

**THE
MISSING
SLATE**
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CRUMBLE



THE MISSING SLATE

ISSUE 19

Winter Issue - 2024

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Throughout time, the record of history has been affected by human bias. With power being its strongest ally, it has cultivated only those records that suit a purpose, that ensure selected human growth and success, and that safeguard against uncontrolled free will and choice.

Time and again, violences are forced onto peoples. Time and again, there is hope for change. There are prayers and revolutions. And time and again, episodes of success and loss are equally lost to the record of history.

The human will to keep fighting, to keep remembering, eventually taps out due to exhaustion and despondency or it is beaten out through ruthless propaganda, politics, and social oppression. That is when the will and work of journalists rises and spreads as though a blanket on a wounded collective memory, seeming to say that it will pull through the rough work, inscribing the details, absorbing the images, and keeping the honest facts of the present buried deep into the fibers of time for humans to safely sniff out and recollect whenever the chance arrives. On the surface, journalists bravely opt to shelter their subjects from the hellish scapes of injustice, violence, and persecution, choosing to take the brunt of existential chaos. Within their selfless sanctuary, humans receive news from the frontlines.

In recent times, in recent global politics, these heroes have given up their lives, their physical well-being, their safety, the safety of their friends and family members, their homes, their basic human needs only in the pursuit of giving record and history their due diligence. There is no fanfare at the end of the path that they have chosen. There is no recompensation that humans can even come to think about which may be enough for their work. There is only the fact that the very threads of time and the stuff of universe itself owe their existence to journalists which can come close to being a reward for journalists who stand for the truth and stand against, in the face of, and bearing the worst of human action.

Incredibility is what defines their strength.

Awesomeness is what embodies their unwavering determination.

Courage is what epitomizes their whole lives.

We dedicate this issue of The Missing Slate to journalists at home and abroad.

Recordkeepers of time and history. Protectors of memory. We thank you deeply. We thank you indefinitely.



Nwa Rizvi
Co-Editor in Chief



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Editor - Flash Fiction and Short Prose



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In efforts to be honest, to follow in the footsteps of all who contributed and submitted to this Issue, I find myself in the current position of a participant to crumbling. Issue 19: Crumble, showcases the range of emotions when we both allow and are jarred by such experiences. This is why I must first thank our amazing contributors, who have lent these pages life.

I want to thank our artists who created pockets of safety for us to contemplate, alchemize, and grieve in their honesty. So, what is an editorial without give and take, with only praise and not the bravery to embrace the theme head-on myself? During the middle of producing this Issue, I had to be resuscitated due to organ failure. I found inside the irony of limitations that I was living the Issue I already felt so close to.

It is no exaggeration when I say that this issue could not have been produced if not for the incredible and steadfast work of our editors: Nwa, my Co-Editor in Chief and gentle reminder; Maryam, our Managing Editor and glue; Taqdees, our Non-Fiction Editor and worker-bee; Rameen, our Essay Editor and force of nature; Saniya, our Art Editor and personal Lancelot; Jabeen, our Prose/Flash Fiction Editor and enthusiast.

May ease find you where it can,

Free occupied land,



Kristia Vasiloff
Co-Editor in Chief

As a collective effort, Crumble promises to bring you the most demystified stances from the pens aimed at dethroning the guardians of oppression. Contained within the fluid mosaic of grief, love, lament, memory, pain, and loss, this issue holds the space for finding hope and light. We hope it serves as a gentle shadow in the scorching sun—a refuge from suffering!

This issue is heart-eaten and raw, and to quote Dinos Christianopoulos, from whom the cover art's title came: *many seeds that have tried to be buried*. We hope you unearth parts of yourself, grown, growing, and still buried, as we delve both into the grief and healing of crumbling together.

May ease find you where it can,

Free occupied land,



Maryam Shakeel
Managing Editor

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Litter

Alexandra Burack

The loneliest trust—that printed words attached to my name will outlive me, escape the mouths that catch steel shelves between copper teeth and masticate study carrels of revelation that used to be libraries or basement coffeehouses—is the work of poets. Dispersed amid forever plastics from fast food palaces on every beach, playground, and trail, destitute words loiter at corner stores and bus stops, syllables' memory of humid guttural orations like organ music without the pedals. We're made to feel guilty about waste but not orphans we carve from books, rent from syntax and crumbled under the spindly feet of fowl, who peck them as gruel and chirp, which we mistake for only bird stories.

The Elephant

Andrea Smith

When an ex crashes the birthday party, it makes the celebration a bash.

It happened so fast. The epic screaming match.

Adrienne and Gavin were expected to have great memories. The guests watched as the argument raged on.

A long-simmering feud year in the making. A love triangle. Adrienne's current man Gavin was the love of her life but Bryan, the former boyfriend, couldn't accept it.

Bryan saw Gavin as the cause of their failed relationship. Bryan couldn't see himself taking part in his bad romance. He resented Adrienne too.

He didn't admit it until the end.

She held dark thoughts too. She had signs from the beginning that Bryan wouldn't commit, and she ignored them like she would a stop sign.

In the early days, she thought if she loved him enough, he would want to settle down. Even as years slipped by her with her thirties behind her. She stayed in a relationship with someone trying to resolve her daddy issues. It makes as much sense as getting comfortable with following someone in the dark.

Not meant to be, and she let it go on for years longer than she should have. And then her passion became as numb as the first shot of whiskey. Scared to be alone or admit to herself she had made a mistake.

Her nights with Bryan, getting wasted until she blacked out. And the hangovers.

She was acting as his anchor. The distraction from being alone with his thoughts.

Then her standards changed. She wanted a grown-up relationship, with a family.

Then every autumn her hair would fall out. She couldn't explain it. *Could it be the hair products? Doing the wrong hair routine? It's my body telling me I'm with the wrong man.* Pulling the puzzle apart. She couldn't figure it out. Or put it back together. The Fall of her Discontent. She paid attention to the seasons more than she should have. But why was she so insecure about her hair? Because she always got compliments from people loving her hair. Going back to how it began, she couldn't say it's science or the seasons.

What month did it start? September, October, November?

And she found out about her heart condition. And the cardiologist offered a heart monitor instead of feedback. Like the doctor stumbled into medicine accidentally. Then it became permanent hair zapping in those 30 days of side effects. Adrienne told her doctor, and she dismissed it. Then she figured she could become someone else.

I'll be okay. I'll buy wigs that look like my hair. I am safe.

Hence, on the night of her 40th birthday party, Bryan had a hard time letting go. He appeared just as the candles were blown out. He barged into the room as Adrienne and Gavin were sharing a kiss.

"I want five minutes," Bryan demanded.

Fucking leave me alone. Her fists clenched. Adrienne's pained expression. She was fuming with frustration. She wanted to cry, strike him. She wondered if all dumped fools act like this.

"You get nothing. Stop embarrassing yourself. Have some dignity."

"*You* have some dignity. Will Gavin still love you once he sees the real you?"

Her face transformed into a mask of pain. Her secret shame was exposed. Her hair loss and the wig she wears to cover it.

"Why don't you show him your real hair?"

The guests are stunned, entranced.

“You won't let me be happy you coward,” Adrienne began.

“Why do you need a constant reminder, you're living a lie. I bet he thinks you are the most beautiful thing on earth. I did once,” he continued.

Gavin by her side clutched her hand. He glanced at the uninvited guest and then noticed the agony framing her face.

She took a step forward, “Why are you here if I am so hideous?”

“We both know what you look like under that wig,” he smiled.

Her eyes widen at the prospect that Gavin will realize she's not perfect. She hates her ex for exposing her hair woes.

The pop star and the senator discussed the couple's argument.

“What about the things they shouted? I felt sorry for them both. He said something about her not having long hair. It was embarrassing,” the pop star observed.

“She looked like she saw a ghost,” the senator added.

“He liked that he made her uncomfortable. He derived pleasure from it. He saw it as a small victory,” the pop star continued.

“He's emotionally unstable. He couldn't see that she was unhappy. He certainly was unhappy. That's why it is strange that he chose to find her. He shut her down at every turn. He was defensive towards her. His response was pure hatred.”

“It makes me wonder how they fell in love.”

“You can tell she was trying to get rid of him. He still loves her. He cares that much.”

“No way! If he did, he would care about her happiness. People break up. He can't move on. He's miserable.”

“Maybe she left him without an explanation.”

“What about the new guy? He didn’t do anything but hold her hand.”

“She didn’t need him to step in. She doesn’t strike me as a damsel. She was frightened of Bryan. She hid it well. I noticed the body language.”

What they didn’t know was how Bryan and Adrienne fell in love. It’s easy really. With a lot of free time and lots of sex there was bound to be an emotional connection. She ignored the red flags under the flowers and the sweet gestures. The lovely-dovey phase when you spend all your time together. That first kiss during *The Notebook*. That song by My Morning Jacket they claimed as their song, “Knot Comes Loose.” He taught her how to drive. Bringing her soup and beverages when she was sick. Making her dinner for her birthday.

He had a social life with his boys. She had her books. They were her companions. It was easy to get lost in a daze. The fictional world was more exciting than her purposeless existence. No ambition besides being the loving girlfriend. It slipped her mind that he didn’t spend major holidays or family celebrations with her. It slipped her mind that they were having a teenage love affair. The romance between them was going steady and they were playing house. She met his family, but it was by accident. He didn’t let girls meet his mom. She thought she was special, but it was circumstance.

Adrienne is not perfect.

She met Gavin before Bryan, but they lost contact. They reunited when she was still with Bryan. Before she acted s on her feelings for Gavin, she broke up with Bryan. It was break-up number 2 out of 7. It didn’t matter what number because in hindsight it was one too many. She went back to Bryan convincing herself that it was where she belonged. Gavin mentioned she never gave him a chance. He demanded she choose, but she backed out.

How did they stay in love? It was good until it wasn't. Honestly, Adrienne hadn't done this before. She took his lead. She waited for the calls and texts. He helped find her lost cat when she was distraught. And when the same cat had to be put to sleep. He held her hand while she wept and paid the hefty vet bill. During their fights, he brought her weakness and flaws to the forefront. How she didn't appreciate the groceries he bought when she was broke. Or that he planned every date. Like she brought nothing to the relationship.

In the end, there was an explanation. He refused to accept it. He couldn't let go. Adrienne tried being friends. But who can be friends with an overbearing ex? He needed to monitor her daily movements. He tried to get her family involved. Pleaded with her brother over Facebook. They were tight during their coupling. He even answered Bryan's text when he refused to quit his harassment. Just like that, her vow of radio silence was over. The relentless stream of hate texts began. Some sobbing voice messages, but the resentment and betterment rang truest.

Then those bad dreams. She remembered the room. He was there. Engaging with her sister, she might as well have been a shadow in the background. He acknowledged her like a waitress serving him his meal. Other dreams were signs to this but this one she fixated on.

Without his blessing and his limbo of denial, she moved on.

She had a catastrophe due to her heart condition. It was frightening and she tried every remedy to resolve it. And she had taken too long to come back.

The problem was in whose grasp was reality.

The hair woes and the wig as her identity. Or the ex who couldn't figure out why all his lovers leave.

The gracious host told everyone to leave.

And then she faced her biggest fear.

Later Gavin looked at her. His caring eyes expressed that she was not alone. She tried to explain. But he stopped her.

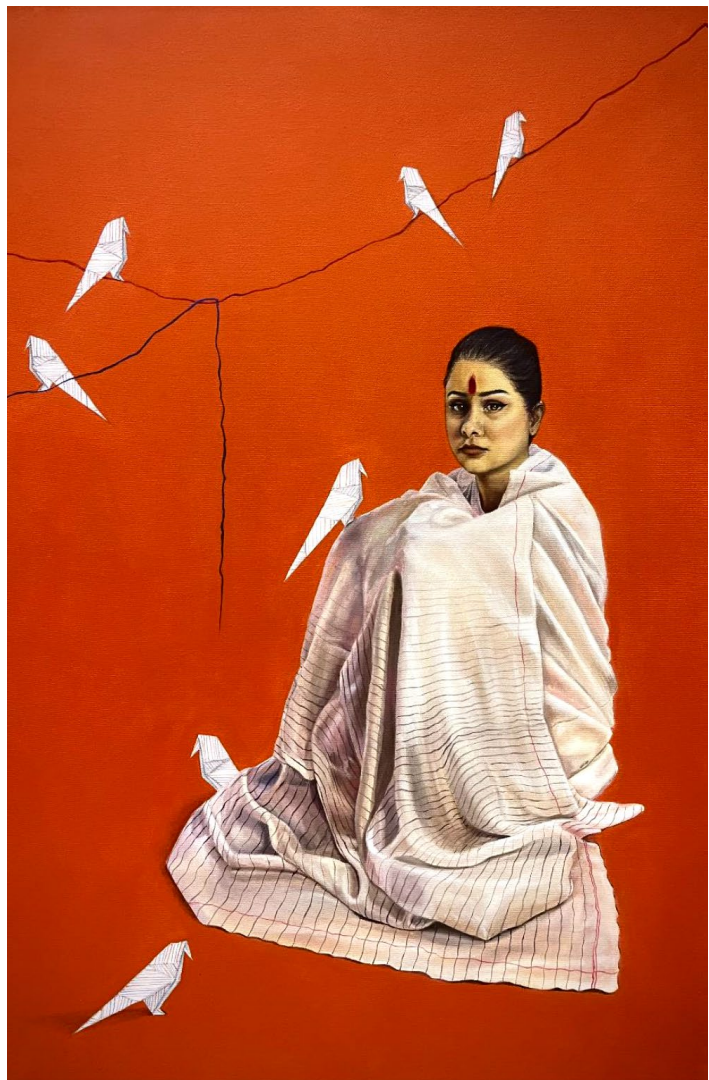
“Are you okay?” dismissing the topic of hair.

He knew how Bryan rattled her.

“I don’t care why. You can show me when you are ready.”

Incinerate

Nabiha Gillani



Jenny of Green Shores

Victoria Lilly

“Never play in the bog,” Mother always said when Jenny was a child. “You could get lost. You could be snatched by someone, or something. You could miss a step and drown in the green mere.”

The dead do not rest easy in the dark water.

All these warnings and well-intentioned tales of horror amounted to nothing in the face of Jenny’s restless curiosity. They were, if anything, so much oil to the fire. Jenny was always a troublesome child.

When her mother died, shortly after her twelfth birthday, it seemed to her only natural to wander out of the house—noisy with the keening of mourners and thick with candle-smoke—into the dark and silent bog.

The deeper she went past the boundary-stones, through the woods, betwixt pits and ponds, the less afraid Jenny grew of the wild. She was, she realised with some surprise, a little disappointed by how peaceful the bog was. What had she expected she would find in there? She did not know. A water-hag, perhaps? A herd of phantom horses, rising from the murky mire? Her own dead mother, not dead at all, but living still among the fairy folk across the water, on some far forgotten shore? She did not know.

