

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES



# **SILK ROAD**

## **ALITERARY CROSSROADS**

ISSUE 23 SPRING 2021

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# SILK ROAD

A LITERARY CROSSROADS

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*Black Snake* by Aryn Calvo

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# EL DOCE DICIEMBRE

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Robin Schauffler

In Morelia in December every day began with shocking ten-foot-tall red poinsettias vibrating against a stark blue sky, and ended in a clear, cold, lonely night. The first days had been full of the thrill of exploring a new place, the sizzle of the unfamiliar. But the closer it got to Christmas the farther I felt from home, where I'd be caught up in a secular pandemonium of familiar rituals with people I'd known all my forty-seven years.

Peter and I had been in Mexico six weeks. In our cold hotel room pale green paint flaked off the concrete walls and the scent of gas seeped from the tiny kitchen.

The little Spanish we had seemed to be leaking out of us. We walked the streets looking for a bag of tomatoes, an extension cord, toothpaste. We stopped to greet neighbors and shopkeepers. It was easy to meet people, but then what?

Our Spanish wasn't good enough to keep a conversation going.

“Buenos dias.”

“Buenos dias...”

“Hasta luego.”

And there we'd be again, two gringos standing on a street corner.

I wondered if our resolve to live two years here was already slipping. I wouldn't risk asking.

A taxi driver tried to tell us about a fiesta in town, to celebrate the Virgin of Guadalupe. He said we had to go, but between his English and our Spanish we didn't understand when or where it was.

We knew about the Virgin, of course: the Patron Saint of Mexico. She's hard to miss; she is everywhere. Her image is always the same: She's in red and gold and green, with a long star-studded cloak, rays of light all around her. She looks down and a little to her right, her eyes modestly lowered, her hands together in prayer. The hems of her cloak and dress are held by an angel. Her skin is brown—that's the point.

A much-condensed version of her story goes like this: In 1531 Juan Diego, a young Aztec convert to Catholicism, was gathering firewood on a desert hillside north of the Spaniards' capital, México, built on the still-smoking ruins of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán. He encountered there a beautiful brown-skinned, black-haired Virgin Mary, and she spoke to him, calling him son. Juan Diego hurried down the hill to tell the Bishop of his vision, but the Bishop doubted. When Juan Diego begged the Virgin for proof, she said to him, "Am I not your mother, who is here for you?" And she caused red roses to bloom on the barren hillside. He gathered the roses in his homespun cloak and carried them to the Bishop, who still did not believe. But Juan Diego opened his cloak to display the roses, and on his humble cloak the Virgin's shining image appeared, just where he had cradled the flowers. The Bishop was convinced.

And the Aztec people, restless under Spanish Catholic rule, embraced her. She had wisely appeared on the site of an ancient shrine to Tonantzin, an Aztec earth goddess.

I asked the young receptionist at our hotel about the fiesta. She looked at me as though I'd asked her if she ate bugs. "¿Qué fiesta?" she snapped. Was she mean, or dim-wit-



ted, or just trying to get rid of me? Or did she think I wouldn't understand?

I decided I didn't want to think about the damn fiesta. We could go next year. It was easier to stay in our room and not have to speak Spanish or deal with Mexico. I was reading *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, that deep exploration of the soul of Mexico by the poet and essayist Octavio Paz. Peter was reading *The Mexican Shock*, Jorge Castañeda's study of the 1994 fall of the peso just three years before. We sat in our uncomfortable chairs and studied Mexico behind a door firmly closed against the very world that Paz and Castañeda were trying to explain to us.

We were in Mexico, but where was Mexico? We were visitors, strangers, and we would forever be strangers. I'd lost my sense of adventure, my vow to embrace every opportunity. I didn't think, "We shouldn't have done this." I didn't feel regret, but rather an infuriating frustration. All around me were celebrations I didn't belong in, people I couldn't know.

The truth is we were slowly making a few connections—I just couldn't believe in them. Peter had discovered a neighborhood volleyball game, and I joined a three-peso aerobics class conducted on a nearby sidewalk. On a street corner we met the owner of an art gallery, an elegant Mexican, and she invited us to a luncheon in her green backyard. We feasted on baked brie and cold salmon imported from Germany, and chilled white wine.

Everyone at the party could speak English, but why should they? They were at home. Conversation raced by in Spanish. I caught what I could: tourism in Michoacán, best places for pozole on Sundays, family stories, telenovelas, someone newly engaged... I could hear warmth and laughter; like a conversation back home. But back home, I'd be in the middle of it.

As plates were cleared and the tequila came out, voices grew louder. What now? Ah, the Virgin of Guadalupe.

An important-looking man intoned, “They call her the patron saint of Mexico! But the Spanish priests invented her to keep the Indians down. She was a trick! Juan Diego y las rosas... pfft!” He dismissed the whole story with a wave of his hand.

The young woman beside him nodded and said, “No one pays attention to her. She is of the past.”

“The poor people believe in her and they do not try to improve their lives, they do not complain,” a college boy added. “She is a slave to the rich.”

But one older woman, with dyed blond hair and a spirited laugh, defended the Virgin. “Oh, let the poor people believe! What else do they have? It consoles them to think of her.”

My eyebrows scrunched together with the effort of wanting to comment, to be part of this. I had studied the history of the conquistadores in Mexico, the devastation of indigenous people and their faith. So I had thoughts, but I didn’t know how to say them.

A woman turned on me suddenly and asked, “Are you Catholic?” I managed to say no without feeling I was making a comment. But her next question was, “Are you Christian? What are you?” We’d gotten used to this—it seemed it was one of the first things people wanted to know about us. This was not rude or prying in Mexico, we learned. Nor were questions about how much money we made or whether we approved of our country’s President, or why we didn’t have children. They were key parts of the getting-to-know-you conversation. In fact I was raised without the influence of any church. The few houses of religion I entered—for a wedding or bar mitzvah or as a tourist—were mysterious places, beautiful but alien. My father’s basic creed, which boiled down to “Treat everyone decently,” and my mother’s: “This includes animals, birds, and plants,” had been all the religion I got; deeply held beliefs, but without a building or a ritual to shore them up.

No god watched over me. Forest and mountains were my places of worship; I am perhaps more some variety of pagan than anything else. I certainly couldn't explain all this in my simple Spanish.

Peter had a better answer, and he jumped in to save me: "My grandfather was a Baptist minister. My mother plays the organ for the church!" In the U.S. he'd quickly add, "Not Southern Baptist; Reform Baptist, the northern version." In Mexico that wasn't necessary: non-Catholics were all the same. There were a few questions about Baptists, and Peter faked it—being a map fanatic, he already knew the location of the Baptist church downtown. He didn't say how long it had been since he'd actually been inside a Baptist church. The conversation wandered away again.

Our hostess served coffee and liqueurs and a dessert of fruit and meringue, and the guests argued about something else until it was time to go. The party broke up cheerfully on the street, with abrazos and promises to get together again.

Peter and I strolled home through the cool evening—when you go out for lunch in Mexico it is dark by the time you leave. The neighborhood was lively, people out on their front steps greeting passersby, a canned version of Noche de Paz—Silent Night—squeaking from the open doorway of a little tienda. I was bleary from the afternoon of eating and drinking, and the Virgin hovered in my mind. We walked back to the hotel and shut the door behind us.

\* \* \*

A week later my gloom had not lifted. We read and napped, the potted poinsettia we'd bought in the market wilting on the coffee table. It was chilly in the room, and colder outside, even in brilliant December sun. I read Paz's description of a Mexican fiesta: "a living community in which the individual is at once dissolved and redeemed." I didn't get it; I couldn't make the words mean anything to me.

I scribbled the date, “12 diciembre,” in my journal and doodled absently, my mind as blank as the page.

Late in the afternoon Peter dragged himself to his feet and pulled out a pair of athletic socks to get dressed for the volleyball game.

I didn’t want to do the work it took to mingle with the crowd along the sidewalk watching the game. Peter leaned over for a quick kiss, and hurried out. I sat on the bed and looked at the wall. The stuffed bunny my nephew had given me before we left home sat mute beside me. Good company.

Fifteen minutes later Peter was back.

There was no volleyball today. Everybody was going downtown to celebrate the Virgin. They had invited us to go with them.

I was almost asleep, my head propped on the skimpy hotel pillow.

“At least it would be something to do. It would be Mexico.”

I knew he was right. We hadn’t come to Mexico to cower in a cold hotel room.

“Come on, let’s hurry,” Peter said. “I don’t think they’re going to wait for us.”

I gave in, through inertia rather than motivation, and scrambled to find a warm sweater and comfortable sneakers. I glanced at my camera on the dresser and decided to leave it—not to look like a tourist.

We scurried to the corner to meet the group. I looked around: all men and small boys. The boys recognized me from the bench at the volleyball games, and smiled. The ten-year-old had shared his bags of chips with me.

His dad, Lalo, had worked for a farmer in the US for many years, coming home each year for the December holidays. He had legal working papers, and pretty good English. He said, “The women have gone downtown already. We will meet them there.” I felt better. The little boys clutched their

fathers' hands and hopped up and down in excitement.

Soon a bus tilted around the corner, already packed. Lalo insisted on paying for the whole group, and we jostled our way into the aisle. I saw Peter check the name painted on the front window, learning the route. As the bus hurtled downhill Lalo stood near us, holding the metal bar, and gave us short lectures in his careful English, with sprinklings of Spanish when he ran out of words.

"Downtown there will be a big desfile—a parade. Everyone in the city is there. Believers will march, some on their knees, to thank the Virgin." He paused. "The children are very excited about the parade, and the feria, the fair." He ruffled his son's hair.

"This is the most important day in Mexico," he added, as though an afterthought.

I stayed mute and let Peter ask the questions. I didn't have the energy to be curious. But I was listening.

I thought back again to the conversation at the luncheon, about the easy way wealthy, educated people had dismissed the Virgin. I was still trying to analyze her, study her. Was this the most important day in Mexico? Was she a trick, a slave? Lost in the past?

The bus lumbered into downtown: a maze of narrow streets, grand buildings of pink colonial stone, heavy traffic. When Lalo gestured we jumped off and trotted after him and the others through hurrying masses of people. At that latitude the sun sets very quickly, and by now it was growing dark. On the central plaza the trees sparkled with red and green and gold lights; the great stone towers of the Cathedral soared above. Peter and I had been downtown and walked these streets, but only in daylight. The city map was not yet in my head: dark streets led to mysteries, centuries-old buildings guarded secrets. I knew only that the plaza lay beside Avenida Madero, the four-lane main street that ran through the city center. Tonight Madero was empty of vehicles, swarming with

people, a confusion of bodies.

“The parade will go all the way on this street to the church of the Virgin,” Lalo explained. Then he stopped walking and said, “My wife,” and gestured toward a slim woman in a long white sweater leaning against a wrought-iron fence. Maybe she had told him she’d be waiting in that spot, or maybe we simply ran into her; I couldn’t tell. She did not seem surprised to find two gringos in her party, just nodded to us with a shy smile and joined the group.

I hurried to keep up; if we lost Lalo and the family, I’d know nothing. Peter knew the streets better than I, but even so, how would we ever get home through this seething night?

Marchers stood ready in the street, hugging their arms and stamping out the cold. Musicians spoke softly with their instruments. Shadows filled the alleys and flooded my senses, matching my shadowy mood.

The family made a chain, each person with a hand on the shoulder in front. They gestured us to join in and we slipped single file through the throng. Soon we reached the head of the parade. “Not a parade, really, una peregrinación; son peregrinos,” Lalo said. A pilgrimage, they are pilgrims, I translated to myself.

We squeezed onto the crowded curb. The little boys clapped their hands and laughed, sitting high on the men’s shoulders. My senses were sharpened, like fresh air after a rain. I hadn’t wanted to be here, but now that I was, I felt I must ingest every detail. With no camera, I would have to rely on memory. The occasion felt important now; I could sense it in the hordes around me.

The pilgrims danced with shuffling quick-steps, wearing soft black shoes, leather huaraches, bare brown feet. Peter tapped my arm and pointed to murky stains on the pavement: flecks of blood. My toes curled and tensed, imagining the harsh bite of stone. But there was no pain on the dancers’ faces, as though the blood did not come from the body but

from somewhere else. Some had wrapped their feet in a ragged bit of bandage, oozing red. Not a parade, a pilgrimage. Maybe blood is required of pilgrims, I thought, and shuddered.

They moved in sinuous lines, one of men and another of women, many with babies in their arms or wrapped onto their backs. The women and girls wore black pleated skirts and the black and blue striped shawls of the indigenous purhépecha people of Michoacán, and long black braids studded with multi-colored bows. The men were in coarse muslin pants, bright serapes, and graceful broad-brimmed straw hats. Each man and boy had a red and yellow bandana knotted around his neck. “That bandana of the men, the red and yellow, it is called the purhépecha flag,” Lalo explained, teaching us.

Following the adults, the dancers became younger and tinier until the last were no more than three or four years old. Small bare feet, little toes on the cold pavement.

Surrounded by music, we pushed on. We passed the pale brick Baptist Church, sitting square and squat beside the avenue. It looked a little intimidated tonight, and for a moment I sympathized with the Baptists.

Manu blocks later, at a spot Lalo approved of, our group stopped to watch the flood of pilgrims going by.

Behind the dancers came less-colorful marchers in jeans and sneakers, skirts and sweaters, business suits. Hundreds of dots of candlelight bobbed through the night, lighting the gloom in smudgy patches. Still uneasy, I shivered in the smoky, passionate dark. I edged closer to Peter against the cold and the crowds.

But I couldn't turn away. It was a glorious display—creative, fervent, wild. Pairs and quartets of people carried their offerings to the Virgin: elaborate altars covered in green moss and strings of party lights; plastic Virgin dolls festooned with red and gold; painted banners of her image; wreaths of red roses, white gladiolas, orange-and-purple bird of

paradise; banners with the names of families and businesses—some hand-painted in antique calligraphy, some laser-printed. I peered at the Spanish words, deciphering what I could as they went by: “May the Virgin Bless You -- The Gonzalez Family.” “The Perez Family Salutes the Virgin Who Founded a Nation.”

