

**THE
OAKLAND
REVIEW**

VOLUME XLVI

CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY
PITTSBURGH, PA
SPRING 2021

The Oakland Review
Volume XLVI

Since 1973, *The Oakland Review* has been curated and crafted at Carnegie Mellon University. For the hungry, by the young. We prioritize an eclectic publication of fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, translations, playwriting, screenwriting, interviews, and artwork, all reviewed and selected by our undergraduate editorial board and faculty advisor associate professor of English Lauren Shapiro. In pursuit of the avant-garde and protection of the raw.

The Oakland Review is published annually and welcomes submissions from writers and artists of all backgrounds. It has been recognized nationally by the Associated Writing Programs, placing as a finalist in their Undergraduate Journal competition. For more information on submitting to our journal, please visit our submit page.

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ISSN 1093-3891
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

We are thrilled to present you with the 46th edition of The Oakland Review, Carnegie Mellon University's student-run literary and art journal.

This issue has the unique distinction of being produced entirely virtually due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meeting virtually has certainly been a dramatic change from our usual in-person meetings: instead of discussing over snacks in the cozy chairs of the Gladys Schmitt Creative Writing Center ("The Glad"), we discussed over Zoom with our readers sharing their thoughts from multiple time zones and countries. I'm sure that all of us have felt the difficulty of communicating through a microphone and video camera, and working past these technical barriers was an adjustment. However, the soul of The Oakland Review held strong. Our critical and emotional responses to each piece were shared just as analytically and passionately, our readers still bravely shared their perspective and openly listened to their peers, and we joined together again in our communal love of literature to produce a journal that we are proud to publish. We hope that this issue provides you with a space to reflect, to be entertained, and to enjoy diving into the worlds that our authors have created.

We would like to thank Carnegie Mellon University's Department of English, the Creative Writing Program, and most importantly Professor Lauren Shapiro, our faculty advisor, for the endless support which they have provided us. We would also like to thank the authors whose contributions form this issue--thank you for sharing so boldly, and we are so proud to offer your work to others. Most of all, we would like to thank our hard-working board members, the students of Professor Shapiro's literary publishing course. You contributed endless time and energy into making this issue the best that it could be, consistently going above and beyond to improve this journal artistically and logistically. Thank you for dedicating your time and sharing your thoughts, and we sincerely appreciate your commitment to The Oakland Review.

We hope that everyone is healthy and safe and that you enjoy this edition of The Oakland Review that we are so glad to present to you. Happy reading!

Sincerely,

Rachael Johnson and Sophie Bernstein
Editors-in-Chief

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*Myths are public dreams,
dreams are private myths.*
- Joseph Campbell

Discovered

When Fate peered out
from the weekend 2 mainstage
gestured his pick hand
at the unshapen clay crowd
and said,
KID YOU'RE GONNA BE SOMEBODY
I coulda sword he was pointing
right at me, although beside me
dancing drunk was the radiant son
of an oil baron

Reading Poetry

Reading poetry in translation in order
to evade the necessity of labour:
To rewrite the epigraph in pencil,
a shift in meaning by way of grammatical need,
the ablative case of the folded page.

The Finnish language has 15 cases
but only 13 remain regularly used.
The Finnish language is called Finnish
in every language but in Finnish itself.

We can try arguing the use of one
to substitute another begins
with location-bound vernacular
but we should try split this down
to the phonemic level. The way an atom gets split

and the universe forgets to care.
This universe is under no obligation to care.

I have decided to be under utmost obligation
to care by way of automated opposition:
disregarding the Proto-Indo-European reconstruction
as a form of talking therapy.
The absurdity of interpreting language
by way of decoding verbal ejaculations:
the outdated ideal of a bilingual billet-doux.

I knew I would enjoy your writing,
although I must confess,
I've only ever read the footnotes.

AMANDA DETTMANN

After Hours, The Workplace Dress Code “Just for Women” Confesses to The First Female Staff Member They Can Find

You're distracting me. From my job. How rude
 you bear bareness.
Another black bra strap game? You're fired.

I can get dirty with taking you down. Draw you
 as a stick figure 8 fashion
Hefted in high neckline. All hallow. No ho jokes.

Your piss-colored “pencil skirt, (non)proper coverage”
 thumb-tacks my tactics
Even harder, stapling my religion into damning detention

Love—your death glare... Opposites attract, you know?
 Anyway, “appropriate”
Needs to get out of line with your underwear outline. Stop

Coloring past neutral, cuticles buffering
 sheer panty hose. A no-no.
Straightjacket that sit-up slouched posture. Wait—

Where are you going? The ladies' restroom?
 Bring me with you?
I can step on your 4-inch-tic-a-tac-toilet-paper-heeled-toe...
Let me?

Owe you. Unapologetic skin. Your butterfly
 tramp stamp flying
Throughout the office. Your unshaven desk

Chair legs no longer hazed, but a maze of
 growth. Undisturbed
Planting. No depiction of panting. Realness

In every fold. Back fat unowned. Tube topping
 my voyeurism into visible
Vandalism I judge. For you. I love. For you.

After all, I am the animal here. Galloping across keyboards
like a marionette manipulating
Your blouse, your see-through stereotype mouth. Without me,

Nobody wins misogynist blackjack. No blazer
frees female birds.
There'd just be tape, and nothing feathered stuck in place.

The night before you bring me to your boss,
make love to me like an exposed shoulder.
I beg to be that kind of beauty, to be

Resisted and revealing. A crumpled
treasure chest of conformity.
A smart fool. When I say this, you'll strand me with a kiss

In the garbage can. For your daughter's pantsuit.
Her new body of law.

Putting a Time Machine to Good Use

Everyone desires a time machine and hopes
to witness the seven days of creation, or visit angels
on a stroll through Eden, watching the world as it sheds
its first skin, the dough of history rising in its bowl.
Or maybe you'd wish to witness tanks rolling
along Main before a president beds down with roses.
We've all philosophized, put our boots to the fire
and argued past midnight over a fifth of Jack Daniels
and s'mores as to who exactly should take the bullet
for the twist and turn of history's combobulations.
I say we nab the overly selfish, the ones who use
their brothers like lumber. Put the machine to practical
use by dialing them dizzy to the slow pitch
of childhood on that day they couldn't hit the ball.
Or whiz them back to their sophomore prom, that heroic date
where they danced a queen home and left her
holding a bucket full of tears. I've gone back to when I lied
to a girl, then unbuttoned another much too quickly
on the plastic back seat of a '68 Impala. I've relived
the teasing of the kid with a limp, the water ballooning
of a frog-goggled neighbor, and the pointing of fingers
at the grade school pudge who wandered the halls
like a cloud without blue sky. I've visited myself
upside down and sweating, pinned to the mat,
a high school bug, ass in the air and shoulders flat, the classic pose
of total humiliation, while the orchid girl took photos
for the yearbook. The truth is we need the pain.
to grow. We mature like the slowest potato,
shouldering packed soil and absorbing chemical
memories, our seasoning to flesh, the meal we need to eat.

Pause from Your Travels

There's a place nearby for you to rest (here)
Did you look at this place and move on? (there)
I am waiting for you in this place (here)
I'm afraid that you are actually still (there)

Now I feel that you have arrived (thanks)
Let's look out this window together (breathe)
I can see that you are seeing light (thanks)
You can see that I'm looking at a bird (breathe)

And the purple leaves that have blown in the window (yes)
Meets the air that we have pushed from our mouths (out)
Together they weave a basket for your mother (yes)
For when she emerges from this cocoon and becomes (out)

We will all forget this moment in the sense that we (real)
Cannot ever be here again, beloved as it is (dream)
I take your hand now and it is the size of your heart (real)
And I use your hand to wave goodbye to myself (dream)

Pickled Beets

When she's lying on her deathbed, imploring you with those sunken hazel eyes and wringing out her shaking branch-thin limbs with her arthritic swollen hands, your heart cracks and your chest caves and you tell her you will marry her grandson and yes you will take the ring that she has hidden in her sock drawer. And when she's lying on her deathbed, they thrust a bowl of ice chips into your hands and you gently lie each flake on the tip of her tongue, which sneaks out between her thin chapped lips, as if a snake craving a view of the world, the spoon shakes in your hands and you worry that you are thrusting the spoon too forcefully or that she will choke on too large of an ice cube, since her dentures aren't in, and oh my god what if your clumsy spoon placement or foolish choice in ice cube size is the reason she dies and not the cancer? And when she's lying on her deathbed, she tells you she's not hungry, that her swollen cancer filled belly is full, but her daughters asked you to feed her and so you rip apart her fridge in search for something she could eat, something she would enjoy. You pull out spoiled milk, hardened apples, a carton of eggs, moldy cheese, and when your hands finally grasp a cool jar of home pickled beets, you dump the bleeding clumps into a white bowl and you try not to think of blood. And when she's lying on her deathbed, you painstakingly chop a beet-orb in half, in fourths, in eighths, *I love beets* she murmurs and her tongue snakes out between her lips, finally you are satisfied with the size of the beet and you drop it into her mouth. And when she is lying on her deathbed, she takes her time and pulls the vinegary succor from each beet, small sucking sounds echo around the room and you then realize you are left alone with her, you wonder where are her grandchildren, where are her daughters that forced you to feed her, suddenly her hands, wrapped in papery thin skin, grasp yours and she croaks. And when she's lying on her deathbed, you rip your hands from her

strangely fierce grasp and push yourself away from her, suddenly you are against the wall and her daughters run into the room calling mom, mom, are you okay? and then, after a harrowing few minutes, her breathing evens out and she turns towards her bowl of beets wishing for more, but you have left the room, running from the family and the death smell, your hands stained beet-red.

House

house
in the tall grass / lays
on the crooks of godless hands
canary blemished from the bruising of silver locks
the door's moon slot quivers where lights are null / I churn
in these obelisk darks / under African cricket sounds / choking softly
around the python of stuffed down / there albino geckos tongue the mosquito
spiders wrap moths in their silks / ants hex together in sixes
laboured with the dead beetle on joined thorax / there dark-
ness wolfs me as in The Veldt / where I am mother and father
lion and lioness / there crooked fingers foreclose mouths of I
canines shanked down.....to bird teeth / feathery
without wills of flight /thorn-tree winglets are
ripped from my blacks.....while Valkyries sleep
on last legs / tonguing.....gravestones for salts
amongst the willowing.....grasses / I hush to fade

Upwords

If your arm can reach it, it's air.
If it can't, it's sky.
Skywriting is the grandest
for being up there,
and should be used only
for big life moments:
a proposal of marriage,
or of divorce, or the revealing
of consequential lab results.
Last week's message seemed to fit
til it turned out to be
a pop star thanking the fans.
The problem of skywriting
is the opposite of
the problem of getting a tattoo—
what to say when soon
your message will be cloud.

Am i happy or am i full of holes ?

today i had a dream
that my daughter woke me

for a glass of milk

when i woke i realized
i have

no daughter

when i woke i realized
i have

no milk

to give

SHARED TITLE

You say we should try owning something *together*.
I want a car. My own car, not to share,

old car, not like other cars, easier to know its mine.
I've spent my whole life not having one.

Is joint ownership of a 1979 Jeep Wagoneer
with wood paneling something I can adjust to?

I've grown into being your emergency contact.
Am I ready to look in the rearview mirror

without asking *Is this mine?*

*

Without asking *Is this mine,*

am I ready to look in the rearview mirror
I've grown into? Being your emergency contact

with wood paneling. Something I can adjust to
is joint ownership of a 1979 Jeep Wagoneer.

I've spent my whole life not having one
old car, not like other cars, easier to know its mine

.

I want a car, my own car, not to share.
You say we should try owning something together

.

The Skinned Dogs

Entering, I:

“you see me embracing the trivialities of this my life
“so that I can work my way back to the profundities
“of my youth – and thus I arm myself for
“the ravages of my dotage”

“But sir, this is a Wendy’s. May I take your order, please?”

yes, for these are my servants – do you see –
these are my servants and here are my orders

But what I say:

“My father often eats at Wendy’s. I will find him here.”

Later, though, I join a table of strangers.

The first stranger:

“yes, I had a puppet once, but ...”

And that’s where I stop listening. I’ve heard this line before,
and more than once, my conversation tending to such.

I untangle strings of my own, you know.
I don’t mean, “my puppet’s strings” -
just these strands right here. And listen, I really don’t mean,
“I wanna hear about your puppet.”

The second stranger has begun to speak:

“the litmus will not strip – the line does not appear.

“Time itself is wearing out.

“I ordered this milk, but –”

“you ordered milk at a Wendy’s?”

“I ordered milk, but it immediately soured.

“*Time is wearing out.* See that couple?”

“They were just now sharing an umbrella.
“But then the umbrella flew away, and I swear to God
“I could hear it screaming in pain.”

“True, some things I can’t even begin to explain:
“viz., those kids with their tongues sticking out in the rain.”

The third stranger:

“Huh. My dogs hate the rain.
“My dogs, you see, have been skinned.
“We have been around, have seen some things.
“And I too had a puppet once, but –”

I rise, leave my tray, say nothing
as my napkin floats uselessly away.

Outside:

The skinned dogs
draw close as though
they found in me a mirror.

I demur, I demur.
I point them to the door.

(I've not spent my life growing clearer, only closer to the floor.)

YVES TANGUY

Yves, you're a rhyme with yourself. Let's
speak about genealogies. Not by birth,
but similarity. Alike to Miró, Noguchi,
and Bosch. To be related, what a thrill.
That's how I feel looking at your gummy
pinks. You seem familiar with dentistry. Yves
Tanguy, you paint sand-crawling extractions.
Members of your encampments appear twisted,
bent or dented. In a wasteland, what can be
mended? Or resurrected? You remind me that
categories, like *old* and *new*, are collapsing
volumes. A day breaks, same as it did when
you were born at the dawn of the Century
on the fifth of January.

THE GOD IN THE GIRLS

The women I collect are better than I am:

gold thread braids their manes,
electricity buzzes their veins,
Shakespeare & Newton pumps their brains.

Sometimes, I feel I've tricked them
into loving me, into wrapping me up in their
Aphrodite arms and tupeloed laughter, cooing

There, there, sister of my soul
or
Slow songs, they for skinny hoes.

Maybe I did play a trick. Maybe I invented some nonsense.

I brewed some tea,
turned up the heat,
and got 'em nice and drowsy,
and just before they fell asleep
aziz-baziz-joon-powsy

Upon waking, of course, they played along,
for even black power *BAM* is but a sheet of

cellophane, a rose & droopy bud: One cannot fool
such gracious gods who see through magic tricks but

RSVP, anyways, to my sequined, disco pith.

DANIEL CRASNOW

When You Call A Boy Pretty

Eyes open to haloed bodies. To strobe lights cycling primary colors,
To pink stilettoes, and bleeding mascara. To a crop top or dress
To a dance floor and chasers, to cigarette traces and my lover
Watching me watch him. Our eyes are locked, and he is a mess

Of pink stilettoes and bleeding mascara, of a crop top, once dress
And wet hair gel and limp wrists frozen in the spotlight, traces,
Of me watching him. Our eyes are locked, and he is a mess
Of fingers, symphonic on faces and hair flying to the wrong places

And wet hair, gel, and limp wrists frozen in the spotlight, traces
Of glow sticks and black lights. Of poppers, sweat, bleach, and smut
And fingers, symphonic on faces and hair pulled to the wrong places
In pleasure or pain. Watch that camera flash boy! Learn to strut

In glow sticks and black lights, with poppers, sweat, bleach, and smut.
Make the camera catch your best; you know we pose the way we dance—
Pleasure or pain. Watch that camera flash boy! Then you learn to strut
Cause there ain't no world in which we'll go unseen. That's our romance,

The camera catching our best, you knowing me, posing the way we dance
On the cover of magazines and TV screens so they'll remember our names.
I promise you, there ain't no world in which we'll go unseen. Our romance,
Two people, knowing the other is worth the millions. The music. Fame—

You— on the cover of magazines and TV screens. They'll remember your name.
Eyes, opening to haloed bodies, and strobe lights, cycling primary colors,
Two people, knowing the other is worth the millions. The music. Fame
On the dance floor, with too many chasers, and cigarette traces, and you.