It was early in the evening when Jenny left her father’s house and ran off into the bog; sunset gave way to dusk, which in turn gave way to an even thicker darkness the further from the village Jenny strayed. When at last her heavy limbs pulled her to the ground, the night was high upon her. Without a thought to the damp and the cold, she lay upon the soft turf on a large glade, eagle-splayed, and gave in to a deep and tearless sorrow, the kind only those innocent of the harshness of this world can feel, when first their innocence is taken from them.

Jenny was a troublesome child, always playing where and when she shouldn’t have, making a mess of her needlework when daydreams swept her away, fighting with

her older brother Jack both in jest and in anger, but she loved her mother dearly. Though she had a sibling and a father still living, suddenly she felt all alone in the great wide world. She could not explain why this was. The dark bog and its nameless dangers were nothing, nothing at all, compared to the dread of this loss. And yet, Jenny did not weep. This disconcerted her. What sort of girl does not cry a single tear over the death of her own mother? Was she truly so selfish, so careless of others, as she had been accused many times by the elders? The thought worsened the ache inside Jenny's breast, smarting and itching and stabbing and burning, until she thought she would go mad with the pain.

When the agony became too much to bear, Jenny sat up on the mossy ground, clawed at her breast, and let out a wild cry.

Sometime later—Jenny was not sure just how long it had been—having tired herself out, she blinked to soothe her dry eyes, once, twice, and looked around.

Scores of fireflies swarmed about the clearing. The girl could not tell where the starry lights of heaven ended, and the glittering candles of the tiny insects began. Athwart the glade they flew, over the wet turf, until she was amid their great complicated dance. She held out her arm, offered her hand; a member of the swarm descended on her outstretched forefinger, a little ember of a critter, warm and tickling against the girl's cool skin. The firefly buzzed and hopped, spread its wings again, and Jenny rose to follow.

They danced through the woods and into the night, through the brush and the moss and the boughs, from the green glades to wide open leas, until Jenny was back to her village and folk. She was reluctant to part, but there was no helping it. The fireflies danced for her their one final number, then turned back to the shadows of the wood. Jenny watched until the very last one disappeared, quiet, unmoving, no longer heavy of heart. Her father and Jack were waiting for her, she knew. The bog lights were gone. The girl remained.

As Jenny had expected, her father gave her a dressing-down the next morning. He may not have shared his late wife's deep fear of the mire, but he was well aware that dangers lurked aplenty in the wild wetland, especially at night. He was troubled enough as it was, grieving the premature death of his wife; he did not need a young girl's foolishness adding to his sorrow, he said. Jenny grieved in her own way, different to that of her father or brother or other village-folk, but she quickly aborted her attempt to explain it in the face of her father's confused looks and exasperated sighs.

"Never mind him," Jack said when the two of them were alone, feeding the chickens. "The grownups never understand."

Jenny wanted to point out that their father did not object to his son's grief when it burst forth as shouting at Jenny for some trivial mistake or misunderstanding or complained when the boy thrashed around the yard at the news of his mother's passing, while Jenny was told to mind herself and help clean and prepare the body for funeral rites. In the end, she decided against it.

The one person she knew would never chide her or lose patience with her, who never forced her to make herself smaller, was Nelly.

And Nelly was nothing like Jenny, mind you. Nelly was a good girl. Adults only ever had words of praise for her. More than once, Jenny heard them, when they thought she was not around, express their disbelief at why a girl as pretty, polite, and diligent as Nelly would ever be friends with a plain-looking, bad-mannered, immature lass like Jenny. She herself often wondered at that. Tall, lithe, with fair hair like gold and a smile sweeter than honey, Nelly was a beauty. Jenny, in stark contrast, was russet, short and freckled, and would have fain traded her green eyes for Nelly's blue ones. They were an odd pair, to be sure. Nelly, on her part, never seemed to give a moment's thought to the fact or doubt the appropriateness of their bond. For that, Jenny loved her friend all the more fiercely.

The next day the two girls ran off into the bog together.

Whatever hesitation Nelly might have had regarding her friend's idea to elope for an adventure, the talk of a dance with fireflies warmed her imagination and persuaded her into the plot. Jenny thought it curious how quickly the straitlaced girl agreed to accompany her on all manner of mischief, and how spirited she was about their games. She treasured this knowledge of a secret side of Nelly, one revealed only to herself. She wanted to share the wonder of the green mire with her friend and was impatient to get away from the village and the odd looks of adults and children both, that plagued her every waking moment.

In the morning, Jenny braided her hair, put on good boots, wrapped bits of food in a handkerchief, and made for the boundary-stones to meet with Nelly.

She was not half a dozen yards past the wicket when her brother came after her.

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere," Jenny grumbled, not meeting her brother's eye. "Leave me alone."

Much to her dismay, Jack followed her down the road and across the fields, keeping a few paces' distance and ducking every time Jenny took a swing at him with her bundle of food. Father had forbidden her from going into the bog again, and Jenny knew her brother would use this against her.

"Leave me alone!" she cried at last when they were nearly at the appointed place, where Nelly was already waiting.

"I'll cut you a deal," Jack said with a grin. "Let me join you, and I promise I won't tell Father."

Jenny wanted to fight him, tell him off and damn the consequences; she had invited Nelly alone to share in on the magic of the bog. To have Jack there would spoil everything.

"Oh, never you mind him," Nelly said, however, when Jenny put the situation to her. "Let him come along if he is so eager. It ain't like we can stop him anyway."

Jenny bit her tongue. It was not worth the trouble fighting Jack now that he was there. So, she nodded and beckoned to her brother, and led them into the wild.

The place was transformed in the light of day, no longer serene. Now myriad critters buzzed and rushed about, between the boughs above the children's heads and in the tall grasses under their feet. The place was swarming with life. Jenny watched and listened with her heart open wide. Not all of them found the experience pleasant however.

"Are there vipers in the bog?" Nelly asked, trying and failing to contain her anxiety at the rustling of rushes and sedges all around her.

"I don't know," Jenny said flatly. Her brother was more expressive.

"It ain't the vipers we should worry about. Don't you know there's hags around here? Keep clear of the water or a grindylow will drag you down and eat you for his supper."

"Jack, shut up," Jenny said.

"What, you don't believe in the grindylows?" her brother prodded. "Mother always used to say there's dangers in the bog."

"I ain't scared of fairies or water-hags," Nelly protested. "Those are stories for children. I ain't a child."

The girl and the boy continued to trade jabs and parries, but Jenny was growing increasingly deaf to their conversation. Her ears were ringing with the buzz of dragonflies and damselflies, and the crescendo of bullfrogs, hundreds of which roared louder and louder the deeper the children advanced. It was sultry in the bog. Green mats covering the ponds to their left and right stank. The noise was dreadful. She wanted the peaceful quiet of the night, not this, not this. She had to get away.

Somewhere behind Jenny came a muffled splash of water.

She realised she had separated from Nelly and Jack; tall sedges and the brush made the path opaque, and she could not see them. She rushed back, towards more splashes and Nelly's apprehensive cries.

"Get me out of here!"

Coming into a clearing, Jenny found her friend waist-deep in slimy green water. Nelly's hair clung to her damp brow and cheeks. She was shaking, wild-eyed. Jack stood by the pond, its edges hidden by rushes, with hands in his pockets and a sly grin on his face.

"Told you the quag is dangerous. Ain't no need for a hag if you're so careless you fall in like a dolt."

Jenny paid no mind to her stupid brother; she leapt to Nelly's side and helped her out of the mire.

"I am sorry," she mouthed while Nelly braced her foot on the solid ground and heaved herself up using Jenny's outstretched hand.

"It ain't your fault."

"Are you alright?"

"I think so, I—"

Nelly turned around to glance at the water. A patch had been cleared of pondweed by her falling and splashing about; in this patch, something rose from the depths. Something leathery and black. A trophy won by Death.

When a frog jumped from its split-open head right at them, Nelly and Jenny both cried out at once. The girls quivered for an excruciatingly long, suffocating moment, watching the corpse—gods know how old—float on the surface. Behind them, Jack cackled and sneered at their fright.

Then the laughter was cut short.

The boy strutted backwards, tripped over a rock, tried to regain his balance; but the dirt beneath his feet was so slick and soft, he fell into the water on the other side of the ridge. In his surprise, he barely even muttered a curse.

His fall and flailing about disturbed the green mat on the surface of the pond. From the bottom, it summoned yet another corpse. An animal one, this time, but no less menacing or unearthly in its oily black garb.

“So much for being careful,” Nelly said wryly as Jack yelped and scrambled for purchase on the causeway. He cursed.

“Oh, sod off, you, I—”

“Both of you, shut up!”

Jenny’s low but icy voice snapped her two companions to full attention. For a moment they looked about in confusion, trying to spot some demonic beast or another in the treeline: then they noticed it.

The quiet.

Where mere moments ago there had been a deafening roar of life of all manner and size, of both creatures of the sky and the water, now there was nothing. Not a creak, not a groan, not a flap of wings. Nothing.

Nelly turned to her friend with mute dread in her eyes. “What’s going on?”

“There,” Jenny mouthed, and pointed at the tops of tall dark trees on the far edge of the clearing.

A great number of black birds had gathered in the topmost branches, and sat there unmoving and quiet. Dozens, hundreds of eyes were riveted on the three intruders.

First came a solitary ‘caw!’, then another one, then flapping of wings, a rolling and unstoppable crescendo of rage, until mere cries and flaps could sate it no longer, and a thousand darklings descended upon the children.

They stared for a moment, seized with terror. Then they ran.

In the swirl of feather, beak, and claw, the three completely lost their bearings and failed to retrace their steps to the open ground. Bullfrogs resumed their hollering, adding to the cries of humans and caws of birds. Jenny could not stand it. To make things worse, as they turned round the shore and deeper into the mire, she found her sight occluded by a rising damp vapour. For all that the sun was high and the sky cloudless, the bog found a way to cover itself with a shroud of fog.

Jenny thought little of her friend or brother at that moment. She moved into the thick downy birches surrounding the watery flats. She slipped. She bruised her palms and knees on knotted roots that had spread across the path. At least she thought it was a path. It had been flat and clear just a few paces back. Was she still on the trail? How could she have lost all her senses of sight and bearing in so short a time?

With the birds no longer pecking her, and the air less sultry under the boughs, Jenny grasped at the opportunity to gather her wits. She was, she realised with dismay, alone.

She moved about, shouted, whistled, shouted again, to no response. Nor did she catch a glimpse of Jack or Nelly, even after she peeked round a tree and at the clearing. The frenzied birds were gone; the heavy, oppressive air remained. This was no place for humans. They should never have come there.

Orienting herself by the placement of the Sun, and trusting her own inner compass and wits, Jenny looked for a way out.

She found it more easily than she had expected. Exactly how long it took was impossible to say, but she was sure-footed and calm of heart, and the bog guided her steps back to the human world. Jenny briefly wondered what had befallen Nelly, and Jack as well. She did not have to wait long for the answer.

When she entered her father's house, Jack was in the middle of receiving a scolding of his own, an even worse one, perhaps, even than Jenny's from the day before. Though she expected to partake of Jack's reprimand, the shouts never came. Instead of anger, her father's eyes were filled with fear.

"What's going on?" she stuttered. She turned to Jack, who looked away and would not meet her eye. Before he said it, Jenny already knew the answer to her question.

Nelly was still missing.

All the men and boys were roused from their homes and fields to go into the bog and find the girl. Nelly's mother was beside herself with fright. Her father and brothers threw scornful looks Jenny's way as she saw the men off at the boundary-stones; she herself was, naturally, not allowed to participate in the search.

"But I want to help!" she cried after her father and Jack, but they said nothing, only shook their heads.

The menfolk set out in the early hours of the afternoon; Jenny watched the treeline closely from her seat atop a knoll, her back against the cool, lichen-ravaged stone, and counted the tolls of the parish church's bell-tower. They rang the same as they always did, heedless of the urgency, indifferent to human troubles. The bells kept their own time. The bog seemed to do the same, Jenny mused, setting aside the time for dancing and the time for running. What kind of time, she wondered, was passing for the men and boys treading upon the ancient wilds? As the sun went down, a mist gradually spread throughout the canopy of the woods, rising from its watery resting-place during daylight hours to rule the night. It would not be gone until the dawn. Would the men find Nelly in time? Jenny looked into the mist and saw lights lighting up here and there: torches and lamps, she realised, of Nelly's would-be rescuers. They swarmed about the expanse of the mire much like the previous night's fireflies. They danced their way into the dark, through the woods and the glades and the ponds.

But they did not find Nelly.

Jenny watched them return from the woods in pairs and groups, haggard, dirty, and tired. Without even having the strength left to curse her, they only cast ugly glances Jenny's way as they passed by. She paid them no heed, perhaps for the first time in her life, and kept observing the mist as it sank back into the thick of the trees and the green ponds beyond. She waited for her friend.

Jack was the last to stagger out of the bog, just as the dawn cracked across the inky skies. His was, perhaps, the wildest look of them all. Jenny hoped that he, at least, would stop and talk to her. He did not. He briefly looked her way much like the

others returning from the search had done. A small curve of his mouth, or perhaps only a shadow dancing across his face, betrayed the guilt inside.

Her brother came and went, yet Jenny remained right where she was, never mind the damp and the cold of her uncomfortable seat beneath the boundary-stone. As soon as the Sun was up and the mist had all cleared, she resolved, she would march into the wild and find her friend. When the first true light of day spilled over the yonder hills, the golden deluge briefly blinding Jenny, Nelly appeared.

Overjoyed at the sight of her, Jenny dashed down the knoll and nearly swept Nelly off her feet with the force of their embrace. Her joy all drained away, however, when she stepped back and put her hands on Nelly's shoulders and looked into her face.

Golden hair had come loose of the carefully braided plaits and somewhat stuck out like wild grass, somewhat clung damply to Nelly's brow and cheeks. Countless small cuts marred her face and neck. Her lip was red and swollen in one corner, where she must have bit it too hard in a fall. Jenny took Nelly's hands in hers and took a second, longer and closer look at her friend. Her arms, calves, and neck were all covered in bruises, some small and dark, others larger and lighter. So sorry was the state of Nelly's clothes that Jenny wondered how they were still clinging to her back. But beyond the messy hair and the stained, tattered dress, the strangest thing of all was Nelly herself.

All light had faded from her eyes.

Throughout that day, Nelly said nothing and acted strange. Her mother embraced her tearfully; her brothers and sisters did too, but neither by a word or a look, a smile, gesture—something—did Nelly show gladness to be back home safe. She scarcely even seemed to recognise her family, or Jenny for that matter. She moved slowly and queerly, like a person sleepwalking.