Between banners came the marching bands. Music boomed, loud and scrappy, joyfully out of tune: guitars, trumpets, drums, trombones, violins; a troop of ten fiddlers in flashy uniforms; mariachis in gold and black and silver. Cars and pickups honked and passengers shouted “¡Viva!” out of open windows. Teams of uniformed co-workers strutted in unison, carrying fringed satin banners on long poles: “Central Furniture Company for the Virgin” and “Pharmacy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” and “Tapes and Cassettes of Morelia Salutes the Virgin Queen.”

I looked down the avenue and as far as I could see the stream of faces and candles and headlights and musicians did not end. The parade formed a long, shimmering line from the indigenous past into the blaring commercial present. The Virgin was at home in both Mexicos, and in all the Mexicos in between. And I was engulfed in the spectacle. I felt my doubt begin to crumble under the weight of this onslaught of belief. I stood squashed between Peter and Lalo’s wife, right at the edge of the street. I concentrated with fierce intensity on the passing scene, trying to preserve it all. It would be hours, I could see, before I could get back to my journal and write it down. I lost track of time; my eyes and ears pounded. A phrase about fiestas from Octavio Paz flickered through my head: “... communion with the most ancient and secret Mexico...”

Just days ago, in bright sunshine, I had been ready to agree the Virgin was a hoax. I heard the young woman at the luncheon saying, “No one pays attention to her...” But on this night the Virgin ruled over the dark streets.



Large, solid men, splashes of silver in their black hair, strode alongside the parade, chanting to rile up the watching legions. Their deep hoarse voices called to the people, bellowing out, “¡Viva la Reina de Mexico!” “¡Viva la morenita!”... “Viva the Queen of Mexico!” “Long live the Little Brown One!” “Long live the Virgin Queen!”... “¡Viva Mexico Católico!” It felt like a war cry, the howl of a people under siege; and every cry was answered in one great swelling voice: “¡VIVAAAAAA!” Hundreds of fists punched the air.

I could hear the cry echoing from stone walls five hundred years old, bouncing off the mountains south of town, rumbling through pine forests and across golden fields of cornstalks, traveling all across Mexico in the dusky night. As though independent of the rest of me, my fists flew high and my voice bellowed with the crowd: “¡VIVAAAA!”

\* \* \*

Finally, long after I was too tired to stand, the parade slowly collapsed, no longer a parade but still a pilgrimage. Troops of musicians, banner-carriers, candle-holders flowed together and kept moving.

The procession swept us on, past the end of Avenida Madero, under the grand arches of the Aqueduct, along a broad cobblestone alley. This portion of the fiesta was unabashedly secular: Gloria in Excelsis Dinero. The quiet colonial lane had been transformed into a wild midway filled with hundreds of puestos, little stalls covered in bright plastic tarps, selling toys and entertainments and food. I felt drowned in sensations, in sights and sounds. Delicious-smelling stands wafted greasy breezes: tacos, chicken, carnitas, tortas, and the fine sharp smoke of roasted peanuts. The pilgrims swarmed past the noise of video games, dart boards, ring-tosses and shooting galleries. Children gawked at booths of cheap plastic toys and souvenirs, Virgin T-shirts, posters of Che Guevara, of Elvis, of Leonardo de Caprio in *The Titanic*, stuffed animals in pink and turquoise and violet plush.

“Mira,” Lalo said, and pointed. “El Templo”: the Virgin’s home. It was a small church compared to the massive Cathedral at the city’s heart, but equally ornate, built from the same pink stone.

At the doors the throng of spectators had to compress, merge into the current of dancers, brass bands, wreaths, candles, banners, guitars, violins. Like a river speeding to enter a narrow canyon, it rushed faster through the grand double doors. I had a vision of riots in soccer stadiums, bodies crushed against wire fences. I muttered to Peter, “Is this the kind of thing where people get trampled to death?”... Tragedy Strikes Mexico Religious Fest... At the very door, just as I was sure I was about to be swept underfoot and crushed, Lalo’s wife turned and took my hand, gently but tightly. I grabbed Peter’s hand behind me, bent my head, and closed my eyes. Magically I slipped into the narrow passage, safe as long as I didn’t let go the small firm hand holding mine. Every part of my body was pressed against another human being; I moved forward without my feet. Then like babies being born we popped out, out of the darkness and into the brilliance and light of the Virgin’s temple.

We entered behind one of the marching bands, and it filled the great chamber with brass and drums. The sound reverberated, pounded my ears, bounced off the glittering walls. Towering murals showed sweet-faced white priests stopping a grizzly-visaged, feathered Aztec shaman from slicing out the heart of a shrieking victim. Stone idols toppled; the grand volcanoes Popo and Ixta rested serene in the distance; loin-clothed youths sat under shady bowers learning to read the Bible, the joy of knowledge glowing in their eyes: the propaganda of the conquistadores, beautifully rendered. Around the paintings, everything gleamed. Gold coated the walls, the picture frames, the ceiling. Meadows of plaster flowers bloomed red, pink, blue among the swirls of gold.

It was like being inside a trumpet played at top volume—color and noise and light blasting the darkest corners with life.

I held fast to the hand of my friend. I had known her only a few hours; I did not know her name or understand her religion; I did not speak her language—but with her I was safe, though my back tingled with a splash of fear. I was, truly, caught in a mob. But below the fear lurked a wonder so potent it kept my feet moving, my eyes and ears wide open. These people around me believed. The small hand did not let go of me, though I could no longer see the woman who guided me. I saw that I was in the Virgin's house, and She is a protector. I lifted my eyes to the gilt ceiling and there was the image of the bishop leaning down to behold Juan Diego's roses.

At the front of the church, near the altar, a tall white priest in a long dark robe solemnly blessed the passing pilgrims. Over him a bloody twisted Christ suffered on a giant cross.

Above all of this floated a small portrait etched on glass of She Herself, the Virgin, the Queen of Mexico, La Morenita, in her green and gold and stars, her calm brown face sketched in delicate lines. She looked down and to the side, not directly at us. For a moment I was disappointed; she was so humble in all this gold. But then I knew: She is so powerful that she does not need to be bold.

My guide bent her knees and bowed her head to receive the priest's blessing. She squeezed my hand, and though I stood away from the priest's reach I felt something touch my head, like a breath, as though a little blessing fell also on me. Not the blessing of the Catholic priest, but of the brown woman far above him. Call her La Guadalupana, call her Tonantzin, call her an apparition, a consolation, a deception—I could not deny, on this night, her palpable presence.

We escaped to the outside and leaned back against the cool stone walls of the church. The night sky looked pink and hazy.

Lalo was there ahead of us. “They will keep coming all night,” he said.

Peter grinned at me and shook his head in wonder. I couldn’t think of any words to say, in Spanish or in English.

The smells of meat cooking and pungent smoke drifted through the cool darkness. I watched a whispered conversation among the men. Lalo turned to us. “If you don’t mind... the boys would like to go on a ride or two.” Peter and I glanced at each other and laughed. We couldn’t mind, of course; we were the ones on a ride.

Lalo bought sweet chunks of sugar cane in plastic bags, loaded with salt and red chili and juicy squeezes of lime. Imitating our hosts we chewed the caña until the flavor was gone and spit the dried-up fibers on the ground. The boys rode golden tigers and garish horses on the merry-go-round and screamed on a squeaky Ferris wheel. Peter joined the men and boys playing foosball—futbolito—under a tent top. The women and I sat and dangled our legs over a concrete wall. We watched the men and children as we cracked peanut shells and ate the dry smoky meat and dropped the shells on the ground. The walls of the Virgin’s temple shimmered in the flickering carnival lights. Mexico was all around me. I took in the scratchy carnival music, the clanky rides, the shrieks of delight and banging of the futbolito levers, a chained dog crying to be let loose.

Finally Lalo’s wife signaled to him and he called the group together and we all wandered out to the dark street, the children staggering like drunks, sated with the noise and joy of the night. Lalo flagged down a red-and-white combi, one of the fleet of VW buses that served the narrow streets where buses couldn’t go.

The peanuts and the caña were my only dinner that night. And yet I had feasted.

I was reborn, dissolved in Paz's living community—in the dancing light of hundreds of candles; inside the gilt-laden church; in the laughter of children; in the crowd bellowing, “¡VIVAAA!”

# HAPPY DAY

---

Cathy Barber

This is a true story.  
My mother was a queen.  
She ruled over southern Wales  
from deep within the earth.

My father was a car salesman.  
(I told you it was true.)  
and traveled to Pointypool  
and Cardiff, Fishguard and  
The Mumbles. When he sold  
a car, he had to take  
the bus back and start again.

My mother was huge with  
me—I'd dropped and was  
making her days and nights  
uncomfortable. She stretched  
a leg here or straightened  
her back with a palm. But

(remember this is true) she  
glowed, glowed!, deep in  
the coal caverns,  
and the miners needed  
no light. And, unlike  
the false version, the one

that took root in family  
lore, in which she  
longed for a boy and  
chose only one name, Mabon,  
'a son', truly she

wanted me, Catrin, 'pure' girl,  
and she and my father,  
arriving just in time by bus,  
did not need a day  
to deal with the unexpected.

They took quivers from  
their bows and shot arrows  
of celebration into the sky.  
She ordered a feast for the  
entire land, pheasant and goose

and boar and pies and cakes  
and wine for all, and wrapped  
me in gold threads  
and proclaimed me the most  
beloved baby ever to live,

and my father designed  
a baby carriage just for me,  
and copyrighted the design  
so it could never be reproduced,

and my mother rocked it  
with her left foot as she sat  
on her throne and conducted  
royal business, cooing over me  
as though the light  
came from within me,  
and the caverns would  
darken without me.



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# THE BUILDERS

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Joan Haladay

Workers were imported from the East to build a wall. They came from many peoples and tribes, from dry lands and coasts, from forests and mountains. They traveled in hand-rowed boats, on foot, by horse and camel, by bicycle, in buses and vans. They came by all means available and necessary to the departure point. A great wave of humanity arrived, - speaking more languages than Babel, bringing compressed hearths in their backpacks, unborn children in their bodies, ancestor photographs, and invisible, restless ghosts.

Arriving, they patiently waited their leaving times, dealt like a pack of shuffled lives. Ten today. Five hundred tomorrow. They were both conscripts and volunteers in this newly assembling army of wall builders, a first. The Great Leader's voice called them a chosen people for a historical erection.

Their transport was varied and shrouded by secrets and mysteries.: Cargo ships with unmentionable resonances. Airborne cargo too—- similar to germs and flus. Silence is best for transporting multitudes.

They were deposited like building materials on the southern border between here and there. Crew leaders emerged out of trials of charisma and gesture. Groups found their tastes and kinds and self-selected chiefs.

How long to assemble the wall, the Great Leader voice asked.? He possessed and preserved land with that cackle on faulty equipment. Or so he claimed, boasted, and promised.

At the site, the wall builders and their chiefs could only see a void to the south, an emptiness waiting for substance: An imagined spot like a mythical place on a medieval map, crouching in darkness and waiting for discoverers, namers, and explorers.

“This is one end of the earth” said a chorus. “Is that why we’re walling out barbarous monsters?”

The chiefs assembled to plan and strategize. One of their own took a script to the crew leaders, who passed it in turn to the Great Leader.

“To construct a proper wall, first we need to study wall building. To learn from the best and the worst. The Great Wall. Hadrian’s Wall. The Berlin Wall. The Coliseum. Just suggestions. There are many.”

The Great Leader agreed, delighted at the thought of replica walls. Tourists would come to the border just as they came to resort hotels to see Leaning Tower of Pisa and London Bridge imitations in air conditioned, weatherproof, vacuumed environments. Already, he could see an overhead protective globe and his name flashing above food and concession stands matched to each distinct section. Themed walls were money makers. The wall would pay for itself many times over and fill his pockets and ego.

“Done deal. Get the crews moving among the likely walls.”

While the crews wandered and meandered, visited archives and museums, archeological sites, and mythic cities, the builders set up encampments and ate rice and corn. They gave birth to children, nursed them, sang lullabies, and told stories. They started their genealogies anew from the precipitous departure date to this southern border. They wrote lineages in the holy books they possessed or wrote in clay and baked the tablets.

A lingua franca emerged among traders and spread like their wares among the campfires. It became the language of the place and defined its outlines. The children soon knew no other. This was their place- not a city, region, nation, or continent- simply home.

The wanderers abroad took their time. Theirs became a grand tour of walls and wall building. Sometimes they paused to learn techniques of destruction and reconstruction to achieve intimacy with the walls. Often, they acquired souvenir rocks to flesh out their photographs and drawings. They paused in libraries and archeological sites to further their researches. The walls of Troy, to name just one example, were invisible while people could be seen. It was the converse of their own building project in the void. Were there still useful lessons for their border wall? The vote wasn't even close, but fell heavily on the side of invisibility and myth. They agreed to include the Trojan Wall as one segment of the southern wall.

Times passed and they trickled back to begin constructing their replica walls. They created them as myths, as history, as stories, as politics, as defense, as lookouts, as art.

What seemed in theory a chronology or, at least, a summary became abstraction, happenings, and other post-modern forms. The more historical the replica, the more of a performance piece it became.

The wall building became theatrical and drew audiences from near and far who longed for live entertainment after too many machine hours at home. Those from nearby assembled, disassembled, and reassembled. Those from afar needed to stay for a while. Soon new clusters of campsites formed around those of the builders.