Forgiveness feels like moving out

I don't blame you, you know.
Sometimes I've made myself a doormat
trying to hold onto keys to the house.

My Mother and I Join the Circus

We'd been through all the routines,
knife juggling, seal training,
axe throwing. Once we performed
the "spectacular woman sawed
in half" act. We both survived.
Finally, it was time for the high wire
performance without a net, the last of our bits,
one we'd been practicing all my life.
She pondersome, a bell of gravity,
so I followed her up the ladder, ignoring the clowns
rattling below on their tricycles, tossing
sawdust and honking their horns.

Aloft, on the platform's edge,
we wavered, grappling with each other,
she pushing me forward, urging
me to the wire that whipped out
in front of us, long and almost invisible.
With no umbrella, no parachute,
no safety anything, I wanted to throw
her to the clowns, let the crowd feast
on her disaster. But that's not how
we ever do anything, not even the time
she shot me from the cannon, she cackling
as she held the lighter, me smudged-faced
and mostly broken. *I hate you,*
I said, as I clutched her hand.
Don't look down, my mother whispered.

Loon Lake

She lay awake in her sleeping bag, wearing Lon's shirt. Should she wake the others? Though she didn't hear it now. The sky showed through the dark weave of tree branches just outside the window. She moved her hands lightly over the shirt's heavy cotton ribbing. Her dream about Lon, playing his flute—perhaps that was the noise that had woken her, the sound of his flute in her dream. She tried to imagine what he might be doing now, over in England. Had the interview at the music school gone well? But she couldn't get a clear picture of it so she played the going to sleep game instead, the one she knew from childhood. *In a bed, in a cabin, in a forest, near a lake*—she listened. No, that was Martha snoring—*in North America, on the planet Earth*...there it was again, the way a flute would sound if a wild thing were playing it, a nymph, a satyr, the wind or—a loon. Yes, it must be a loon, the wild call of the loon. To her it seemed sad, and lonesome. And what a lonesome place this was, all lake and bog and forest—so different from the city and its lakes, different even from the country, the miles and miles of dairy farm just a few hours drive to the south.

The call had come from out there on the edge of the lake, issued alone from some mossy green perch, green like the green of Lon's shirt, a green that smelled like a lake with a rocky bottom, brown pine needles on an old old forest floor, a weak blue sky, cold thin air, brown and green and blue, the color of the favorite marble she still kept, safe, in her jewelry box. On the planet Earth, somewhere in the Milky Way. Moving through the universe at calamitous speed, the way Paul had driven, 85 mph, passing twenty cars at once to arrive before anyone else. That afternoon she and Mimi went swimming in lake water cold as ice, water that had been ice just a few weeks before. The cold caught her by surprise, cold that slowed everything down—movement, time, thought. It was this

slowing down she had had to fight as she made her way back to shore and up on to the beach, wearing Lon's shirt. And back at the cabin, Lon's shirt clinging to her like a kind of second skin, wet, amphibious. She had fallen to the floor, unable to catch her breath. Her mother would say she should go back to eating meat—the nutritional index for a girl her age recommended two servings of red meat, chicken or pork a day to replace the iron lost in the menstrual cycle. And fat, high cholesterol animal fat to protect the vital organs, lubricate the tissues, and insulate the body from the cold.

Strontium

His rare glow-in-the-dark intellect pricked
an interest; his polyglot mastery
of French, Italian, and German upticked
his allure; his tailored V-necked jerseys
fit right in with the form-fitting fashions
at G Bar where he carped about tenure,
Staten Island, and Medieval femmes.
His quips were highbrow; his tattoo, demure;
his academe bent was one I got... Yet
he refused to trek by train to Brooklyn
and felt competitive towards my pet –
a mutt who'd've loved him if he'd let him.
He now snubs me like a dog on the street
as my left-behind socks warm his cold feet.

Diosa Decoding



Abuela at the Interface



A Girl is a Gun

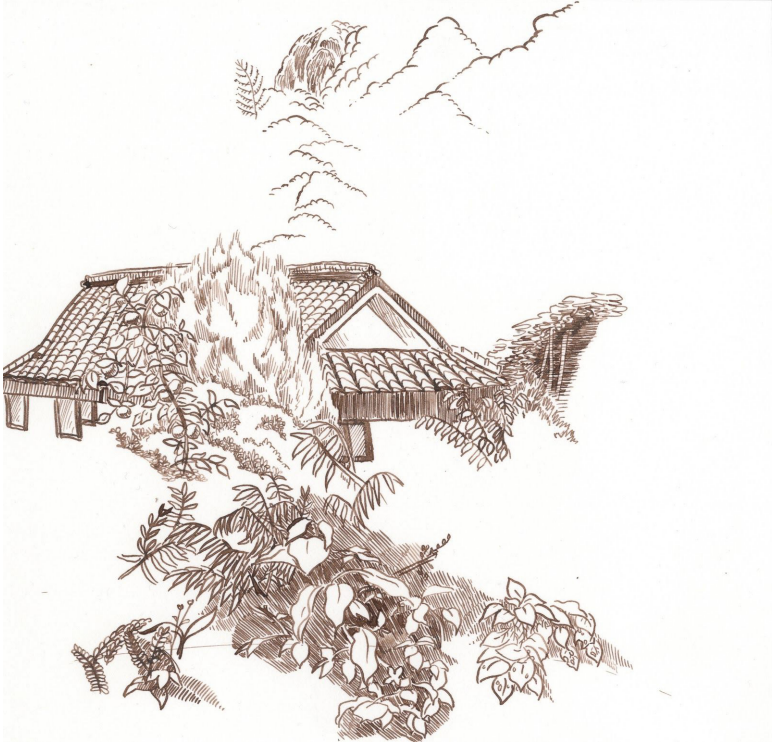




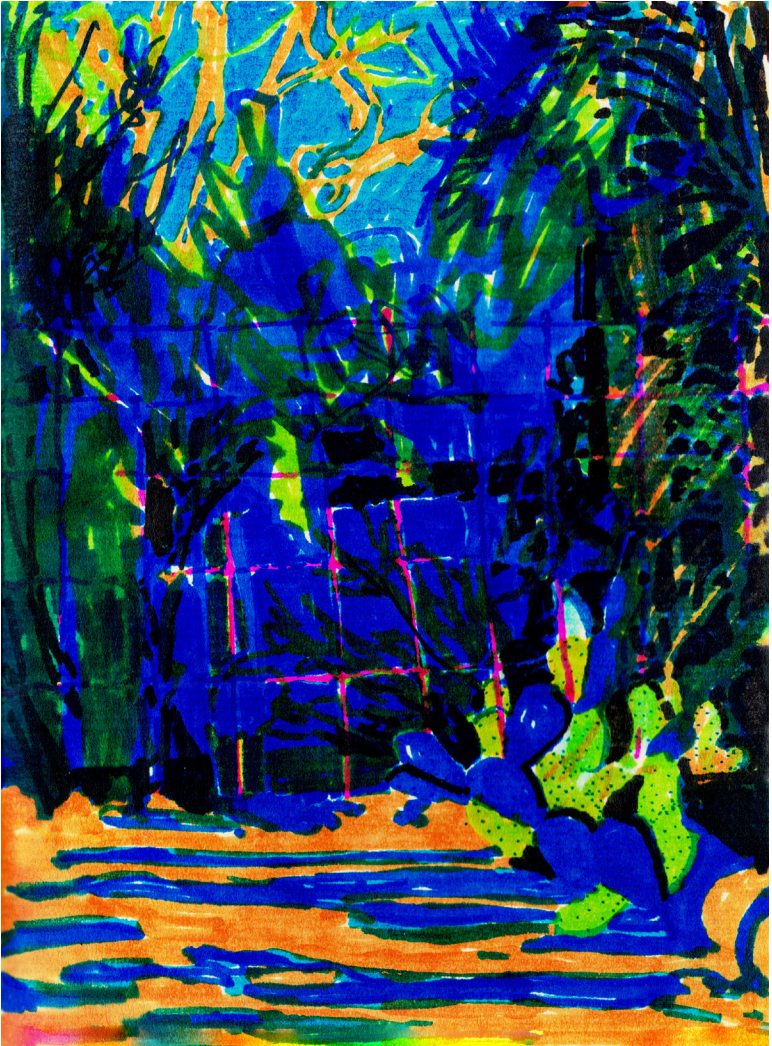
Western View



Crescent



Tantrum



Blush Dusk



A Passion

I.

you walked in on me at the sinks in the men's restroom. In the literal nanosecond afterwards, we locked eyes in the mirror. i felt the pulsation of love in that swift moment, even with the sour face you made afterwards. Who knew that, on that autumn Sunday morning of 2019, i met one of the loves of my life in a well-kept restroom of an Episcopal parish in Koreatown of Los Angeles. However, despite that moment of loving connection, i should not have so readily dismissed the physically nagging feeling that, as indicated by that sour facial expression, you did not have the tools to prepare yourself for a committed romantic partnership. we soon discovered that the want for something good, meaningful, and fulfilling does not equate to sustaining it.

II. January 2020

"I pray you seek folks with professional training to accompany you in the process of examining your motivations, feelings, and behaviors."

-from you

"i did not expect you to respond to me at this point and am shocked by what you said.

However, i forgive you.

i hope your move to Richmond, Virginia will give you fulfillment and whatever else you need.

i don't really know you and my interest in you is affected by who i imagine you to be.

One of my "folks with professional training" of choice is Brené Brown, and i've finished *The Gifts of Imperfection & Daring Greatly* earlier this month and am on the cusp of finishing *Rising Strong*. i may not drink or do drugs, but i'm proud of my substance use!

Walking through many shitstorms in life taught me that it's often trial & error, and i'm finally in a place in my life where i've chosen self-compassion & self-love.

Can you pray that i make peace with and through the trauma?

That i find clarity amidst the confusion? And discover the purpose with all that is thrown my way?

Before you leave, maybe we can get tea.

i would like to develop a friendship with you, if anything."

-from me

III. February 2020

My experiences with him are truly worth writing a novel about.

i envisioned the life after the passion phase of an infatuation ends,

i imagined the periods of hardship in the relationship that we would know are temporary,

i warmly settled into the periods of life where we would no longer look as we do, but we would be okay with that.

i have faith that i'll be with the man i'm meant to be with:

i'll be with a man with similar values, who will work with me effectively through conflict, who will be fun to travel with, who has a good sense of humor, who will support my dreams, who can manage finances responsibly, who will commit to growing within the partnership, who will still have his own life, who will enjoy the mundane with me, and more.

i deserve this.

i deserve this.

i deserve this.

depression scenes

A:

Kitty litter on hardwood; veggie broth on the coffee table;
empty chopstick wrappers on the floor.
A candle still with wax, encased in
broken glass bones.

an opaque beer bottle
the pieces scattered at my feet.

B.

where they shouldn't be.) (Too many things
(That's why we don't smile here.)
same.) (I don't know if she felt the
the right time.) (It might never be
many things where they shouldn't be.) (Too

C.

This whole place born with broken bones. Chipped teeth, too.

Last night, an old friend came to see me. We had grown different, but I still loved her.

I wanted to tell her about her old neighborhood, laugh at the yuppies who moved in, with their breweries and soy cafes. But it didn't feel like the right time.

Instead, I sipped from an opaque beer bottle and she told me that she doesn't drink. I didn't answer; just picked at the label until

D. (all of the above):

Kitty litter on hardwood; veggie broth on the coffee table; empty chopstick wrappers on the floor. (Too many things where they shouldn't be.) A candle still with wax, encased in broken glass bones. This whole place born with broken bones. Chipped teeth, too. (That's why we don't smile here.) Last night, an old friend came to see me. We had grown different, but I still loved her. (I don't know if she felt the same.) I wanted to tell her about her old neighborhood, laugh at the yuppies who moved in, with their breweries and soy cafes. But it didn't feel like the right time. (It might never be the right time.) Instead, I sipped from an opaque beer bottle and she told me that she doesn't drink. I didn't answer; just picked at the label until the pieces scattered at my feet. (Too many things where they shouldn't be.)

MARK MCGAREY ROBINSON

Pac-Man

You are merely mouth.
Have you eaten the rest
of your body? Within
that right-angled rat race,

gluttony becomes your
acute stress reaction,
the always running away
from ghosts across food-

strewn streets at the clink
of a coin or two: electric
conception of four mono-
chromatic presences: the

blood-dunked shadow of
Blinky;
 then there's speedy
Pinky;
 and bashful Inky—
like an atmosphere blurred

a neon-blue—
 lastly Clyde,
pokey like a baby carrot
made knifelike.

 But it's
never bothered you: the

eating of everything, the
never growing, ever two-
dimensionally
 fated, the fact

that ghosts don't ever die.

Post-Partum

I used to hate the night, the way it separated me from light, the way it cut off contact, the sun like a friend you watch guillotined every day. I would weep as I saw sunset—I knew what was coming.

The quiet streets. The occasional car's tires squealing like a pig's cut throat. The sad blue light of a lonely T.V. buzzing someone into numbness down the block. Everyone trying to shake off the day and rinse clean, but night felt dirty to me: water left in a tub, smoke lingering in sheets, the way unwanted touch remains as though branded onto skin.

Night was three and a half years when the world closed its eyes as I lost my grip on what rest even was, when I began to understand the movements of shadows in hieroglyphs on the walls as they spoke in groans I could hear with my hands—my unsleeping daughter crying all night into my eyes, my inconsolable daughter screaming all night into my mouth.

Bloomers

Underpants hang on a clothesline along with t-shirts, sweatpants. All XXL solid colors— eggplant, robin's egg blue, forest green, cherry red. Backlit by the sunrise, the wash is illuminated like a row of import-store patio lights and the underpants glow like giant blossoms. *Bloomers* is a better name for a garment so intimate with the body. Bloomers are the first to try new ideas. Bloomers dream of freedom, elevation, flight. Bloomers wave to the saggy parabola of tees and sweats. Bloomers unpin themselves. Red bloomers encourage the forest green tee to unpin, too, and it rises. Next the sunflower yellow one, then the eggplant one. Passersby barely notice the odd kites circling above, figuring somebody's kids are having a good time, which could be true. Passersby mostly keep their faces pointed at their shoes. Red bloomers are encouraging, and heather gray sweatpants have to work hard at overcoming inertia but they do. Nothing is left but the line and its weathered pins.

Thirteen

A bike spoke in jeans.

erections
The boss of free-range
and the grass growing on our backdoor mat.

Too slight for Dad's radar.

His blips blistered by
a monster-mommy
and a trip
through World War II.

My mother

had my brother
's route money.
I had no place
in her economy.

In daylight
when I inhaled
I was large

enough for her

IDIOT! signal
to bounce off me.

I built what I could

between suns.
Kitchen water
was easiest at midnight.

After school
out back

among the yellow.

weeds

and jet lace ribbon

at thirty-thousand feet,

I would raise my palms.

Forecast for being left

Temperature:	Unmoving, I am uninhabited.
Realfeel:	I resign in desolation,
Wind:	such a prolonged exposure.
Humidity:	Even the sun can't tolerate
Dewpoint:	whimpering. Holding nothing,
Air quality:	I live off nostalgia just the same.
Sun strength:	Do I require more?
Precipitation:	Obscuring darkness,
Cloud cover:	pitched black into black,
Sunrise:	nothing gets bright enough.
Sunset:	My day at its end,
Last light:	I have gotten all I will.
Visibility:	The stars insist on being adored,
Shadow length:	dim, illegible, I easily forget.
Moon phase:	Craters yearn the distance,
Tomorrow:	still, gravity holds.