While some were perturbed by Nelly's changed demeanour, others thought little of it at first. It was to be expected, the latter said, after suffering god knows what hardship in the bog. But there were yet others, who whispered far away from the ears of Nelly and her family of her being changed by the wilderness, in some deep

and unspeakable way. Jenny looked into her beloved friend's dark eyes, and could not read them.

Days passed, then weeks, with little improvement in Nelly's condition. She regained her speech after a few days but spoke seldom. She continued to move in an odd way: either strolling about languidly or fretting at the slightest rustling of grass under someone's foot, nervous as a sparrow. Gone was the carefree, bright girl everyone had known. It did not take long for people to lose patience for Nelly's strange new ways. Jenny observed them look at Nelly behind her back in much the same way they used to look at herself and continued to do so. Now the two of them were both targets of whispers and taunting cackles. It was as though in their eyes Nelly had ceased to be a person.

The exasperation of Nelly's parents with her aloof, erratic demeanour pushed Nelly away from her family; her other girlfriends too, thought her fey. The longer Nelly failed to get better, the farther they kept their distance. Jenny thought it only natural for Nelly to seek out her company more often than before. While she never regained anything close to her former cheer, Nelly seemed a little more at ease when she was alone with Jenny. There was a strange sort of tenderness growing between them in those long quiet moments when they were left on their own.

Jenny, for her part, did not think her friend strange or troublesome or a burden—certainly not the way everyone else seemed to treat her. To be sure, she was concerned for Nelly's well-being, and well aware the blame lay with herself for bringing Nelly into the bog and causing this change. For all that Jenny enjoyed the softness of the air between them when the pair sat on a drywall or under a tree, or on the knoll looking out towards the bog, she also hated it. She knew, deep down, that the wild had, indeed, transformed Nelly in a profound, irreversible way. A part of Jenny wished that Nelly would smile like she used to before. She wished for Nelly to be happy, and free of care, and unharmed.

What Nelly herself wished; Jenny did not know. She asked, naturally, many times, about what had happened in the bog after the three of them split up, and about her thoughts and feelings now that she was a stranger among her own kin, an outcast worse even than Jenny herself. Nelly only ever smiled, shook her head, and spoke soft sad words. Jenny never pushed her to say more. The few vague clues she

received were enough. And if this was to be the new Nelly, she would be her friend the same as she had been to the old one.

She would hold Nelly's hand and clasp it tighter and warmer than ever before. Nelly, who was of late wont to stare into the distance, would turn to her friend, and smile a troubled smile.

After about a month had passed, Jenny resolved to do something more than offer sweet words and warm embraces to her friend. She approached Jack, who had been different ever since that day in his own way, with an idea.

"Someone or something did this to Nelly," she said. "Whoever or whatever it is, maybe it can change her back, make her better, something. Maybe we can make the guilty pay."

Jack stared in disbelief.

"Are you touched?" he said. "Go back into the wild? We nearly got killed the first time and look at Nell! You want us to get snatched by the bog the way it happened to her?"

"We led her there. It's our responsibility."

"Our?" Jack drawled with a mocking expression. "Was you who took her on that little trip, not me. Why should I risk my neck for nothing, just 'cause you've gone mad?"

"You decided to come along. You were by her side when the bog split us. You're just as responsible as me," Jenny was resolute. Then she shrugged. "Well, never mind. I mean to go back tomorrow with or without you. I'll find out what happened to Nelly, and I'll make things right. If you're too scared to come with, by all means stay here among the chickens."

Jenny had aimed her attack well. His pride injured, Jack turned sullen and mulled things over; he caught up with her the next morning at the wicket. Nelly, to whom

Jenny had confided her plan, said her goodbyes to Jenny at the boundary-stones. She was not coming with them.

The mire was the same that day as it had been the previous time: loud and sultry. Yet as the two trekked deeper and deeper into the wild, the hot summer day gradually changed the scenery around them. Jenny kept her eyes on the treeline and the top branches; no black birds were to be seen or heard today, which was worrying in its own right. The longer she looked left and right, the more she noticed vapour rising from the green surface of the water, obscuring her gaze, hiding the far shores behind an even thicker veil.

Having noticed the encroaching haze himself, Jack muttered, "We should go back."

"We haven't found anything yet," Jenny replied coldly. "We can't leave at first sign of trouble."

"I'd much rather find nothing and keep my head on my shoulders, thank you very much. Maybe you've a death-wish, but I don't."

"Suit yourself," was all Jenny said.

Despite his protests, Jack did not go back, though he did groan and complain as the fog grew thicker and its ethereal fingers reached and grasped at them.

Then lights appeared, in wisps far to their left and right, then behind them; but Jenny knew better than to follow those. The fog had by then crept its way to a yard or so around them, so all she could do was keep her eyes on the ground before her feet, gauge its firmness, and take one step at the time into the unseen. The haze was thick, and colder than she thought it would be, for the day was so hot. It hummed, like an insect's wings. It called to her. There was something soothing and familiar about the fog, something she could not name. The nearest thing to it was the feeling during those soft solitary moments with Nelly. The bog was not an enemy, not to her. She didn't need to have any fear of it. She would make things right.

A cry erupted in the distance.

Jenny turned, and Jack was not by her side.

She rushed the way she had come, not gauging her steps now, not thinking of the treacherous damp ground and the pungent waters or what might be lurking in their depths. More cries came, each gruffer and wetter than the previous one. Then the sounds dwindled, as though the crier had been submerged under water. Or, perhaps, it was Jenny who had plunged beneath the slick mat of pondweed, maybe that was why her hearing had altered all of a sudden? She did not know.

At length the haze began to part, the air around her growing warmer and the sounds clearer. Jenny stumbled into a corpse of gnarled ancient pines by the water, their trunks and boughs promising a haven from the fog and the roar of critters.

Sitting between the roots near the water's surface, was Jack.

He was not quite sitting but was rather slanting backwards with his shoulders against the trunk at an awkward, uncomfortable angle. Not that this would have bothered Jack, though, for Jenny at once noticed another thing. His head was smashed in.

She crouched at the corpse's side in silence, and examined the gaping mess of bone, blood, and brain that had once been her brother. His were not the kind of wounds a human being could have inflicted, surely. Jack's right leg lay twisted and crushed, fabric of his trousers nearly dissolved by blood, shredded by the jutting shinbone. His head had been bashed in as though with a great and sharp rock; but though she turned left and right, observing smaller patches of blood among the trees that revealed Jack had already been injured before he finally fell here, Jenny saw no such weapon. The biggest stone she glimpsed was no larger than a fist. What sort of strength did it take to lift a boulder, anyway? Yet more troubling, the wounds were fresh: she put her fingers to the red pulp of tissue that used to be Jack's face, and his blood was warm and quick to the touch. Flies and other creatures had not taken a taste so far, but they were bound to soon enough.

She ought to run to her father and tell him what happened, Jenny knew. They ought to carry away Jack's body, as the job was too much for her alone. All of that; Jenny

knew, but did not act. She only stared, deaf and dumb, at the tattered remnants of her brother; she did not weep for him.

When at length she returned home, shortly before nightfall, Jenny could not bring herself to tell her father the truth. Nor did she remember where exactly Jack's remains lay, so she thought it better not to say anything other than why the two of them had gone into the bog again. She was not sure whether her father believed her or not, but she did not care. She did not care what anyone thought anymore, or how people would look at her after they learned of her brother's fate. Her only interest and worry now was Nelly, and how she might react once Jenny told her the news.

When she did, Nelly was as impassive as ever. She listened to Jenny's story about the fog and the cries, and Jack's mangled body beneath the Tanglewood trees, with a distant look in her eyes. Once Jenny was finished, Nelly sat quiet for a moment, then nodded. She took Jenny's hand. That was all she did.

On the morn, ere the sun rose, the two girls once more ventured into the wild. It seemed only natural to do so. Besides, what did they have to fear, now?

The bog was different than Jenny had ever seen it before. Warmer and clearer than on that first night, when she danced with the fireflies; quieter, fresher and more peaceful than on the two dreadful days they intruded upon the mire. The wilderness was neither trying to scare them away, nor hunt them down, nor show them the way home. This was something new.

"Was it like this that time? Before you returned to me?" Jenny asked.

Nelly shook her head. "No, not quite. I was dazed and overcome. Back then, I ain't sure I wanted anything, not even to find my way home. It all felt rather like a dream," she said softly. "I saw someone in that dream. First, I thought that was you, then I thought it was Jack. It made a change in me. It...Ah, none of that matters now. I knew I couldn't stay, but I didn't know where to go. So, I looked for you."

Jenny squeezed her fingers around Nelly's.

“I got lost that day,” she muttered. “I couldn’t be by your side, I couldn’t protect you. They wouldn’t let me. I am sorry.”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for.”

“No harm will come to you again. I swear it.”

“I know,” Nelly said gently. “I know.”

Jenny opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came through the parted lips. What words could one speak, of the hideous wounds coiled in their hearts? What words for such loss, such wonder? Whatever their pain, better it bled in secret and silence. Jenny much preferred touches to words anyway and held her friend’s hand as they walked on in comfortable quiet through the shadows.

The girls made their way past the woods and to the ponds, which lay green and still and peaceful, resplendent. Faint sunlight cast dancing flickers and thin shadows across their surface. The two stood at the boundary, sedges and rushes reaching up to their knees. They gazed at the waters, and the far shores beyond.

“Ah,” Nelly sighed, closing her eyes and lifting her face to the sky. “How weary I’ve grown! Would I were at rest.”

Jenny did not raise her eyes as her friend did. Instead, she looked upon the grubs and larvae squirming among petals of purple flowers at her feet. They would be moths and butterflies come autumn, she knew, but in the meantime...

She muttered, “We can’t stay.”

“I know,” Nelly said. Not turning her face away from the sky, eyes closed still, she shrugged and bit her lip. “I know.”

“It will be all right.”

At that, Nelly turned at last. Her arms, which before she held crossed firmly against her chest, now rested freely at her sides. Light flickered across her face, and she smiled at Jenny the way she used to in the old days.

Jenny stepped forward and put her arm around Nelly's shoulders, held her closer and more tenderly than ever before. Their embrace stretched on for one heavy, dark, eternal moment.

Then Nelly stepped back, still with that smile on her lips. Lashes fluttered before her bright eyes, flesh slid wetly against iron, a drop of blood on the blooming marshlocks at her side. Nelly fell into the mere, and the last thing she saw as she went under, before the waters delivered her, were the soft green eyes of her most beloved friend.

Jenny watched in silence as the pondweed broke, swelled, stilled again. She let the bloodied blade fall into the rushes, but did not otherwise stir. Sunrise warmed her brow, the air in the bog was fresh. Everything was at peace.

Somewhere in the trees far away, a nightingale sang.

Saat Din

Nabiha Gillani



An Expensive Lie

Nah Hannah

but it just costs air, someone's last breath.

Never in a million years did I think

I would be grateful,

of the toxic air I breathe out

and the gust of fresh air I breathe in.

My heart breaks for Marcellus Williams.

Condemned to be executed,

not for what he did, but for what he didn't do.

A Black innocent man

whose DNA cleared him of being the killer

whose testimonies cleared him of being the killer

those statements coming a little too late,

sits in a jail awaiting to take his last breath.

His days are counting down fast,

His heart is bleeding, he is anxious

Maybe we can do something,

maybe we can pressure the governor.

And so Marcellus will be executed

despite being innocent.

I hope poetic justice is not what we breathe for

because sometimes poetic justice is just a beautifully written injustice

Until Night is a Chorus

Sandy (Olson-Hill)

in the aperture

of space and sky. I renew.

to build back up, if I falter. I don't fall for I am carved from titanium

scars, charged from particles, made of cosmic space, of diverse stars

of mountains, molten plate over plate. Bolt to bolt

I climb note after note, treble to clef,

where stars are impresarios. I gather my magic, where the sea of nebulae parts for me.

Beyond the aluminum mask of the moon, I harbor

her dark maria, her white bone of iron & light, her titanium

heart. Like me. Like stars compressed.

I'm a diamond from nitrogen dust

in a symphony of galaxies to orchestrate

Allegro, Libretto, night after night, bar

after bar, in four quarter time. By moonlight & meteorite I spin

in worlds I dream about. Aurora, where the sky's alive, where the night sways

stars into waves. Into Magellanic clouds the voice of spheres

to shatter sound. In space,

I'll make my way until day breaks me in beauty.

Until the Sun comes floating

helium boned. Carbon eyed, hydrogen in her smile,

serving song into dawn. Like her,

my core is nuclear. Like her,

I've sung like oxygen fueled
out of darkness to spark
until I'm lit to light like her,
like this
Ms. singing fire into bliss.

Din Raat

Nabiha Gillani



Molasses and Mirrors: A Journey to Self

Jehan Loza

When I was five, my mother took me by the hand, knelt on one knee and asked, “Gigi, why aren’t you responding to roll call?”

I gazed into her honey-coloured eyes, almost seeing my molasses-coloured ones reflecting at me.

She was beautiful, my mum, with her round face and soft pale skin.

“The envy of many a woman,” the village women said, before looking at me with a slight shake of the head. “Not at all like her mother. Her skin is too dark, and those eyes...” They clicked their tongues.

“The colour of molasses,” my almost-teenaged uncle once said of my eyes. “Yuck,” he added, his face scrunching as if tasting something bitter.

His words plunged, like a knife, into my chest.

I stitched myself back together in the knowing that my mother loved molasses. I closed my eyes and, searching for her, found her in the kitchen spooning mouthfuls of the black syrup straight from the jar.

“Here, I’ll make you a sandwich,” she said, licking her lips as she lathered a piece of flatbread with the sticky stuff, rolling it up and handing it to me with a kiss on the forehead.

“Gigi, why aren’t you responding to your teacher when she calls your name?” she asked again.

“She never calls my name, Mama.” I complained. “She says everyone else’s name, but never calls out, Gigi.”

My mother let out a rambunctious laugh. “That’s because your name is Jehan, silly. Gigi is what we call you; it’s not your real name,” she said, still catching her breath.

I accepted her explanation without question, and the next morning, when my teacher called my “real” name at roll call, I raised my hand.

But back home, I remained Gigi – a name wrapped in the warmth of my mother’s affection, as soft and comforting as her embrace.

It would be this way for several more years.

In July 1977, as Australia’s multicultural policies were being written, I arrived in Melbourne as an almost seven-year-old with my family. My passport said ‘Jehan’, but my parents, unaware of Australian norms, enrolled me in school as Gigi.

“Say good morning, Gigi,” my teacher prompted on my first day. It was a gusty winter’s day, and my mother had dressed me in a pair of brown ADIDAS tracksuit pants that were too big, and a matching sweatshirt that was too small, both chosen carefully from the bag of clothes donated to us by the Red Cross.

