

THE STONE SHIP

by Judit Hollow

First Prize Prose - Adult

Where Österlen's lacy coastline unfurls under the bewitching horizon on the top of Kåseberga ridge, I finally catch sight of Ale's stones—or Ales stenar as the inhabitants of the Skåne region in Sweden often refer to them. Surrounded by dolmens and graves dating back to the Bronze Age, the monument consists of fifty-nine stone slabs placed in a boat-like pattern, constituting the country's largest remaining ship setting. Nobody really knows whether this peculiar "vessel" perched on a rigid seaside cliff once functioned as a gathering place for casual afternoon chats or an old-school sun calendar, but it has been noted that at the time of summer solstices the sun sets at its northwest point and rises at the opposite point at winter solstices.

Unflinched by the sharp splinters of sunrays, hoping to be able to spot him aboard, my eyes trail the giant-shaped stones, dreaming different characters into each of them. Chatting on the internet, living in distant corners of the world, we have been planning this meeting for countless months. The tiny boats swinging like multicolored tombs beneath the rocks remind me of how secure I felt on my way here - a country that I would finally be able to call my second home.

Envisioning possible futures, my mind keeps wandering back to the ones who would be left behind on the other side of the sea. There they come, one by one, fragments of memories unspooling in tainted colours, the dust-laden sunsets with the asylum seeking boy who saved me from sleeping in the subway after I escaped from my abusive boyfriend.

Standing on the ridge, I inhale the petrichor-scented June air. Midsommar is now celebrated with untamed dances all over the country as maypoles, like flowery masts, brighten up the verdant landscape. It should be the very summer solstice of our relationship as well, but the moment I lay eyes on the furrowed brows I sense instinctively that it will prove to be an all-consuming task for me to keep the internal demons he has been fighting for all his life at bay. All of a sudden, as if a heavy weight was lifted between us in the fertile silence, he becomes

that twelve-year-old boy again—sitting on a packed train, with a ripening frown, ready to be sent off by his parents to spend the summer vacation with relatives. As the sultry tones of his last lingering white lies fill the evening, there's nothing left for us but to turn away from the ruins and head back to the car.

It appears the ship spills over under the weight of sunbeams and sinks behind my back. I close my eyes to the kaleidoscope of ancient petroglyph sites I have visited so far.

Beneath Ale's stones, there are no kings or brave chieftains sleeping, but layers of several other boat formations hide under the surface of the ground, waiting to be discovered by wannabe time travellers just like myself.