There were tents of every hue, hammocks, food stalls and country-style beehive ovens for baking morning rolls, chorizo bread, and handheld pizzas. There were market stalls with sacks of spices, coffee, and tea. Scents of vanilla, ginger, cilantro, ruby onions, cardamom, mint, turmeric, and chili peppers wafted through the air. Fresh flowers appeared, and potted plants and herbs. Some came

from newly planted kitchen gardens and informal parks. Plazas sprouted naturally for peoples returning to promenades, terraces, strolling musicians, preachers, and poets.

Some called the encampments villages, townships, neighborhoods, even cities. The children just called them home.

To them children, all the wall segments were themed climbing walls. At night, adolescents with nascent bravado and flawless senses of immortality vaulted segments with poles, on skateboards, horseson horseback, or with bikes. The quiet, the talented, and the wounded stayed in place and covered the walls with graffiti and vibrant murals.

As time passed and the construction fervor increased, work songs were added to the daily tasks. At night, around hearths, journey stories, origin stories, hero exploit tales, here-and-there accounts added to the history of the partly built walls. Soon they turned into an epic and formed the folklore and poetry of all the people living beside the walls

The Great Leader, still inflamed by power, appeared to assemble a parade along the wall. He called on the chiefs, and the crews, the researchers, the children, the adolescents, and the support staff to turn out for a festive day. Proud and self-assured, he called children to the microphone and asked them what they saw when they looked south. The children replied: people, faces, eyes, other children, playmates, classmates, friends.

The Great Leader tried to conceal his irritation with the responses. He shrugged the children off as fanciful and imaginative—- not yet fully living in the real. Next, he moved on to question the adolescents in the same way. They answered: girlfriends and boyfriends, soccer players, dance partners, teammates, comrades, friends. The Great One chastised them for insubordination and teenage unreal dreams.

He turned next to the researchers, wanderers, and crews. They saw compatriots, partners, teachers, customers, food vendors,

mentors, family, friends. The support staff just said “Ditto,- to all of the above.”

The Great Leader felt like he had backed into a wall. Without turning, he could feel its sturdiness against his body. He should feel it as a support for his form, but it felt like a structure built constructed to wall out his own ideas and origin story. Along its route, other notions and births had replaced his as sources and driving forces. The energies that had gone into imagining, creating, and constructing the wall were organic. It had turned into a living structure. There was flora and fauna in its crevices. They were multiplying even as he interviewed and spoke. Soon, they’d form a multitude on the side of the wall builders, their loved ones and progeny, their new additions, and future life.

The wall was already turning green. People—- all the workers, residents, and visitors—- flooded both sides of the constructions. They mingled at gates and gaps, crossed over from one side to another until no one was sure which side was which or whether they’d started elsewhere or where they stood. The children said it was good. They were all at home.

# LIGHT

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Sharon Whitehill

In the deep shade of the redwoods  
we marvel at splintered root-ends  
exploding in turquoise-tipped blooms,  
at the gray, green, smoky blue streaks  
vertically striping the bark  
of one tree,  
at the river of pebbles and stones  
that serpentines out of a hollow  
of fern-dusted stumps.

As if painted by Guido Reni  
I lift my eyes to the behemoths  
with reverence.  
Elemental yet otherworldly:  
how they soar up and up,  
their tops remote as cathedral spires  
illuminated by sky holes  
and shafts of sun  
that incandesce in the leaves  
of the scrub—  
slanted shafts that remind me of rays  
from crepuscular clouds

or portraits of Jesus for children.

In St. Petersburg's Church of the Savior  
on Spilled Blood,  
millions of tiny gold tiles gild the mosaics,  
rain down on an unwary maiden,  
beam from a star on a cradle,  
backlight the Christ resurrected.

In a vivid gold sweatshirt,  
my grandson presses his back to a trunk  
and spreads his arms wide,  
his bright hoodie encircling his face  
like a halo.

# BOMBOGENESIS

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Sharon Whitehill

When I blew into the Oregon coast  
to visit my daughter,  
I seemed to have spawned  
a bombogenesis, a bomb cyclone.  
Which made me think of my father,  
nicknamed Bom,  
his volatile temper another storm  
that swiftly built to a tempest.

Wind pummeled the car  
to the degree that teenager Riley  
willingly yielded the wheel to his mother.  
We watched the sea boil at Paradise Point  
as waves lathered the sea stacks—  
shark fins of black basalt  
generated from liquid lava  
squeezed out like toothpaste  
between tectonic plates.

Doerner firs on the roadside,  
so tall their tips vanished from view  
above the top of the windshield



while my daughter attempted a hill in the rain,  
slipped in red mud and tumbled back down  
unhurt but hard for a mother to watch.  
Later, the trailhead at Humbug Mountain  
enticed us into a primeval forest  
silvered with mist:  
tree trunks living and dead  
randomly scattered like black pickup-sticks  
showing stark against mosses and ferns.

My father seemed to be with me all day.  
Bombogenesis: though stormy as nature itself,  
he passed on to me  
his love for a physical world  
whose beauty could bring him to tears.

# BLACKBERRIES

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Chris Shorne

## Part I

It is the summer of my twelfth year and I've left my brother at the campsite and gone off to pick blackberries. I pluck the darkest and plumpest berries I can find. My younger cousin Tara, who has tagged along, is less selective in her picking. She crawls into the opening of a rabbit-sized trail, scoots back out, and drops a handful of half-ripe berries into the basket I hold.

Every summer, except for those first few years in which he was not yet born and which I cannot remember, my brother and I have gone camping together. Most things my brother and I do, we do together. At home, we stamp catalogs, fold order-forms, pack Tupperware into boxes that our parents will deliver; we make GI Joe forts, race Barbie's convertible, and best each other's Sega scores. Here, we fish in streams and jump in lakes, make logs into teeter-totters, and back away from brown bears, together. This trip our cousins have come too, with their parents and grandparents. On the other side of this blackberry bramble, our families share adjacent campsites, our tents spread out like the teepees of a small white tribe. We are surprised when the boys appear.

"What're you doing?" asks an older boy. His sneakers make indentations in the dirt.

It is hot, but the heat is a recent arrival. In July, the summer of the north has not yet accumulated itself. The pine trees breathe the damp air. My breath comes shallow. My body tightens. The faces of the boys blend into a blur of peach and pink. They have silly putty faces and silly putty hands and they are trying out, maybe for the first time, the shapes of power.

“What’re you doing?” he asks again, stepping forward. I look down at my right hand holding the half-full basket of blackberries. “Um, picking blackberries,” I say. I lift the basket for emphasis.

I can picture my parents sitting in their lawn chairs on the other side of this wall of Himalayan blackberries, salal, and sword fern. I know that if I scream, they will hear me. So although I am not unafraid—was there ever a time I was unafraid of boys and men?—I am not very afraid.

The boy repeats me, mocking, trying to make his voice higher than it already is: “Um, picking blackberries.”

My hand holds hard to the handle of the basket. The boy takes another step and, using two fingers, lifts my basket from the bottom, tipping it. Next to me, Tara is still and silent. The basket turns over and the berries tumble onto the ground around our sandaled feet. The boys laugh.

I look at the berries on the ground: some plump and some piddly, black and red mostly, but a few still splotched green. There’s even less than I’d thought. They wouldn’t amount to a pie. It makes me cry. Then feel ashamed to cry.

Through the slur of the boys’ laughter and the blur of my tears, I see my cousins, Austin and Dallas. And then I find my little brother, partially concealed by the shoulder of a taller boy. His shirt is light blue. His eyes, like mine, are brown as the branch of a spruce tree. Briefly, our eyes hold one another, and it hurts. He does not laugh; and he does not move.

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I'm thirty-six and will spend next year in Guatemala as an international human rights accompanier. I've visited the country twice before. The first time was to learn Spanish at the cheapest language school I could find. During my summer at La Escuela de la Montaña, I sat at a desk in an open hut with yellow butterflies flitting about during my one-on-one Spanish lessons and learned history I never wanted to know. Certainly, I am not the first U.S. citizen who had to travel outside their country to learn their own history, but this was the first time it happened to me.

My second visit was with a delegation supporting communities defending their land. To get to the first community we went to, Copal AA (pronounced Copalá), we traveled most of one day, two hours the second day winding through mountains, then a left off the paved road, and another hour on an increasingly bumpy dirt road until the driver said he could take us no further. We hired a pick-up, loaded our gear into the truck bed, and climbed in behind it; for another hour, we stood holding the bars above our heads as the dirt, rocks, and gravel devolved into a state that seemed more pothole than road.

The road into Copal AA made me increasingly anxious; still, I didn't close my eyes as I bumped along in the back of that pick-up through the richest—that is, lushest—land I had ever seen. I live only a few hours from the world's largest temperate rainforest ecoregion: I thought I had seen every shade of green there was to see. I had not.

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When I tell my parents how my brother stood with the boys while they laughed at us, they call him over. Usually, when we tell on each other, my parents wave us away with an order to “knock it off with the tattling.” But this time, right there in front of me, they scold

him. In the open area in front of their tents, with the coolers and the lanterns and the lawn chairs, where cousins, aunts, uncles, and strangers on their way to the restroom can hear, they tell him what he already knows.

“But I didn’t do anything,” my brother tries. “I was just standing there.”

It’s clear from the sound of his voice that even he knows that makes no difference.

“Never—” my father says.

My brother moves his eyes to the pine needles on the ground, then—“Look at me when I’m talking to you, son!”—he moves them up again. He looks like he’s swallowed a mouse.

“No matter what,” says my father. “You always stand with your sister.”

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After two days travel, the pickup stopped in front of a long building and a row of trees that looked like the pineapple trees I’d seen in children’s books. We had arrived in Copal AA. I climbed out, layered in dust and sweat, and a Mayan woman put a coconut in my hands. I’d never held a coconut. The husk was cool and stringy, like cedar bark, but softer. Following the example of the other delegates, I put my mouth to the hole in the coconut and drank. It was cold. Between the 130 families in Copal AA, there are three medium-sized refrigerators; one of them was used to make our coconuts cold.

We walked into the building for our first meeting, husks in hand. “Throw them out the back window,” we were told. “They’ll compost.” We tossed the emptied coconuts into a carpet of green as high as my waist, then sat down for our meeting. Out of the fifty or so communities that make up the coalition, twenty had sent representatives. Before we discussed what we’d come to discuss—their organizing against the construction of a giant hydro-electric dam that

would flood their communities to export electricity—each person introduced themselves and the community they represented.

When, four hours later, the introductory meeting ended, we were invited to tour their land parcels. Someone pointed out a line of short trees to our left; the primary school children had planted them and, when they got older, they would use them to build their family homes. Someone else pointed out the pineapple plants (not trees). But it was only when one of our hosts bent down to run his palm over the newly growing bean shoots—a natural, nitrogen-rich fertilizer—that it registered that although no one had said “Here we are at the land parcels,” we had been walking right through them, perhaps the entire time.

“We have parcels up to three miles away,” he said, still squatting, pointing to where we’d come from that morning. The land I had thought wild and untouched as we drove through it was actually cultivated and cared for, just like the land I was standing on.

“There’s no land like this left in Guatemala anymore,” he said, his knees resting in the spongy soil. “We don’t need chemicals. We work with the forest. The forest is its own fertilizer. If they flood it, if we had to leave, we’d never find land like this again.”

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Though I felt awful about my brother’s public shaming, my parents’ admonishment clarified my own values. I, too, had thought my brother embarrassingly weak for standing there with the big boys, trying to glean power from a more powerful group. I thought he should have crossed, should have stood with me and with our younger cousin. And I wasn’t wrong.

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People ask me why I chose Guatemala. But rather than choosing the country of Guatemala, I feel I've accepted the invitation by people in Guatemala. First, by the language school in the mountains and then by the communities that invited our delegation.

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My brother did not cross that day in the blackberry patch. And I was fine. I had so much already: my cousin, my height, my parents in their lawn chairs. I didn't need him to punch the kid, didn't need him to stoop down and pick up the fallen fruit. I didn't even need him to cross to my side. But I wish he had. If he had stood there, beside me, in his quiet way, nothing would have changed. And everything would be different.

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The third invitation I received—to be an international human rights accompanier in Guatemala—was sent while I was still in high school, years before I'd receive it. It was sent by (among others) the people of Copal AA. They had fled to Mexico during the Internal Armed Conflict. In the 1990's, as the conflict lessened, they saw that an international presence could give them some security. With foreigners from powerful ally nations such as the United States observing, documenting, and educating people in our own countries, community leaders were less likely to be threatened as they returned to their homes, the bus of returned refugees less likely to be pushed off the road. Our presence could offer them a little more space to do their work: buy land, plant trees, catch fish, and organize with neighbors to care for their land and water. For over twenty years, Guatemalans have worked with the U.S.-based NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala) to provide this international presence in the form of human rights accompaniers.

In the 1990's, Guatemalans called for foreigners to stand with them as they crossed back to their homeland and, twenty years later, they were calling still. In response, I spent months improving my Spanish and weeks answering the thirty questions that made up NISGUA's application. I requested letters of recommendation and sent them in, then had a two-hour interview and Spanish assessment.

Five days after my interview, the director emailed asking if we could "follow up." Had I done something wrong? Was my Spanish not quite enough? Were my interview responses somehow inconsistent with my written application? I trusted their process and knew that if they did not choose me, it was because I was not qualified. Yet, when I'd applied, I'd been sure I was qualified. I had already learned another language (American Sign Language), spent time in rural Guatemala and learned its basic history; I had always lived collectively, and, importantly, had spent years doing community organizing.

In my own communities, I was involved in decision-making. At seventeen, I organized panels of LGBTQ youth. At my community college, I worked with other students to put a cap on tuition hikes. But in other people's communities, it didn't make sense for me to lead. How should I know what's best in contexts and cultures unfamiliar to me?