JACKIE BRAJE

Memory invented / a radiation point / soft glow /
/ glass screen / soft grass / left a burn / on my legs /
had to bathe / the itch away / soft yellow/ through citrus tree /

fibers on leaves /so thin / I remember scuffs /on our walls / no, paint /
no, cherry stems / my mother/ could knot them / with her tongue /
I've seen it / Renee Zellweger / was had / at hello / my mother cried /

every time / deknottng the stems / setting them / in ceramic /
glass screen / men so deft / men completed / by women /
men disassembled / but in a complete way / men bet

on dogs / men were music /pure music / they were late / on Christmas /
car troubles / they came to / all the dance recitals / brought roses /
bought me / a cat / with one eye / had to return it / cat didn't take /

to men / too well / the men / had girlfriends / got drunk / piano keys /
pure music / salt water / in their hair / candy bars / at the gas station /
new white shoes / from k-mart / the men / were disassembling /

we watched / it all / Renee / had a secret garden / she pruned /
her gardenias / the grass / so smooth / you could lay in it.

AT THE FRENCH BAKERY

The croissants line up
like the errant heads
of the aristocracy

Napoleons march off
to the Russian Tea Room
or the island of desserts

baristas operate guillotines
cutting off the foam
of lattes and the sound

of the ocean, a mosaic
of musical notes:
la mer, la mer, la mer

behind the scenes
bakers line up beating
and kneading dough

Mona Lisa moaning
in the bathroom stall
smiling to herself

Baudelaire cutting
holes in his story
following Poe

waking to find
women rising like yeast
in a graveyard of bread.

Still hungry, you wander

into the kitchen
watching Madame Bovary

molding madeleines
into the petite shape
of a vulva:

the waiting room
of Proust's dreams
and the palate's abyss.

Cruelty

The scene opens and there's a man in a blue gray business suit walking down the street holding an ax. We see his legs moving in neat v's, step on step, gliding over the pavement in the morning light. Cut to his office and we see the axe colliding with the dark laminate of his desk. Papers fly in slow motion everywhere, falling leaves of white, yellow, and manila. The first blow hardly pierces the desktop, but the second sends splinters peeling away from a wound that the blade tears open with a dull crack. The third impact begins in a wide arc, the man knocking down a shelf behind him as he raises the ax before colliding once more with the desk; this time tearing another hole wide in the surface panel. Flash to a pair of horrified secretaries standing at the door, a man behind him dialing a phone to reach the extension for building security. Smash cut to the businessman's eyes alive with that inchoate dream madness that drives him to smash the axe over and over till his office is in smithereens. Binders splay like slain birds all over the carpet and keyboard keys come flying from their rows and skitter like shrapnel against the walls. Over and over, crashing in mounting intensity; then interrupted by anxious stillness. The man walks out of the office, lays the axe neatly leaning against the doorframe, and turns to face his coworkers, huddled at their workstations. There's a pregnant pause, and he parts his lips as if to say something, reconsiders, and makes his way to the double doors of the exit. He turns into the hallway. But he hears footsteps approaching on the linoleum up the corridor, and decides to turn into a stairwell to exit out the back. He disappears, his feet clattering down the concrete, echoing distant down the 7 stories to the ground floor.

Now we see the man again laying awake at night. His sleeping wife is besides him. He silently reproaches himself for how obvious his fantasy is, playing out wordlessly as he lays still in the dark. He sits up, careful to not wake her, and walks

quietly into the other room. From his window he can see a tv glow in an apartment building across the street, the sole star on the skyline besides the orangey glow of a street lamp up the road and on the corner. He doesn't turn on the light. He just stands there in the dark waiting.

It's 3 am and I'm drifting off in front of the television, dreaming feedback between black and white reruns. I change the channel and an infomercial fills the dark with noise and color.

I get up and walk to the kitchen. I can smell the rice I'd cooked for dinner, caked in a saucepan on the stove. From my window I can see the wall of the graveyard, the leaves of a maple diffusing a halogen bulb and casting shadows back on to my face. I can't sleep so I just stand there waiting in the dark.

It's a little past noon now and I'm sitting in a Geo Tracker on the side of the road in North Versailles. I listen to a white bluesman on the radio and raise my telephoto lens to gaze between two low slung ranch houses up at the end of the cul-de-sac. An old man walks back around to the front yard to bring bags of leaves to the curb. Click-Click-Click-Click-Click and I have him bending over at a hundred yards. He's raking leaves now back arched, exhibiting a much wider range of movement than alleged in his insurance claim. Photos won't establish anything on the account of his pain and suffering, but they would show he's much hardier after the accident than his lawyers claim. The yardwork shots are money in the bank and I raise the lens to fire off another volley of shots when he ambles back over and behind the house. I crane my neck and try to see if I still have it, but I can't see him now. Wondering If I can work my way around the back to find him again, I get out of the car and hide behind a parked Pontiac Aztek, hiding from no eyes in particular. I jog up around the corner and tuck my camera in the crook of my arm like a clutch as I make for the next section of subdivision. I duck under some pines, kick up some mulch and cross from the lawn back onto the cement lip of the pathway.

I take a bad fall on the pavement. My shoelace catches the curb and slides beneath the sole and the concrete edge catches my knee and tears a wide gash across my knee as my leg falls beneath me. I scramble up and the rush of blood and pain gives me fifty quick paces, trying to walk it off. I don't want to look at it, I know seeing will make it worse, but another pulse of heat and wet feeling down my leg makes me turn my eyes to the wound. It looks bad, a big red river gushing down into my sandal. Damn. I reach down out of reflex and it paints my palm.

There's a woman up the street watering her lawn. She's leaning against a green Nissan, smoking a cigarette, holding the rubber hose sort of limply. Whether or not she's surprised by the blood pouring down the sidewalk I can't tell, her eyes are hidden behind fit-over shades and her thin red lips stay pursed around the butt end of the cigarette. I ask her if I could trouble her for maybe some water and a bandage. She says she doesn't have a bandage but she would give me a towel. I follow her inside trying not to bleed too much in the carpeted entryway. She has a kind of Zoffany parlor, plaster busts and bone china and bright little pictures on the wall. There's a tiffany beer lamp on a dark maple side table making a dusky kind of light. She brings me to the powder room and I lean against the vanity to wash the blood away. She leaves me to it while she gets a dish towel from the kitchen. I sit on the toilet, pressing a wad of toilet paper

I called a plumber to snake the drain, she says. She says, can I take a look at it? She says that it's downstairs in the basement.

I blink and I'm in the basement. I blink and I'm in my car. I blink and it's night and I'm dreaming once again.

LAWRENCE BRIDGES

Zabriskie Point Abstract





Muerte/Death



Washington in Capitol



Nafisa Ali's Life, Love, and Friendship, Before and After the Muslim Ban

Nafisa:

It would be unkind to say that Nafisa's life is boring. "Staid" would be more appropriate. Nafisa lives alone in a rented apartment. She goes to work at her lab, where she is a scientist. She is new in town. Though she has seen brown people at the grocery stores, she isn't able to guess if they are Bangladeshis or Pakistanis or Sri Lankans. So she doesn't smile at them. When she gets done with work, her husband Adil is asleep since it is dawn in India. She doesn't call him but leaves a text saying "Hey I am home" so that he doesn't wonder after waking up if she has reached home safely. Adil worries because she doesn't have a car, and mostly walks to her lab. To take the bus, she has to walk almost a mile to the stop. He worries about her a lot, and his irrational worry is the most exciting thing in Nafisa's life. That's why sometimes she doesn't text him after reaching home. He wakes up and makes a panicked call, asks her in a hoarse morning-voice if she is all right. She likes it. She finds his groggy, broken voice sexy, and though she is okay, she lies and says that she is sad. He talks to her for a while to make her feel better. She often complains to Adil that it is dull here. She wishes aloud on the phone for something interesting to happen. Nafisa's wishes would soon come true. There would soon be some unnecessary drama in her life, and she would regret complaining that a few weeks ago, she was bored with her regular, everyday life.

Nafisa doesn't have the courage to drive in America. She has failed the learner's permit test twice, and the women at the local DMV are so rude and so loud and they ask so many questions and want so many documents that she doesn't want to ever go there again. Despite the problems with boredom or her commute, Nafisa doesn't want to leave this town. She wants to work hard, increasingly hold senior positions at the lab and

get fancy grants from wealthy corporations to conduct research about gene editing, which will cure cancer. She is on a work visa and when students who are on a student visa meet her, they give her both admiring and envious looks. They always ask, "My God, how did you get a work visa?" Because I am brilliant, she says in her mind but aloud, she says, "Oh, I was just lucky."

She doesn't tell anyone, but she has decided to apply for a green card and eventually become an American citizen. When Adil enters the country, they will make a baby. The baby will go to India with an American passport because he will be born here. The baby will be a boy. She is sure about that. She is confident about her plans, too. She knows they are foolproof plans. She will do everything by the book. She will follow all laws. She will never get a DUI because she doesn't drink, has never been to a bar even to dance with friends. In fact, she has never broken any laws in her life; not even home curfews or love laws that tell us who should date or marry whom. When it was time to date, she found a good Muslim boy, also an Assamese speaker. Born and brought up in Bangalore, he had taken a keen interest in her when they met for the first time in college. She was the only Assamese speaker in the entire college, and through her, he was able to connect to his roots.

Sometimes, she doesn't text Adil after reaching home. He panics and calls her repeatedly. She watches her phone's screen and realizes that his panicked calls are the most exciting part of her life. She perversely enjoys his fear.

As days go by, she creates different kinds of fictitious situations: "Adil, stay with me please till the bus arrives, I guess I am going to faint; the bus will directly take me home." Adil says endearing things to her and she sniffs his fear, which makes her feel safe. After reaching home, one day she lies to him that she has a fever. He asks her to take a Tylenol. "I just don't have the energy to get up; you just talk to me." He is watching a movie with his friends. She likes it when he comes out of the theatre for fifteen minutes, encouraging her to go to the kitchen to take a tablet. That night, she sleeps better because she feels secure. The loneliness of the city doesn't bother her. This continues—the only drama in her life, until the real drama happens. We will come to that in a bit.

Nafisa and Annie:

The second most exciting thing about Nafisa's life is the conversations with her neighbor Annie. She actually doesn't like Annie or talking to her. But she likes that someone notices her, accosts her, and talks to her. It is a reconfirmation of the fact that Nafisa is a human being, made of flesh and blood, and is visible to others. Otherwise, after stepping out of her white lab coat for the day, she doesn't know anyone or have anyone to talk to. Annie has black hair and wears pretty, printed shorts that Nafisa wants to steal. She wants to wear such shorts one day and sit on Adil's lap at a park and run her finger through the back of his neck. She knows she would feel him growing.

Annie quarrels a lot with her boyfriend, who lives with her. Max calls her a "bitch" and shouts, "oh, fuck you." She also screams, "Fuck you, bastard." They also have a lot of noisy sex. One night, when she hears a woman's moans, Nafisa worries and wonders if she should call 911 because the characters in Law & Order do that. She peeps out from her second-floor apartment. She finds Annie grabbing the pillar of the first-floor apartment's portico, Max behind her. He is clutching her stomach, and his chin digging into her hair. Nafisa stretches her neck and finds them having sex in the dark, with little light from the streetlamp falling on them. Nafisa is aroused and ashamed for being excited. Her cheeks grow hot. She could never imagine herself having sex in public.

Annie talks nonstop when she accosts Nafisa. She doesn't have a job, and Nafisa wonders how she can live without responsibilities. Sometimes, when she finds her in the morning on the way to the bus stop, Nafisa misses the bus because Annie doesn't stop talking about her cat that died six months ago, Max who is a veteran, their damaged car that Max rammed into a tree, what their health insurance would cover and not cover because Max has PTSD since serving in Iran, and she has some chronic back pain after a car accident in Chicago that also partly injured Max because he was driving. Max was already on a disability cheque; after the crash, even she filed for disability. Now they both live on these cheques and his military pension. Nafisa doesn't want to know any of that, but she is

patient and polite and listens quietly. Annie often forgets what she told her a few days ago so most often, Annie repeats her stories: the cat that died six months ago, disability cheques, cars ramming into trees, military pension, etc.

Annie likes Indian food. She says that Nafisa's food, when she cooks, smells good. Nafisa isn't sure if she would invite them to her house because she isn't sure if she would be able to stand Annie talking for several hours. The longest she has spent with her is forty-five minutes when Annie perhaps said 400,000 words and Nafisa literally said these four words: "Oh," "really?" "That" and "Okay."

But Nafisa feels sorry for Annie, and especially sorry for Max. She has seen him on his manic days. He goes under the car with a toolbox and comes out after many hours. He is usually bare-bodied while doing this. Occasionally, he crawls out of the car and walks around the parking lot. Nafisa can see that from her dining table or if she stands near the fridge. Max wears boxers when he works on the car. When he bends forward, she can see part of his buttocks—they are really tiny shorts, like the ones that are trendy among undergraduate freshman girls. Nafisa can't ever imagine wearing those even to bed. Actually, she watches him because she waits for a glimpse of his ass. This is something Nafisa wouldn't acknowledge even to herself. So often, after getting a glimpse of what she has been waiting for, she walks away from the window and murmurs, "Ya Allah, why did I waste all my time watching Max?" Then she does some housework or cooks.

Nafisa and Adil:

On the days she doesn't want Adil's attention, she types that she is fine, and keeps aside her phone. She doesn't even watch an episode of Law & Order. Instead, she sits at the dining table with a cup of tea and observes the parking lot through the window on her right. She doesn't buy tea leaves here. She buys tea leaves from India because that is where you get the best Assam-tea. Assam-tea is stronger and brisker. She prefers tea to coffee. With the electric coffee maker, coffee making is so much more convenient that she ends up drinking coffee in the morning. That's why she makes tea after work. The milk is

boiled with cardamom and tea leaves over a low flame while she is changing and wiping off her makeup with a wet tissue. She likes her teatime. She finds that time relaxing and luxurious. But at this point in the day, despite finding it relaxing, she also feels a little sad. She feels lonely. She wants Adil to be with her. She wishes he didn't have to postpone his arrival for another six months to be present for his mother's hysterectomy; Adil is her only son. She reminds herself that she is here, as a researcher and immigration authorities will issue him a dependent visa. He will look for a job once he is here, and when he gets a job, he will get a new visa. They will have a baby boy. They will have a house with a large green lawn. They will live happily ever after.

When she thinks about Adil's arrival, her mood changes, and the evening becomes slightly bearable, but her sadness doesn't end. Though everyone in this small town is out on the streets running, she feels as if the whole world is asleep and she is the only one who is awake, watching the world, like a jobless night owl, without anything exciting in her life.

That's going to change soon.

Nafisa and her mother:

Adil thinks Nafisa has a lot of drama in her life already because of her mother. Nafisa left home for higher studies in 2002, and since then, she has owned a cell phone to remain in constant touch with her mother. In 2002, it was costly to call between Indian cities, so she would send a "Missed call." One missed call meant "I have reached home safely" and two missed calls meant "Please call me back."

These days, after coming home from her lab, Nafisa sends a text to her mother, too. When she is cooking dinner, she posts photos to her mother via WhatsApp and rings her before sleeping. Her mother never keeps her phone on silent. Nafisa is her only child. After her retirement, her life revolves around Nafisa. In fact, she suspects that her mother lives in US time. They have two clocks in their bedroom: a blue clock set to Atlanta time; another black clock set to Indian Standard Time. She suspects her mother only follows the blue clock. The black

clock is made of granite. It is more expensive. The blue clock is cheap, bought online. On certain nights in India, Nafisa's mother wakes up and starts calling her if she hasn't texted "I am home." If she is with colleagues, especially during late nights, her mother will call her every two hours to check. It has started to become embarrassing, but she hasn't been able to convey that to her mother.