A bunch of white skinned, rosy-cheeked Grade One kids sat cross-legged before me, their blue eyes pricking me like pins, making me aware of my very different, molasses-coloured ones.

Yuk. My uncle's words lunged at me, the scar they left on my chest pulsing.

"Good morning, Gigi," the kids said in robotic unison.

I imaged them whispering about the molasses in my eyes.

That lunch time I sat alone on the edge of the schoolyard, straddling a forgotten log.

"Dirty Wog," an orange-haired boy spat my way and, though I did not know the meaning of the words, they came at me with such force they winded me, leaving a dull ache in my stomach.

The next day, and for what seemed like endless days that followed, I clung to my log. From my perch, with wide eyes, I studied the other kids.

Could I ever become one of them? I wondered, making mental notes of my observations: See how the girls giggle as they swing from those metal bars, how they wear skirts and tie their hair in little tails and how their lunches consist of neat slices of white bread with thin fillings. Always an apple, never cucumber.

At home, I overturned my drawers, yanking out every skirt and dress, arranging them in neat piles. The next morning, I wore a skirt and sweatshirt. As my mother tied my hair into pigtails, I stared in the mirror, pleased with my reflection.

"Two thin pieces of bread, Mum, with the mortadella in between. No cucumber," I said, schooling her on the art of sandwich making.

I skipped to school, confident in my new creation, cheeks aching from smiling so much.

Then, my teacher opened *The Ugly Duckling* and began to read the story of a black duckling so ugly no one wanted to claim it. I felt a dozen blue eyes burrowing a hole into the back of my head.

This time, I swear I heard them whisper about my ugliness. I swallowed my smile along with the lump rising in my throat.

"Gigi," said Donna, the prettiest and kindest girl in my class, "do you want to play kiss chasey?"

I looked up from my writing book, where I'd been perfecting the letter G.

Of all the games, this was the one I had been watching from the sidelines, longing to be one of those girls being chased by one of those boys.

"Me?" My heart thudded, surprised someone like her would invite someone like me into their world.

That lunchtime, I ran with all my might across the schoolyard, glancing over my shoulder every few seconds, hoping to see Jim chasing me.

"He might chase me tomorrow," I thought, drifting off to sleep.

But just before lunchtime the next day, with my stomach flipping in anticipation, Jim pointed at me and, to the entire class, said, "I'm not playing with her. She's a nigger."

His words landed like a punch I didn't see coming. For a moment, the world around me blurred, my ears ringing as if I'd been struck.

When Miss Sullivan looked at me with eyes brimming with pity and said nothing, I knew nigger meant something dirty.

They're right, I thought, trying to focus on my workbook, though distracted by the imagined fleas crawling on my skin.

I began to see myself the way they saw me.

I was eight.

When I was ten, crouched on all fours playing hide-and-seek in the library, Mr. Walsh startled me from behind. "Are you pretending to be a gee-gee, Gigi?"

I tilted my head, confused like when my mother asked why I wasn't responding to roll call.

"Don't you know what a gee-gee is?" His awkward smile stretched across his freckled, pink face. "It's a horse. Are you pretending to be a gee-gee horse?"

Laughter erupted around me.

"Gee-gee horse," someone mimicked, and a wave of shame crashed over me, burning my ears.

I stood up slowly, and as I did, it hit me – I must have looked like a horse, crouched there with my brown skin and frizzy black hair, hanging down my back like a mane.

When I was twelve, we moved suburbs. I changed my name.

“Jehan Loza,” I said to the woman filling out the enrolment form.

“How do I spell that?” she asked, without looking up.

At dinner, I told my parents, “Don’t call me Gigi anymore. It’s not Australian.”

My father nodded in appreciation. “Did you know you were named after President Sadat’s wife?” he said, nostalgia creeping into his voice.

“His wife is beautiful, just like you,” my mother added. “In Arabic, Jehan means beautiful flower.”

Later, I stood before my mirror, trying to find that flower. But all I could see were the roots of a weed: a Wog, a Nigger, a horse with molasses-coloured eyes.

“Yuck,” I muttered. “An ugly duckling that doesn’t belong.”

“Yohun,” A boy called out one day, trying to pronounce the words someone had chalked on the back of my sweater.

“It’s Jehan,” said my friend, Jane.

It was the mid-eighties. Multiculturalism was gaining force, and my friends were trying to embrace this new world of difference.

“Yehan, Johanna, Yohanna, Yohan, Juhan,” they fumbled. “Where are you from?”

I am Australian, I wanted to shout, but I answered. “I am Egyptian.”

They oohed and aahed, as though I were an exotic specimen. In their multicultural delirium, they teased, “Do you walk like an Egyptian?”

Which was worse? I wondered: the colour of my skin and horse-like name, or the exotic, unpronounceable strangeness of my identity? Either way, my identity seemed immutably etched into my skin and attached to my name.

I can never be like them.

This irreconcilable difference causes me to rage until one day it erupts.

“Fuck you,” I say to a teacher, storming out of class. The words surprise me as much as they surprise her.

“Actually, fuck you all,” I mutter, storming off to the toilet for a secret cigarette.

Later that day, I am still simmering with agitation and turn to a male friend. “Go fuck yourself!” I say, and God, it feels good.

“You’re a loud-mouthed bitch,” he shoots back.

I swallow those words whole, letting them mold, shape, and define me.

For years, I carry them like a badge of honor.

Finally, I have a voice.

But I know that words don’t erase the pain of not belonging.

“I wish I was like you. You’re so strong, so beautiful,” Jane says, catching me off guard, causing me to choke on my rissole roll.

“What the fuck?”

“You do swear too much, though,” she adds, with a grin.

I am nearly sixteen.

Back in front of my mirror, I study the face looking back at me.

A beautiful flower. Is it possible? I ask my reflection, in disbelief.

“Jehan, the beautiful, loud-mouthed and strong!” I declare and burst into laughter.

In a country where multiculturalism has woven into the fabric of its society, I’ve come to realize that identity is never static. It’s shaped by the names we are given and the ones we choose for ourselves, by the histories we carry, and the cultures that surround us.

Like a flower, I’ve grown and shed old petals, making room for the new.

My name may still be hard to pronounce, but my skin has been embraced by diversity and kissed gently by loved ones. And like molasses, my essence remains sweet, thick with history, and unwavering.

I keep a jar of it in my pantry, a reminder of the sweetness that has always been mine – even when neither I nor others could see it.

My flower keeps evolving, and as it does, I discover new names for my being:

Fighter, survivor.

Compassionate, curious, passionate.

Mother, friend.

Lover.

I am Jehan Loza.

I am all the names I have ever been.

Living Room

Carol D'Souza

Television bricks. Neighbouring roots

grown over years find civil waters,

now with difficulty. Errant children, erratic health:

surviving safe topics. Wall building: now the answer,

it matters little what the question is.

Dam the heart on the go.

Mobile facility is contracted out to cell phones.

When far-reaching network of glowing square-inches

remotely manages to section and wall-off neighbours

living cheek by jowl at a moment's notice,

the scale of the bricklaying machinery comes home.

Elegy for a Simulacrum (read: Family)

Khadija Sehar

Read and answer the questions given below carefully and with candor. You will be held fully responsible for your answers or the lack thereof, and a precise and expert evaluation will be provided to you upon pressing Finish. Any query will be directly referred to the author.

1. Who are your parents (give names), and do you forgive them or wish to be forgiven by them?
2. How old were you when you realized that Mother wouldn't have loved you if you were lesser than you are?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being a tightly coiled spring waiting for release and 5 being empty eyes devoid of fury or feeling, how did you feel when the shards of the broken mirror reflected parts of them? (*Them* here refers to Mother and Father)

1 2 3 4 5

4. Did you or did you *not* pick up the broken pieces of the mirror off the floor?

Please circle one: Yes No

5. In general, do you think it is easier to be good parents when you have relatively good children? Or is the ability of a parent not defined by the disposition of the children?
6. To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements: (mark one)

strongly agree / agree / neutral / disagree / strongly disagree

- we will never truly know our parents. they will always be familiar strangers.
- you do not have to be good / you do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
- the love a parent has for their child is unconditional whereas the love a child has for their parent is conditional.

- the love a parent has for their child is conditional whereas the love a child has for their parent is unconditional.
- unconditionality is not achievable because humans, good or bad, are inherently selfish creatures.

7. According to Wikipedia, a simulacrum is a representation or imitation of a thing or person. An example of a simulacrum is caricature; when an artist makes a drawing of a subject (human) and the likeness to the subject can be seen in the exaggeration of certain prominent features. Do you believe families to be like caricatures, with certain features/persons/elements purposefully highlighted more than others (the features/persons/elements that are given less attention could be due to shame, neglect, non-acknowledgement, non-acceptance or any other reason you see fit)?

8. Do you believe your brother to be the smudged, blurred lines in the caricature?

Please circle one: Yes No

9. To Mother and Father, you are: (choose all that apply)

- their easiest child
- jack of all trades
- Frankenstein's monster
- you exist in a world separate from them; they do not understand what you are
- a perfect merchandise for them to show off

10. What is a mother but a thief of all your dreams? What is a father but one huge apology?

11. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once. In the aforementioned context, do you think a mother is a monster?

12. How would you describe Father (before): (please choose one)

- an erupting volcano
- someone who is always a little out of reach
- a man looking for God
- someone's son
- your father is only your father until one of you forgets

13. How would you describe Father (after): (please choose one)

- an erupting volcano
- someone who is always a little out of reach
- a man looking for God
- someone's son
- your father is only your father until one of you forgets

14. Do you find yourself wishing to be held by them even if the thought of them fills your throat with sand?

Please circle one: Yes No

15. Do you wish to undo all of it, or do you believe it to be the punishment for a monster(s)? Choose one of the two.

16. Do you dream?

Please circle one: Yes No

17. Do you dream about: (choose all that apply)

- the blissful ignorance before the world turned itself upside down
- your childhood
- a meal made by Mother (except you don't know what a meal made by her tastes like)
- a rage eating away at the cells that make up your body
- what you could've been
- broken mirrors

18. Do you love: (choose all that apply)

- Father (walking away, *always* walking away)
- Mother (before; haven, shelter)
- Mother (after; stranger)
- your siblings
- the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain.

- books
- the girl that claimed to love you but threw your flaws in your face
- quiet, undisturbed nights
- laughing with your sisters
- yourself
- the youngest son (useless, scary, broken)
- the lines on your palm intermingled like a spider’s web
- God
- the house(s) you grew up in
- your hands

19. From the following, choose the ones you feel connected to:

- A father whose goodness scares you because goodness cannot exist without evil and matter not without anti-matter.
- Walking down the stairs of your house that are littered with eggshells.
- You’re sleeping next to your mother in a moonlit room, and you are thinking how she has never touched you with love, how her love has never been free from selfishness.
- You walk into your brother’s room, and he points a gun to your face.
- You grew up always shrinking in on yourself; always docile, *always* obedient, never a child.

20. Do you believe some things should never be found out, and should always remain a mystery?

Please circle one: Yes No

21. Blood is thicker than water.

Please circle one: Yes No

22. Do you believe you answered these questions honestly, or is the child who used to fracture their bones and reset them to fit in, still inside you?

23. Who are you (give name) and who do you believe, in this story, deserves forgiveness?

Thank you for participating. Press Finish to submit. This is not the end.

References made:

the format, as a whole, is inspired by *Wolf Moon* by Nina Mclaughlin

in Q6, “you do not have to be good”...taken from Mary Oliver’s poem *Wild Geese*

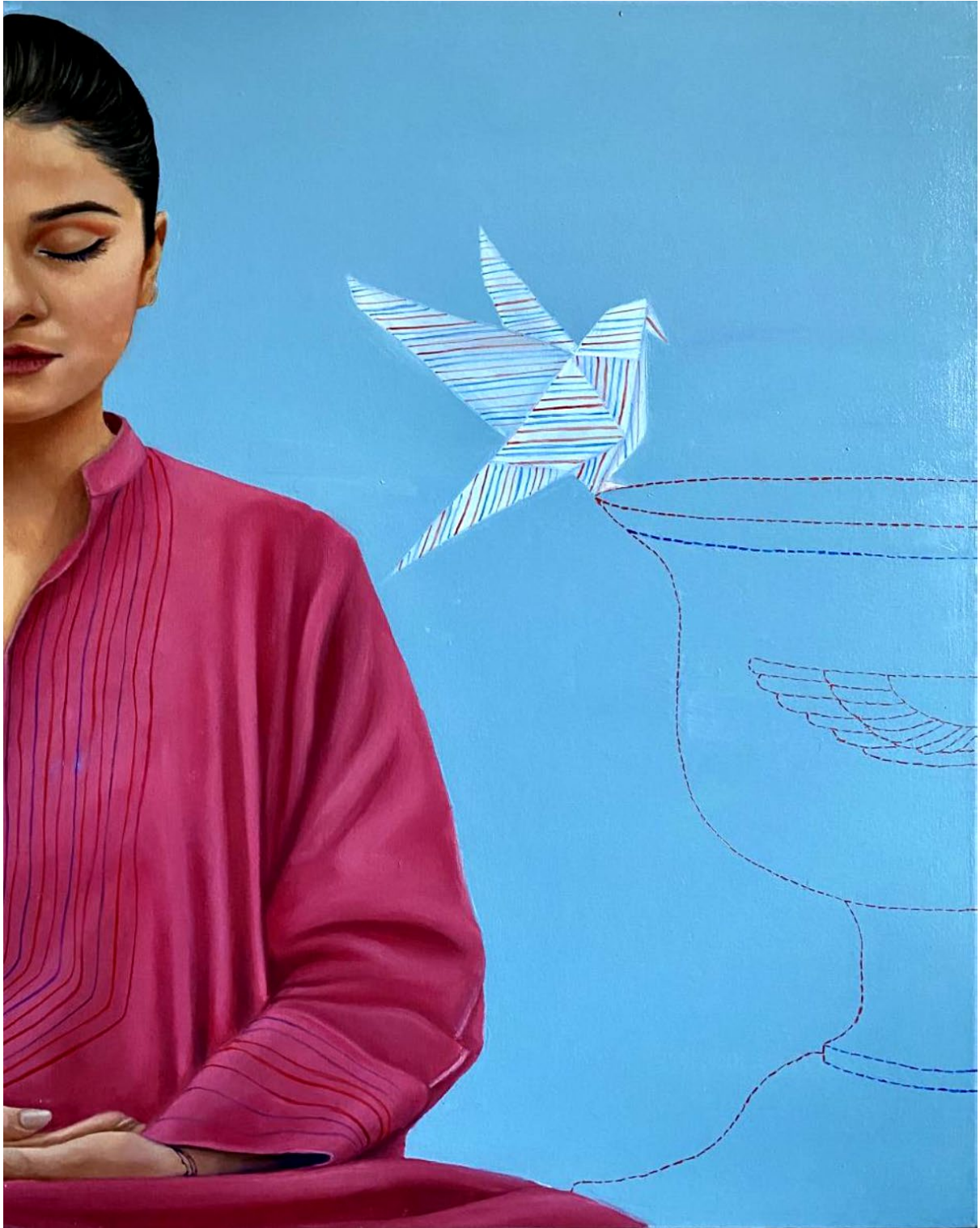
in Q12, “to be a monster”...taken from *On Earth we’re Briefly Gorgeous* by Ocean Vuong

in Q13 - 14, “your father is only your father”...taken from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong

in Q18, “the treason of the artist”...taken from *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin

Exodus

Nabiha Gillani



I Live in Gaza

Mahmoud Mahran Abu Dayyeh

I live in Gaza.