Still, I had connections with people whose communities I was not a member of but wanted to support. I chopped vegetables for DeafBlind Community Class, phone-banked for the people-of-color-led Coalition to Undo Racism Everywhere, and pulled invasive blackberries from the banks of the city's river with Friends of the Duwamish—Duwamish being the name of one of the native peoples in my area. As an accompanier, I would also be organizing and educating in my own communities while supporting organizing other communities were already doing. Instead of standing with parents of color as they spoke out at a school board meeting, I might be standing with indigenous survivors at a trial for war-crimes, but the concept was the same. It seemed that, without me realizing it, a



good part of my life had been spent preparing to be an international human rights accompanier.

I sat down at my desk five minutes before our scheduled phone call.

“I just wanted to let you know in person, in real-time,” the director said when I answered the phone, “that you’ve been invited by NISGUA to be an accompanier—”

“Really?” I squealed.

“We want you to think about it. Talk to your people, your family, friends, then let us know your decision.”

“Yes yes yes,” I said. “Yes is my decision.”

The director laughed and told me to sleep on it. I emailed my yes before getting out of bed the next morning.

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The day after we toured the land parcels of Copal AA, we rode a wooden boat down the Chixoy River. We then began a 30-minute hike up to Las Margaritas Copón, the community just above the confluence of the Chixoy and Copón rivers, the site of the proposed dam. Unlike the returned refugee community of Copal AA, made up of several indigenous groups, each with a different language, Las Margaritas Copón is and for generations has been Q’eqchi’. During the Conflict (1960-1996), the Q’eqchi’ of Las Margaritas Copón, unlike other communities, were not interned in so-called “model villages;” had not fled into the jungle to live off malanga root and wild plants for years; they had not been rounded up and shot, kidnapped and tortured, or forced into domestic and sexual slavery. They were not, as were their neighbors upstream at Rio Negro, massacred to make way for a hydro-electric dam. Though they were not untouched by 36 years of the government’s rifles and machetes, the Q’eqchi’ of Las Margaritas Copón continued to live with their land, care for their river, and organize themselves to meet their needs,

just as they were doing the day we visited.

As we hiked up to Las Margaritas Copón, teenagers in shorts scooted past us. When we arrived in the center of the community—a large flat field—we found a soccer tournament underway. A hundred people from surrounding villages were there. We were invited into the home of Víctor Caal Tzuy, a member of the coalition to prevent the dam. We sat in his wooden house, which his community had recently built. We ate squash from their food parcels while Víctor bounced his baby on his lap.

After lunch, we walked around the soccer field to another wooden building for our meeting. The ancestral authorities set their staffs on the long wooden table and spoke first. Víctor interpreted from their Q'eqchi' into Spanish. The first elder thanked us for accepting the invitation that Víctor had sent on their behalf when he had toured the U.S. with NISGUA.

“I want to thank you for coming,” began a second elder. A three-year-old stood on the bench next to him, elbows on the table and chin in hands. “A few years ago,” the second elder continued, “we had some other visitors from the United States come and bring us shoes. And so, we thank you for that also. But we want to thank you—the delegation—especially, because you are helping us keep our land. Shoes are great. But shoes wear out. Land is forever.”

## **Part II**

It is late summer in the Northwest, when the fruits are full and free for the taking. I walk to a patch of old growth that juts into Lake Washington. Along the water's edge, blackberry brambles dominate. But this is a popular summer spot, most of the berries have been picked by walkers, joggers, bikers; kids and their parents; sweethearts out for a day at the lake. Twenty-five years have passed since that day in the woods with my little brother; I know now how to

find all the best berries.

Leaving my sandals on, I wade into the gently sloping lake and walk around to the water side of the brambles. On this side, branches bloat with bursting black berries, ripened by the sun reflecting off the lake. There are no bears in these parts anymore; the picking is easy. As I pluck one at a time, boats buzz past and the sun floats in and out of the clouds. Somewhere in the tops of these trees Bald Eagles land and the Great Horned Owl nests. My fingers and hands turn deep red with juice. I can eat no more. Even empty, my mouth trembles with the taste of blackberry. I lean back and let myself float under the sky of the Pacific Northwest in the water of Lake Washington and think: there is nowhere I'd rather call home.

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During our delegation's last gathering in Guatemala's mountain villages, the school kids re-enacted the day representatives from the dam company showed up—via helicopter. The pilot was played by a teenager with huge headphones; he twirled an umbrella, making a buzzing sound with his lips that mimicked the helicopter's blades. When a farmer and his child working in their fields saw the helicopter land, they went to the community loudspeaker and announced it. The representatives from the community then went to the representatives from the company and asked them to come only when invited.

This was how I learned, from the youth, that permission was either given or denied, that everyone I had seen at that soccer tournament and thought strangers were actually guests, invited. Before leaving, we, the guests, ate Chopa fish pulled by the people, Q'eqchi', who have always lived here, from the river, Copón, from which they have always fed. The fish came from a net slung out into the river I had waded in, right at the confluence where, if plans go through, twenty-four stories of wall will stand.

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We are transplants, my people. My maternal side fled France during the massacres of Protestants. My mother's father was the last of the Protestants I knew, the only grandparent to live long enough for me to really remember. To remember his smile is to feel the muscle and bone of my own jaw shift itself into the smile I remember. To look at those creases in my brother's cheeks is to see our grandfather's life inside his.

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In our family of six, violence descended the birth order like stairs. I was twelve years old in those berry bushes; I had years before my little brother would outgrow me, before he, like his brothers before him, could have his retribution. The day it happened, he was sitting on the footrest in the family room playing NBA Jam on the Sega.

I asked him something from the doorway. He ignored me. I requested, then demanded. He said No and No again. I lunged and knocked him backwards. He landed on the floor between the footrest and couch, with me on top of him. The carpet was dirty. There was a hot wheel under the couch. I was sixteen years old.

Whatever combustible material had propelled me toward him just as quickly burned itself up. My arms felt stringy and weak. I wanted badly to be free from this awkward intimacy, but our legs had somehow entrapped each other: my left leg between his legs, my right foot hooked under his left ankle.

He was the youngest and had nowhere to turn the violence I turned on him. And when the time had come for him to give it back, he didn't. He just didn't. Didn't push me off or smack me. Didn't scream for me to get the hell off. Didn't even adjust his legs or rub

his head we here it had hit the floor. He just looked at me. Looked with those same brown eyes that had looked at me in the blackberry brambles, but this time I could find in them no shame.

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In the fall of 2014, before I visited Víctor Caal Tzuy and his community of Las Margaritas Copón, Victor had come to my city with NISGUA's Rivers for Life Speaking Tour. I didn't hear him speak, but heard about it from NISGUA staff who did. He gave a talk with Ken Workman, descendant of Chief Sealth, after whom the city of Seattle is named.

The Duwamish Longhouse, where Ken and Víctor gave their talk, is not an old building. It was built in 2009, about a hundred years after European immigrants had burnt down the other longhouses, of which there had been nearly a hundred.

In 2015, just after Victor had returned to his own community, President Obama denied to the Duwamish the federal recognition they'd previously been granted. One reason cited was that they had not lived continuously in their traditional ways.

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It used to be that one could not walk to this patch of old growth jutting into the lake because the strip connecting it to the mainland was underwater. Lake Washington, at that time, was called Xacuabš, meaning basically "a lot of water," in Lushootseed, the language of the people who fed from it. At its southern end, the lake poured its excess into the Black River. The Black River, in turn, fed into the Duwamish River and together they emptied into the south end of Elliot Bay where today stand the cranes of the shipyard.

Duwamish, roughly translated, means "the people inside the bay." This includes the people of the Black River. "The What River?"

my neighbors ask. The reason my neighbors have never heard of this river is because of the ship canal that now connects Lake Washington to Puget Sound. With the digging of this canal in 1916, the “lot of water” of Lake Washington dropped and the Black River which fed from it—and from which the Duwamish fed—dried up.

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I pulled blackberries with the Friends of the Duwamish just the once. And when the Duwamish asked community groups to fundraise to help build their longhouse, I dropped a few dollars in a hat instead of fundraising. When I found out their federal recognition had been revoked, I told myself I’d gather signatures for the letter of support. But I only put my own name down.

Recalling my brother’s face there in the blackberry brambles sends a sheet of electricity through me. It is not that he looks like me, or not that only, but that I am not sure it is not me standing still in that crowd of powerful pale faces.

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On a sunny day a few years after that camping trip with my brother, mom and dad bought a cheap blow-up raft and drove us to Flaming Geyser State Park. My brother and I pushed off at the mellow part of the river. Ignoring our plastic oars, watching our parents watch us as they walked along the bank to our right, we let our legs dangle over the raft’s edge. When the current picked up, mom and dad would jog, then slow again as it slacked. Without them noticing, the river forked around an island and we went left. They ran, screaming our names, throwing their gazes far and wide but coming up empty. For my brother and me, nothing happened. We remember it only because they do, because for that terrible minute in their world, we’re gone.

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As far as I know, all my ancestors were indigenous to that great continent that today is named in two. But who can be indigenous to a landmass as large as Eurasia? The dirt and rocks, rivers and watersheds may still exist—in what is now called France, Germany, Ireland—but I will never know them as my own. What does it mean to want to save forests and rivers when I have not known a single tree shaped into a plank of wood in my home, when there has never been a river that I have both needed and known? What does it mean to kneel in soil that is bare of the bones of my kin?

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The people who used to fish the now dry Black River and the now toxic Duwamish River are still here. After their longhouses were burned, they were banned from the city that would be named after them. They scattered, but not far. They were offered land on reservations, but most declined; they believe in staying close to the burial place of one's ancestors.

Down Rainier Avenue, out by the Fred Meyer, some of our people are buried, Ken Workman said recently, then added, "Seattle put streets right over the top of 'em."

Literally speaking, the land on which I stand holds the bones of the Duwamish ancestors; legally, however, the Duwamish have no land and no standing.

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On the day the Black River dried up, the canoes dropped and dropped, then stopped floating. The white people came with sacks, grabbing at the fish left flopping in puddles between dry land.

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I walk back out of Lake Washington, the lake of the dropped water and unfed river. I walk a peninsula that was once a seasonal island, my eating of blackberries made possible in the same shaping of earth that made the catching of fish impossible. When they spoke together at the Duwamish Longhouse, Ken Workman of the people inside the bay said to Víctor Caal Tzuy of the river Copón: “Don’t let them take the river; we lost our river and look at us now.”

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Why do I go to Guatemala? I go because ten percent of the people living at the time survived our arrival and we thrived; because there is a 90% chance that I would not exist and my brother would not exist if during that contact, our ancestors had been on the other side. I go because the banana republic made people in the United States rich by making peasants in Guatemala landless. I go because while I was camping as a kid, our CIA funded a campaign that would take two hundred thousand lives while we went on unharmed. I go because the big dams bring money to the bank accounts of foreign stockholders instead of electricity to the homes of the poor.

Still, there are things that are not right happening all over the world, including in my own back yard. Why leave my house and my family and my summer for a year to stand with Guatemalans? Why involve myself in the affairs of a foreign nation? When I shop at my local food co-op with my nephew, they give him a free banana. I have met the children who pick bananas for export and I have met their parents and it is not often that they can afford to buy fruit. I go because I am already involved, even if I do nothing. For those things from which I benefit at another’s expense, I am responsible.

But I cannot do everything. I can do very little. This is something I can do. I go because I can.



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I bought my plane ticket a few days ago, then I sat on the couch next to my brother, slapped his knee and said, "Guess I gotta go to Guatemala now. Do this accompanier thing."

"Guess so," he said. His eighteen-month-old sat on the floor playing with the Tupperware Pick-Up Truck that he and I had played with as children.

"Remember, we used to try to make it pick up blocks while driving backward?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"People keep asking me why I'm going to Guatemala," I said.

"Really?" he asked, surprised. "Sometimes people think too hard," he said. "I mean, there's a need, right?"

His daughter brought a block over and put it in his hand.

"Well, there's need all over the world," he added, "but Guatemala, I mean, it's just, that's where you have a connection."

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How can the Q'eqchi' of Las Margaritas Copón be separated from the river Copón after which they name themselves? The Duwamish from the Duwamish River? How can I separate myself from my brother? In his eyes, I am chastised and I am chosen; I am myself and my history, inescapably.

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I remember that day in the blackberry bushes with my brother because it is the only time I felt betrayed by him. I go to Guatemala because I would like to take after my little brother, to be someone who is so often on the right side that a single mistake from childhood is from then on remembered.

And why couldn't I be? Both of us lived, in the beginning, floating in a bed of water inside the same woman. He carries in his watery cells the same generations I carry. He holds the memories I cannot remember. And I for him. He looks like grandpa. He is as close as I get to a world in which we live once again alongside our ancestors, walk the land they walked.

As I cross over, with my backpack and my passport, water sloshing in my water bottle, it is him I walk toward, toward the person I want to be in his eyes. Wherever I stand, I stand with him; I stand because of him. He is the river I fight for. He is my place.

# PROPHET OF OUR OWN AGE

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Marisa Clark

*--for Natalie Scenters-Zapico*

After the reading, the poet from El Paso  
will speak of visiting the Walmart:  
the area fenced off and festooned  
with crime tape; the conspicuous police,  
armed to the teeth and circling  
the new memorial; the store closed  
“for renovations.” She will say how  
she walked the perimeter—numb—and cried;  
how the story is getting lost, its ugly  
particulars buried; how it’s become  
just one more mass shooting in a series  
without end. The manifesto—, she will say.  
Did you read? It made clear the shooter’s  
racist intention, and the quickness  
with which silence surrounded  
the event is its own shade of whitewash.

After the reading, we join friends  
at a bar. On the way in, we stop  
at the restroom. There's one for women,  
one for men. The poet says she'll use  
the men's, but I'm closer to that door.  
Inside, I find a replica of its counterpart—  
the décor ungendered, the toilet seat  
flipped down—but the whole time  
I'm there, I sense the possibility of harm.  
Someone waiting in the hall may judge  
my queer androgyny and hurt me  
for my choice of pissing place. I brace  
and pull the door. Someone waits.  
It's the poet from El Paso.

