to make a mark that might survive.

I hold this to me. I hold it close.

The Voice speaks. "Where were you this time?"

"I'm in a city. A place I don't recognize."

"Did you know where you were?"

"I don't remember."

"Were you alone?"

"My sister . . ."

"Were you with your sister?"

"Maybe. I think I feel someone beside me. But when I turn around, no one is there."

"What did she look like?"

"I . . . um." I struggle hard through broken memories, through disjointed synapses. I try to bring it to mind. A face like mine, but different? A smile that crinkles around the edges just before it starts. An expression in the eyes. Anything.

I can't reach it. The Caretakers watch me with their empty faces. They gaze from pale expanse of nothing. Nothing below the eyes but four quivering slits that might be how they hear or how they smell or how they breathe?

"I can't remember."

"Maybe she wasn't there after all?"

"Maybe . . ."

"So you were alone?"

"Maybe."

"What did the alley look like?"

It goes like this, on and on. The Voice speaks. I answer. The Voice questions. I answer. The Voice pokes and pushes and prods, points me to some vision I can't quite fathom. The same questions, altered slightly, just a bit. Sometimes, the same words again, which feels like a trick.

I falter, unsure. I tell it again. The Voice sounds satisfied, or perhaps, I only imagine it so, dreaming a feeling for a machine person with no such feels.

I am distracted these times, thinking only of what it could mean to make words like that, words that remain. To leave a story that, whatever else is lost, the story stays. I handle this curiosity, and my thoughts are wild and bold.

Meanwhile, the Voice speaks on, and I answer—and answer more 'til my

mouth is parched desert-dry. (From somewhere, a stretch of fractal-cracked earth.) The Caretakers drip water on my tongue, like to a wee hamster in a cage.

The Voice asks me of the wall, and I describe it best I can: a boundless harum-scarum scrawl of “Find me,” “Find you,” “Have you seen,” “I’ll meet you,” “Lost,” “Missing,” “Found,” like a history of the world.

The Caretakers draw near again, cautious as they always are, though, of course, there’s little I can do restrained so.

They inject my veins once more, but this fluid is a sudden rush of joy. I lean lolling against the seat from which I cannot anyhow stir or stray, and I let the warm wash over me, like gold and liquid light.

Again, the Voice asks, and I retell a story of blood and screams and harvest that now feels oddly lightened in my heart because how can there be such loss and terror when I am fixed here in the light?

I begin to conjure this story in the moment of my mind.

I dream of a time such that I could write. As I did in nows like that one. As I did to leave a message, some feels or thoughts that could survive.

This is how I grasp the thread that takes me from this now until a time I cannot see.

I have these thoughts. And in my dream, these blissful thoughts that I could write again, scrawl such messages . . . all is coming clear this now, next now, all time, forever. I’ll record this now, so next time I ask about before, it all appears . . .

Bumping and bobbling against this thought comes the next, just as quick but sharp: if I write, I must have blood.

If I write, I must have blood.

The Voice carps and worries on, and in my golden state, I recount past horrors. Before the Caretakers came the Harvesters, clomping and stomping with earth-shaking strength along all streets, snatching and stealing any shrieking signs of life. This I know. This I remember. Such things I could not know before, but I know them now, and I tell it with . . . with *boredsom* bliss, still floating on the fluid.

But beneath these illusions, I am me, somewhere far but almost touchable, still Lolo. And sneaky, I begin to plot with wily cunning—how to find the blood I seek.

Such blood could only be my own.

I have a thought of blades, of science instruments like on the cart. This cart

I cannot reach. I am still bound. Yet all memory duties must come to an end as all questioning sessions. So as I speak through raptured fog, I keep close eye on these torment gadgets. Same time, I see the Caretakers keep close eye on me, but I refuse all fear.

Our talking on-and-on is interrupted by a wailing turmoil. The room blares and squawks and shakes while lights flash a blue-to-yellow revolution. I sense I know this sound and what it signifies, but I can remember nothing of it. I know only a cold and creeping dread that almost breaks the bliss.

The Caretakers move quick to a panel upon the wall, sheltered from my sight.

This alarm is too loud for my tender hearing, too bright for my sheltered eyes, and it crackles hair-raised against my painful skin.

We live most times in gentle light and mild air and serenely yielding floors. This is not that. I writhe and tremble against the blitz.

Then I know: this brief, din-drenched instance, I am a moment freed. My restraints are unlocked and cast aside.

Still bound by languid burnout, my futile muscles are weakened by the drug. I fight to move. I reach first with my mind to scramble upon the other side. This battle is submerged, fought somewhere low within my muddled mind. It is a skirmish buried deep.

While the Caretakers fiddle and tinker in their silent, nasty way at controls I cannot see, I feel a screaming panic, almost near enough to reach. Take it. The syringe. I tell myself, *Do it now. Reach. Try.*

I reach first for the feeling (fear, love, anger, loss—it is written in scrawls on that infinite wall). *Reach. Try.*

I reach for the syringe.

For the briefest moment, I hold it in my palm and then tuck it deep and hidden in my sleeve.

The brightness in my eyes recedes, the wail becomes a whine, and the Caretakers abandon their secret task upon the console. They are unspeaking as always.

The tethers bind themselves against my wrists once more.

Our peculiar labyrinth sometimes spasms in weeping fits and moody outbursts of its own.

It came so slowly yet so quickly. I almost cannot fathom it happened as a fact.

I think perhaps 'twas only a hallucination, a lucid delusion, one verse or chapter in this waking dream.

I think I thought to move my hand and yet was still.

I think I *visioned* this cold danger against the pale lifelines of my palm, yet it remains on the science cart, undisturbed. The things I think exist are seldom real.