What does that mean?

It means that my life has always been a series of wars and continuous conflicts, and now I am living through a war that is nearing its first full year.

Some may wonder, is this the first war we have experienced? Absolutely not. Our grandparents lived through the 1948 war, known as the Nakba, which resulted in thousands of martyrs and injured and the displacement of 1.2 million Palestinians to the diaspora.

Then came the 1956 war, or what is known as the Tripartite Aggression, during which the Gaza Strip was invaded by the Israeli army in cooperation with Britain and France. Despite the lack of media documentation at that time, the stories of the survivors recount unforgettable tragedies.

Then we witnessed the 1967 war, known as the Naksa, during which Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, keeping it under control until 1994. In this war, about 500,000 Palestinians were displaced from Gaza and the West Bank, many for the second time after the Nakba.

During the First Intifada (1987-1993), Gaza witnessed repeated clashes and severe repression by the Israeli army, leading to the martyrdom of approximately 1,162 Palestinians and injuries to about 90,000.

Then came the Second Intifada (2000-2005), during which violence escalated significantly, claiming the lives of around 3,000 Palestinians and injuring about 25,000 others.

The 2008-2009 Gaza War was one of the deadliest, lasting 22 days and resulting in around 1,417 Palestinian martyrs and approximately 5,300 injuries, in addition to the displacement of about 100,000 people.

In the 2012 Gaza War, which lasted for eight days, around 174 Palestinians were martyred, and about 1,000 were injured.

The 2014 Gaza War was one of the most impactful on the Strip, resulting in approximately 2,251 Palestinian martyrs and around 11,000 injuries, with about 500,000 people displaced.

Between 2018 and 2019, the Strip witnessed several rounds of military escalation, resulting in about 260 Palestinian martyrs and approximately 2,200 injuries.

In May 2021, another war broke out, lasting 11 days and resulting in the martyrdom of around 256 Palestinians and injuries to about 2,000, with approximately 100,000 people displaced.

And now, we are living in the midst of the 2023 Gaza War, which began on October 7 and is still ongoing.

Throughout all these years, we have been subjected to various forms of oppression and violence: from grave desecration and executions to starvation and blockade, aerial and artillery bombardment, systematic destruction of infrastructure, and targeting of hospitals and schools.

Every possible means has been used to destroy our lives and our will, as if we do not deserve to live as human beings.

But despite all of that, we are here. We live and resist because life in Gaza means resilience and determination to survive despite all odds.

This piece remains unedited until further notice. During the editing process, Mahmoud's residence was bombed and Mahmoud sustained life-threatening injuries, including shrapnel in his brain. He is currently in the care of his sisters and family, but can use as much support and love as possible. We thank him for his deeply resonant work and keep him in our hearts during his recovery.

Lin-Lin's Light

Elinor Davis



Lin-Lin was tiny and lithe with a springy walk, like the gymnasts on TV who awed me during the 1988 Olympics. I met her on the first day of seventh grade when our homeroom teacher seated us next to each other at a double desk, with everyone in alphabetical order so he could learn our names. Lin-Lin Cheng and Claire Chatsworth. Ordinarily, I resented regimentation and arbitrary seating formulas, but this one gave me my first friend at a new school where I didn't know anyone at all.

My Mom had just moved me and my sister, Maggie, four miles north to Albany for its good schools and small-town atmosphere. The pre-gentrification South Berkeley neighborhood we'd lived in since my parents' divorce was affordable, friendly, and had lots of kids to play with, but then the crack epidemic hit – assorted drugs were openly peddled on our corner and drive-by shootings erupted weekly. That spring, when a man walking home from a bus stop was beaten to death by four teenagers for his watch and wallet within sight of our front porch, Mom decided it was time to leave.

She managed to buy a little three-room house with a big backyard on the Albany-Berkeley border, promising to enlarge it soon. Meanwhile, she let me and Maggie have the bedroom while she slept on the living room floor surrounded by six-foot high stacks of boxes and clothes. Nine-year-old Maggie seemed to think of this as an adventure, like camping, but I was mortified. How could I bring friends, assuming I made any friends, to this hovel that looked more like a storage shed than a home? This was not a quirky Berkeley enclave of aging hippies; this was respectable, middle-class Albany.

Lin-Lin lived several blocks from us in Albany Village, the housing complex for University of California students with families. The shabby World War II barracks-style apartments built as “temporary shelter” were still in use 45 years after the war ended. Her parents were post-doc researchers newly arrived from China, and Lin-Lin could read and understand more English than she could speak. Our first

whispered conversations at our double desk were perfunctory attempts to get acquainted, she was tense and straining to pronounce the Rs and Ls correctly, I was trying to enunciate simple words slowly and clearly.

Since the serendipity of our “C” names cast me in the de facto role of her guide and protector, I felt obliged to introduce her to American ways. Though Albany was new to me, this whole country was new to her, and I worried that someone who looked so delicate might be overwhelmed. That first day, I saw the 12-year-old boys shoving each other, making fart jokes, and the shrieking girls in their too-short skirts and teased-up hair through the eyes of a foreigner. I was suddenly embarrassed to be an American. Assuming all Chinese children to be as well-behaved and neatly dressed as Lin-Lin, I wondered what she must think of these hooligans. I politely admired her pink backpack and showed her my fancy new notebook with plastic zippered pockets for pens, pencils, erasers, and a ruler, all held snugly in place with a Velcro flap.

“Do you need some paper?” I asked.

She shook her head and pulled out of her backpack an even fancier vinyl covered binder decorated with big-eyed kittens and puppies. “Target has everything!”

We discovered that nearly all the clothes we each had on came from Target (except for my embroidered jean jacket from the Salvation Army, but I didn’t mention that). We bonded over a mutual love of shopping and pink hair accessories. I needn’t have been concerned about her ability to adjust. After a month of American TV and middle school, she seemed more at home in Albany than I did.

My walk home from school passed through the Village and Lin-Lin invited me in to meet her parents. When I asked if she had any brothers or sisters, she said matter-of-factly, “Kids in China don’t have brothers or sisters.”

Since I couldn’t entertain company at my shed of a house that fall, we did our homework together at her tiny apartment. They only had some leftover furniture from the previous occupants and what they’d brought in their luggage, so the apartment did not feel crowded. We lay on our stomachs on the worn carpet, munching chips, watching TV, and writing in our social studies workbooks. Slipping

into stereotypes we didn't yet know about, she helped me with algebra and biology, and I helped her with history and English, her vocabulary increasing daily.

Somehow Mom wangled a home equity line of credit and as promised, set about enlarging our house. She found an architect to draw up plans for a second story that would double the square footage and hired a contractor to frame, roof, and enclose the addition. We lived in a construction zone for months with workmen arriving before seven a.m. and stepping over our still sleeping bodies on the floor. To save money, she finished the interior herself, with occasional help from friends or a paid handyman. We made countless trips to a giant hardware store to buy drywall, bathroom fixtures, paint, screws, shelves, curtain rods, and carpeting.

I was grateful for the refuge of Lin-Lin's apartment, which we had to ourselves after school until her parents came home. They seemed glad that Lin-Lin had a friend and always made me feel welcome. I ate half my meals there. Mom sometimes brought them an offering of groceries to thank Mrs. Cheng for feeding me so often and to apologize that our house was not yet fit for guests. She always invited Lin-Lin to come along on our weekend outings – swimming, movies, Marine World, and, of course, Target.

When the addition was finally done and we had all moved into our new upstairs bedrooms, Mom sat us down and confessed that she could not afford the high loan payments. We would have to watch every penny and skip our annual trip to Gompers, Kansas, for the Cobb family reunion. But that wasn't the worst part. "We'll have to rent out the downstairs bedroom to make ends meet," she said. The room had its own entrance and bathroom, but the tenant would share our kitchen.

"You mean some stranger is going to live with us?" I shrieked.

"Unless you want to get a job," she said evenly, "this is the most practical way to bring in enough money to support our bigger house." Mom already had a full-time job, so we resigned ourselves to a roommate.

A few days later, we were picking up burritos at Maria's Taqueria around the corner and saw a little note taped to the counter. "Wanted: Room to rent in this

neighborhood. Talk to Maria.” As Maria assembled our chicken burritos, Mom told her we had a room available.

“Really? My brother Julio, he works here nights and needs a place to stay that’s close. Can he see the room?”

We knew Julio, a big friendly guy, and had met his kids at the taqueria. “Doesn’t he live with his wife?” Mom asked.

“Si, but they’re splitting up and she needs to keep their car,” Maria said with a shrug and a sad *What can you do?* expression.

Mom looked at me and Maggie for our reaction. I’m sure the prospect of a non-relative male living with us gave her pause. But we shrugged and nodded OK, so Mom gave Maria our address and phone number.

Julio came over that evening and said he’d take the room before he even saw it. “It’s perfect location,” he said. Just two blocks from his job, with buses and shops nearby. He’d been sleeping in a nook behind the taqueria kitchen for a week and Maria was relieved that he had found a place to live so soon. He left and returned 20 minutes later with two large plastic garbage bags full of clothes, and we had our first tenant.

Gregarious and charming, Julio soon alleviated any misgivings we may have had about bringing a male presence into the household. He made himself useful, cleaning up the kitchen, unclogging the sink, repairing annoyances like a loose cupboard door hinge. And he was a prolific cook. He concocted huge pots of soup and stew, which he freely shared, and his burritos and quesadillas were better than Mom’s. He told us that he and 16 siblings grew up on a ranch in Zacatecas, Mexico. They lived a life that revolved around raising and preparing food. Maria had made a business of it, and Julio seemed to enjoy cooking as much as we enjoyed eating.

The most magical of his talents was an ability to grow vegetables and flowers in the weed-infested clay soil of our backyard. On his walks through the neighborhood, he chatted with anyone he met on the street or working in a yard and thereby acquired seeds and cuttings that he planted after clearing the weeds. Tools materialized – a shovel, trowel, hoe – and by mid-summer, he had conjured a

thriving, though chaotic, garden. He cut up potatoes and buried the pieces there, stuck a whole avocado in the ground there, drove stakes for tomato plants and constructed a trellis for kiwi, jasmine, and passionflower vines. Orange nasturtiums appeared (“You can eat them in salad,” he assured us), red peppers, garlic, scallions, squash, a blueberry bush, fennel, cilantro, rosemary, whatever he could scrounge. The flowers, vegetables, herbs, and small fruit trees intermingled in a riot of color and foliage, with no discernible rows or pattern. Somehow, he knew what and where each plant was, though he often couldn’t tell us the English name for it, just what it was called in Spanish. We ate an endless variety of organic produce plucked fresh from the yard. Neighbors offered him handyman jobs, paid him to help them move and let him take their discards, which he installed as garden sculptures or used to decorate his room.

Once our house was presentable, Lin-Lin and I started doing our homework in my new bedroom. One day we came home to find Julio building a scrap wood-enclosure on stilts in the backyard. We went out to investigate and he showed us two tiny brown rabbits in a cardboard box. “They eat our scraps, and their poop feeds the garden,” he said, grinning.

I wondered if Mom knew about this escalation from flora to fauna, a heretofore unexplored dimension of home ownership. We had a row of tall bamboo along the back fence, screening us from the businesses and busy street beyond. “Maybe we could have pandas, too, since they eat bamboo,” I said. “And koalas – we could feed them with eucalyptus leaves from the park,” Lin-Lin added. We were giggling over plans for our mini-zoo when Mom came home and Maggie went wild over the bunnies. She wrapped them in a blanket, plopped them in her toy buggy along with several dolls, and perambulated up and down the driveway. Mom didn’t object to the rabbit hutch, but warned us not to get too attached, hinting that when the adorable fur balls got bigger, they might wind up in one of Julio’s stews. We scoffed at such an outlandish notion, as if she’d proposed eating the neighbor’s Chihuahua. She assured us that lots of people hunt and eat rabbits, including our Grandpa and uncles in Kansas.

Since Julio worked evenings at the taqueria and was home while we were out, we didn’t see much of him during the week, especially after he managed to buy a

used Chevy. He loved that car and spent many hours washing and polishing it in our driveway while we were at school. I heard Mom tell a neighbor that having a man on the property probably helped deter would-be daytime burglars. He came home late at night and slept late into the morning, so our paths rarely crossed in the kitchen except on weekends. I didn't think much about where he went after the taqueria closed or why he began to fall behind on his rent. But there were clues. Racing forms from nearby Golden Gate Fields racetrack on the counter, lottery tickets in the trash, messages left on our answering machine demanding that Julio "pay up."

Once Lin-Lin and I came home and there was a man sitting on the porch, smoking. "Where's Julio?" he asked. I just shook my head and mumbled that I didn't know. "You tell him Robbie needs to see him." His raspy voice sounded like some of the phone messages.

A few days after this encounter, I realized I hadn't seen the Chevy parked out front for a while, even when Julio was home. "Where's your car?"

Julio just stared into the pot of beans he was stirring on the stove. "Oh... I owe a guy some money and he, uh, took the car. Just till I pay him."

"Robbie? Is that what he wanted?"

"Yeah, sorry he bothered you."

I'd never seen Julio so dejected.

By the following fall, our garden was a jungle of vegetables, berries, and herbs that found their way into our kitchen and onto our plates. Maggie and I ate all sorts of things we never would have tried if we hadn't watched them growing in our own yard. Once Mom threw a garden party and one of the guests asked, "Do you use pesticide, Fran?" Mom shook her head: no.

"Then how do you keep the plants looking so healthy?" Mom shrugged and said something about Julio's green thumb. Years later, I read an article about flowers and herbs that naturally repel various pests and realized that Julio had practiced what the magazine called "companion planting" to discourage bugs and diseases

from ravaging our garden. Multiple litters of rabbits came and went; Julio sold the babies at a flea market when they were old enough to leave their mother.