During her reading, the poet stands  
at a podium. Behind her, behind glass,  
a George Orwell display: posters and books,  
quotes from *Animal Farm* and 1984,  
and over her left shoulder, fittingly,  
“Prophet Of Our Own Age.” The poet  
reads. *Mi boca*, she repeats, and *limón*  
and *estados unidos* (that most sour thing).  
She reads about the border where  
El Paso and Ciudad Juárez meet—  
about violence and race, murdered  
women, crossing guards; about the river  
and the bridge; about the land, the lore,  
and love. We listen enrapt, in rows  
of chairs in a room in a university library.  
A glass wall looks onto a hallway,  
where, in my periphery, a hulk of a man  
lurks at the door. An unsettling type,

he bounces and sways. I refuse to look  
his way. I scan the room; there's no  
escape. Suspicion shows me bloody shards  
of glass and bullet holes—this is the age  
I'm living in—and finally I face the threat.  
The man, my colleague, holds his infant  
in his arms. Not a shooter, but a father,  
rocking his little baby quiet.

After the reading, we sit on the same side  
of a booth, the poet and I, our backs  
to a wall of the basement bar. The stairway  
opens to our right. I think of a couple  
I know, first responders, who assess  
every place they go for entrances and exits  
and where they'd be most vulnerable  
to attack. Our friends across the table  
hold that position. In truth, we'd all  
be doomed. For now, we drink wine,  
eat salmon, catch up and laugh, talk  
about people we all know. The night  
proceeds. And when I bring it up,  
we talk about El Paso.

# SAVAGE

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Rewa Zeinati

If I tell you we eat the livers and brains of sheep you might look at me like I am savage. And I might look at you like maybe you are right. I could push the envelope and tell you we also eat the liver raw, uncooked; the aftertaste of metal with a sprinkle of salt is what keeps our children strong. We make feasts out of these for breakfast. Our land is filled with barley and grass. Our land is filled with sheep and goats and cows and us. We are taught to cut. The barley and the sheep. We eat. We smoke. We never trade the secrets of our secret recipes. We eat intestines, stuff them with rice and beef, we eat hooves, bone marrow, balls, and tongues. We eat whole tongues, too. Just not the way you do.

# HECUBA IN GRIEF COUNSELING

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Jeneva Stone

you tell me I will take these steps:

denial,

anger,

bargaining,

depression

and on to acceptance—a line traced

like the arc

of an arrow

from the tension

of a bow

to the heart

of its target

direct

daily Achilles pulled my son's corpse

behind his chariot

around Troy's walls  
until Hector's skin

peeled from his back, rocks wore gaps  
in his flesh and  
he thickened  
with dust

each night as Achilles slept  
Apollo restored  
Hector's body to beauty  
with the rising sun

Achilles

woke enraged  
hitched his horses  
tied Hector's ankles

again

driving his own grief  
for Patroclus  
round and round  
my city's perimeter

as if tracing a finger about  
a wound's point of entry  
the hole  
an arrow makes  
slot of a blade

acceptance

yet another death among so many



we shrieked and tore our hair on the battlements  
because grief-letting  
bleeds out hope  
slowly enough  
for a soul to bear

each night Hector was restored in body  
I hoped  
Achilles might force it one more round

what's a child other than possibility?

*right, you say, you're grieving*

fuck you

what the gods do to us all  
sear into our flesh their desires  
raising a red welt of acceptance:

that grief and its renewal are all that ever is

# SUMMER OF HEROIN

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David Pérez

Vinnie opens the dime bag, dips inside with his long-nailed pinkie, and scoops out a pinch of white powder. He licks the dope delicately.

“Good shit,” he says.

“Better than bad shit,” Chino says.

“Vaya,” I say—right on.

Vinnie, Chino, and I are sitting on a park bench in Chichamba, a humorless playground across the street from the Seven-Up factory on 132nd Street near Cypress Avenue, as south as you can get in the Bronx before ending up in the Harlem River; the Deep South Bronx. It’s the summer of 1970, July. I’m about to snort heroin for the first time. I’m fifteen years old.

The day is hot and muggy in that distinct New York City way, heat and grit seeping its way into your pores. Vinnie takes out a miniature spoon and begins snorting, inhaling the heroin into his right nostril, then the left. His wiry body shudders. Vinnie is eighteen, practically an elder. Today he’s sporting a stitched shirt, sharkskin pants, and Playboy shoes, the Puerto Rican fashion of the times.

Vinnie passes the cellophane bag and spoon to Chino, who repeats the two-nostril ritual. Our neighborhood has a lot of Chinos and Chinas, their Asiatic features a reflection

of Puerto Rico's Taino Indian roots. This version of Chino is an aspiring lightweight boxer, training for the Golden gloves at Mary's Recreational Center. He's fifteen years old too. Like me, he's wearing a tee-shirt, pressed wrangler jeans, and white Converse sneakers. We're not dressed to the nines like Vinnie but we look good. When you're poor, appearances mean everything.

"My turn!" I shout.

My partners-in-drugs laugh. Before this moment, I'd been the guy from the block who got high grades in school, which got me goofed big time, alternately called Birdbrain or Brainiac, the comic book super-villain with a mushroom head. I was, however, the top sprinter on the Cardinal Hayes High School freshman track team. That earned me an honorary hangout card among the tough crowd who prided themselves on "not giving a shit" about anything. Sports rocked in the hood: basketball, stickball, football, handball, boxing, and running fast, whether towards a finish line or away from the police.

I began the summer of '70 adrift, sick of my straight A's, jealous of my buddies who were discovering hooky gigs and drugs, wanting to not give a shit to. It was the first summer of a new decade. The Beatles had split up and the Temptations were singing about the Ball of Confusion. Carlos Santana had electrified the block with the phenomenon called Latin Rock, singing about Evil Ways. And who better to start my evil ways than with tecatos. In my mind, addicts took on an almost mythic role, players in a Greek tragedy I wanted to act in.

The heroin stings as it goes up my nose. When I swallow, the powder travels down my throat tasting of Milk of Magnesia.

"Good shit," I say, as if I knew the difference.

"Your money paid for it, bro," Chino says.

Actually, it was my father's money that paid for it, the

ten dollars I stole that morning. Mami hid whatever cash was leftover from Papi's post-drinking and gambling paycheck in their bedroom dresser's top drawer, nestled among her costume jewelry and rosary beads. I'd only recently discovered the stash when I was home alone pouting about my dwindling allowance: \$1.50 week, barely enough for an occasional bear, loose cigarettes from the bodega, and Hostess Cupcakes.

Later, I gave the money to Chino, claiming it was mine. He copped the heroin from the neighborhood pet shop, where Little Moses supplemented his income by dealing through the back door. Among his other offerings was Chiba, a newly-arrived brand of marijuana reportedly laced with embalming fluid. That was next on my list on drugs to try. Heroin was the first. Both promised to get you "fucked up," which, of course, was my whole point.

After a couple of minutes, we're done snorting. We settle in and wait. Gazing eastward, I spy the Millbrook Houses framing the hazy skyline. When my parents moved there in 1958, the projects were sparkling new, a mini-city of red brick and glass high-rises surrounded by crisp lawns, plentiful trees, ample parking, a community center, a huge laundry room, and a small office for housing cops. Now their main selling point was being fire-proof. Arson had begun to spread through the South Bronx like an oil spill, competing for mayhem with the rising amount of daylight muggings.

"Yo, Dave, why is this park called Chichamba?" Vinnie asks.

I point to the soiled mattress inside the handball court. "That's a clue right there," I say. "It comes from chichar, you know, to fuck."

Vinnie and Chino aren't listening. Their eyes are shut, stoned.

I'm not feeling anything. I close my eyes and wait again. Minutes pass. Nothing.

I crack my knuckles, bruised from playing a card game called Knuckles, supposedly invented in Riker's Prison. Whatever its origin, the guy with the losing hand got his knuckles hammered with the card deck. I lost a lot. The other day, I was administered the Slicer: the deck's edge wielded sideways across the knuckles, a slicing motion that peeled skin and drew blood, yet another sign of valor.

I peek at my fellow dopers. Vinnie and Chino have begun the tecato nod: eyes closed, mouth slack, fingers brushing tips of nostrils. Addict nodding is an art form. Tarzan and his brother Cheetah, two other teenage elders from the block, are masters at it. Their heads and torsos would lean sideways and then forward, two trees on the verge of toppling, and right before you could yell, "Timber!" the two pros would snap themselves back to a straight sitting position. Rinse and repeat.

I'm still not feeling high, but do the nod anyway, making sure to sniffle and letting my mouth droop, a dribble of spit working its way out my lip, But mostly I'm thinking: I've finally tried heroin and it's not working! I wonder if it's because my nose had been broken twice from playing tackle football without a helmet, running face-first into Fat Ray's thundering kneecaps. Maybe the permanent bump in the middle of my nose has filtered the dope from the dope, rendering it impotent.

Vinnie goes behind the bench and throws up. Chino follows suit. I forego joining them. It's one thing to fake the nod. It's quite another to fake the vomit.

"You guys okay?" I say.

Vinnie starts walking away, not looking back. Chino gets up to join him.

"Gotta go train," he says.

"Gotta go take a nap," I say.

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The second and third time I snort heroin ends the same way. Vinnie and Chino get fucked up. I pretend to do so. My nodding skills improve, although I did ruin a perfectly good alpaca shirt when my drooling stained the collar. Chino had scored the dope the second time; Vinnie the third. My mother's stash of extra cash had disappeared, and my father was coming home later and later, having discovered two new named Gin and Poker.

Meanwhile, heroin had upped its ante. A few guys from the block had turned to mainlining. Addictions grew, as did robberies. Tutú, already an urban legend for stealing a meat-slicing machine from a bodega when its owner turned his back, was crazier than ever. One day, I witnessed him opening the back door of a food delivery truck as it waited for a green light, his pregnant wife yelling at him from their fourth-floor fire escape to "stop that fucking shit and get upstairs!"

Determined to get wasted from drugs, I decide to try some of the Chiba pot that Little Moses dealt. So I seek out Edgar and Focus, two friends from St. Luke's Catholic School. We were all graduates of the Class of '69, survivors of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart: a regime of priest-wannabe's who doled out education alongside paddles and fists, an experience both scary and surprisingly funny.

Edgar is a real ladies man, a new jeba in his arms every week. Focus used to be called Julio, but changed his name after buying turquoise-rimmed glasses. Like me, they wanted the summer of '70 to be a time for new highs. The three of us hung out together a lot in the Big Park, the inventive name given to the biggest playground in the Millbrook Houses. There, we chugged quarts of Colt 45 and pints of blackberry brandy. But deep inside we wanted, needed better shit, good shit.

I'd hadn't told them yet of my heroin adventures. I'm not sure why.

We score the pot at a seedy tenement on Bruckner Boulevard, near the Old London factory, which made Dipsy Doodles and Cheez Doodles. Tutu and his minions targeted the place numerous times. Little Moses had moved his dealing operations to the adjacent building because it felt “more professional.” Or so I had heard. Edgar thought it was because the pet shop owner got suspicious.

Little Moses is on the top floor, and hands us the nickel bag of Chiba through a sliding window on the door, much like in a confessional booth or prison cell. “Did you already pay him?” I ask Edgar.

“He owes me,” Edgar replies. “You know, this doesn’t really have embalming fluid, and you only roll three skinny ass joints. But half of one will knock you on your ass.”

“Time to get fucked up!” Focus says.

We walk down the creaky stairs, and go outside. Standing there is a plainclothes Latin cop, gun drawn. “Freeze!” he yells.

Edgar runs and the cop grabs him. Edgar, all 100 pounds of him, fights the cop off with his fists and dashes down 138th Street. The cop exhales and, gun at his side, turns to Focus and me. I’m shaking but trying to appear brave.

“You all were trying to steal the fucking pigeons!” the cop yells.

Focus and I stare at each other in disbelief. “What pigeons?” I ask.

“The homing ones on the roof, I know that’s what you all were trying to do.”

“No, we were just copping some herb,” Focus says, adjusting his glasses.

The cop glares at us like we’re nuts. Maybe we are.

“You sure you all weren’t trying the steal the pigeons? The owner’s been complaining about kids trying to steal his fucking pigeons.”

“You mean like in *The Birds*?” I say.

“Fuck the birds!”

“I’m telling you, we were just copping,” Focus repeats.

“Yeah,” I mutter. “None of us have seen or heard any birds, I mean pigeons.”

The cop sighs and holsters his gun. I exhale.

“Get the hell out of here,” he says.

A couple of blocks away, I turn to Focus. “Why the fuck did you keep saying ‘only copping some herb?’ Were you trying to get us busted?”

“Yo, chill out, Birdbrain. You were the one with the stupid joke about the bird movie, so shut up.”

I shake my head. “It’s weird. Little Moses worked at a pet shop, and now he’s dealing in a place that has expensive pigeons? This is, like, serious *Twilight Zone* shit.”

Focus tells me that the reason Edgar fought off the cope and ran was because he had a dime bag of heroin in his pocket. It was to be a surprise for me, a little snorting to go along with the Chiba.

“We wanted to get real fucked up, Dave!” he said.

“Come on, we’re okay, okay?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t okay. All I could think about was being in a cell with a heavily tattooed con, telling him I got rolled because of stupid pigeons. He’d lick his lips and say, Oh really? Also, we were almost shot. And here was heroin again, raising its head.

“You know, Focus, I think I just want to go home now. I’ve already snorted and it’s not my kind of head.” I omitted that it wasn’t any kind of head at all.

“You doped already and didn’t freaking tell us? What the hell is wrong with you, man?”

I tell him I don’t know.

“What about the smoke, do you want to not do that too?” Focus asks.

“We got all summer,” I say.