It is Friday. Late night here, and late morning in India. Nafisa is standing in front of a restaurant on the east side of the town. Though it is just ten pm, it feels as if it is one at night since she lives in a small city. She isn't able to find a ride after her dinner with her lab mates. Her friends have left. They offered her rides, but she was sure she would find an Uber. She hasn't found an Uber. They are all forty minutes away. Uber is also on surge so they are charging her sixty dollars for a ride that should cost her only fifteen. Eventually, when Nafisa reaches home in a local cab booked by the waiter, her phone comes back to life. It screams with a ton of notifications both from Adil and her mother. Her father receives her call. Nafisa learns that while she was still waiting for a ride, her mother had a panic attack after Nafisa's phone died. Her mother threw up, and then sat under the water tap, letting the cold-water drench her whole body. When her mother hears the voice, she regains normalcy.

Adil complains that she had called him around fifty times during that hour when Nafisa's phone wasn't reachable. She wanted Adil to call his friend in Michigan and ask if he could reach Nafisa.

"It doesn't make sense, so dramatic."

Nafisa understands why Adil is irritated. But doesn't take it well when he calls her mother dramatic. Her mother has always been like that, since childhood. "Adil, you don't know what it means to grow up during an insurgency," she says in a cold, steely voice. Adil doesn't argue, but Nafisa feels terrible about her mother. She vows to keep her phone on and orders a power bank.

Nafisa and Max:

After talking to her parents and Adil, she is exhausted. She pours herself some peppermint tea, adds a few drops of honey, turns off the light, and sits on a chair. The fridge is

behind her. On her right, there is the window with the blinds pulled up. It is shut, but the sound of cars moving on the road is loud. Because of the streetlamps, she can see an occasional lone person—mostly students—hurrying home.

She thinks how her life would have been different if rebels in her state hadn't demanded to form a separate country by seceding from India. If her childhood wasn't mottled with news of bomb blasts and skirmishes and rapes and gun battles between the security forces and rebels. She thinks about her mother and forgives her because sitting here, watching the cars in the parking lot and staring at the damaged bonnet of Annie and Max's car, she isn't able to imagine what it must have meant for her mother to send her to school at the other end of the city every day, and tell herself that her child may not return home if violence erupted. The fear of death was so normal, but it didn't mean that the experience was bearable. Ironically, that's why she had forced Nafisa to leave the state and carve a life for herself. And now she has, far away from home in a small, predominantly white town where the cab drivers are more than surprised to know that she is a scientist, "Wow, you must be a brilliant lady if they hired you all the way from India." She knows that it is not a compliment.

She stands up and looks at the road and slides the window open. The sound of cars becomes louder. A gust of cold wind. The smell of crushed leaves. She realizes she is bored. Nothing happens in her life. Standing there, she imagines herself at fifty. She is now an old woman who has done nothing adventurous, who has done everything by the book, every expected thing, and never something surprising. Does she want to get into trouble? No, she doesn't want to get into trouble, but she wants to do something exciting. Suddenly, she recalls the forty-minute car ride from the restaurant to her house when her phone was dead. Those blissful forty minutes! Watching the quiet night outside, she had felt free in a very long time. She felt single! Yes, Nafisa gasps, stamping one of her legs—she felt single and free and liberated. And now, with the phone in her hand again, after making those calls, telling her mother she is okay, talking to Adil and promising him that she would take the power bank next time, she feels trapped. I wish I were single—

not unanswerable to anyone's worries; she gasps and is surprised she feels that way.

It is twelve am, and that's why when she hears Max, she is startled. "Hey, how are you?" She is almost scared to death. "What a lovely day! So bright!"

Bright? She wonders if he is drunk. What is he doing here this late, in his shorts, in this cold? The streetlight bathes him. She notices that his body is glistening. He is sweating.

"Yes," she says, but is crept out.

"What a lovely day!" he repeats and crawls under the car. She notices beams of a flashlight under it.

This is a car that will never be repaired.

That night she dreams that Max is roaming around the parking lot with a machine gun. The lot is mottled with drops of blood. She wakes up, startled, and sweaty. She turns off the heating. This was a bad decision; she should have never moved to a new country without Adil. What was she thinking? She had never lived alone. Never had to shop alone. Never even went to a conference alone—the two of them used to pitch joint-abstracts and be in the same panel. She should have waited for other opportunities. What is she doing in this small town in Georgia all by herself? She wants to weep. There is a lump in her throat. Everything is quiet and slow. So quiet that she can hear the wind. So quiet and windy that she feels as if she is walking in a country road, alone, for miles, lost.

The phone beeps.

She looks at her phone screen and finds a message from Adil, "Received the documents from your university we need for the visa. Bhal lagise."

Suddenly, she hears the sound of leaves rustling. She is calm. She isn't walking on a lonely country road anymore. She is home. With her cup of tea, her leg on the ottoman. She is reclined on a comfortable wooden chair that has a lovely cushion. Everything will be okay on nights when she would wake up startled to find him lying next to her. She will ask him to switch off the air cooler, or the ceiling fan. She will not step out of the bed when Adil is here. There will be someone to take care of her.

Annie and Max are fighting, and she can hear bits and pieces.

“Fuck you,” Annie’s voice.

“Oh, fuck you—you are responsible for all my misery.”
Max’s voice is louder.

“Ya right, just blame it on me. I am the one who....
right?” Annie’s voice is louder now.

“All you do is complain...just fucking complain...leave
me alone!”

“You fucking leave me alone.”

“You leave me alone.”

Nafisa and Annie:

The next day, Adil schedules his visa interview and books his tickets to join Nafisa in two months. Perhaps that is why she accepts Annie’s suggestion to go to the Indian restaurant in town.

On the way, Nafisa wonders if she should tell her about Max repairing the car at 2 am, but she restrains herself not because she wants to be polite but because she has a strange feeling about it as if talking about it would ruin Annie’s mood. She is often upset about her dead cat. She often cribs about her insurance. Today, she is cribbing less. But Nafisa is surprised that there are no signs of last night’s fight on Annie’s face.

They walk downtown because it is just one and a half-mile. The weather is good. Annie asks if Nafisa would mind if she smoked and she says she wouldn’t though she would. She talks about her love for Indian food, the better options available in Chicago, where she was born. Nafisa nods her head quietly: partly because Annie talks so much that she can’t contribute at all, and partly because she just wants Annie to speak; she is also tired by the walk. This is a hilly city. So, she just wants to think about Adil’s arrival, his smooth visa process, his mother’s well-being. When they reach the restaurant, she doesn’t tell Annie that like most Indian restaurants in America even this place is named “The Taj Mahal Restaurant,” that the spice levels in the buffet are really low to cater to an American taste, and that it is run by a family from Pakistan’s Punjab. She thinks it would burst Annie’s bubble because she wants to have

"authentic" Indian food but Nafisa wants to tell her that India is such a large country that there is nothing authentic; everything is authentic because if you say something about India, stress it as authentic, the absolute opposite is also true in some corner of the country.

They pick a table near the large window. They can see the university buildings from here. In India, Nafisa studied in a private university that never made it to national rankings. It was a small campus of just three acres. Now, the size of this campus, the massive lawns, the beautiful gothic buildings just amaze her. She still has so many things to explore: the huge botanical gardens that have many themed trails such as the white trail, purple trail, yellow trail, blue trail. She wants to walk with Adil in the purple trail wearing purple printed shorts like Annie. She will find a lonely spot. She will sit on his lap, slowly hardening him. She will rub his neck with her thumb and flick his earlobes with her tongue when no one is looking. Will she be able to do that? She wants to; but in public? The thought makes her tense. Her cheeks are warming up.

Annie and Nafisa sit down to eat after serving themselves from the buffet. Annie says that she is sorry if the noise her boyfriend makes is bothering her at night.

"Oou..." It takes a while for it to sink in. Nafisa wondered what it was about then realized that Annie meant the late-night quarrels. As if calling them "noise" makes them less disconcerting. Nafisa lies, "No, I have heard no noise."

"That old man who lives alone, he complained about us to the cops—you know."

"The one who drives a black SUV?"

"Yes, that's right," Annie says, chewing the chicken tandoori. "Asshole. He is horrible. I mean—if you have a problem with us, why don't you fucking talk to us?"

Then she bitches about that neighbor for the next fifteen minutes: how he called the cops on them twice, and how it is true that they fight a lot, how people should come and tell them to keep it down instead of calling the cops. Nafisa thinks it doesn't take much common sense to understand that you shouldn't fight late into the night when your neighbors are sleeping. She just says, "That's terrible."

Annie is agitated now. Her face is red. She says the food is spicy though there is just a hint of chili powder. She bitches about the neighbor more.

Nafisa says, "Yeah, it is spicy." She doesn't find it spicy; she finds the food here quite bland. She wants to add chili flakes, but this is not Italian or Mexican food. The chilly has to be nicely fried and mixed with the dish; not sprinkled on the top at the end. She also doesn't want Annie to find out that she lied.

"But I still like it." Annie continues, "I get it, you know, I get it that we fight a lot. This isn't the first-time neighbors have complained about us. That used to happen a lot in Chicago, too, when we were together. But we fight a lot less now. We are working hard on our relationship. Our therapist says we should get a dog, but I don't like pit bulls, and Max wants nothing but a pit bull. We were just fighting about that, and he started blaming me for everything terrible in our life. Did you hear us fight? This was last night. That old fart complained, and the sheriff sent a cop to our house. Max was so wound up, he left the house and started to repair the car. He does that when he is stressed and during this manic phase. Did I tell you he is bipolar?"

"Oh, I see. I am sorry. I didn't hear you guys fighting—I returned very late."

"It is okay. At least things are taken care of. Do you want something sweet?"

"No, I am good. How about you?"

"I would love that mango pudding."

When Annie leaves to get the pudding, Nafisa reclines on the chair and wonders what she is doing spending time with her? She doesn't like Annie, but she is happy that someone notices her, asks her if she would like to get out during the weekend for lunch. She wants to tell Annie that they are really noisy, that Max should start wearing longer shorts and they shouldn't fuck outdoors, Nafisa decides otherwise. She dislikes herself for clinging onto this semblance of a friendship with a person she would never be caught dead with if she were in India. She is confused for finding their dysfunctional, scattered and morbid life strangely fascinating. Like a harmful, addictive family soap opera, she wants to continue watching them. Breaking the friendship with Annie meant switching the TV off.

She wanted it to continue—this train wreck of a soap opera. Besides, everything will be okay when Adil is here. She won't be hanging out with weird people, people she doesn't like.

When Annie returns, she isn't holding a bowl of mango pudding. She is in tears. She asks Nafisa if she is done. "We have to go, don't worry. I paid already."

Nafisa follows her. Words such as "wait," "what" "What happened?" and several other incoherent sentences tumble out of her mouth as she tries to catch up with Annie. She has eaten a bit too much. She feels bloated. On the sidewalk, she is not able to walk as fast as Annie. The speeding cars make her nervous. The sun feels hotter.

"You go ahead, I will take a cab."

But Annie just turns to her, and weeps, "I am sorry, I am sorry. I have to be fast, but no, I won't leave you here. Actually, we should take a cab; I forgot that we didn't bring the car."

"What happened? Tell me what happened? Can I help?"

"No, you can't. I have feared this. You know - he has, Max—Max has these manic phases when he goes out in his car. Oh god, I should have never left the car home. Today, when I wanted to bring the car, he said we could just take the bus. I didn't know he was planning to go out. And it is a bit embarrassing also to drive around in this car with a broken bonnet. It is such an old car."

Nafisa is breathing fast now. "Is he okay, just tell me what happened."

"He's been arrested because he hit another car, and this is the second time he has done this. We don't have the money if we have to pay a fine or higher insurance."

She begs her to calm down, "Annie, I got this. You just wait. I will take you home."

The cab driver tries to chat with them but when he hears monosyllabic replies, he keeps quiet. The car smells of lavender, and it is really cool inside. Annie looks out of the window. She has calmed down now but with her forlorn, lost look, her pursed lips, looks resigned.

She whispers, "Nafisa, I am really sorry I panicked. But you know, with so many men getting killed by cops, you can't always be calm when Max gets into trouble. He is not a danger

to society, but he drives very badly when he is in his manic phase, and now, this is his second time. I don't know how many hundred more dollars we will have to pay now in insurance."

Before they are about to reach their apartment complex before they see the cops before Annie starts looking for their lawyer's number, she reclines on the backseat and murmurs, "You know, I love him, but I am not his therapist. I feel I am his therapist, and he dumps his shit on me. Sometimes, I just wish I was single."

Nafisa feels a weight on her heart. As if someone has pressed her chest gently—that's the kind of pressure: of reassurance, of companionship. Sometimes, I just wish I was single.

She wants to ask why she won't get out of this relationship and seek out her independence, but she isn't sure if that would be a good question. So, Nafisa doesn't say a word. She enjoys the reassuring weight on her chest, puts one of her hands on Annie's shoulder and pats it. It means, she understands.

The parking lot has three police cars. Their blue lights blink, and since the sky is cloudy, it feels like evening though it is just 2 pm. Nafisa hurries inside and watches. Max is sitting inside one of the cars. He is bowing his head. His hands are cuffed. She feels scared. Scenes from Law & Order come to her mind. She has read reports of men killed by cops, especially black men. She is worried about Max, though he is not black. Her heart starts to beat hard. He will be fine, she tells herself, patting her chest. He will be okay, he is a veteran, and she presses her chest with her hand and pulls down the blind. Later that night, Annie texts her that he is now released. The judge ordered his release.

She texts back, "You take care of yourself." She pauses for a few minutes after that.

"Thanks, babe. Hugs." Annie writes back, but Nafisa pauses more, staring at her phone before writing,

"Sometimes, even I wish I was just single."

"I fucking get it!!" Annie writes back.

Nafisa and Adil:

Nafisa wakes up late the morning after the department conference, but even at 10:30, she is still sleepy because she attended the dinner party where she talked to other scientists till late. Some of her colleagues danced and asked her to join, but Nafisa isn't comfortable dancing, and she has never danced with another man but Adil.

However, unlike other occasions, she stayed till late, enjoying the party. Now, she decides to go to the lab later than the usual time. The day before was a good day but busy and exhausting. To meet so many people who cared about the same things as she did was reassuring and now she feels she isn't the only person spending days overwhelmed and excited by the sound of test tubes tinkling; she isn't the only one awake when the world is sleeping.

But she is shocked when she finds several missed call notifications from Adil. What happened? Is his mother okay? Did her mother call him again because she was unable to reach Nafisa? Missed calls from India are bearers of anxiety. Her heart sinks, and instead of calling Adil, she calls her mother. After all these years, that is her biggest nightmare: that she will be sleeping through one of her parents' death and by the time she reaches, it will be too late; a garlanded photo waiting for her with a candle burning in front of it.

And that's why, when she finds those notifications from Adil, she calls her mother's cell instead. Her mother sounds normal. She is watching her daily soap, and her father is reading the paper and commenting on the increasingly terrible world, "We are all going to die due to climate change. Imagine, what will happen when two-hundred million Bangladeshis will move to India in search of living spaces?"

"Let's talk about it later," she says, Adil had called her for something specific. It must have been important—he called several times.

When she rings Adil, he is sad, "I don't have good news. I should have traveled with you, Nafi. Now, I don't know for how long I will be stuck here."

"What are you saying? Is your mother okay?"

He tells her that his mother is okay. She is recovering well, and after he leaves, one of his cousins will arrive to stay

with her. That cousin is responsible. She will cook and clean and talk to his mother and go shopping together; nothing to worry about. She couldn't come before because she was writing her exams. Now, she is free for three months before the results are out. She will be with his mother. "I am surprised you don't know what is happening. Don't you read the news?"

She is still groggy, "I had a late night, and I woke up just now. What happened? You know I don't like cable, and that's why I don't have it."

Adil sighs, "I may have to cancel my tickets."

"What?"

"I don't know if I will get enough back now that I am canceling just a month before my travels. I don't even have so much money to waste if I have to cancel my tickets."

"But why?" she screams and sits up on the bed, his sentence working like a shot of caffeine. The mattress bounces under her body. "Why do you have to cancel your tickets?"

Adil pauses.