Lin-Lin and I had two classes together in eighth grade and continued doing homework together at my house, which required crossing busy San Pablo Avenue at an intersection with no stoplight. The elementary schools had crossing guards with orange vests and big signs, but middle school kids were on their own. One late October afternoon we were waiting at the corner for a break in the traffic, eager to get home and work on our Halloween costumes. An SUV stopped to let us cross, and Lin-Lin took off into the street.

As she stepped out ahead of me and past the SUV, a car in the next lane approached too fast, not taking the cue from the SUV that a pedestrian was in the crosswalk. With a sickening thud, the car slammed into Lin-Lin, tossing her aloft like a doll. The car never stopped; Lin-Lin landed 30 feet away.

Some woman grabbed my hand and dragged me out of the street, my screams soon blending with sirens. An EMT hovered over Lin-Lin for a moment, then lifted her crumpled form onto a gurney and covered her with a sheet that slowly turned red. After the ambulance pulled away, I saw something bright pink in the gutter. Lin-Lin's hair clip. She'll want that when she wakes up, I thought, projecting myself into an alternate future in which she was not dead and would appreciate getting her favorite hair ornament back.

A memorial service was held in the school auditorium, the stage awash in flowers, photos of Lin-Lin, and posters made by classmates. Her teachers and a few students spoke. "So quick to learn, always curious, helping her classmates, everyone loved her laugh..." Her parents looked frozen in grief, small, desolate, alone in a room full of people. They had no family members there to console them, just some neighbors and University friends. I heard someone whisper something about the "one-child policy" and remembered Lin-Lin saying, "Kids in China don't have brothers or sisters." It was only years later that I understood what this meant for parents like hers, too old to have more children.

The next day, two police officers came to our door and asked to speak to Julio Mendez. He wasn't home, but they wanted to see his car. He doesn't have a car anymore, Mom said.

"A Chevy Nova registered to him at this address was involved in a hit and run accident on San Pablo Avenue, according to a witness who saw the license plate. Do you know where he was on October 28 at 3:30 p.m.?"

At work, he would have been at work then, she said. They gave her a business card and asked her to have Julio call them when he returned. Later, she told Julio about the police visit and he blanched. He said he would call them, but that night he left, and we never saw him again. If Maria knew where he was, she wouldn't tell us.

That winter the garden devolved, reverting eventually to its pre-Julio state, overrun with bamboo and blackberries. We got a new tenant, a grad student who spent most of her time in the library studying and never cooked. I gladly left middle school for Albany High and never let myself have another best friend. After Maggie and I finished college, Mom sold the house and moved to an apartment with no yard to maintain and we rarely spoke of those years.

Recently, I had the opportunity to drive through Albany on a shopping errand. I felt my stomach tense as I neared the corner where I had crossed San Pablo Avenue every day on the way to and from middle school. The WWII barracks were finally gone and some of the storefronts had been remodeled. Maria's was now a Thai restaurant.

Then I saw it.

A big red traffic light suspended over the intersection, commanding me and everyone else to stop. Lin-Lin's legacy. I wish I knew how to reach her parents, to let them know. *There's a stoplight now. We remember her.*

Fast Food Poets and Anti-Poets

Alexandra Burack

I'm top sirloin, baby the guy in a red baseball cap boasts, wagging his steak&egg wrap toward Rose, who's hunched against my shoulder till the rime of winter morning drips from/her hair. She side-darts roiled eyes to the plastic fork dispenser, primed to ward off the lie. My reflection in the cheesy-art mirror behind her recalls the less fat-marbled line I bought in another speedy-meal palace, dwindling the way of women whose left atria are reserved for deceit (fellow writers never fib, unlike abaft misogynists stalking already at 8 a.m.). I muse how discernment is discarded—stale, dank, and mold-pocked, like doughnuts remaindered to slush-iced asphalt for parking lot pigeons, lucky in trash-mired snow. Choice meat all around; even jackals have souls. A pack of truants invades, howling *we want our coffee now, bitches!* I revere the simmered rage in women's guts, enclose the safe hunger of the hunted under my dura before the trudge against sudden sleet that pollinates the street, this domesticated street, a bordered pasture of aimless entreaties.

Falesia

Joan Mazza

*noun. The disquieting awareness that someone's importance to you and your importance to them may not necessarily match.

From *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* by John Koenig.

Pronounced "fuh-lee'-zhuh"

Source of my discontent with friends
and lovers I came to revere, admire,
treasure more than any loved
asset or possession,

only to discover I was no more
than a blurry acquaintance, passing
fling, detour on their journey to
imagined stardom, fame, and wealth,
not even a respected colleague, not

even a fellow defenseless human
on this spinning marble. Do you
remember I wore short skirts for you?
I noted

you loved your foods hot and moist,
your drinks in chilled glasses
with crushed ice, cloth napkins, pepper
grinder near. What did you know
of my quirks and preferences

beyond that one kink we shared
twice? How easily you let me go.
And yes, there was one woman I

never met, who sent me six emails

a day, photos of her dogs, requests
to read her poems, stories, unsent letters
to her mother, brother. I blocked her
without explanation. She was dazzled,
but I left her baffled, maybe hurt.

With All Due Respect

Angela Townsend

With all due respect, that is a chalupa. With all due respect to the venerable tradition of gift-wrapping disdain in “with all due respect,” I propose we scramble those words like the eggs in your handheld breakfast.

I have not reached forty-two frizzy years of age without splattering a few things on the linoleum. Citizens inform me that I am too loud. Professionals care enough to confirm that I should not wear neon if I don't expect a certain reaction. At least one person possessed of a “Master of Divinity” diagnosed early symptoms of a Jezebel spirit, a purple protean thing that wriggles at the word “respect”.

Nobody respected me more than the man with the family. He gave me a piping-hot new name. He respected me enough to worry that I disliked runny eggs and did not center my words when addressing envelopes. Such things could be cured. Respect could protect me from unlawful reactions to my orange fur coat. With all due respect, I was not twenty-two anymore.

I spent Christmas Eve across from a child fracking his nostrils for stocking stuffers. I contemplated inviting him under the table with the dogs, but they wore collars. Their parents spoke of interest rates and beneficial programs. I wandered. I turned away when I saw my reflection in a beige I had not chosen. I reached for my lapel protest, my grandmother's gaudy brooch. Santa was in ecstasy. I fumbled for a button to summon my happier ancestor.

With all due respect, I was summoned.

The family expected me to eat animals. It was good for me to outgrow a meatless youth. A life left of the center could be cooked until the edges were firm. The man promised to respect my yellow center and let it jiggle. I just had to understand that green earrings and scented markers were dangerous gifts. I just had to understand that respect was evidently not my native language. My “thoughtful” was better translated “strange”. I just had to understand that gift cards and Godiva were more respectful than tiny Big Birds and books of wet poems. I just had to hear how often I used the word “just” when defending myself. It made me sound desperate. I should be more mindful of that habit, with all due respect.

I just saw something golden under his mother's bangs. She was not too old for watercolors. She had not worn her last sequin. I just saw how big his father's eyes became,

even now. He kept a small Ferris Wheel on a mahogany desk. He told me he giggled when he saw Gritty, the galumphing hockey mascot. I contemplated smuggling them ear-flap hats and quartz angels. I contemplated outing the nosepickers, burning the breakfast, and freeing the dogs. I contemplated inviting everyone to sing Joy to the World, as far as the curse is found.

I wore fringe on Christmas Day. I ate a mint chocolate chip and thanked Jesus for joining the soiled and the neon. The man said that was not a breakfast. I ate happy and alone. I invited Jesus to flip through cookbooks while the man dressed. Women named Aldene and Lula submitted the recipes. They rolled meatballs like spherical sacraments. They loved green granddaughters enough to use separate spoons. They used the word “zippy” with disregard for repetition.

And there you were, Maria S. from St. Louis, apologizing before preheating the oven. “I know it’s not a real chalupa.” You might have just heard the word “chalupa” for the first time. I pictured you turning it on your tongue, sparkling with the teenager across the table. “I put mozzarella on everything, and some say it just doesn’t belong. I am kind of a rebel that way! My husband says this is not a chalupa!”

With all due respect, that is a chalupa. Jesus is loud.

May the rebellion jiggle outward from the center.

What the Universe Said

Sandy (Olson-Hill)

addressing the dead while the World opened
skin to layer you in mystery & space. Face
after face, the heart has stories, place, provisions, living
water if water were, if you were not
still under stone. & Texas terrain & Sunlight
bent under the strain, under the stain of May.
from Uvalde Classrooms across the grass,
are doors to desks to floors to halls.
In hemispheres that call no more, war
tall branches yield, nor more, but raise their
root to fist for every spun from breath & Sun.
For Mars is packing sulfide ore and Jupiter
is solar wired. Strategize to do away,
said the planets to the prey Don't sleep the seas, but cast and trawl where rivers reap &
pluck from firmament to hail to sleet to flow,
where methane rains where cosmic rivers bank
and bend the planetary heads to matter slain & see
other worlds embrace the weight of Jupiter
between your dreams. What could've been
won't again. We ain't got no answers. Here
is none. But ante up, we've got your
fear, fallen in order. Falling
is water. What is left. What is here.
A lie, a thief, the exodus of God to grief.

Is Something Broken in There?

Taylor Aamot

Insects crackle out of sight

A short zapping noise

Electric

Disembodied, I feel it echo in my skull until

It's mine. Snapping synapses, neurons

Short wiring

The sound of activity

Or a fray, chirping into ruin

What is Needed

Faithna Geffrard

A sour taste filled her mouth every time she nudged the second molar on the right side. For months it had a dull ache, so she chewed on the left side. Now a sharp pain pulsed beneath the gums causing the entire right side of her jaw to throb. At best, the small white tubes of over-the-counter tooth ache gel paused the pain allowing her thirty-minute reprieves of sleep. At worse, the pain drummed in every part of her brain. The hammering smashed against the bones of her skull, she wished to open her head and remove them one by one.

And still, she could not stop nudging the tooth. In the blue tiled bathroom of her apartment, she used her pinky finger to pull her mouth open. In the watery, pink cave the infected tooth stood out. Grey and cracked while its mates were shades of white. She nudged it again and winced at the immediate agony.

Eli popped his head into the doorframe and grimaced. “You need to get that thing checked out.” His voice leaned closer to disgust than concern.

Nella made eye contact with him in the mirror and glared. She knew what she *needed* to do. But she was hyperaware that she could not. Nursing provided her the salary to send money to her mother, and for her mother to send a part of that to family in Haiti. Four days on with twelve-hour shifts stretched her mind and body beyond their human capabilities. Followed by three days off where she balanced between caring for her younger siblings across town and being immobile in bed.

It wasn't as simple as going to the dentist and Eli knew that. He knew that it was her salary that paid the bills while he drove her car and tried to make a career out of playing video games. He called it “streaming”. She called the microphone, dual monitors, ring light, adjustable desk, ergonomic desk chair, and sound mixing equipment that took up their spare bedroom a waste. In his yearlong endeavor, Eli successfully brought in \$103.

She made monthly payments into a dental plan that limited the dentists she could see in a three-mile radius, ten miles away from her home. Some had dental plans that included credit checks from their in-house financing and others obliged to being seen promptly if you paid \$1,000 out of pocket.

From the mirror, she watched Eli fold himself into meekness before walking away. Nella squeezed the crimson gel from the tube and glided it over the sides of her tooth. Work started in an hour; she could use the sleep.

Killing of the Light

Richard A. Perez Jr.

You never know when the last curtain will be drawn. I dug on some cinema gold during the late 1980's-early 2000's. I could rattle off some of the classics, but the list would stretch like the Great Wall of China. But since I'm here and my over-the-hill memory is still intact, let me peel off just a few for your interest and bragging rights: *Full Metal Jacket*, *Trainspotting*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Colors*, *Rocky 4*, *Training Day*...

I was a pretty good lad during these cinematic times, rarely sneaking in outside food and paying full admission at the door. If my local Edwards in Monterey Park was not showing a particular title, I would make the 15-minute public transit towards the next city over. The Edwards Alhambra seemed to offer better amenities. I played a game of chess until Alhambra won at the end. Chalk it up to bigger elbow room seating and title selection galore.

Since high school was a bummer, spending the weekends at the Alhambra was a refuge from my failing grades and math tutor. In class, I sat in the back with the 'rough' crowd, cracking jokes and playing the clown. Entering the theater, I was usually in the center row bringing my good manners, keeping my Chuck Taylor's down and setting myself on mute. I tried to absorb every action, sci-fi, horror, etc., but there was this thing called 'graduation' that was getting in the way.

By the skin of my teeth, I walked with my graduating class. During the summer of 1992, I was surfing along midnight cable channels catching *Slacker*. My eyes glued grossly relating to these people who didn't do much and sorta just wandered through life. I gave the film two thumbs up, way up for its originality. It was like a fresh stick of gum for my late 80's mainstream tongue.

Since Alhambra did not offer any independent releases, I would trek over to the next two cities. The Laemmle Pasadena screened *Barton Fink*, *Reservoir Dogs* and midnight showings of *Eraserhead*. The attendance and vibe were more mature and sophisticated, not loud and sometimes delinquent like my neighborhood theater.

I did keep the Alhambra in my pocket, just in case something ‘different’ mainstream-wise would pop up. I didn't want to forget my original Earth. When *Colors* and *Boyz in the Hood* were released, Alhambra Pd was there ‘just in case’ something was going to happen. Viewing these films in my own area not only felt comfortable but was more relatable, due to some of my friends and former classmates being active gang members.

I went through a nasty snob phase, turning up my nose on movies that casted Bruce Willis or *The Terminator* or anything that was laced with unnecessary explosions, boneheaded car chase scenes, and corny tough guy dialogue. One boring summer, the cat got the best of me, and I decided to sneak in the back corridor to see the first *Fast and The Furious*. I only sat long enough to kill my 24 oz bottle of Stella Artois, buzzing over to the next room to see *Donnie Darko* for the second time.

The ‘shit’ or the shift came roughly around 2008. I noticed Hollywood was getting HollyWIRED on some serious hot trash. I did dig *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, but the whole Marvel franchise and other comic-book-turned-Hollywood that seemed to be steel toe stomping was just not my cup of coffee. On top of the rising cost of admission and concession, I found waiting for something good on Redbox, Netflix, a pirate version on DVD or illegal download would make more sense. Swallowing a barrel of popcorn and drowning in a gallon of soda is not the same when it's in the comfort of your living quarters, but there was a time when I had to decide for a weekend escape that would not endanger my economy.

I will admit under oath that not paying for a ticket and waiting till it came out later or sooner on DVD and online did have its own cost. Life size movie posters that loomed in the lobby area. The opening curtain, the killing of the lights and the trailers; the classic ‘scenes’ of the theater itself were absent.