# RIVER AND SEA: SIGHING IN LATE WINTER

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Ginnie Gavrin

They wrestle in midair, two eagles,  
spiral of black, of white. Talons  
a splash of gold against the sky.  
Courtship a tumbling clutch. Instinctive.  
Reflex against the possibility  
of extinction. Although any species  
could succumb to annihilation now,  
winding down out of Time,  
out of the future. The way there are  
only so many right whales  
left in the sea. Their colossal distress  
beached on the sand, watched  
through the tunnel vision of a telescope  
as if viewing a miracle in reverse.

# WAT SAMUT CHIN

---

Polchate (Jam) Kraprayoon

There was a road here once,  
running along the pylons,  
wires linking shops, farms  
and stilt houses.

Off the coarse-chopped shore,  
this line of sturdy matches,  
black-budded tips,  
are speared into the ocean.

Waiting to be lit  
like paper lanterns, red as luck,  
they disappear into the distance.

Now sunk, our coast is like a sponge,  
soaking up the brackish water,  
vanished roots of mangrove and memory.

Three times in thirty years,  
our host said, they've had to go to higher ground.

His finger moves along the map  
from point to point, each time  
lingering just a little.

Only this temple stands now,  
jutting out into the sea,  
lashed and battered by breaking waves.

An islet shrine patched up  
with wooden planks  
And filled with roving packs of  
haggard dogs and monks.

The planks merge to rural lanes,  
a tangled span of bridges,  
then concrete highways  
cutting right to the city.

Capillaries merging into arteries,  
arteries snaking to a heart,  
whose chambers will one day overrun with salt.

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# TISH'S FISHES

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Anita Powell

Satish Uncle ran a harshly lit chippie on the wrong side of Botany Bay, which offered an unobstructed view of the refinery that glowed orange at night and spewed fat puffs of black smoke into the violet air.

He liked the view. The belching towers were a rare sign, he thought, of honest industriousness in this oppressively pretty city. He and his brothers had been out-leased and out-cultured in suburb after suburb until they gave in and dug into the rare patches of ugliness, cramming themselves into awkward rentals and sharing alleys with dank betting shops and square, leathery men who practiced the dying art of cutting keys. Satish Uncle found his niche offering predictable, practical fare, like the hoarse-throated Amritsari street vendors he remembered from boyhood. This humble act of service was, he thought, much more valuable than his dutiful performance of ticking Labour at every poll. It was, he told himself, his own, tiny part in Advancing Australia Fair.

It wasn't always a chip shop. His first attempt in that space failed miserably — an intimate, gently lit sit-down with blood-red tablecloths and a lamb curry that took two hours to prepare but which didn't sell, even after he lowered the price to what he thought was a very reasonable \$16.90. He had pictured sandy-haired couples huddled over candlelight,

whispering romantically or whatever it is white people do as they drink glass after glass and linger seemingly forever on their tiny patch of gustatory real estate. He imagined steam rising in elegant curls over the delicate dals and range of veg- and non-veg curries, all promising “a wonderfully, fresh exotic taste” and served in gleaming copper kadais.

It was not to be for poor Uncle. But instead of lamenting all the time and effort he'd spent in France filleting and brunoising and learning the finer points of sauces, he adapted. So what, he thought, if these loutish Australians didn't want his culture, Bombay by way of Paris' best kitchens, delivered to the undeserving denizens of La Perouse for under \$20?

But he kept the walls, which he had painted a deep saffron like that one sari he remembered his mother once wearing. It was the only part of her that hadn't faded in his mind after all this time. Inside that warm embrace, he cheerfully slung fish and chips to the sweaty, orange-vested tradies who tromped in, their thick fingers closing over a Coke and whatever seafood content he could stick together — whiting, basa, cod, flake or snapper, often a fish-smash of all of the above — batter beyond recognition and chuck into the deep-fry. They gobbled his gleaming fish and smacked their lips around his inimitable Masala Scallops, golden discs of undesirable potatoes which the distributor let go for cheap and he restored to glory by twice-frying and sprinkling liberally with his proprietary, top-secret spice blend.

The workmen weren't much for talking. Mostly they grunted and pointed — probably because out in those parts, still, everyone assumed Uncle couldn't speak English. After a while, Uncle figured it out it was easier all around if he just assigned everything a number. They would enter just after the clock struck 12, an orderly queue of overgrown lemmings, point to the menu board and flash a hand sign for their choice. Uncle would smile, take their creased bills, and

bow his head like he imagined they expected him to. They would step to the side, grumbling to each other in a language he couldn't make out, and he would hand them their lunch wrapped in last week's Sydney Morning Herald, which earned him an approving nod, a grunt and the occasional, "ta, mate." It suited him fine. His customers never complained, didn't linger, made few demands. In fact, for the first time in 46 years in this miserable country, Uncle thought, he had found happiness.

He called it Tish's Fishes.

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Through the years we had all done time in the Uncles' operations. They used it to remind us how we all got here, through hard work and not talking back, not all this gallivanting around and expecting rewards to just come to us like that (fingers snapped for dramatic effect).

"I thought we all got here on Qantas," Rohit once quipped, which earned him three straight weeks behind the tiny, barred service window at Ajit Uncle's Redfern takeaway. It wasn't the testy drunks or the ragged council-dwellers that scared him, he said: it was the raw fear that filled his throat every time he handed over a flimsy white plastic bag bulging with lava-hot Butter Chicken (because it was always Butter Chicken) and sizzling Lamb Lollipop or Steak and Chips (heavily dosed with Satish Uncle's secret spice blend) or medicine-sweet Chicken Manchurian. Those thin, slippery bags felt weaker than our grandmother (may she rest eternally), but were, like her, surprisingly resilient. Once he figured that out, he slung those curries like a pro. We almost dared believe he would take the hit and go on to do what none of the rest of us wanted to do.

When they arrived in Australia, the Uncles had divided up the city like culinary colonizers: Ajit, the first-

born, claimed the Inner Suburbs and a large slice of the Inner East; Hari, the petulant youngest, staked dominion over the Inner West. That left quiet, middleborn Satish with the sleepy Sutherland Shire, and a 30-minute buffer between him and the nearest brother, which suited him fine. At Parramatta, they turned up their beaky noses. The brothers did not come all this way, they sniffed, to serve distant cousins who demanded discounts and were unmoved by the greatness of their vindaloos, or the higher power of Satish's spice blend.

It probably broke their hearts that none of us followed them into service. But if so they never said. And besides, our fathers were never, ever home during the dinner rush (which was when, as Home and Away led us to believe, Mums and Dads had their heart-to-hearts with those troubled but lovable kids).

Instead our mothers, who, truth be told, were superior cooks — always were really, but had the grace never to say so — stood proud over pots of bubbling oil and patiently fried pakora after pakora. We descended upon them like seagulls, dipping them in more ketchup than they thought provident, and our poor mothers wiped their brows, swallowed their anxieties with a gulp of milky, over-sweetened tea and carried on, carried on, carried on.

They said nothing when Ajay became a realtor. Nothing when Subhash went to work for Deloitte. Grumbled among themselves when Rekha said she was considering insurance, and when Prashant went into the music industry, even though, he stressed, it was a proper office job, very corporate, lots of money at stake, for the love of God, stop worrying. Felt a surge of familial pride when I took my MBBS — Finally! A doctor in the family! — then a dip when Jasminder ran off. Cried deep, anguished tears when Jasleen married a Vietnamese boy, thought about casting her out — but found something more to worry about when Vikas, always determined to one-up us all, brought home Brian, and didn't even

have the courtesy to pretend he was a business partner.

And so on and so forth, as the Kapoor family sunk deeper and deeper into the gunky Australian soil.

Me, I fled over the mountains, hoping their drama would not cling to me like the scent of Uncles' cooking. Never really cared for Sydney anyway. It's not that great when you only see it from the back of a takeaway.

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We just assumed the foregone death of the family empire, until we remembered little Krithika — or rather, until she remembered us.

Everyone forgot about poor Krithika. It was natural. She was a good decade behind everyone and was, as I now know as a consultant obstetrician, the result of an increasingly common phenomenon. Her brothers were all staring down their HSCs, dreaming of uni girls and the tantalizing freedoms ahead of them when Sushmila Auntie thought she had entered what, she prayed, was a merciful end to her monthly travails.

It was a perimenopausal fertility surge. And before she knew what was happening (it had been years, she said, how was she to know?) well, there was Krithika, wailing and moaning and, Prashant claimed, rubbishing his shot on the Mathematics Advanced exam — a cheeky try if we ever heard one, because Krithika was three by then and mostly content to silently shadow her brothers, those big brown eyes searching their faces for the adoration she thought she deserved.

Hari Uncle, nearing what he too thought was the end of his fortitude, welcomed his only daughter with exuberance befitting a grandfather — which he has yet to become, yet another way we have all failed them. Krithika reaped the spoils her brothers were never allowed to even consider: talking back, Vegemite on toast, swimming lessons, sleepovers. He



even permitted her to speak in that lilting way that we were all forbidden to — “why everything is a question with these people?” our parents would moan, raising hands to Ganesh or whoever it was you were supposed to ask on those weekends they dragged us out of bed for the endless drive out to Campbelltown, where we dutifully trod in circles and rang bells and genuflected, all for that one miserly laddu at the end. That, too, Krithika was spared — Uncle had recently taken to saying “I have always been more spiritual,” which was really, we all knew, a dodge to avoid the long slog south only to learn that So-and-So had died or Such-and-Such had taken ill or, worse still, the What’s-Their-Names were expecting their fifth grandchild, this time a boy, Hai Ram!

When I heard Krithika was spending time out at Satish Uncle’s, I struggled to envision her all grown up, asking questions in class and driving a car through city streets. It’s hard to dislodge the picture of her gap-toothed and heavy-plaited, forlornly swinging one of her brothers’ cricket bats and begging us to bowl her a googly (or seven), which we indulged her because even then, young strapping specimens we thought we were, with grander things on our minds, we could never bear to say no to little Krithika.

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For her Honours Marketing course she was doing a case study. Her classmates had dutifully filed off to shadow Brand Managers and Stealth Marketers and Viral Influencers — not Krithika. She settled her sights on Tish’s Fishes.

“I think you could benefit from some modern marketing strategies?” she said to Uncle, in that way she had of turning everything into a question, as she squinted at those harsh, jarring walls.

She drew up a new marketing plan, and Uncle smiled and nodded as he watched the presentation flash by on the

screen. He shrugged noncommittally and smiled benevolently, because he was the favorite Uncle, the one who never said no and dandled her on his knee and let her watch TV and eat Minties, as many as she liked, as was his avuncular prerogative.

“It’s just,” she said, “Tish’s Fishes sounds like a ... pet shop.”

He liked the name, and tried to summon the courage to say so.

“It’s nice,” he said mildly, inclining his head gently to the side. “Easy to remember.”

“Yeah, but —”

She sighed in that rolling-eye way that would have landed any of us washing dishes before we could have even finished a complete revolution.

“Can we at least make it a bit more ... cool?”

Uncle smiled indulgently, wanted to look into those deep brown eyes, framed by his brother’s eyelashes, and say no, first you spend thirty years chopping and frying and smelling like onions at all hours and taking the night bus home, winding in the darkness through dozing suburbs to your slumbering family, before even beginning to think about cool and whatnot.

He was about to speak. But he felt the pressure behind his eyes again, saw the walls blur and refocus themselves, as Krithika faded into and out of view, like that one time he and his brothers had dared to try the bhang lassis and spent all afternoon sitting on the sidewalk laughing at the traffic signals.

“Nothing too hectic,” she said.

“Nothing too hectic,” he agreed.

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The first step, she said, was to replace the backlit menu display with chalkboards. She hired an artist to draw the

menu in loopy script.

She hauled the Coke fridge to the corner — “make them work for it, get some exercise” — tossed the candy display (which Uncle, if we’re being honest, kept there mostly for himself), added barstools and a narrow counter along the wall, and then, perplexingly, moved all the lemons from the kitchen into a big, difficult-to-open glass jar on the counter.

“It’s pretty,” she said.

Uncle focused on his frying as she nattered over him, talking of this and that and he nodded, carried on.

“— receipts from the last two bank holidays,” she was saying. “You’re running at a loss. Why not stay home, or go to the beach? I have a few final touches still.”

Uncle didn’t know what to say. The Uncles didn’t see why they should take a holiday just because the bank did, they always said.

He returned Tuesday, after a wasted day spent on the sofa, watching cricket but not enjoying it and eating endless, ketchup-soaked pakoras, to find she had covered the walls in a soulless white.

“It took three coats before we stopped seeing that horrible orange,” she said.

She had replaced the happy blue awnings with somber black ones and, in a final indignity, redubbed it Uncle Tish’s.

“Not that different,” she said. “Right?”

He felt his eyeballs being pressed gently from behind, saw spots, said nothing.

She tied a black bandanna over his hairnet. It had little skulls on it.

“There,” she said. “That is cool.”

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When he was little, Uncle listened to his brothers argue back and forth about their future empire. He was roped in

to settle disputes, and to his everlasting regret, they began to see him as the ideal third pillar: the one in the centre that shouldered the load, never complained, and knew it could not stand alone.

Amritsari fish or chicken lollies? they would debate, with increasing vim and threats of violence. Rajma kebab or onion pakora? Red curtains, or pale yellow? Jalandhar, comfortable and close; or the lure of dirty, complicated Amritsar? For the truth is, even in their big dreams, not once did they consider venturing beyond Punjab.

But it was Satish who did just that. To everyone's surprise, he won a seat at the Cordon Bleu. Of course he had to take it, his brothers and his father and the neighbourhood said. Satish secretly hoped he could steal away quietly, maybe even settle there and allow his family to forget him as he walked the Paris streets swinging his arms freely after years of keeping them close to his side, all the better to keep his brothers from pulling him in opposite directions.