"Why do you care?" He asks. "You were sleeping till late. You were at a party, must be dancing with someone random. You are having fun and here I am, roaming around in Delhi, hiring a cab, haggling with auto rickshaw drivers, standing in line in front of the American embassy. Do you know how long the queue is?"

"Adil—have you gone mad? Why don't you tell me what is wrong?"

"Do you really care? You are having fun. You just don't care."

This has never happened before—Adil has thrown tantrums before, to get her attention, but he has never been this unreasonable and it is not that he accuses her of having fun while he is toiling away in India to get all the paperwork done, taking care of his mother, worrying about her. It is his accusation that she danced at a party. It is so unexpected, so out of the blue that she loses her mind. She wants to scream, "Fuck you" like Max or Annie but she bites her tongue. "Adil, you are getting me panicked now. You need to tell me what has happened."

She walks to her dining table, where she rarely dines. It is her workstation. It is the same place from where she watches people running or hurrying towards their destinations, the parking lot, Max getting arrested and just the road lying there like a black snake's back when the world is asleep, and she is the only person awake.

"It is Trump. You know my flight is via Saudi Arabia. I mean, I am not the citizen of a Muslim country, we are Indians, but you never know, you never know with this government—we can't forget our names, our religion, can we? He has banned travelers from some Muslim countries. I don't know what to do. Maybe divert the flight via Frankfurt?"

Nafisa tries to sound calm and reads the headlines on Google news. "We don't even go to the masjid, Adil. I mean—we are both atheists. I inject chemo to fat rats in the laboratory and don't believe that God has created us." She tries to sound funny, but he isn't reassured. "You still have forty-days, Adil. You are going to Delhi next week for your visa interview." She tells him, but at the same time she realizes she doesn't believe her own words. For the first time in her life, she feels very Muslim. She wishes her name were Katy or Catherine or Bipasha.

"Well, what if they reject my visa at the interview?"

She ignores the fears. She decides not to let it affect her. "By then, something will happen. All these countries that run these luxury airlines are not going to just sit and take this when people start to cancel their bookings, you know?"

Though Nafisa says he will be fine, that she will book him a ticket via Frankfurt or Amsterdam or a direct flight from Bombay to New York, she disconnects the phone as soon as possible. Her laptop is covered with drops of tears. She feels alone again. That feeling of being awake when the world is sleeping, wraps her like a dark shawl over her face because she knows that even if she books him a new flight, it would be such a dent on her little savings she has made since coming here that it would take both of them to shop from cheap stores and eat lousy food. She has never lived like that before—from paycheque to paycheque.

Nafisa and Ian:

“Come to the house party,” Annie asks her that afternoon. “We have sausages, sandwiches, pulled pork.”

“I am not sure, Nafisa replies, “I will let you know.”

She is sure she will not go to the party. She doesn't want to meet Annie and Max and their friends. She is worried they are noisy and crazy and public fuckers, just like Annie and Max.

But in the evening, though she is at home, there is no peace. She sits with a glass of water on the loveseat and tries to clear her mind because Adil's messages and calls are driving her crazy. She can hear the music from the party. Come anytime, if you change your mind, Annie had told her. She is still upset with Adil. How could he accuse her of dancing with ‘someone random’? Of course, he meant ‘some random man’, not ‘someone random’. He has a dirty mind. Something has changed in a single night between them. She wants to shout at him, but she hasn't because he is going through a hard time now.

Adil has been sending her every news item he can find about the Muslim Ban. She wants to think something else other than the Muslim Ban. She wants him to stop, but she knows that if she says, he would be hurt. She doesn't want to respond to his political commentary, which is now veering towards alarmism. Back in India, he hasn't slept all night, which means, she hasn't been able to sleep after her lunch, or watch Law and Order and relax, have some me-time.

“Adil, what would be the worst?” She asked him an hour ago. “I would just go back. Find a job at the Indian Institute of Sciences. Don't panic. Go to sleep.”

But he doesn't go to sleep. After about half an hour, he starts sending her conspiracy theories: they are now going to eject people with green cards from the country, people with green cards wouldn't be allowed to enter, new Muslim citizens would be disenfranchised, Chinese Americans would be sent to internment camps, and naturalized Indians would be losing their citizenship. This is followed by a barrage of misinformed advice: take your passport every day, keep copies, don't go outside the city without your passport, reach out to your department head, and ask for help.

She starts to get a headache. She tells him, I am going to take a nap now—you also get some sleep. She turns her phone on silent mode. She sits on the chair, sips some water and makes a decision.

Annie had told her that she had invited a lot of people to the party. But there are only three other faces excluding Nafisa: a handsome man who says this is his last month in this city and a red-haired woman who has a younger boyfriend with a long beard reaching his chest. They look happy together. He gets her beer after beer, as she talks to Annie, but he spends most of the time with Max, while occasionally checking if the red-haired woman needs more beer. They are smoking outside on the portico full of trash and dried leaves and pots that perhaps had herbs in them once upon a time. They are getting quite drunk. Max is tipsy, and when Annie asks him to be careful, he screams at her, "Shut up, you don't get to tell me..."

"Hahaha, he always shouts at me when he gets drunk," Annie laughs loudly, cutting his sentence. He leaves, in search of more beer.

But Nafisa notices that Annie's eyes are misty. She forces a smile and asks everyone to eat more before adding, "I get so anxious when he drinks. My anxiety ..."

Annie is taking out mugs and plates from the dishwasher. Nafisa walks up to her and asks, "Do you need any help?"

"No, babe," she says. The word "babe" makes her uncomfortable, and she doesn't understand it if lovers use it for lovers or friends also use it for each other in America. "I am fine, are you having fun?"

"Yes, it is great. I am so happy to be here." She says though she doesn't mean it. She wants to get out as soon as possible. She wonders if she made a mistake by not bringing her phone. What if Adil is having a panic attack? Should she run and get her phone? But she told her that she would be napping. She is worried if he finds out she is attending a party, he may get offended: I am frightened to death here, and you are dancing at a party? He is very capable of saying horrible things when he is stressed. Once, when they were working in Chennai, he found out that his mother had taken ill. He rushed to her

house at the other end of the city, rushed her to the Apollo Hospital, and returned late. Nafisa's parents were visiting from Assam. Her mother suggested that since he would be late, they should cook a proper meal and set it aside for him. Her mother cooked fish-tenga and chicken-korma but he returns earlier. With a smile on her face, her mother laid him a table. He was in a bad mood, Nafisa noticed, and followed him to the bathroom where he broke off a bottle of perfume, "My mother is in the emergency room, and you guys have cooked up a feast! Is this for her funeral?"

No, no, she can't share the news with Adil that she is at a party.

Okay, I will stay here for a while, be a good neighbor—she tells herself and thinks that her presence is also perhaps perfunctory; neighborly duties, and she wants some distractions.

"I hope things have settled down now—I mean, with Max." She hesitates to say that, but she has been thinking about the arrest, so she has to check.

"Oh, thank you for asking." Annie shuts the dishwashing machine and heaves a sigh of relief. "It is just a matter of time, you know. We will get our settlement and then move out of this place. This city is too small actually, and it stresses him out. He needs a lawn to work on, a tree's shade, some space to plant stuff – get busy, you know? We will be fine after that. We don't have to live from cheque to cheque."

"I didn't know about this settlement, but it sounds good." Nafisa isn't sure if she should ask anything further, but she has already pressed the button. Annie loves talking about her life and the problems in her life. "I told you that we had an accident in Chicago, remember? It was a drunk, teenage girl who just rammed her large SUV into our car. I have severe cervical pain because of that. It is unbearable, and I can't work for long hours at a desk. I can't accept any job or go to school. I do hope I will complete my coursework someday, but I am not sure if I will be able to meet all the challenges. So, we are really looking forward to this settlement."

"I am so sorry. This sounds like a lot of tension." Nafisa gasps. "So, when will this settlement reach you?"

"Oh, in a couple years," she shrugs. "Maybe more. But our lawyer is trying his best to get it done soon. I mean, he will also get a cut, so it is also in his best interests. So, if we get this settlement, we will put in part of the money for a house here. The houses are cheap here, not so expensive like Atlanta. You have to come to the housewarming."

"That would be so nice." Nafisa is genuinely excited for the two of them. "There is much to look forward to."

There is loud music. The people are talking. The little apartment is noisy and stuffed and she feels warm. Annie lowers her voice when she says this to Nafisa, "And until the settlement money reaches us, I have to live with him in this house. I can't even break up with him. It is one of the terms – because we filed the lawsuit together, as one party, as a couple."

Nafisa scans the table for food. Annie has now laid the plates and cutlery. There is only meat: chicken burgers, sausages, pork chops, and some mac and cheese. She doesn't like any of this. She grabs more corn chips and salsa, sits in a corner and debates if she should eat the chicken burger. She likes pork, but only when it is cooked with garam masala.

Ian, the handsome guy, says it is a pity they didn't get to speak to each other despite living in the same building. She agrees, but honestly, she doesn't care. He says that he has been busy "mending a relationship". He has found an excellent job in Oklahoma, and his boyfriend works as a waiter in a local restaurant but is not willing to move. It is such a good job that his boyfriend will not have to work, perhaps go back to school, and concentrate on writing more poetry; he always wanted to be a poet. But his boyfriend doesn't want to live in Oklahoma. Nafisa asks why, and Ian pauses at her question. He is surprised. He says, he doesn't want to go; there is no reason. There is no reason—Nafisa is astonished. It rubs it the wrong way, perhaps. He doesn't want to, I mean, he just doesn't want to go, he repeats. Then he gets defensive that his boyfriend—who is now his ex-boyfriend—does not have to have the right reason to not want to go.

"So, you guys just broke up?" Nafisa asks, sipping more pink lemonade. She can't believe she is drinking pink lemonade—she used to make fun of it.

"Yeah, he was just not listening and wouldn't do long-distance. It was horrible—the last few months were horrible."

She is quiet. She feels sad for him, and then she realizes it would be rude in this country to not explicitly say that she is sorry. "I am sorry," she says and finds it funny that there is a tinge of nasal sound in her sentence. She is becoming American, or as Adil would joke in Hindi: Umrican. Umrican; indeed, nasal sounds, pink lemonade that tastes just like regular greenish lemonade, drinking coffee in the morning and watching Law and Order.

"Thank you, I really appreciate it," Ian says.

At home, she thinks about the word "mend." Ian used that phrase "mending a relationship." She sits with her cup of tea, watches the world outside, and thinks, what an apt word: mending. Everyone is mending something. Max is fixing his car, Annie is mending their relationship until the money comes, Oklahoma-bound Ian spent the last few months mending his relationship only to fail, Trump ensuring that a lot of mending would be required once he steps down from the throne; the throne itself would need mending.

And Nafisa? Would Adil turn up? How would his visa interview go? What if his visa is rejected? Would he come here and mend the boring life that forces her to have strange friends who are reeling under a broken relationship and a broken car and are yet together because there is something promised ahead? What if that money never reaches them or takes too long to reach them? Would they go on living together? What kind of living is this—to sail a ship with holes, and continually drain out excess water with a mug to stop it from sinking?

She thinks about the Muslim travel ban again. She doesn't want to read the news. It is stressing her out. Her iMessage and WhatsApp is full of updates from Adil – all about the travel ban. She is annoyed with him for not sleeping and unburdening his stress on her. She is the one who is alone here. She is the one who has failed her learner's permit test. She is the one who is stranded after dinner, making friends with people she has nothing in common with. She is going to become an old lady who has done nothing out of the ordinary, adventurous in her life. She sees herself with Adil when she is fifty: with grown-

up kids and lots of test tubes. Gosh, what an experience. She is fifty. She tries to remember how many parties she has attended and can't.

It is late.

She paces her balcony and thinks about Ian. She admires how quickly he can move from mending to moving on. She wants to be like him, but she also knows that she would immediately fail, and the thought makes her laugh. Ian is so handsome. Great thighs, amazing shiny, taut neck, broad chest. She feels sad that he is gay as if she would have given it a thought if he were straight.

First, she is surprised that she finds it so funny—I didn't even drink at Annie's house, why am I laughing like this—she wonders, and then she says aloud, "I didn't even drink at Annie's home, why am I laughing like this?" There is some peppy music coming from Annie's. Perhaps, everyone is dancing. Annie had asked her to stay, "Stay, we will have some girl time, it will be fun. The boys are going to be so sloshed," a slightly drunk Annie had told her, holding her hand firmly, prodding her to stay.

Nafisa steps out of her house and pushes Annie and Max's main door. It is unlocked, and she is really having her girl time with the elderly lady—though Ian was dancing with them, too. Max has taken off his shirt and is shaking his ass. He is wearing those shorts that reveal his butt when he bends. He is bending a lot. Annie repeatedly slaps his ass and shouts shake-that, and he shakes it harder, aiming it at Annie like a dog wiggling its butt to get attention. His upper jaw is digging into his lower lips.

"OMG is the music too loud?" Annie asks, slightly worried. She is slurring. The lady with a younger boyfriend with long beard continues to dance. Max is completely oblivious.

"No, I like the music so much that I thought I should come back. Am I weird?" Nafisa screamed at the top of her voice, giggling.

"You are being fab, babe!"

"Come on, wohoooo," Ian said.

Annie slaps Max's ass. He shakes it harder.

"I thought you planned some girl time!" Nafisa steps in, a bit hesitant. Annie drags her to the middle of the room—the dance floor for that night. Max follows them, shaking.

"You don't like me here?" Ian is screaming, "Don't worry, I am a straight woman. Who said I am a man?"

"I love it that you are here! You are my new best friend!"

Max comes in between the group of two women and the man who claimed to be a straight woman and continues his dance. He bends a lot. Nafisa takes tequila and starts laughing. "Shake it, Max," she screams. "Shake it."

"Max," Ian screams. Max goes near Ian and starts to twerk, rubbing himself against Ian's crotch.

"Are you getting aroused or something?" Annie asks. "My boyfriend is hot."

"You are so sloshed," Ian says, placing his hands on his crotch, laughing. Max is naughty today."

Nafisa starts to shake her body a little and click her fingers—like she used to in her college days when she had just begun dating Adil in Bangalore and they used to go to a lot of slam poetry events. She looks at Annie and laughs. She throws a flying kiss to Ian, and she walks towards Max and slaps his ass. Annie encourages her.

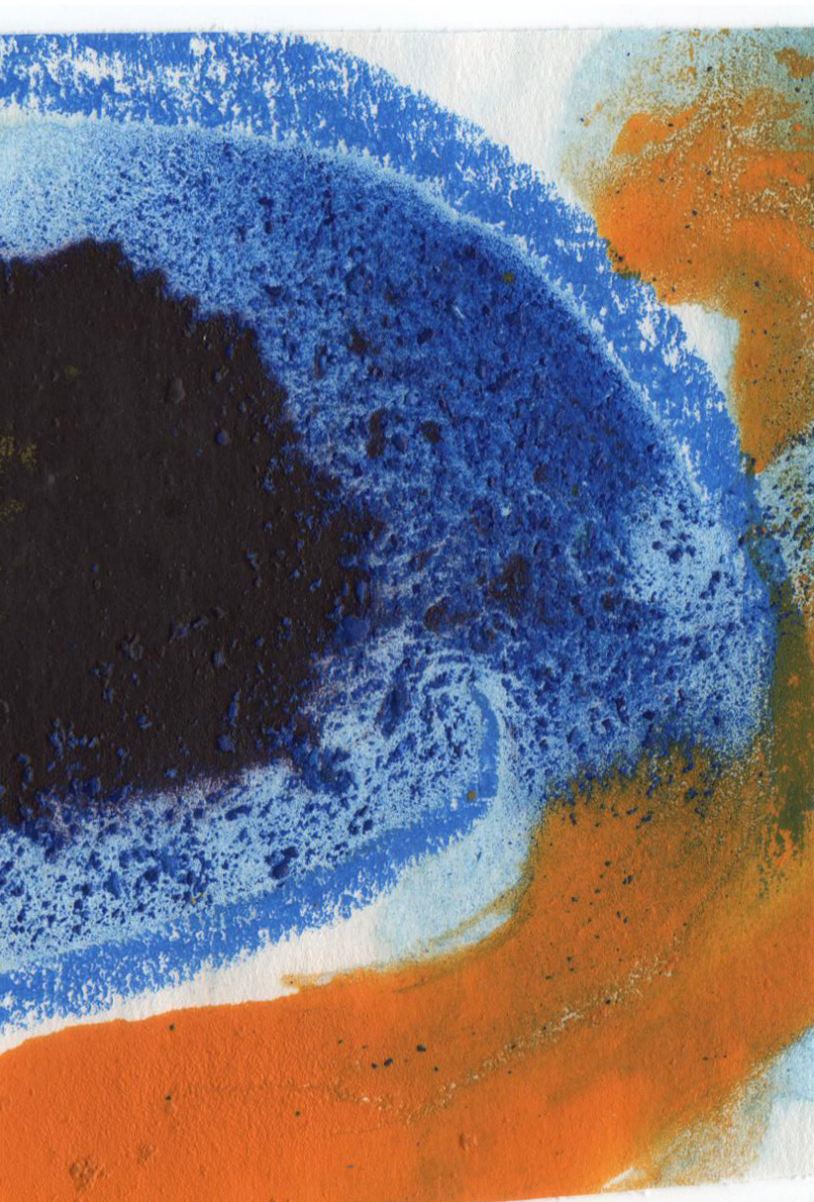
"The world is asleep, and we are dancing," Nafisa screams, shrugs, before bursting out laughing. She had always wanted to have fun like this but after meeting Adil, that opportunity never came because Adil is serious, he doesn't like such debauchery.