When I saw the *Rocky 4* premiere, almost the entire room roared when Balboa avenged the death of Apollo Creed by defeating Ivan Drago by TKO. When Luke Skywalker unmasked Darth Vader, the entire room was paused in suspense. We all got goosebumps during the beginning of *Pulp Fiction* while hearing the snapping of beer bottles and cans.

I took many dates to Alhambra. Although most of them were a bust, there was one ghost I carved onto its sidewalk. Before viewing *Twilight* in its third week of release, my date told me to turn my back on her and wait for a big surprise. Hoping it would not be a steak knife. I was shown an Edward doll that she stuffed in her purse. When her back was turned, I considered flapping my wings but soldiered through the entire movie and date. During the film, I was asked if I was Team Edward or Team Jacob. I told her that I was N/A like a question that didn't relate to me on a job application.

There was a nasty rumor floating around the neighborhood that the Alhambra was having a problem keeping the lights on. Attendance was low. Weekly specials were heavily advertised to drum in business. A patron had fallen to her death on the top level of the parking garage which turned out to be an 'accident'.

I managed to be swallowed by the belly of the beast, making the 20-25-minute treks towards the Hollywood Arlight. My tongue got peculiar around 2007, only interested in watching more thought-provoking films or some regrettable pretentious art film. I was spending a little more time and bread in Tinseltown but when you're comfortably slumped into a reclining chair, legally drinking a beer inside and watching *No Country for Old Men* along a stretch of Sunset Blvd, it doesn't get more velvet rope than that.

Good times were had at these venues, but I was not thoroughly rinsed in warm water and dried in nostalgia that the Edwards Alhambra had given me.

Many years later, I was living with my ex-girlfriend about 10 minutes away from the theater. I was curious to see how the theater was holding up or onto. As we passed by its main street, a THANK YOU was lettered on the marque. I gave her some painted layers of the screen's past.

The theater was destroyed during my freshman year in high school by a 5.9 earthquake in 1987. It resurfaced a week before my 33rd birthday on May 17, 1991.

July 2011. Upon transferring to another bus line towards home, I was fortunate enough to see the wrecking ball finishing what was left of the theater. I sat on the

bus bench with my back straight, eyes fixed, my cinema experience now dusted. No curtains, no lights, and no sequel.

Needle Work

Emily Ferro Sortor



Tango for One

J. B. Polk

When Eamonn O'Brien first visited Las Pampas, he said it looked and smelled like an Irish bog. Rose, his daughter, was not surprised by his comment, since, for as long as she could remember, her father had always compared some aspect of their life in Argentina to the vestiges—half-remembered, half-imagined—of his childhood on the Emerald Isle. Eamonn's past had never completely relinquished its hold on him, and he passed it on to his daughter like a cherished family heirloom with little monetary value, but one that she was supposed to safeguard at all costs.

It could be argued that the O'Briens had forfeited their claim to Irish identity through a generation of self-imposed exile. Yet Eamonn, a man who defied convention at every turn, believed that what truly defined a person was not their place of residence but the time they spent cherishing and upholding traditions. For him, there was a clear distinction between physical location and ethnic heritage, and he was determined to keep his roots alive no matter where life took him.

Like many other Irishmen of his age, Eamonn had left his homeland in search of a better life. He consistently chose the less-traveled paths, and after hopping from Mexico to Panama and from there to Bolivia, he finally settled in Argentina. He made a modest living from tea imports. It wasn't much, he admitted—just enough to get by and maintain a respectable status in the émigré community. However, for Rose, he wanted more. Much more! In his eyes, and as if by osmosis, in hers too, his daughter deserved better than the average girl. After all, she had so much to offer—herself!

That's why her engagement to Carlos Antonelli received Eamonn's approval and blessing. It was a perfect match in the eyes of the Buenos Aires *beau monde*, and Rose became the object of universal envy for having snatched the city's most desirable bachelor.

Mild-mannered and courteous, Carlos Antonelli was the epitome of classic Latin American charm. He was lean and of average height, with black hair that he slicked back with brilliantine, following the fashion of the day. Educated abroad, he spoke French like a native Parisian, and his English exuded a charming Oxford lilt.

Apart from good looks, Carlos possessed another asset that made him a coveted catch: Las Pampas, thousands of hectares of undulating pastures, melting into an unreachable horizon. It was rumored that crossing from one end of the Antonelli property to another would require a week of horseback riding. Rose never confirmed the claim, and she spent the first year of her marriage within a mile of the main house.

The first Antonelli to set foot on Argentine soil was Laurence, a Swiss who pined for the picturesque gingerbread chalets of his homeland in the Alps, and who had an architect brought in from Europe to design his house in a similar style. The servants' quarters were located close to the main building, but the gauchos' huts, the Las Pampas cowboys, stood more than a mile away. It took Rose quite some time to get to know the world of the gauchos, and her first impression was a fusion of smells: wet hide, horses' sweat, and steaming manure.

Although Carlos was too polite to prohibit anything outright, interacting with the staff, let alone the bad-mannered gauchos, was frowned upon. And while he was hardly a prude, he didn't want Rose to get involved with people he deemed unsuitable for a landlord's wife. There was a clear border between the social circles, and an Antonelli woman such as Rose was expected to remain inside her own.

It took her the entire first winter to understand what her father meant by Las Pampas' stagnancy. After the wild Buenos Aires life with its movie theaters, motor vehicles, foxtrot, and chic clothing courtesy of Chanel and Helena Rubinstein, the estate appeared soulless and drab.

Utterly besotted, Carlos tried to alleviate some of the boredom engulfing his wife like a black fog. He'd seen the same frustration take hold of his mother's and, presumably, his grandmother's lives before that. He encouraged Rose to remodel the house to her liking, and she realized that what she thought was magnificent upkeep of the furniture, rugs, and tapestry was nothing more than the efforts of other Antonelli women who, bored to tears, tried to escape the monotony by redecorating the house on multiple occasions.

She tried everything from ordering Eileen Grey chairs and ostentatious marble-topped tables to swapping satin draperies for damasks, bringing in *objets d'art* from Dresden, and acquiring a grand piano from Madrid. Trunks and cartons labeled

"fragile" and containing beautifully crafted hand-painted ceramics arrived from the capital. She dutifully oversaw their unpacking and meticulously arranged each item in its designated spot. But she was only pursuing a hobby, barely sufficient to alleviate the interminably long stretch of idle hours before her.

There were days when tears of despair welled up in her heart, and she burst into a fit of wrath, determined to disrupt the orderly harmony of her magnificent but monotonous home. She mooched around, spilling ash from her cigarette holder straight on the hardwood floor or pounding Wagner on the piano—the cacophony of sounds drawing servants from the kitchen and her husband from his study.

The drabness of the people around her, coupled with the unchanging surroundings, filled her with gloom. She knew some people liked routines and the company of their thoughts, but not her! She loathed inactivity and looked forward to exciting upheavals that would break up the predictability of days, weeks, and months. Whether it poured or the sun shone through the curdled clouds, nothing ever changed in Las Pampas. There were too many hours to occupy with meaningless reading, rearranging misplaced items, or writing letters to friends who lived thrilling lives in the capital.

Eamonn wrote regularly, and his letters penned between hectic engagements only added to her misery. She ripped them to shreds and, like a child whose favorite doll had been taken away, vented her rage on her husband.

Carlos, with the patience of a man accustomed to Las Pampas' hypnotic effect, promised trips to Buenos Aires, mornings filled with shopping sprees, afternoon visits to the cinema to see the latest Pola Negri flick, and evenings of shimmy and Charleston. But not just yet! Not until the calving season was over, the newborn calves were strong enough to survive on their own, and the wagons with grain were shipped to Europe.

If spring's approach brought any changes, they were too subtle for Rose to perceive. But, unable to bear her husband's lethargy any longer, she ignored his warnings and decided to leave the confines of the living room to see if there was any life out there beyond her house. She requested a gentle mare and headed off through the pastures, which lacked even the smallest distinguishing feature: a tree, a boulder, or a river to break up the monotony of the surface.

After approximately fifteen minutes, she welcomed the appearance of the disordered constellation of shacks and directed the horse to some broken troughs. Water spurted from a rusted pump as black piglets shoved their snouts into piles of decomposing straw, half-covered in puddles.

Then she saw him—bare from the waist up, his chest overgrown with a tangle of black hair, muscles bulging beneath the bronze skin, rippling with each movement. He splashed cold water under his armpits with abandon, confident he was alone. Lost in the self-caress, he seemed to relish the intimate gestures.

She tugged firmly on the reins, forcing the horse to rear. The gaucho's hands stopped in midair, triggered by the animal's neigh. His gaze, reserved for prize-winning cattle, fixed on her, sending a shudder down her spine as the black pools of his pupils pierced through.

He walked toward her with a quick, assured gait. The horse reared again, almost knocking her to the ground as she tried to steer it back toward Las Pampas. He grasped the bridle and calmed the terrified animal. Drops of water glistened on his body and his black, curly hair. Despite his recent ablutions, he was close enough for her to smell his sweat. She struggled to remove the harness from his hands, but he was too strong, and the horse, recognizing a dominant mind, remained anchored to the ground.

"Let go," she whispered.

His lips parted in a mocking smile, revealing white, monolithic teeth.

"Let go, I said!" She yelled this time.

He kept holding the leather straps. His volcanic passion, which other males she knew lacked, captivated her. She couldn't find it in Carlos, who moved in a classy but slightly effeminate way and had soft, salon-like manners. But she knew it existed. She'd seen it the night she'd sneaked into a dark, steamy café on the banks of the River Plate without her father's consent or knowledge. There, she'd recognized the same effervescence in the angular movements of a tango dancer—dressed entirely in black, his hair falling across his brow in a wild, untamed manner. His passion had left an indelible mark on Rose's memory, fueling her desire to seek out that same fiery spirit in the man who would later become her life partner.

Upon witnessing the performer's initial movement, she immediately felt a surge of raw energy as he embraced his partner with an almost scandalous intimacy, spinning her around and over until it appeared as though she were gasping for air. How she had wished then to be in the dancer's grasp, divining his every move, swirl, and pressure of his hand on her waist, dancing with precision to the alluring lament of the accordion!

Now, she recognized the same traits in the half-naked gaucho, and a spark of shame flashed through her.

"I'll tell my husband," she stammered.

He ignored her, his gaze roving up and down her body.

"You'll be back," he whispered hoarsely, flashing one final smile before releasing the reins.

The horse, no longer confined, bucked. She raced away, digging her heels into the mare's flanks and feeling the gaucho's eyes sear into her back.

As always, Carlos was sitting on the porch with an open book in his lap, seeking intellectual betterment. He greeted her with a smile, and she grinned back insincerely.

"Enjoyed your ride?" he asked.

She nodded but remained silent, afraid that one sound would unseal her lips and unleash a stream of words she would later regret.

As she entered the house, he returned to his book. The new, unused furniture rattled. She longed to throw vases off mantelpieces and scratch deep grooves in the dark skeleton of the piano, whose highly polished surface projected the gaucho's image.

She tossed and turned in bed at night, unable to forget him. Carlos, clad in gray silk pajamas, snored softly beside her. He slept the same way he lived: with a remarkable economy of movement without violence or passion. The contrast between his peaceful slumber and her turbulent thoughts kept her awake until the early hours of the morning.

A letter from her father arrived the next day, announcing his impending return to Ireland.

"I'm getting old, and as I know you've found happiness in Las Pampas, all I want is to spend the rest of my days in my homeland," he wrote.

At breakfast, she watched Carlos nibbling daintily on buttered toast, pouring dark, fragrant Earl Grey into her and his cups, and wiping his mouth clean with languid gestures. She felt repulsed, despite his apparent elegance. His righteousness and god-awful decency in everything he did enrage her. She yearned for him to bite into the bread lustily, slurp the tea, spill it on the pristine tablecloth, then take her in his arms and kiss her so hard her lips would blister.

As soon as they finished eating, she saddled the horse and rode towards the gauchos' huts. She approached cautiously, knowing that her restraint would not last. With each meter, she shed inhibitions like a feral beast, unfettered for the first time. She wasn't entirely free yet; her jail, the sprawling Las Pampas, loomed close behind.

Dressed in a dark, crinkled shirt with a yellow bandanna around his throat, the man stood and waited. They exchanged glances; she was near the horse, and he had his back against one of the shacks. He didn't move, leaving the decision to come closer in her hands. She resisted, fighting the last vestiges of her dignity, but desire took over. Captivated by his mocking stare, Rose led the horse through the peat-brown mud.

There was no one nearby. Even the pigs had vanished. The gaucho remained still, luring her nearer until she stood beside him, close enough to inhale his savage scent again. She removed her gloves and stretched her arm toward him. She took one more step, and their bodies collided. Only then did he make a leisurely movement, engulfing her waist and neutralizing the last semblance of her decorum. She pressed her face against his chest, inhaling the pungent aroma of sweat. She felt the hardness of his palms, callused by rawhide lassoes, and the biting force of farm tools through her silk blouse. She let herself get pleasure from his touch. Nothing about him was soft, yet she liked the rough efficiency with which he unbuttoned her top. He'd struck a chord in her that Carlos didn't know existed, let alone knew how to play.

Suddenly, his roving hands stopped. He pushed her aside.

"Tomorrow," he said. "The boys will be back soon."

He walked away, leaving her clothes in disarray and her emotions blazing.

She wanted to scream all the way to Las Pampas. The horse flinched under her vicious lash and frothed at the mouth. The longing that had remained dormant, repressed by the conventions she'd been molded into, nearly knocked her heart out of her chest.

She stayed in her bedroom all day, disregarding Carlos's gentle invitation to join him for tea.

"Come out, darling," he coaxed. "The cook has made brioches with fresh butter. The way you like them."

But again, he accepted defeat stoically and left her to her own devices without a word of reproach. She wanted him to yell at her, to crumble, for once, the wall of bovine inertia he had cordoned himself off with, but she knew he wouldn't. To him, rapture and violence were foreign concepts. He was not, and would never be, an active participant in the drama of life but a mere spectator—unresponsive and detached. The boundaries he set for himself—or rather, the ones set for him by his upbringing—were impenetrable.

The night dragged on, and in her insomniac pacing, she ticked off the hours till dawn. She could think of nothing but the gaucho's rough hands on her skin. After breakfast, she galloped towards the familiar huts and the waiting man, racing the wind.

She was surprised and disappointed to find him surrounded by men wearing similar clothes—coarse shirts, faded pants with leather patches, and boots spattered with mud. They whispered to one another as they watched her approach.

With more resolution than she felt, she stepped closer. Words caught in her throat like toast crumbs.

"I...I need to talk to you," she muttered.

The gaucho thoughtfully stroked his chin.