It was not to be. Ajit dragged him across that stupid ocean, and then brought Hari across, too. Once they were marooned, the bookend brothers got to work, staking out territory, blowing through Satish's Special Spice by the kilogram, carrying on, carrying on, carrying on.

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The night crowd began to change, from tired workers and harried single mums, to young Indo kids in tight-tight trousers rolled up ridiculously to expose two centimeters of bony, tattooed ankle.

"Your friends?" he said.

"Oh no," Krithika said cheerfully. "It's the promo."

"What promo?" he said.

"Oh," she laughed. "I took an ad out on Hinder. I didn't tell you because I wasn't sure it would work. You get an off-

the-menu meal-deal for \$36 if you, like, hashtag us.”

Uncle opened his mouth to say that a meal for two would normally cost \$29.89, not \$36, but thought better of it.

“You put it on what?” he said.

“Uncle-ji,” she said slowly, “it’s like Tinder, but for Hindus. But a bit of a piss-take, you see, because it, you know, hinders the whole arranged thing?”

Uncle felt the pressure behind his eyes again, thought he saw a smear of orange beyond his peripheral vision. Were the walls coming to life again? He shook his head to dislodge the thought.

“But what’s Tinder?” he said.

“Oh. Emm. Gee,” she said, turning to wave at someone. “Seriously, Uncle.”

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It was, I could have told him — if anyone in the family listened to me — a warning sign. I have for years been telling Uncle he takes too much sugar in his tea, that he needs to watch his weight, stop eating all the scallops too ugly to serve (no one is going to starve to death in Australia, Uncle), that his blood pressure is already dangerously high and that — I feel like I’ve said this a thousand times — diabetes runs in our blood. After so many generations of service, our veins, I’m convinced, run sluggish with Butter Chicken.

But of course no one listens to me. That left poor Krithika to carry the weight, call the ambulance, ride with Uncle to hospital, and find his Medicare card in his wallet between all the pictures of the children and the nephews and nieces and — yes, there she is, a gap-toothed, heavy-plaited Krithika, who stared up at herself searchingly as she wondered if it could still be Uncle Tish’s without Tish Uncle.

Uncle came to with his brothers’ voices hovering over him, quarrelling as always, to the metronomic rhythm of the

monitors.

... this rubbish, Ajit said. If you hadn't gone in there bothering, muddling, all this nonsense. Now see. See! You landed him in hospital.

Oh sure, Hari retorted, blame me. None of your useless children —

Uncle regretted that whatever had happened hadn't just killed him, bought him some peace and quiet for once.

"Uncle," he heard Krithika say, her voice launching above theirs, decisive, firm. "Dad. Stop."

Satish, even through the fog, was startled to hear their voices halt suddenly, leaving only the beep, beep, beep.

"Uncle-ji," Krithika said, those brown eyes coming into focus over his. "You had a stroke."

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It put things in perspective. Uncle, shaken by his brush with death, didn't mind that Krithika's Hinder promo was now bringing in \$8 per order more — even though these customers were more demanding than the lunch rush — and not only that, she had dramatically reduced the portions. She reassured him: during the day, she said, when no one bothered to venture out all the way to Anzac Parade, she put on a proper-sized Fair Dinkum Deal for the workmen, which now included a choice of what she called "naked coleslaw" instead of chips or scallops. She'd worked out a deal with the distributor for shredded cabbage, the junk he thought was only used as garnish, real bottom-of-the-barrel stuff, which cost \$2 per kilo less than frozen chips. To Uncle's surprise, half of the workmen went for it. They couldn't bring themselves to say "naked" — or "coleslaw," for that matter. Instead they pointed at the pile of vegetable ribbons, grunted, smiled.

Uncle adjusted to his ugly bandanna, to the embroidered chef's jacket she made him wear, to the lemons in that

stupid big jar, sitting there stupidly, doing nothing but being pretty. And he grew accustomed to Krithika's constant adjusting, correcting, restructuring — he even, occasionally, very tentatively, ventured to bicker back, and felt a warm rush in his cheeks every time he dared. She didn't seem to mind. Long after the term was over, she stayed on.

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"I was thinking, Uncle-ji," she said. "We should be looking at plant-based proteins."

He looked at her blankly.

"For ... customers ... who ... don't ... eat ... meat," she said.

"But fish aren't meat," he said. "They're fish. We don't sell meat. And they can have the scallops."

Krithika sighed.

"Uncle," she said. "I mean ... vegetarian meat."

Except she said "vegetarian" the way our dads did, with a W instead of a V, wedge-uh-tarian, pitch-perfect, even with that sweet little head-waggle at the end.

"Oh," he said, thinking of the Chinese who ran the shop next to Hari, back in the Cabramatta days. "Like ... tofu?"

She screwed up her face.

"Tofu?" she said. "Ew. Do you know how many trees are dying for the soy industry?"

Uncle did not know how many trees were dying for the soy industry.

"It's awful," she said.

"Okay," he said.

"They did a study," Krithika said. "Fish make friends. They have feelings."

He opened his mouth, the words poised, unbidden, fierce, causing his cheeks to flush and his eyes to pulse. He

steadied himself against the counter, prepared to launch forth his tongue.

No, he thought. Think of your blood pressure. He closed his mouth.

“Look,” she said, clapping her hand over his as he reached, spoon trembling, for a second scoop of sugar. “It’s just something to think about. It’s healthy. People want options.”

Did they, he wondered? The workmen who used to come in never asked for options. They seemed happy with their daily hunk of fish-meat and tangle of chips. His mother never asked for options in place of all those children; in place of the slick of burned skin stretching from chin to sternum that her mother-in-law had marked her with when she was young and stubborn; in place of hands swollen from chopping and washing and tending and carrying on, always, always, always, carrying on.

He, the stable, steady middle pillar, had never asked for options.

“So I’ve been talking to Jai,” Krithika said.

He searched his memory bank of Kapoors, came up short.

“My boyfriend,” she said.

Uncle struggled to remember any of his brothers allowing any of their children to have a boyfriend.

“We met through Hinder, actually,” she said. “Well, sort of. He brought some awful Parramatta Princess here for the promo. Anyway. Jai’s doing culinary school, has been experimenting with some sustainable, wheat-free protein alternatives.”

Uncle closed his eyes, tilted his head up towards Ganesh (or whoever), and meditated into the orange of his eyelids. He knew better than to push Krithika, especially with his blood pressure to consider.



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Jai was a lanky boy with cuffed jeans, spiky hair, a ring through his nose and an elaborate tattoo on his forearm. Uncle wondered how any self-respecting chef would consider hiring a chap who looked like an emaciated cow crossed with a cartoon pirate.

“So,” he said, setting down a canvas tote with a thunk. “We’ll just play with some flavors today. No worries.”

Uncle wasn’t worried up to the moment Jai told him not to be. He felt the pressure mount behind his eyes, and he sat heavily. Their voices continued over the sizzle of the deep-fryer.

He stared at the white wall and fancied he could still see the orange glowing through. It began to vibrate.

“Oh, and Uncle,” Krithika said, producing the yellowed slip of paper he kept even though he knew its contents from memory — they were carved on his heart by this point — and he wondered with a start how she managed to find it. “I had Jai take a look at your spice blend. He tweaked it a bit. It’s too salty. And MSG is terrible for you.”

“There are so many other ways to get umami,” Jai nodded.

“Costs a bit more,” she said, “but we can make it an extra, charge like \$1. It’s worth it.”

“\$1.50,” Jai said.

“Before GST,” she said.

Uncle felt a flush of orange around his face, and suddenly remembered the last time he saw his mother in that sari. The whole family had put on a to-do to see him off. She stood there in the chaotic departures hall, proud and tall, her face a mask, frozen among a writhing mass of Kapoors. She did not want him to go. He could feel that pulsing from her chest, from her burning brown eyes, from her swollen hands as she cupped his cheeks. But she said nothing.

He could swear, his face plastered to the tiny window, that he could see her blazing, still figure long after everything else faded out of view.

“Krithika,” he blurted, “do we need all this? I mean, this is just a small chippie. We are doing fine. Our customers are happy. You’ve done good work. But this is enough.”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “Actually we do. Rent’s gone up.”

Uncle couldn’t remember a rent increase since he had arrived. And, in the remaining logical corner of his brain, he wondered why Krithika hadn’t handled that, too.

“I tried actually,” she said, reading his face. “But the new development, I was the one who argued it would bring value to the area. I could hardly fight the increase, it’s only fair, and it’ll bring us heaps of new customers.”

“What?” Uncle said. “New development? Here?”

“We had a petition?” she said. “Remember? And a promo night? Oh, actually, you were in hospital. The Council finally got enough signatures.”

She turned and pointed at the towers, which were glowing in the late-afternoon light.

“They’re shutting that ... thing down. There’s gonna be a roastery, a brewery, a reclaimed garden space ... what would you say, like, an urban village sort of concept?”

“More like an activation space,” Jai said.

“Yeah,” Krithika said.

“Here,” Jai said, producing a fried mass the size of a pack of cards. “Looks just like the real thing, hey?”

“Except minus the bad karma,” Krithika beamed.

“We can call it Ffish,” Jai sounded out the fs, “For ‘Fake Fish.’”

“It’s a working title,” Krithika said.

And then, for the first — and the last — time anyone can remember, Uncle completely lost his shit.

“No,” he sputtered. “No. Rubbish. Hai Ram! For, for

... fucking sake, Krithika. Fish aren't meat! Fish don't think! They just go where the ocean tells them. They don't have karma, don't care one ... shit if they land up in a fishtank or wrapped in newspaper or, or, in some, some, some ... urban garden business, or activation place or, or, or —”

He had dribbled off uselessly into the sound of the deep freeze's faulty compressor, complaining again. He saw Krithika glance over, add it to her mental list.

“I'm sorry,” he said, feeling breathless. “I'm just —“

Krithika looked searchingly at his face, her brow furrowed. Uncle flapped his tongue uselessly against the roof of his mouth, unsure what to say next.

Jai laughed.

“Uncle,” Jai said, “Of course fish feel pain. They're living creatures.”

“They have a social hierarchy,” Krithika said. “They're not that different from us, really.”

“But I think we should call it ‘for fucking sake fish,’” Jai said.

“Too right,” she said.

Uncle wanted to tell her that in his Australia, honesty mattered. Hard work mattered. Reality mattered.

In his Australia, family secrets stayed in the family.

And in his Australia, fish most certainly did not make friends or have opinions about how people chose to live their own damn lives.

But he looked into those big brown eyes, framed with his brother's eyelashes, and again, like all of us, found himself unable to say no.

He bit into the soggy, spongy mass that somehow tasted like bananas and seaweed but also like nothing all at the same time. He chewed meditatively, looked out at the orange lights twinkling orangely, and suddenly felt very, very far from home.

# WHAT THE MIND FORGETS

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Jack Donahue

What the mind forgets  
the body remembers:  
the drop down the stairs;  
the pop of bones through flesh;  
the stress of veins across the neck;  
the wreck of a life continuously bent  
on counting scars.

There comes this moment to run your fingers  
over the labial patchwork of cauterized wounds  
one last time, recall love's default  
that stalls the razor from severing the vein,  
that kisses the lips  
that opens the mouth  
to whisper into the mind  
what the heart must remember.

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# THE HOUSEGUEST

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Maya Nordine

I've been awfully busy entertaining Suicide lately. Believe what you want about her, but my fiancé hardly notices. What can I do? She keeps coming around. Practically family, and gets such a bad rap. Poor thing. It hurts.

So I greet her with open arms, make her up a bed on the couch. But like clockwork, sooner than I can say her name, she's wedged between my fiancé and me. Now, I'm dreaming about her. Each night, I drape myself in her lap before a convex mirror. Her arms stretch out to open the vanity drawer, reaching inside to pull out the hairbrush. We count together as she brushes my hair 100 times. It's sort of an honor, really, sharing house with such a celebrity.

# THIS ROOM

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Michelle Cacho-Negrete

This room is sterile white, drowned in the stink of antiseptics, unidentifiable medicinal smells, and an unstated one, despair that follows the gurneys to this floor, seeps through the halls into rooms, challenges efforts at cheer.

This room, your temporary home, has an outrageous, massive rent; thousands of dollars a day.

This room is in the children's ward of the local hospital.

Prints line the walls: clowns with bulbous red noses like misshapen growths, kittens with imploring eyes that fail to inspire pathos, children from some Dick and Jane book now lost in a time warp. Besides the nurse's desk is the floor to ceiling photo wall of discharged children; some smiling in excited anticipation of leaving, others whose inward-focus and soft accepting faces are characteristic of those who don't leave.

This room is embedded in a community of parents who struggle to retain belief in either a cure or a peaceful, painless end. Most are angry at God but pray anyway. You have never before been part of a community with this psychic interconnectedness, a mysterious loop that connects every mother and father as though they are all leaves on the same vine. You have seen a parent in one room lift their head,

sense a child losing ground, and race to the parents of that child. You are both part of and not part of that loop. Your child is not in danger of dying.

This room has faded teddy-bear flecked curtains, a print of six kittens in a basket, a pyramid of get-well cards tacked to a bulletin board, blue, red, yellow green thumb-tacks; a crescendo of primary colors. Stuffed animals crowd together in your son's crib like comrades in search of a safe place, their googly eyes scanning for danger. The table is piled with beloved books stained by food and greasy fingers, ripped in places, precious as a future that seemed certain. That future is a lie: two healthy children; no, a reasonably stable marriage; no, a summer beckoning with campgrounds, road trips, swimming; no. the future you though was coming was only a projection of a different reality.

A fifteen-month-old, suddenly limping, the left leg suddenly refusing to obey simple orders: stand, walk, sit. Pediatrician's suddenly tight face. X-rays. Strangers arrange the small body that seems to grow smaller with each required position; lie down, sit up, extend legs, bend legs. Fingers point to a shadowy, inside-out world; a tumor in the femur bone devouring healthy bone marrow. A car ride to a renowned surgeon's office. He's astonishingly diminutive, small, smaller than you, with long, delicate fingers and a clarity of vision, a depth of knowledge, that leaves no doubt he is your future. Drive to the hospital, immediately, right now, don't stop to get anything. His nurse will call ahead.