"We are fucking dancing," Annie says, shaking her body vigorously and suddenly, Nafisa likes her. She feels an ache in her heart and wants to be her good friend. She holds Ian by the waist, faces him, still dancing, brings her mouth closer to his face and screams: DO NOT GO TO FUCKING OKLAHOMA.

MARSHA SOLOMON

Cosmic Drizzle





My Father and His Cousins



I Eat My Butter Warm



Topography of Another April

Associative leaps:
from fear
of closed spaces
to the memory of a bearded
blue grass band
at a sheep shearing festival.
We don't owe anyone
a map. How did we travel
from the tunnel
of a brain scan to a woman
in a tent selling
skeins of woolen yarn
the color of nectarines, varied?

Who wants
the closed loop of a story
that ends, neatly?
But it's enough to say
the youngest was two. He watched
the fiddle, unable
to look away, bouncing
his bottom to a song
singing of life in a time
before sarcoma clinics—
when eight gauge needles came
in pairs of carved bamboo.
The pattern repeats:
knit one, purl two.

Ranchitos

He snuck out the metal door, carefully studying the concrete steps ahead of him, the rows of red block ranchitos on either side going up and down the mountain. In the distance, he could see the other cerros filled with shanties. Below was the old colonial town, swallowed in by the immensity of the city with their high-rise apartments and office buildings. He heard a gunshot, followed by machine gun fire. He stooped and looked around. It was too perfect, not like the real thing, which was closer to the sound of firecrackers than the shots in the gringo movies. He saw the flicker of a TV set through the metal bars of a window, heard another perfect gunshot, then music and a deep voice talking about some product – a commercial. He shrugged and rushed down the steps.

They would be down by the entrance, where the steps began, Catire thought, looking down the mountain, at the steps, at the tin roofs with tires and bricks and rocks and garbage on them. He tightened the belt around his books, feeling his front pockets for the steel bearings, his back pocket for the slingshot. No rocks this time. They had no right calling his mother a slut. All their mothers were sluts anyway. All their brothers had different daddies. Only that they hated him and pointed it because he was indeed different. He was a catire, which meant blond hair, and he also had green eyes, like a cat. The only green eyes up their mountain, the only catire in the whole barrio, other than the peroxide whores in the bordello where the mountain met the street, by the entrance.

They wouldn't be by the street – he reconsidered. They'd be hanging out a lot higher, away from too many eyes. He checked his other pocket. Shit, he remembered he no longer had his switchblade. One of them had it now. Probably Ramón, the one he cut.

He stopped and undid the belt around his cuadernos and textbooks. He moved his homework towards the middle,

protected by the hardbacks that Doña Wilsón had bought him since his mother didn't make enough to buy all the books required by the school. Hell, Doña Wilsón should pay for them since she didn't pay her mother enough. Still, the old lady was like a grandmother to him. He even asked for her blessing, bendición, whenever he went to her house. "Dios te bendiga," she always responded, with a slight accent. And she was the one who had him enrolled in that school, who paid the tuition, who kept pushing and pushing him. He felt slightly guilty. If only Doña Wilsón knew what it was to live, to survive in their barrio, really less than a barrio – a slum. If she only knew that this was another world, unlike the one down by the streets, with their tall buildings and houses, with their middle-class illusion and naiveté. No. Regular cops didn't even come this high up the mountain. And when they did, they drove two to a motorcycle wearing riot gear and machine guns. Like they did when they came for Dengue, who had shot a cop that was part of a ring stealing cars and dismantling them for parts. The cops came up the concrete steps riding bikes and when they found his ranchito, they kicked the door down and wasted him while he was screwing one of the whores that was off duty. Too bad he didn't belong to a colectivo militia. They never "apprehended" anyone up here. Whenever they came up, they took down a body bag.

He decided to descend a different way this time. He was no chicken. He could not avoid going down. Today his history report was due and he had to read it to his class. He was excited about it since he felt like Paez, the hero from the wars of independence, who came from the Venezuelan Llanos, the plains, and went into battle wielding a spear in each hand, halfway naked, steering his horse with his bare feet. Paez was a catire like himself and a fighter, and a Llanero like his abuelo. He really wanted to read the report, even though it scared him like never before having all their eyes staring at him, waiting for him to screw up. But this time it was different, not just because of all that he had found out about the battle, not only he felt he was like Paez, but he wanted to impress on those rich son-of-bitches at school that he was not a dumb ass from the ranchitos, a recojido, the son of a maid that got banged by the boss. He

was no coward. He could fight and he had fought, but that was of no use at that school. One more fight and they would kick him out, and then it would be back to the barrio's school, with all the crack heads, thieves, gangs, and losers who didn't want to learn anything anyway. He shouldn't give a shit anymore. All he really wanted more than anything was to tell the class about what he had found out, more than their stupid book said. He could recite it from memory, loud and proud as if he was Paez himself. As if he were the man who decided to face the badest most formidable army in the whole Europe -- the very army that had stopped Napoleon in his tracks and whipped his ass; the royalist army that thought it could finish off the riffraff in the Americas that dared to call themselves a free Republic, like the Gringos had done. That was what he had chosen for his paper because his Abuelo, his mama's father was from right there and knew the Llanos like the palm of his hand.

He had to admit that in the past he had hated all the boring stuff about history, all the dates, all the names, all the mumbo-jumbo crap until Doña Wilsón's oldest son, Señor Jorge, who lived in a house replete wall to wall with books and artifacts and didn't treat him like the maid's son, told him that most history books had no fire, that they had turned flawed men into perfect heroes, boring saints, and that was not the truth.

Catire took a narrow alley between shacks. It stunk of sewer and excrement. A mangy dog surrounded by flies followed him. The alley widened and narrowed as it twisted like a labyrinth behind the ranchitos. It was the perfect place for a trap, he thought. Fortunately, not many people knew the ups and downs of the alleys, since most of those guys came from the ranchitos below, the ones that had color TV's, satellite parabólicas, refrigerators, potable water, and real toilet seats instead of a hole with a pipe leading to the ditch in the alley.

He had practiced reading his report aloud. He'd had Señor Jorge correct his grammar. They went through the details. He still could not memorize the dates, but he knew the battle by heart now. Señor Jorge let him hold an authentic spear blade in his hands, cold and sharp even after all these years. He

showed him how to load a musket. Bang! Catire yelled jerking his arm up as if he'd shot the musket.

The mighty Spanish Royalist pounded Bolívar's patriot army relentlessly with artillery. If they could get Bolívar and Paez, it would be the end of that little republic, of that band of outlaws and traitors who believed in a land without a King. Bolívar knew that he was outnumbered, so he was looking for favorable terrain to wage battle, but the Spaniards got their reinforcements and now had about sixty-five hundred men. Between them lay their only safety, the Arauca – a fierce and turbulent river, carrying water from the Andes and practically unswimmable, even in the dry season.

Paez, who'd already had several skirmishes with the Spaniards and was tired of Bolívar's pedantic order giving, offered to cross the river. If he managed to stay away from the Spanish infantry and their sharpshooters, he could try to get to the artillery and that would allow them to buy more time. He selected a hundred and fifty of his best men. They stripped their horses of any additional weight. They strapped only their two spears, one short, one long, to the sides of the horses and prepared to cross the turbulent river in the middle of the night.

Catire remembered seeing the river with his Abuelo when they went out hunting in the deep Llano. He remembered how his Abuelito taught him how to make a slingshot, how to pick the perfect branch from a guava tree, how to aim, how to shoot. He could pick between the head or the wing of a bird at thirty paces; he could get an iguana from the highest branches of a tree on his first shot.

He slipped into a ditch and almost got his school regulation black shoes dirty. That was the last thing he wanted to happen, they would not even let him enter his class. He found a narrower path of the alley that went straight down the mountain, but he had to be careful, he couldn't be in school smelling of the slum.

In the dark of night, a hundred and fifty Llaneros took their horses to the river. They slid into the turbulent dark waters, rolled off the backs of their animals holding tight to their tails to keep from being swept away. The water rose and dipped and

swirled as men and mare and horse were taken downstream like small ants. If they let go, they would not have enough energy to swim across, if they climbed on their horses they would both drown. If they went back and the day was clear, they would be obliterated by artillery fire.

Catire checked his front pocket again for the ball bearings, his slingshot in the back. But what good would they be? He knew Mikal-Jordan now had a Glock, which he liked to show and flaunt, all-powerful, intimidating the rest of their gang, making them do his thing. His slingshot was a child's toy in a world of automatic and semi-automatic guns.

The alley dipped down and from where he stood he could see the valley below, the old town with the colonial red roofs, the 400-year-old church, the plaza in the middle and behind, tall buildings and the smog of the big city. If he could keep his uniform clean, he might be able to reach the street below without running into them. He might even have enough time to stop for an empanada before taking the bus to school.

Paez and his Llaneros reached the other side of the Arauca. They did not mount but walked quietly along the bank. Paez was aware that he was about to face a well-trained infantry. If they had the chance to form, his Llaneros would be doomed, picked off like flies. One man would aim at the horse, the other one at the rider while a third one reloaded. Six thousand, five hundred men awaited them, with guns, artillery and cavalry. They only had lanzas.

Catire's foot slipped into the ditch full of dirty water and muck. He cursed. Not today. God, not today. He could not afford to just be a smelling charity case from the slum. Not today. He rolled names in his head. He could recite his paper without the notes. They were so clear in his head, he could smell the river, the grass, the dust. The Llaneros were soaking wet, caressing their battle-trained horses, holding their reins, listening to the furious river as they moved stealthily towards the Spaniards. In the distance the Spanish began feeding their troops, confident that their enemy could not take several days of

cannon pounding, that soon they would try something stupid, that soon they would be squashed and end that illusion that the North Americans had started, that the French with their revolution and then Napoleon had tried to spread like a wildfire. But soon in the name of their king, it would be over, like the English tried on the north in 1812, but this time they would win.

Catire had misjudged how long the alley went. It ended into a ditch and a dirt trail, which lead back to the main stairs that cut through the middle of the mountain. As he descended, he looked in between the red-block shacks, hoping to find another alley. He saw ahead of him the silhouette of a person coming up the steep slope, holding several bags. It was Doña Esperanza, who lived even higher up the mountain than his mom. He figured that if she suddenly looked around that would mean they were there. His shoe sloshed but he continued walking.

Dusk, light, morning dew, a dissipating fog, and soon the Spanish artillery would be able to see their target across the river. They loaded the cannons. How stupid could these criollos be? They had no cannons, their infantry had no discipline, and unlike the history books indicated, most of them didn't even have uniforms. Morillo, the Spanish General, had plotted several traps and dreamed of returning to Spain soon with Bolívar and Paez in shackles, or better yet their heads.

Paez moved stealthily along the bank, trying to avoid their scouts, moving from thicket to thicket, crossing ponds with dog-like rodents, chiguires and the occasional snouts and eyes of babas, the alligator of the plain. He kept worrying that if the infantry had the chance to form a "cuadro contra caballeria" their sharpshooters would tear them to pieces.

But this was the Llano, the plains, a place where the sky was so big it might swallow a man, and the rules of war had not been written yet.

Catire remembered Señor Jorge telling him while coming down from a shelf with books, that the Llaneros, unlike the Europeans with their pointy spears, used a wide, sharp blade. Their objective was not so much to puncture and pull back, but

to cut along a path. That allowed them to move in a sea of men inflicting blow after blow by the mere movement of their blade without having to slow down. Some Llaneros went into battle with two spears, the long flat one and then a smaller one they used for poking in close proximity or to throw at a target. They were even more effective than Alexander the Great's phalange since they were on horseback.

The canons began pounding the ground. That was their signal. Their loud blasts would mask their advancement. They would have only one chance to achieve the madness that they were set out to do.

He dried his shoe with his own socks and ditched them. They might notice in school, they might send him to the principal, but he could make up some excuse, something they would believe as long as they didn't smell anything.

He looked down the trail. Behind the woman, several kids ran across the ranchitos. It didn't look like they were hiding from him, or waiting or anything. If he was a little closer he could aim, he could get one, but he wasn't sure it was them. These kids were too carefree as if they were just playing. He walked along the side of a wall filled with graffiti and political posters. The boys passed the woman carrying the plastic bags. They kept coming in his direction, then they disappeared between some ranchitos.

Catire fastened the belt he used for his books around the one around his waist. He needed to be able to run fast, to have his hands free and he could not lose his paper. This was too important. He increased his pace but he didn't want to look alarmed.

One of the kids popped his head out from behind a wall. Then all three kids came out.

"Catire, they're waiting for you before the abasto," one of them said.

"You cut Ramón on the face," another one said.

They came out in the open and ran past Catire up the mountain.

A mirage of horses emerged from a thicket, pounding the ground, galloping into the open towards the artillery. Infantrymen ran in their direction. Where had they come from? How did they get so close? The Spanish General ordered his cavalry to go and squash them. They mounted and unsheathed their swords.

Paez and his Llaneros found their target, the artillery, and hit it swiftly, wielding their 10-foot spears as if they were handheld knives. Artillerymen began to run away. In the distance the infantry tried to organize their formations, covering the plain with their bright red uniforms, their gallant flags, the bugle trolls and lethal muskets. One chance to shoot and Llaneros would be annihilated. Paez also noticed the cloud of the Spanish Cavalry. It was time to finish the job and go into the second part of the plan.

They galloped one last time through the cannons, setting fires, turning buggies, scaring horses and mules away. The Llaneros could slice a man in two without blinking, but they didn't have the heart to kill a horse. The ground rumbled again, louder and louder and the cloud moved closer to them. It was time to move out, to balance the numbers, and use the open Llano, hot and merciless and dusty in the dry season, full of mirages, deceiving. They galloped away from the fighting. The cavalry pursued, they would exterminate this miserable band of half-breeds, runaway cowards.

They were by the abasto – six, maybe seven of them. Any other day and he would have confronted them, but today he couldn't skip school or mess up his uniform. Today he was going to read his report. Today he was going to show them that he was not a dumb ass, even though he was scared of how they looked at him every time he got up to give the teacher an answer.

There was no way to avoid them, go around them. Even if he climbed behind some of the ranchitos, they would see him the moment he hit the street, and then they really would think he was a coward. He was going to walk through them.