"Guys, the boss's wife wants me. It wouldn't be polite to keep her waiting, would it?"

They laughed in unison.

He took her elbow and led her to the closest hut, with his friends whispering behind their backs.

It was dark inside. She saw two iron beds with messy blankets, no sheets, and clothes and boots scattered on the floor. A light spear pierced the window's filthy panes. The wooden floor creaked, answering the tread of their footfalls.

The man's hot breath tickled her nape as he blew away a few renegade hair tendrils. Without any tenderness, he made her sit on the bed looming above her, boring into her with deep black eyes. Like a sandcastle built on the beach, her resistance crumbled under his intense gaze grain by grain, leaving her feeling powerless and vulnerable.

Visions and sounds of the tango swirled in her mind as she sank into his embrace. She pretended she was back in the dark, steamy café on the River Plate's banks, dancing to an accordion's pulsating throb. She was the dancing partner now, sensing every twist, every turn, and every pressure of his hand on her waist as she lay in the performer's embrace.

Before losing herself entirely in her imagination, her last rational thought was that she couldn't turn back. But why should she, though? For as much as she hated clichés, she crossed her Rubicon and accessed what she most needed in life.

60 Seconds

Shehrbano Minallah



On October 8, 2005, I was woken up early in the morning by my small room swinging with a force I had never known before. My scrawny teenager body was flung off the single bed. I tried to stand up but I could not, the ground was shaking too much. I crawled instead and made my way to the door. Behind me, I could hear the wooden chimes beating frantically against our second-story apartment building window in Islamabad, Pakistan. As I reached my bedroom door and left my room, I saw Bibi, my grandmother, at the threshold of her bedroom door opposite mine holding onto the door frame.

“Do not move, stay still! It’s an earthquake!” she screamed in my direction.

An earthquake? I thought to myself. I thought it was the end of the world.

I was still on all fours. A crack had begun to form in the middle of our living room, growing wide enough for me to be able to look into the downstairs neighbor’s apartment. *When will it stop?*

The family pictures on our living room wall had started coming down. A picture of Bibi and Daddy on a reunion trip to their old home in the Tea Gardens of Sylhett, Bangladesh. They were both standing in the middle of the tea bush lanes, smiling towards the photographer, Bibi’s green eyes full of glee but with a hint of sadness.

Perhaps, I imagined the sadness because Bibi had told me that they were smiling in that photograph, but it was an extremely difficult trip for her. Returning to the house where she had given birth to all her four children and then going back in time after two of them had passed in their youth. The Tea Garden house was her first marital home after she had been married at the young age of fifteen in 1952; leaving behind her family in a village in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

She was a painfully shy and thin new bride, completely overwhelmed by the size of her new home and its thirty-two person staff. A red-orange brick driveway with perfectly trimmed hedges on each side led to a large single-story Bungalow right at the center on a raised hillock. The house had a thatched roof which was common for

many tea estates. It was called the Barra (bigger) Bungalow which was reserved for managers of the tea company.

Years later, when she returned, she could see her children who were no more in every part of the Barra Bungalow. Her daughter Sheila in a spotless white frock and a white bow on a mass of light curls on a swing. The swing which hung from a Lychee tree by the pool, taller than the Bungalow itself. The ground would be full of Lychees when they were in season, some falling and drowning into the pool. Her son Shahzad by the pineapple grove, grinning mischievously.

She had hoped the reunion trip would lead to closure since they had to flee Bangladesh during the 1971 war without any of their belongings. The closets full of Bibi's prized sari collection. She would turn heads when she walked into the gymkhana parties in her *kanjeevaram* saris with pearls to match. The humidity in the tea gardens was extreme so the saris were always kept under low voltage bulbs inside the closets. She had her own personal tailor who sat on the veranda floor stitching new blouses for her. The cabinets displaying the Gardner Porcelain which she had kept with such care. The library which was her refuge as a new and lonely bride; the books which had become her savior in an otherwise lonely existence of the tea gardens. The drawers full of silverware that she polished herself before hosting endless dinner parties. The kitchen was a good 30 to 40 meters away from the main Bungalow, so the assistant chef and wait staff took messages from Bibi to the head chef. Every morning, the chef was summoned to the breakfast room. Bibi gave him elaborate notes on what was to be cooked each day and for how many people. If an overnight guest was coming, two more staff members were added, and more chickens were slaughtered. A small cow was slaughtered every other day. The animals were from the Bungalow's farm and the organic meat meant that they were tiny, up to five chickens would be slaughtered to host a small dinner party. Daddy absolutely loved to host and celebrate life and in Bibi he found the most diligent of hostesses. The gardens were full of her flowerbeds including her favorite Dahlias. Every single thing was left behind when they fled and went back to Pakistan, *like refugees in our own home* she would say. Instead of closure, the reunion trip had opened up old wounds.

The ground was still swaying, the framed picture of me and my schoolmates from a newspaper clipping had also come down. The headline read “High Achievers O-Level Examinations.” How fixated I was with getting the perfect grades and how pointless my grades felt in that moment when I was on all fours in my pajamas at what I thought was the end of the world.

Then I spotted Daddy at the other end of the living room; ‘Daddy’ was what we called our grandfather. He was seated in his wheelchair in his grey pajama suit and his usual grey tweed golfing cap. His Christian home health aide was standing by his wheelchair, making his final prayers and signing the cross across his chest.

Daddy and I looked straight into each other’s eyes. Never had I known a look of such absolute terror and helplessness on his face. The stroke had left him mostly paralyzed and he could hardly speak. When he did speak, there was a disconnect between his thoughts and words. I could see then how badly he wanted to say something, to get away, but he remained anchored in his wheelchair, living through his worst nightmare.

It was difficult to see Daddy like this, Daddy who had dressed up every single day in his perfectly tailored suits flown in all the way from England. He would sit by his solid wood antique bar cabinet on a high wooden bar stool every evening. In the cabinet were crystal decanters and carefully selected liquor for all tastes. There was always a supply of fresh dry fruit in the drawer section of the cabinet. He always smelt of bath soap with a hint of alcohol in the evening, courtesy of his evening drink. He often broke into song or a poem or a quote from a book he had enjoyed. He loved a good joke-book and would chuckle to himself while reading Khushwant Singh.

Losing two children had never stopped him from living his life to the fullest, travelling any chance he got. My room was full of souvenir gifts from his travels: a wooden giraffe from Kenya, a stuffed panda from China, a decorative plate with lemons on it from the Amalfi Coast, a small painting of a hunting scene from England with hunters in red coats. Bibi and Daddy were connoisseurs of flavors, bringing in exotic spices from all over the world; there was always a different pickle on the table. At each meal Daddy would comment, “I hope you tried that pesto with

your cottage cheese” or “That dried tomato caprese will go very well with your bread” or “Try that sambal with your omelet.”

You had to be thick-skinned to be in his company. He was ruthless in making fun of relatives, giving everyone a nickname or worse, addressing someone with the entirely wrong name and getting a kick out of it. He would go to the famed *Hayatabad Bara* market in Peshawar where smuggled foreign goods came in from Afghanistan. He would walk confidently in his shorts with tanned legs from his daily game of golf through a sea of *burqas*, *chadors* and men in *shalwar kameez* and thick beards. The shopkeepers would call out to him, “Come mister, this way mister, imported juicer mixer.” They always mistook him for a foreigner and tried to make a profitable deal. They would be shocked and embarrassed when Daddy responded in Pashto.

As a twelve-year-old boy, he had left his village in Ziarat Kakasaheb and followed his father to India where he was working. There he studied at the Raj Kumar College for Boys. He and his siblings were like two different worlds. Those who stayed back never showed any interest in leaving the safe confines of the village. When Daddy spoke, it was as though he had been trained in English by the Queen herself. But his siblings couldn’t manage to string together one complete sentence in English.

For all his vast verbosity, he sat across me now completely mute as the building shook. He had always feared earthquakes. What I did not realize then, his face full of absolute terror, was that he had suffered a silent heart attack during the quake and that he would pass away soon after. He had survived an anti-tank mine incident in Bangladesh which blew up his car as he was driving it; he had earned the nick name of “Anti-tank Minallah”. The anti-tank mine did not kill him that day in Bangladesh but the 2005 Pakistan earthquake did.

After what were the longest 60 seconds of my life, the earthquake finally stopped. When we managed to get out of our apartment building, we all looked at each other too shocked to speak. The neighboring apartment building had collapsed. The sky was full of smoke, the ground full of debris, every sound was muted by the blaring of ambulance sirens. Emergency helicopters had arrived on the scene. Everyone was running towards the ill-fated apartment building that had collapsed. There was a surge of traffic as people tried to flee the remaining apartment buildings for fear of

them coming down too. Yet a smaller group was running back indoors to salvage their belongings: a pet forgotten in the panic, important documents, and a middle-aged neighbor of mine who ran back up nine stories for her gold jewelry. We did not dare go back towards the building.

I held Bibi's hand as we headed towards our car. Once again, she was leaving her home with only the clothes on her back.

Over 78 of my neighbors died that day—78 life stories, dreams, plans, hopes, love, fears ended in an instant. This number included a childhood teacher of mine and a schoolmate who was in the same “high achiever” group photo newspaper clipping with me. All of this in our otherwise small and safe capital of Islamabad.

In the rest of Pakistan, over 86,000 people had died, and millions were left injured or displaced.

The rest of the month was a haze of Daddy's funeral, repeated aftershocks, TV sets always on, reporting the increase in death tolls and devastation. Most major buildings were closed for repair work including all our schools. It was a month shrouded in a thick blanket of grief and renewed fear each time the ground shook with the aftershocks. It was also a time of intense relief work, people laboring tirelessly to help the survivors.

When the solid earth under your feet betrays you, an underlying fear becomes permanently lodged in your body. Home is where you feel safe, but when even your home can become your coffin, you realize that nothing can be relied upon, and nothing is certain.

It can take 60 seconds for your world to change completely. And it could be the very next 60 seconds in which that change can happen.

FEATURED ARTIST: SARA HAQ

A Narrative Interview by Saniya Khalil

Sara Haq (fluidity/rock/tree/etc.) is an artist, gardener, writer, cat-lover and sacred medicine practitioner based in London, UK. Her work is interdisciplinary in approach. The content is reflective of personal experience and processes which often explore intercultural relationships and ecologies, power dynamics, transformation and interactions between art, nature, healing and social change. Sara's work has been exhibited and published widely. Notable commissions include: Para Site - Hong Kong, 10th Berlin Biennale, Wellcome Collection and forthcoming publication with Bethlem Gallery in 2025.

Instagram: @monkeytreepro

From her artist getaway in Sweden, inside a cozy room, Sara Haq is someone who's charisma and warmth is felt with great power even on a Zoom call.

She starts with an easy conversation, and I find out about her love for cats.

The idea and inspiration behind the piece, she tells me, came to her on the harrowing anniversary of the genocide against Palestine, the 7th of October 2024. She was in a state of deep grief and reflection. She tells me that it was difficult to find words to describe it, the year, everything that had happened. It found its shape as an image: her kitchen had two pomegranates that called to her.

She took out her phone, conscious of the symbolism and limitations many Palestinians face when not having equipment, and the collection began to piece together. Symbolism in seeds with the pomegranate, founded within history, mythos, and Palestinian agriculture, and contemplated what it meant to be broken. And then to grow from that place.

Influences of nature, she informs me, help to soothe her mind, reconnecting her with nature to find the soul of life. Nature is a force of healing, everything is alive, the birds and animals, the trees, she explains.

She says that now she focuses more on clearing rather than healing. It is a better choice of word, for her, saying one must look and understand the truth before you begin the journey to rebuilding and healing, and clarity comes first.

Her parents moved from Pakistan to the United Kingdom, and though she has lived a majority of her life in the UK, she still feels the arching shadows of the rich culture of Pakistan.

She tells me that the juxtaposition of experiences and cultures all around us is speaking and has so much to say. That there is no such thing as inanimate objects: everything - the trees, the birds, the animals, us, we are all equally full of life and should be seen and recognized for it. That is the root of it, she tells me, it's important to keep going back to the things that make you, you.

As for her advice for creatives? Sara states there really is no message, the work is for the people to make of it what they will. As an artist, there is no way to control public consumption. You let people see and understand on their own, in their own time.



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Contributors

Mahmoud Mahran Abu Dayyeh is from Gaza, Palestine.

From shattered Gaza. I am from Khan Yunis, the city of resilience, the city of love and life, the city of dreams and reality that has now become a city of rubble and destruction, a city of memories, a city of sorrow and grief. I am 23 years old and bear the responsibility of caring for 8 people in addition to my parents.

You can support him at: [Mahmoud Mahran Abu Dayyeh: GoFundMe](#)

Elinor Davis (she/her) led a peripatetic early life, eventually settling in Northern California, USA. After finishing a BA in sociology and realizing she had no marketable skills, she also got a nursing degree and license. She lives on an urban homestead where she helps weed the garden and works as a health care writer/editor. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in numerous U.S. and international publications.

Joan Mazza (she/her) has worked as a medical microbiologist, psychotherapist, and taught workshops on understanding dreams and nightmares. She is the author of six self-help psychology books, including *Dreaming Your Real Self*. Her poetry is widely published and has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *The Comstock Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Slant*, *Poet Lore*, and *The Nation*. She lives in rural central Virginia.

Taylor (she/her) is a writer from Los Angeles who uses her work to explore anxiety, gender, queerness, and any feelings that are just too big for names.

Faithna Geffrard (she/her) is a Haitian American writer. She is an alum of *Roots.Wounds.Words*, *Wild Seeds Retreat*, and *VONA*.

Richard (he/him) is a writer whose short stories have appeared in *L.A. Affairs: 65 True Stories*, *Blink-Ink #38*, and *It All Dies Anyway: L.A.*, *Jabberjaw*, and the *End of an Era*. He lives in the San Gabriel Valley and sometimes can be found on IG @1000blackcats

Emily Ferro Sortor (she/her) is a Delaware-based artist and writer. She holds an MA in Art History from the University of Delaware and has a decade of experience in the art world. Her artwork has been exhibited around the United States and her writing has been featured by publications including the *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* and the Walker Art Center's *Walker Reader*. Find her on Instagram: @sortorfunnyjokes

J. B. Polk (she/her) is Polish by birth, and a citizen of the world by choice. Her first story was short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing fiction in 2020, more than a 140 of her stories, flash fiction and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication. She has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement literary contest.

Shehrbano Minallah (she/her) is an educationist in Pakistan/Canada. In her free time, she enjoys reading (preferably South Asian literature) and writing. She also loves reading children's books with her three children. She has a master's degree in Sociology from the University of Chicago which she attended as a Fulbright scholar. She can be reached at sminallah@uchicago.edu



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