Yet I feel it still within my sleeve. An intrusion, cold and steel. It waits.

I also wait. Knowing, cold and cunning and not at all afraid, that this now is not the same as nows before. This now has changed.

Soon.

Another word for time is *soon*.



Night comes. I lie quiet in my bunk, breathing as steady as any rapt child who's forgotten before's nightmares.

"Lolo?" Gor says from below, but I pretend to sleep.

Soon, he's sleeping, too. I listen and breathe, awash in his snuffling snores.

In this bubble, he is my courage, my heart. He doesn't know what I'm about to do. I didn't tell him. I wouldn't dare. I lie here, my chest beating fast. I am afraid.

I am *very* afraid.

But pain is just pain. It is fleeting. It is always forgotten. It can be fought.

Gor murmurs in his sleep. Crying out in the flicker of before's that might be our own—or maybe not.

I rummage in the hollow at the side of my bunk and produce my stolen good. I sit up, inspect its fierce, sharp prick in the greenish flicker that *luminates* all nights.

I grit my teeth against my tears and yelps and clench my jaw tight shut. In the pallid softness of my forearm, like the serpent's underbelly, I plunge the needle.

Pain is just pain.

I scratch and drag. I make the first cut.

With the needle's honed point, I etch the first tremulous symbol against the gray wall above my bunk. I inscribe it tiny. I cannot already know the size of

this splintered and perplexing story, but I know my ink is hard won, and my canvas is not in endless supply.

The first symbol is a swing set.

One frame, two swings. One for each sister.

I've forgotten letters, I've forgotten words. If I sit very still and hold my feeling to myself, I can almost remember how it felt to shape them. Or rather, the feels they gave: some clarity, some truth, something not vague. But their forms are lost to me. Their contours, their silhouettes, their downward lines and horizontal strokes. Gone. Lost to some before.

I trace a swing.

More cuts. More blood. More jaw-clenched tears.

I trace a cloud.

More cuts. More breath.

I sketch a blurry portrait of a Harvester, the creepy-crawly limbs that reach and grasp.

I draw a wall.

Pain is just pain, but this hurt is growing desperate. I'm crying now through gritted teeth. My bloody handiwork blurs through the wet lens of my tears.

I need something to stop the blood. I shimmy out of overshirt and undershirt, back into overshirt. The soft undershirt I roll up tight against my bleeding scratched arm. I pull the cloth against the pain.

I pull it tight—and tighter still.

It helps.



Our clothes are not our own.

Each morning before breakfast, we queue as the Voice calls out our monikers and take our turns in dressing rooms. There are lots of dressing rooms but not so many as our bunks. I wait, patient with all rapt children until a dressing room comes free.

With fingertips, I open up the cubby as I do each meal to take my fodder tray. The cubby's empty, waiting for my dirty clothes. I take off all, except the bandage shirt, which comes slow, stiff with drying blood. Such ugly scabs. The shirt is stained. I wad up all ugliness, toss it inside, close the cubby shut.

After, the room cleans me. Mist comes from all spots at once. It's wet and dry,

all the same time. It makes me fresh. But also stings so bad in my fresh cuts, I must chomp down on my other hand to keep from yelling out. It stinks like clean, and on my arm, it feels like a thousand needles new.

My cleanse all done, I check the cubby once again. Inside, there's all new clothes. Just like the ones I put inside but clean and mint condition. Don't smell like me. Or much at all.

I wonder, shower thoughts—are these the same pajamas, just cleaned? Like I am cleaned, and at the same time, too? Or does the cubby take the old, swallow it like breakfast, and just as quick produce the new?

It is a mystery.

These clothes shed no new light. The undershirt is lily-white, no sign nor smear of crusty blood. I wrap my arm as before. I put on the other clothes.

I'll do the same again.

This world makes all things from itself. It knows what we need and when and where and how to give. Somehow, our fingers speak to cubbies everywhere, and cubbies give us what we need. Then, take back when we're done.

But now, I own one thing. A syringe whose sharpness belongs only to me. That is what makes it sweet.



At breakfast, Gor asks me, "What's bad?" He sees my dark-shadowed eyes, my pain-stretched smile. He touches me on my lacerated limb, and I don't mean to, but I flinch to the feel.

He doesn't understand. I see his sadness. But he shrugs those feels away. We do this always; there is so much unknown. We cannot hold it. It is slipped and gone.

I'm Lolo. He's Gor. This much is true.

It's not enough.

"Eat this pudding," he says, pushing his cup toward me, his smile a question. This face I know.

"Thank you, Gor," I say. "Yummy." He watches, now smiling sure.

I eat. It's very sweet.

(tess)

HERE, WHERE CHILDREN PLAY. FLOOR IS SOFT, SITTING cross-legged, sit in circle 'round some castle built from blocks—take one block away, add one block. Blocks stick together. Children build higher.

Holding marbles, squeezing tight. Marbles smooth and polished, touch is safe, feels like home. Marble is orange, flecked with red fire. Marble is blue and turquoise like a planet to hold all life. Marble is violet. Marble is yellow and gold, and marble stares with a narrowed eye.

Holding hands behind back, touching marbles, squeezing tight. Feel afraid.

Building the castle—take one block away, add one block. Voice speaks from room. On the wall is a castle. Seeing picture, listening to the Voice, building castle.

Marbles inside one hand, then inside the other. Marble in mouth, held against cheek. Feel worried.

Marble tastes like . . . Tess. Does not go down throat. Marble stays in mouth.

Tess. Tess spits out marble. Marble goes in hand. Stomach hurts. Throat sore. Nose snuffles. Pain is fear,