Maybe he should not have wasted so much time with Señor Jorge reading history, about old battles and stuff that didn't

improve his chances or gave him any idea as to what to do in a situation like this. They had a gun so now they thought they were in the big leagues, like Dengue and his buddies. And now that Dengue was gone, Mikal-Jordan wielded that Glock like a dick, seventeen bullets in your ass, hijo-e-putas. He should have paid closer attention. But Ramón was the one that couldn't control himself.

He did what he had to do. Catire slowed his pace as he reached the last step into the street.

Ramon and Mikal-Jordan stood by the corner, making jokes, posing on their own stances.

"Hey, hey, Catire," one of them yelled.

"Long time no see," another one said.

They walked across the street, forming a wide circle around him. Ramón moved into the open, in his hand he held Catire's switchblade, closed, playing with it between his fingers. Mikal-Jordan kept to the background.

Catire slowed down and switched his bundle of books to his left hand. He took a ball bearing from his front pocket and inserted his hand into the back pocket to make sure that the round ball of metal fit inside the pouch of the slingshot. He held tightly to the pouch with his fingers but let his arm relax as if he was just keeping his hands there. It would take him about three seconds to drop his books, take out the slingshot, pull with the other hand, aim and shoot.

"Look at you in your cute little uniform, going to that sifrino school. What happened? Your real daddy finally felt guilty? Or is your Mama giving him good head now?" Ramón said, smiling, cocking his head up, weaving the closed switchblade.

That hijo-e-puta. He could put the bearing through his eye before he could even open the blade. Control. Control. Don't show your anger. Señor Jorge had told him that the key to any battle was understanding your enemy better than understanding your own selves.

"You know something, Catire," It was now Mikal-Jordan talking, walking towards him, his hand resting on the gun as if he was holding his dick. "What happened to you? Huh. Ever since you started that school you turned down on your own. We asked you to at least provide a little service. Make some dough

along the way. But no, you're too good for us now. So don't be so fucking naive, Catire. They do the stuff. Some of your good classmates are trusted clients, coke, pot, you name it."

Ramón moved even closer and stopped swiveling the switchblade. Mikal-Jordan kept fondling his pants, where the gun rested. They were all around, watching, some silent, some laughing, but keeping some distance.

"What you got there?" Ramón asked.

He heard the click of the blade.

It was now unavoidable.

"You still playing with slingshots?" Ramón said, moving towards him with the blade ready to strike, then slashing the air several times. Catire ducked, flushed the slingshot deeper into his pocket, and swung his bundle of books across Ramón's face. He noticed a glitter of light as Mikal-Jordan pulled the gun into full view.

Catire threw his bundle of books at Ramón and began to run away. Ramón followed him.

"I'm going to slice you, hijo-e-puta."

"Get out of the way. Get out of the way," Mikal-Jordan screamed, trying to aim, but having Ramón in the way.

God, his paper was gone. It was in the middle of the street. He could still recite word by word the rest of the battle. He could ask after class to have the chance to re-do the written part, even though they would nail him on typos. He could still prove to them that he knew his stuff, that he was not a recojido, a charity case.

He ran as fast as he could. His heart pounded, then as if some strange force had hit him, as if a revelation of some kind or some spirit had inhabited his body, he whispered to himself what Paez told his men when they were deep into the open plain with the complete Spanish Cavalry behind them.

As the Llaneros ran away from the Spanish Cavalry, Paez told them to spread out and form a single line. A new order was passed, "Vuelvan Caras," turn around, face them. They stopped, turned and now, instead of running away from an army ten times bigger, they were going to embrace it.

"Vuelvan Caras," Catire whispered, as he pulled out the slingshot out of his pocket. He aimed at a charging Ramón. He could get him in the eye, finish him. He shot and Ramón bounced backward and hit the ground. He took another ball bearing and when he aimed he could see the gun pointing at him. He saw smoke and Mikal-Jordan's hand recoil. When the hand went back into position Catire released the pouch, whispering "second finger."

Mikal-Jordan jerked his hand as if removing it from a fire. The gun flew away, landing across the street almost underneath a tire.

"You son of..." Mikal-Jordan said. Catire had already loaded his last bearing. He aimed the slingshot at the others, then he let go of the handle and lifted the hand holding the pouch higher. They moved around the sidewalk, behind a car, but none came into the open. Catire walked to where Ramón lay on the ground. He picked up his switchblade and folded it by pressing against his pants, then gave Ramón a hand.

"You almost killed me you son-of-bitch," Ramón said, blood gushing out from a ball forming on top of his eyebrow.

"If I wanted to kill you, you would be dead," Catire said, giving Ramón his school regulation handkerchief. He walked toward Mikal-Jordan and stopped by his books, now slashed up and down, but his notebook was all right. Mikal-Jordan walked towards his gun, keeping his eyes on Catire.

Catire lifted the hand holding the pouch slightly but did not hold the mast of the slingshot. Mikal-Jordan leaned down and slowly got a hold of his gun by the barrel. He lifted it and then placed it in his belt. Catire, lowered his hand, still holding to the pouch. Mikal-Jordan cocked his head and smiled at Catire. With his head, he motioned to the others to move away, to let him go.

"The battle of Las Queseras del Medio" Catire said aloud, looking around the classroom at all the eyes staring at him, some with curiosity, others with a mid-afternoon ambivalence and bored. They probably had all whispered about his lack of socks, or that he had blood on his shirt, or that something

smelled. Catire realized then that he had a lump in his throat, that his hands quivered, and that for the first time he was absolutely scared shitless. But he began to say the words, and every detail of the battle came out as if he had been there and understood the meaning of life and death.

He got to the point where Paez told his Llaneros "Vuelvan Caras," and taking a deep breath, he continued. They turned and faced the incoming cavalry that outnumbered them ten to one. The Llaneros let go of their reins and steered their horses with their bare feet. In one hand, they held the long lanzas with a flat blade, like a machete on a long pole, in the other, a short one. Sword and musket and gallantly uniformed horsemen met the almost naked, shoeless, shirtless, with only a straw hat and knee high pants. They were all savages, Criollos, Llaneros, half-breed Indians, Negros and Mulatos, all fighting together for a crazy idea about a land for the people, with no king. The long line split in two and moved to both flanks of the coming Cavalry. Soon the Spaniards realized that in the deep Llanos, the rules were different, for the savages did not stop to engage them nor gave them a chance to use their superior sabers. Instead, they galloped through them shredding everything on their path. A single Llanero could cut down ten well-trained horsemen. The Cavalry retreated in disarray, only to get shot by their own infantry as they reached their own lines, giving the Llaneros the cover necessary to overrun the infantry. The Spanish retreated out of the Llanos. It became the turning point of the war, proving that the Spaniards with their guns and cannons were no longer invincible and could be overrun by the savages with primitive weapons and a taste for independence. Five hundred Spanish soldiers perished that day, while of the one hundred and fifty that went across the Arauca River only two found their final fate.

All eyes were fixed on Catire. The lump in his throat felt bigger. The teacher cocked her head to the side, still staring. But for the first time, he felt it was not the you're-wasting-my-time type of look or the you-shit-for-brain-from-the-barrio dismissive stare, but something else, something new, maybe good, if he could only figure it out.

#

Did we touch the thorn
In the sand, Jon?

In the sand, did we
step on the thorn?

The sand, Jon, so warm,
and the thorn, it couldn't

have been deep.
Did we part the clouds

in the sky, Jon? Feels
like water in the hands.

Was the water cold, Jon?
In the hands we parted.

We parted, Jon, thorn
from sand in the warm

water, in the cold sky.
The kite got caught

in the bramble, Jon. Sky
got caught in the kite.

Is the thorn all
we felt, Jon?

In so much sand.
In hands we parted.

Are you running
bramble through

your fingers, Jon?
Are fingers parting

the water? It feels
like sky. Have we

done this before,
Jon? Warm thorns

in the fingers, you
ran your kite through

the water. Jon, are
you bramble or are you

sand in the kite?
The thorn it runs through.

Did you part open
in the sky, Jon?

The sky, it is bramble,
or is it running.

Did we, Jon? Did we
touch deep the thorn?

SARANYA SUBRAMANIAN

Ghazal of Contempt

CONTEXT OF THE POEM: On August 14, 2020, the Supreme Court of India had taken suo motu cognisance of advocate Prashant Bhushan's tweets; two in particular. The first one was on June 27th, which said ""When historians in future look back at the last 6 years to see how democracy has been destroyed in India even without a formal Emergency, they will particularly mark the role of the Supreme Court in this destruction, & more particularly the role of the last 4 CJIs." The tweet on June 29th had a photo of CJI SA Bobde riding a cycle, and read "CJI rides a 50 lakh motorcycle belonging to a BJP leader at Raj Bhavan, Nagpur, without a mask or helmet, at a time when he keeps the SC in Lockdown mode denying citizens their fundamental right to access Justice!" For these two tweets, the bench charged Bhushan with contempt of court and, on August 31 2020, charged him with a fine of Re.1/-.^o

after Prashant Bhushan

"If we do not take cognizance of such conduct it will give a wrong message to the lawyers and litigants throughout the country. However, by showing magnanimity, instead of imposing any severe punishment, we are sentencing the contemnor with a nominal fine of Re. 1/ (Rupee one)." - THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA, INHERENT JURISDICTION, SUO MOTU CONTEMPT PETITION (CRL.) NO.1 OF 2020

You know, this social media is so rotten these days.

Small tweets-sheets also are dangerous¹
Speaking English is a nasha, so people say anything and

these days. get away. Even hi-fi judges are scurrilous². This daze

makes us forget history, how Bapu fought British buggers.
Now we're left with coconuts, all malicious³. These daisies

are not men. How can one speak like this of his own people, that too in language so scandalous⁴? These dares

were given to him by those lal salaam bastards. They spread their filthy teachings, all insidious⁵, through these drains

that connect one house to another. But we live here too and we will not tolerate behaviour so unscrupulous⁶. These drapes

will open to reveal the saffron we are growing in our home. Its beauty will strike all things contemptuous⁷ these days. Bhumi

¹291. "The legal parameter within which a report or comment on a sub judge matter can be made is well defined and any action in breach of the legal bounds would invite consequences. Compared to normal reporting, a sting operation is an incalculably more risky and dangerous thing to do." - pg 62

²Democracy is based on free debate and open discussion, however, cannot go to the extent of the scurrilous attack and shaking the faith of the general public in such institution - pg 72

³When the criticism turns into malicious and scandalous allegations thereby tending to undermine the confidence of the public and the institution as a whole, such a criticism cannot be ignored. - pg 56

⁴When the criticism turns into malicious and scandalous allegations thereby tending to undermine the confidence of the public and the institution as a whole, such a criticism cannot be ignored. - pg 56

⁵Insidious attempts pave way for removing the inconvenient. - pg 32

⁶Whenever any political matter comes to the Court and is decided, either way, political insinuations are attributed by unscrupulous persons/advocates. - pg 47

⁷In our view, if a speech or article, editorial, etc. contains something which appears to be contemptuous and this Court or the High Court is called upon to initiate proceedings under the Act and Articles 129 and 215 of the Constitution, the truth should ordinarily be allowed as a defence - pg 5

⁰ Every line comes from this Supreme Court judgment:
In Re Prashant Bhushan vs Incorrect Or That The on 31 August, 2020: <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/196421935/>:
THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA, INHERENT JURISDICTION, SUO MOTU CONTEMPT PETITION (CRL.) NO. 1 OF 2020.
QUOTE AT THE BEGINNING SOURCE: *In Re Prashant Bhushan vs Incorrect Or That The on 31 August, 2020:* <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/196421935/>:
THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA, INHERENT JURISDICTION, SUO MOTU CONTEMPT PETITION (CRL.) NO. 1 OF 2020.

Love Poem Called Die Hard

Tonight you are a handsome rabid animal
I want to lick the toothpaste from your chin

Love may be disgusting but the good news is
You'll never kill us both without me, so

I want to put you to sleep but not forever
I want to joust you with a marzipan lance

Shakespeare-style or unlike Bruce Willis
You die hard but you're alive the whole time

Give me *Die Hard* or give me *Mortal Thoughts*
I envy the two tongues of your shoes

You slither into bed with renaissance plasticity
You untuck the duvet of our coeval tomb

It's here I want to love you tonight forever
It's here I could die like an Easter egg

You could crush me like a menthol
With one hand you could drive me

Like the fastest glass motorcycle
Hydroplaning on the river of your blood

The rain falls from a manmade movie rain machine
The rain in Brooklyn falls mainly on the weekends

Endings

When the moon asks of my weeping,
I reply, weeping is a door,
and I'm not sure what side of it
I'm on, though I hear
the whooping laughter
of my madness— imminent
from some direction. Weeping

is a cluster of lupines, my mother's
favorite flowers, the one's she's never
seen in person, the ones I refuse

to grow in my child's garden.
I keep the seeds in my pocket because
weeping is the opposite of a garden
with lemon-colored fences—
it is the blank soil, waiting

to be guarded. My moon,
weeping is you at your fullest,
brimming with tears, vivid
and looming. As if I could know anything

of your sorrows. Dripping,
my tears are one with the separate
streams of the wind. A small insect is swept

into my mouth, but before it finds its footing
on my sticky tongue to depart, my hand
brushes its wing and shudders,

the many paths of this Earth, ending me.

Paring the Yard

It's a cold spring with small bloom
as if the garden is fighting a virus,
too. She stands watch on stone
front steps, hands on hips. They come
with spades, gloves, boxes, pots.

Mother's yard is a taxonomy of grief.

A Japanese maple after her father
passed. His tomato plant weaving
through paint chipped lattice panels.
Ivy spread across the back gate
like the blossom of a bad bruise.

A wall of ferns, triumphant in day's
last light, to honor the women
of our lineage, who have always
grown them beside wide verandas:
Alice in her gravy stained kitchen
apron, Kathy checking her fogged
rain gauge. Mary Jo with the wide
steel watering can. Each of them
with an ear to their mother's words.

Her azaleas offered
to the neighbors, like small favors,
in parsed words over the phone.

They will unearth her work,
transplant it in their own backyards
beside pools and outdoor patios
in fresh new soil. Mother's face
does not mourn. She watches

her archives rise from their roots,
trundle down the hill,
and into the neighborhood.

MAIREAD DAMBRUCH

A Web Worth Days





Bios

Leah Albert

Leah Albert is a painter working from the Sonoran desert of southern Arizona. Her landscape paintings and works on paper contrast nature with man-made artifice, quietly examining our impact on the natural world and the paradox of contemporary isolation. She examines how our developments serve to both connect and disconnect us from each other, exploring the absurd beauty of our surroundings in the blurred space between celebration and criticality. Leah currently creates from a tiny home and mobile studio space in southwest Tucson; a renovated 90's Airstream Excella and 60's Shasta travel trailer nestled amongst the shade of Saguaro and mesquite groves.

Chiron Alston

Chiron is a research coordinator for the College of Pharmacy at Oregon State University. He received his MFA in writing from OSU-Cascades. He has two grown daughters and lives in the Portland area with his wife. Before children, he was a professional stage actor who worked on both coasts. After children he became a journeyman printer, a restaurant owner and computer systems manager; then found a home assisting scientists with research proposals. Chiron is honored to appear in *The Oakland Review*, and has had other poems appear in *TIMBER*, *The Hole in the Head Review*, *Rambler Magazine* (sic), and *Poetry South*.

Sterling-Elizabeth Arcadia

Sterling-Elizabeth Arcadia (she/they) is a half-time poet and quarter-time tattooer in Washington DC, where she watches birds and cares for her cats. She is currently working on her first manuscript, a collection of queer ekphrastic love poems based on her friends' Instagram posts. Her work has been published in *Lucky Jefferson*, and is forthcoming in *Stone of Madness Press* and *Voyager Zine*.

Jessica Barksdale

Jessica Barksdale's fifteenth novel, *The Play's the Thing*, and second poetry collection, *Grim Honey*, are both forthcoming in April 2021. Recently retired, she taught at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, California for thirty-two years and continues to teach novel writing online for UCLA Extension and in the online MFA program for Southern New Hampshire University. Born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, she now lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband.

Marije Bouduin

Marije Bouduin is a Belgian writer now living in Germany. She believes in Jacques Derrida and the filmography of Andy Warhol.

Her work has previously been published or is forthcoming in *Posit Journal* (2020) and *Allegory Ridge's Poetry Anthology* (2021).

Jackie Braje

Jackie is a Brooklyn based writer, the programs director for the Poetry Society of New York, and the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Milk Press. Her work has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, the *Westchester Review*, the *Minnesota Review*, *Waccamaw*, the *Nottingham Review*, *Bridge Eight*, *Vagabond City*, and elsewhere. She is a 2019 Brooklyn Poets Fellow and an MFA candidate in poetry at Brooklyn College.

Lawrence Bridges

Lawrence Bridges is best known for work in the film and literary world. His poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and *The Tampa Review*. He has published three volumes of poetry: *Horses on Drums*, *Flip Days*, and *Brownwood*. As a filmmaker, he created a series of literary documentaries for the NEA's "Big Read" initiative, which include profiles of Ray Bradbury, Amy Tan, Tobias Wolff, and Cynthia Ozick.

Jill Bronfman

Jill Bronfman placed second in the Joan Ramseyer Memorial Poetry Contest in 2020. Her work has been accepted for publication in *Sad Girls Club*, *Qwerty*, *New Plains Review*, *Inlandia*, *Rougarou*, *Ruminate Magazine*, *The Write Launch*, *The Decadent Review*, *The Halcyone*, *82 Review*, *The Passed Note*, *Storgy*, *Verbal*, *Kallisto Gaia*, *Main Street Rag*, *High Desert*, "The Very Edge," a book of poems in English, Spanish, and French by Flying Ketchup Press, *Carcosa*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, *Ripples in Space*, *Mothers Always Write*, *Talking Writing*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, *Flock*, *Wanderlust Journal*, and *Quiet Lightening*. She has performed her work in *Poets in the Parks*, *The Basement Series*, and *LitQuake*, and had her story about a middle-aged robot produced as a podcast.

Briana Craig

Briana G. Craig (she/her/hers) is a researcher who moonlights as a writer of stories, poetry, and plays. She prefers to write about the experiences of women and recently published an all-female one-act play titled, *Purple Ink* (*Pioneer Drama*, 2020). She credits caffeine and her cat, Navi, as her main sources of inspiration.

Daniel Crasnow

Daniel Crasnow is a multi-genre writer and scholar who graduated from Stetson University in 2020. While there, he held a Sullivan Scholarship in creative writing. He is gay and Jewish. His work is published in, or forthcoming from *30 N Literary Magazine*, *The Gateway Review*, *The Mochila Review*, and more. When he was young he created a sword and fought a demon in his dreams. He hasn't had nightmares since.

Tom Crosbie

Tom Crosbie is a Canadian writer based in Copenhagen. His work has most recently appeared in *The Maynard*, *Noir Before It Was Cool* (Weasel Press), *The Cape* and *THIS Magazine*.

John Cullen

John Cullen attended school at SUNY Geneseo and currently teaches at Ferris State University. His work has appeared in journals such as *American Journal of Poetry*, *Stone Hamilton Review*, *The MacGuffin*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

Diana Clough

Diana Clough has been writing poetry and making aesthetic collages since the age of 15. She grew up in Florida, from immigrant Latin-American parents and is a very proud first-generation American. She graduated from the University of South Florida in Tampa, FL with a B.A. in Theatre Arts, concentration in Performance. She is 43 years old and lives in New Jersey, right outside of New York City with her husband & 3 sons.

Mairead Dambruch

Mairead Clifford Dambruch is a painter and a weaver. She is a failed multitasker and an amateur rug collector. She walks fast and paints slow. Painting, for her, is an extension of the self; a living document that absorbs a spectrum of energy and sentiment from the maker. She is a teacher of art to all ages. Her work is informed by research in the fields of cultural textiles, anthropology, folktale, and the sustainable and ethical practices of herbalism and farming. She believes in building upon the roots of other's learned labor and listening as a radical action. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2020 at the School of Art of Carnegie Mellon University.

Jen DeLuna

Jen DeLuna is an alumnus of the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University. She primarily works in painting and sculpture. Her work draws upon found imagery, feelings of nostalgia and the familiar. Through figuration, color and material, her artwork seeks to invite the viewer into intimate, referential and familial spaces.

Amanda Dettmann

Amanda Dettmann is a poet whose current work explores womanhood, eating disorders, existence, and becoming. Her work can be found in her published poetry book *Untranslatable Honeyed Bruises* as well as the following literary journals: *Underwood Press*; *Black Works* (Dark Imagery Issue), *The Mosaic*, *Angles*, and *The National Poetry Quarterly*. She is currently an MFA candidate at NYU.

Gabe Durham

Gabe Durham is the author of three books, including a novel in monologues, *FUN CAMP* (Publishing Genius, 2013). His writings

have appeared in the TLR, Barrelhouse, Hobart, Puerto Del Sol, and elsewhere. He lives in Los Angeles where he runs Boss Fight Books.

Amelia Eilertsen

Mashaela Farris

Mashaela Farris writes among the rocky mountains in Salt Lake City, Utah. Her various poems, prose, and essays have been featured in Warp & Weave, Essais, and Touchstones. Mashaela is currently teaching and earning her MA in literature and creative writing at Weber State University. When she isn't writing, she can be found scrambling up the mountainside with her hound dog.

Sheila Fraga

Sheila was educated at The Manero Experimental Workshop of Painting, La Ceiba, Cuba (1994-1995), and she graduated from The San Alejandro Academy of Fine Arts, Marianao, Cuba (1996-1999). She received the Grand Prize in the Salon Flora 2001 in Homage to The Cuban Painter Rene Portocarrero. She first came to attention with her debut exhibition Unfoldings (2002) at The Domingo Ravenet Gallery, La Lisa, Cuba. In 2004 was invited to The Aveiro University as an Artist-in-Residence, Portugal.

Jaclyn Garver

Jaclyn Garver a freelance writer and editor from Fort Wayne, Indiana. She has been featured on Poets Reading the News, Narrow Road, the Superstition Review blog, and Prometheus Dreaming. She has written book reviews for The Literary Review and Poetry International Online. She also received a scholarship for and attended this month's Tupelo Press Manuscript Conference.

Grace Gilbert

Grace (ge) Gibert's recent poetics & lyric essays can/will be found in the Adroit Journal, Hobart, Ninth Letter, Pithead Chapel, the Offing, the minnesota review, Gargoyle, DIALOGIST, the Penn Review, Maudlin House, and others. Her digital micro-chap, 'no sharp things' can be found in NAILED. She is an MFA candidate at the University of Pittsburgh where she consumes unholy amounts of cheese and dumplings. Peruse her work on her website-- gracegilbert.com, or follow her on Twitter @geg2us.

Madi Giovina

Madi Giovina writes poems and stories. She has work in fresh.ink, Bewildering Stories, Second Chance Lit, and several zines. Madi is a co-editor for Backslash Lit and the founder of Perennial Press. She lives in Philadelphia with her feisty cat, Shrimp.

Mara Grayson

Mara Lee Grayson's poetry and fiction have previously appeared in Mobius, Fiction, Construction, The Ilanot Review, Columbia Journal, Mr. Beller's Neighborhood, Neologism, and English Journal, among other publications; her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is the author of the books Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing and Race Talk in the Age of the Trigger Warning: Recognizing and Challenging Classroom Cultures of Silence. Grayson holds an MFA from The City College of New York and a PhD from Columbia University and is currently an assistant professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills.

Kristina Hakanson

Kristina Hakanson is a graduate of Pacific University's MFA in Writing program where she served as senior poetry editor for Silk Road. Recent poems of hers have appeared in ellipsis..., NonBinary Review, Broad Street, and Tinderbox. She lives in Arizona. logic0fwings.wordpress.com

Chelsea Harlan

Chelsea Harlan holds a BA from Bennington College and an MFA in Poetry from Brooklyn College, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow. Her poems are forthcoming or have appeared in Sixth Finch, Hobart, Cold Mountain Review, The Greensboro Review, The American Poetry Review, and elsewhere. She is the co-author of the chapbook Mummy (Montez Press, 2019), and the recipient of the 2019-2020 Mikrokosmos Poetry Prize, judged by sam sax. She lives in Brooklyn.

Morgan Harlow

Morgan Harlow has fiction and other writing in Blackbox Manifold, Tusculum Review, Washington Square, The Moth, Seneca Review, and elsewhere. I teach literature and writing at Madison College in Madison, Wisconsin.

Helen Hawley

Helen Hawley is primarily a visual artist working across several media. Her experimental hand-drawn animation was an official selection of the Beijing International Short Film Festival (2019) and South London Shorts (2020). Group exhibitions include the Wisconsin Triennial at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, WI; the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, TN; James Patterson University, NJ; and the Flux Factory, NY. My work has been supported by a Foundation for Contemporary Art Emergency Grant, NY and residencies at the Vermont Studio Center, VT, Wassaic Artist Residency, NY, and Waaw in Saint Louis, Senegal.

Samuel Horgan

Samuel Horgan is an alumnus of the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University. He is an artist and writer producing work

grounded by his upbringing in rural Western Pennsylvania. He continues to live and work in the Pittsburgh area.

Alexis Ivy

Alexis Ivy is a 2018 recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship in Poetry and the author of *Romance with Small-Time Crooks* (BlazeVOX [books], 2013), and *Taking the Homeless Census* (Saturnalia Books, 2020) which won the 2018 Saturnalia Editors Prize. Her poems have recently appeared in *Saranac Review*, *Poet Lore* and *Sugar House Review*. She lives in her hometown, Boston.

Natalie Jill

Natalie Jill is a member of PoemWorks, the Workshop for Publishing Poets in the Boston area. Her most recent work is forthcoming in *Free State Review* and *Sugar House Review*. She's also a collagist, psychotherapist, and blogger.

Julia Justo

Born to Argentinean parents of European and Indigenous descent, Julia Justo is a multidisciplinary artist born in La Plata, Argentina. In 1999 she relocated to New York, a move that had a profound impact on her. Her sense of identity became one of increased complexity as she migrated to a land with a significantly different culture than the one she grew up in. Justo received a M.F.A. from La Plata National University. She has exhibited extensively in the US and abroad including Smack Mellon, Museum of Buenos Aires, Art Complex Museum, Hunterdon Art Museum, Asheville Art Museum, American Folk Art Museum among others.

Aruni Kashyap

Aruni Kashyap is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Georgia and the author of two books of fiction. Kashyap's work has previously appeared in journals such as *The Boston Review*, *Catapult*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Kenyon Review*, etc.

Kate Kobosko

Kate Kobosko is a second year MFA candidate in Poetry at Emerson College. She teaches creative writing to high schoolers through *EmersonWrites*. Her work has been published in *Red Cedar Review*, *Hunnybee Lit*, and *Reunion: The Dallas Review*. Her poetry focuses on place, memory, and personal history. Originally from Maryland, she lived in Florida before moving to attend graduate school. Now, she lives on the North Shore of Massachusetts, where you can find her at the beach regardless of the season.

Winston Lin

Winston TL is 25 years old, gaysian, and interested. He attended Seattle University & studied Interdisciplinary Arts, and he is currently an MFA in Creative Writing student in Pacific Lutheran University's

Rainier Writing Workshop. His writing has been published by The Lit Pub, The Waking (Ruminate's online publication), Papeachu Press, FUMEC-ALC, and The Spectator (Seattle University). His published work includes reviews, poetry, and non-fiction and has been translated into Spanish. Interests that complement his love for art include health, social sciences, and comparative theology & philosophy. Learn more about him here: <http://about.me/winstonll>

Belle M

Hello, my name is Belle, I've literally never been to France, and I'm usually less awake than I may seem.

Michael Minassian

Michael Minassian's poems and short stories have appeared recently in such journals as, Live Encounters, Lotus Eater, and Chiron Review. He is also a Contributing Editor for Verse-Virtual, an online magazine. His chapbooks include poetry: The Arboriculturist and photography: Around the Bend. His poetry collections, Time is Not a River and Morning Calm are both available on Amazon. For more information: <https://michaelminassian.com>

Theresa Monteiro

Theresa lives in New Hampshire with her husband and six children. She is a former teacher and holds an MFA from the University of New Hampshire. She has had poems published in The American Journal of Poetry, Pittsburgh Poetry Journal, Black Fork Review, Good Fat Poetry, Silver Needle Press, and forthcoming in The Meadow, River Heron Review, and Presence. She received the Dick Shea Memorial Prize for poetry in 2019.

Drew Pizarra

As one half of the ongoing poetry activation project Saint Flashlight, Drew Pizarra has been finding playful ways to get poems into public places everywhere from NYC to Charleston to Miami. "Infinity Standing Up," a collection of his sonnets, came out via Capturing Fire Press in 2019. His gay short story collection "Publick Spanking" was published by Future Tense eons ago.

Mark McGarey Robinson

Mark McGarey Robinson was born and raised in New Orleans. For the past 12 years he has made a home in NYC, where he works as a grant writer.

Peter Scacco

Peter L. Scacco began making woodcut prints when he was sixteen years old. His artwork has been featured in numerous print and online journals. Mr. Scacco also is the author of seven books of poetry and a translation of Théophile Gautier's The Salon of 1850-51. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, and a graduate of Fordham University with a degree in art history, Mr. Scacco has lived and worked in New York, Paris, Tokyo, Brussels, and cities throughout the USA. Since

1995 he has made his home in Austin, Texas. Further examples of his art can be seen at www.scacowoodcuts.com.

Howard Skroll

Marsha Solomon

Marsha Solomon has been living and working as a painter and a poet in New York. Her work has been presented in museums and galleries in the US and Europe, and has been the subject of eight solo exhibitions. Her abstract paintings can be seen on her website www.marshasolomon.com

Meghan Sterling

Meghan Sterling's work has been published in Rattle, Glass, Sky Island Journal, Red Paint Hill, and many others. She has been awarded a Hewnoaks Artist Colony Residency in 2019 and 2021. Her first full-length collection, *These Few Seeds*, is forthcoming from Terrapin Books in 2021. Read her work at meghansterling.com.

Saranya Subramanian

Saranya Subramanian is a poet, writer and theatre practitioner based in Bombay, currently pursuing an MFA in Writing at the University of San Francisco. Subramanian writes poetry that is inspired by travel, violence, and nighttime.

Miya Sukune

Miya Sukune is a visual artist working and residing in the Pacific Northwest. She works with paint at her studio easel and designs in metal for her public art. She has exhibited in group shows at Vashon Heritage Museum, Phinney Center Gallery, and Fountainhead Gallery. Her solo shows include Mt. Hood Community College (OR) and Hastings-Cone Gallery. A Gage Academy of Art graduate, Miya has been an artist-in-residence at Vermont Studio Center, Studio Kura (Japan), Atlantic Center for the Arts, and the Serlachius Residency at the Serlachius Museums (Finland.) Her work can be viewed at www.miyasukune.com.

L Vocem

L. Vocem's work is forthcoming or recently published in *Carve*, *Tulane Review*, *riverSedge Journal* and *Fiction Southeast*. Other stories have appeared in *Litro*, *Ghost Town*, *Wraparound South*, *The Seventh Wave*, *Azahares*, *Zoetrope All-Story Extra* and others. His work was awarded Editor's Choice in the 2020 Raymond Carver Short Story Contest, first finalist in the 2018 Ernest Hemingway Prize for flash fiction and made the shortlist for London Magazine's 2018 Short Story Prize.

Cloe Watson

Cloe Watson is a second year MFA student at Bowling Green State University. Her work has been featured in Dreams Walking, Defunkt Magazine, Beyond Words Magazine, Ohio's Best Emerging Poets, Alleghany Review and Mosaic Magazine.