Your two sons are in their car seats in the back seat. The older, four, is entertaining his little brother by reading Dr. Seuss. He reads, "One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish," making little fish gurgles so his brother laughs. You are not really listening. You are examining what you did during your pregnancy: you didn't once drink a glass of wine. You stopped stealing puffs from your best friend's cigarettes. You

couldn't completely give up coffee, but you only had one cup a day. What about before your pregnancy. The motorcycle accident you and your husband had during an unexpected rainstorm, you two skidding along the metal, scraping arms, legs, while cars screeched and swerved to avoid you. Mononucleosis at eighteen, no lingering effects. You never used drugs, you were too frightened you'd never make it out of the ghetto.

"It's nobody's fault," the surgeon had said, forestalling your question of why. "Just some random coding error but it's not fatal." He takes your hand for a moment and you marvel at the delicacy, the strength, the promise in his hand.

"You won't be able to stay overnight," he tells you. "All parents have to leave at nine o'clock, but you can sneak in by six if you are careful."

What you see when you arrive is the looming cross on top of the small hospital like some proclamation of certainty. You are Jewish, but no hesitation, go in immediately, right now and your friend is waiting there, worried face, with her own four-year old daughter. She hugs you, tells you not to worry, says your son can stay overnight with her. Hugs, kisses, reassurances, and then they're gone, each four year old holding a hand, your friend turning for a final smile. Now - through the crowded lobby, into the crowded elevator, your son kicking, then quiet, somehow recognizing his fate when you enter the crowded floor of children in wheelchairs, crutches, casts. Mock-motor cars, trunks, motorcycles, locomotives; dented, scratched, cracked plastic, that have been on the hospital corridor-road too long, all pushed by parents who become the engines to get these children from a starting place to their uncertain destination.

Then this room.

Two cribs. You put your son in the empty one where he immediately goes to sleep. You step over to the other crib - recoil, close your eyes; a baby composed of tubes and pipes



and bags and a head that seems its entire body - take a few steps back, then at the whimpering of a child in need come closer and rub its back. The nurse arrives and checks the baby's IV.

"Hydrocephalic," she tells you. "Spina bifida. His parents abandoned him after he was born. We can't get in touch with them." She pats the baby's back, your two hands engaged in the same task. She looks at you, shrugs and leaves. That night your husband brings every stuffed animal you own. Your son wants only Winnie the Pooh, just Pooh bear, just this bear, an umbilical that stretches from this room to his room back home, an umbilical that stretches from the safe past to this uncertain present. He curls around it. You take the tiger, tamed with no hint of savagery yet his stance tells you he's a fighter, a survivor and move him into the other crib along with the elephant, strong and proven and maternal or at least you've heard that. Your husband follows you, looks in the crib then backs away. On the rare occasions he comes he will never look in that crib again, pretending he doesn't hear the gasping sobs, soft as a memory of once believing in comfort.

You understand why he is never there, his mother died in a hospital. You understand, but you never forgive. The next morning a small tribe of nurses arrive. They push in a contraption, a metal bar, ropes, pulleys, weights...traction to get weight off the leg, prevent movement, carefully straighten it pre-surgery. Your son is engulfed by a cloud of white, of comforting murmurs, instructions, toddler shrieks of horror, and when the curtain of white parts, your son's leg is strapped to the mechanism, a vertical bridge between baby body and the metal bar.

The room is crowded with explanations, each nurse voicing her part in this ongoing play of your lives. He will be in traction for a week to pull the leg gently into place. The surgery will involve scraping out the femur, sucking some

healthy bone marrow from the pelvic bone and placing it into the emptied bone where it will grow like a newly planted fern, fronds filling every spare inch. All you can think about is that this is some medieval torture device, manipulating, imprisoning, redirecting. It makes you think about the crosses on every floor. As a child you went into a church with the girl who lived next door because she asked you to. She pointed to a bloody figure on a cross. "This is what we do to Jews," she told you contentedly.

The dark fear that contorts your face when you see your son summons a cacophony of reassurances from the nurses along with the pats on the back, the arm around your shoulders, the hand holding yours gently, but especially voices saying, again and again, "He will most likely be fine." Then suddenly there is silence, the surgeon, parting sound like Moses parting the sea, a small figure walking through towering walls of nurses. He looks into both cribs, makes a minute adjustment to the hydrocephalic baby's tube, and gently pats his back. You learn the baby is a different doctor's patient but the surgeon checks every time he comes in. He looks into your eyes, spins quiet explanations and confident assurance like the happy ending of a fairy tale; this will work.

You call your mother and ask her to stay with your older boy, who is four. She leaves her job in the middle of the day to catch the Long Island Railroad and then a cab to your house. The two of you don't get along, she is very bossy, everyone knows that, she wants to be in charge. She and your husband don't even speak to each other, but she has never let you down in times of crisis.

Years later, this same son will be in another hospital, in California, a university institute with nothing cute on sky-blue walls and corridors of glass that look out onto numerous buildings, and palm trees, and brilliant flowers and stands of fresh fruit and smoothies. He is in isolation while the doctors

try to figure out what infection he has that leaves him short of breath, exhausted, wheezing needing oxygen. He has his ever-present iPad and the newspapers and near his pillow a terribly old and feeble Winnie the Pooh, a talisman that has traveled with him from state to state, year to year.

You are in his room with your second husband, the two of you in masks and gloves and booties. Your son's wife, practical, intelligent, so devoted it brings tears of gratitude and love to your eyes, goes home to see to their children. Your husband steps out to get you smoothies: two mangos and a strawberry. When he comes back he will use disinfectant, then new mask, gloves, booties. You are dozing, eye half-closed when you see your mother, dead for forty years. She is so vivid, so animated, so alive, the restlessness energy that kept her constantly in motion, suddenly there, death be damned. How, you wonder, can somebody be in two places at the same time, in her grave and in her grandson's room, although you will open your eyes and she won't be there. But for a minute or two she has been resurrected and there is a comfort in that. There was never a crisis that didn't resolve itself itself when she was on the scene. She is on the scene and your son will be fine.

But that is forty-four years in the future.

This room is where you sit alone when your son goes for tests every day: x-rays, scans of some sort or another, blood draws, and whatever else. You were never in a hospital as a child. You had your tonsils taken out, along with your brother's, in a doctor's office, for a "buy one tonsillectomy at full price, get the second for half" (nobody believes this story but it's true.) You seem to remember your mother in the room holding your hand and your brother's on adjoining tables during the operation, but that couldn't be right. Then your son is back, drinking a soda, that square bandage on his arm from blood tests. Years later he will tell you he remembers nurses taking him for cans of soda.

You have a week before surgery, a week with his leg up in the air like some diapered chorus girl. You read books, play Chutes and Ladders and Candyland, and draw pictures. You bring your older son's small rubber dinosaurs and there are ferocious dino battles on his stomach with noisy chomping and screams, none of which wake up the baby in the other crib. When your son sleeps you run downstairs to the cafeteria and buy a sandwich or a salad then run into the hospital thrift-shop to see if there is some new toy to entertain him. How did your mother entertain you when you had chickenpox and later measles? You remember the room was dark because your eyes were inflamed. Your mother told you stories or sang.

Sometimes you fall asleep when he does or remember things that happened to you as a child, falling down the stairs, being hit on the head with a skate by neighborhood kids, the holocaust survivor who wandered the sidewalks screaming, your stepfather teaching you to ride a bike before he left your mother, left all of you, the key around your neck when you were eight, your brother four, your mother leaving for work with warnings not to get into trouble. Now it's you who are in two places at once; in this room, and in rooms from the past. You wonder now about that past – about its truth: did your stepfather stay until you learned to ride your bike. How could your mother take care of you when you were sick yet still go to work. Was she that bossy when you were a teenager or did you overreact. It doesn't matter right now. You don't want to examine the truth of that past, the lie about the present is enough.

In this room days pass, the same games, books, songs, toys, blood tests, x-rays. The same complaints, frustration, tantrums from a 15 month old with enough pent-up energy to power all the toy vehicles on the ward. But your son is sweet, a happy toddler. The nurses bring him little treats and he says "Ta," for thanks.

“You are so smart,” the nurses tell him. “So cute. So sweet.”

Your friends visit. Your mother sneaks your older son in and the nurses pretend for almost ten minutes that they didn't notice before they protest “No children,” and shoo him out. Your husband's two aunts and uncles visit. They ask if your husband has come and left already and you answer, no. They are silent, then play with your son. The aunts tsk about the baby and pat him on the arm. The uncles pretend to wrestle with him.

Nobody visits the baby in the next crib except you, your friends, the aunts, the nurses, the surgeon. The baby whose head never quite drains despite a shunt designed to redirect the fluid. The days are a parade of sameness and you play little games with yourself to keep track of them. Which nurses have dropped in on which day to play a moment with your son, who is one of the favorites. Which child has gone home, at least temporarily. What day did the cafeteria have the lemon meringue pie. Which day did you bum a cigarette from one of the mothers and you all stand shivering outside in the just-starting snow, smoke mingling with your breath and circling all of you like a target. Then there is the day you have no confusion about. The morning you came into this room and the other crib was empty. The nurse who comes in meets your eyes and her own fills with tears. “I'm sorry,” she says as though the dead baby was yours and you cry as though he was. The surgeon comes to say hello, as he does every morning, and avoids looking at the empty crib.

“Tomorrow,” he tells you, and you nod.

The day is here. You come alone with a Micky Spillane mystery your mother just finished reading and pushed on you, a sandwich, a thermos of tea. Your husband went to work because, he told you, his presence in the hospital wouldn't change whatever would happen. The surgeon who stopped in for a moment before the surgery, the nurses, the

other parents are surprised when you arrive alone but remain silent. Your son is subdued, under the influence of valium to keep him calm. You sing him a little song about getting well, coming home, going to the playground with his brother. The orderlies arrive to take him downstairs. You kiss him on the forehead when he leaves then go to the waiting area outside the operating rooms.

The day is gray, wet snow falling. There are reading lamps but the small waiting room has a stale yellow light that discourages reading. There are a number of chairs but for the first hour you are alone. The chairs are not new, easy chairs that look like they've been hauled in from somebody's yard sale. There is a bench that looks even more uncomfortable than the chairs. The tables hold newspapers: The New York Times, The Mirror, the Post, the Herald Tribune, and unexpectedly, The Enquirer. Magazines: Woman's Day, Family Circle, Better Homes and Gardens, Time, New Yorker, Sports Illustrated, The Atlantic, Vogue, Seventeen, Highlights for children. Most of them are old, but you haven't read any of them before and you skim through photographs addressing gardens, clothing, how to apply make-up like a movie star, prepare a filling meal on less than \$2.00, attract the man of your dreams. You put aside the mystery; nothing interests you. You look out the window, pace, drink your tea, decide to buy a sweet.

Over the next four hours friends come in and out, busy with their own children and routines but wanting you to know they are thinking about you. Parents from the ward drop by to ask if you've heard anything yet. You shake your head. A few nurses come by with reassurances; "He's one of the best pediatric surgeons anywhere." You nod. Your mother comes by with your older son. She's taken a taxi here to say hello. You hug her gratefully. You walk around outside the hospital with your older son while she sits in the waiting room, your proxy, and then she and your son leave. You are

not going to call your husband...you are not.

For the last hour of waiting you imagine all the things that could go wrong. The tumor is bigger than they thought and it's cancer, something the surgeon felt certain it was not. The scalpel slips and cuts an artery that bleeds out before they can clamp it. It cuts a nerve and your son will be paralyzed. The bone, already very thin from the tumor, shatters before the surgeon can inject marrow. You run through all the horrible things you can come up with and realize there are many you can't even imagine. You begin to hyperventilate and admonish yourself to stop even if there are crosses everywhere and you are Jewish. Jesus was Jewish and anyway you are an atheist.

When the doctor comes out, his mask hangs from one ear and his green surgical cap is still on. There is no blood on his surgical scrub and you think he must have changed it before he came out. His smile is satisfied. "The surgery went fine. The tumor is benign as we thought. He'll have to be here another week while we watch him for infection. We'll send him home in a cast that needs to be changed every week and when it comes off in six weeks there'll be rehab; training to learn to walk again, but I don't anticipate any problems. You can see him in about a half hour."

You throw your arms around him and hug tightly, surprised at how broad his chest is, how strong his arms are when he hugs you back. You call your mother, your best friend, the aunts and uncles who will call your husband. Too energized for the elevator, you run up the stairs to tell the parents and nurses on the unit but they already know and hug you and congratulate you and tell you they knew it would be alright.

You run back down the stairs to the waiting room and a nurse takes you to recovery. Your son is pale, his eyes half open then closing again. He is in a cast from his ankle to mid-chest with holes to eliminate through. You learn that al-

together he weighs ninety pounds but you will lift him many times a day, put him into the car for a ride, onto a stroller for a walk, onto a garage mechanic's dolly so he can whiz around the house. When the surgeon tells him next morning he must now use a bedpan, and later the potty like a big boy or he will ruin the cast and they will need to replace it more often, he understands. He never has an accident! The next day you fit him into a new metal red wagon you bought and he joins the flow of traffic, the damaged, fragile, deeply scarred children in their scraped up vehicles saying, "beep-beep," or "whoohoo," or "varoom, varoom," this grand parade of children, and their exhausted, loving, hopeful, resigned, stubborn parents, the engines for their children's lives.

Your last day in this room, you buy pizzas and a giant, triple layer, goodbye cake with pink and blue roses on vanilla buttercream and vanilla, chocolate and strawberry filling. You all sit in the community room and the children confined to their beds are wheeled in with their IV trees keeping watch, some children in the cars and trucks. The night nurses have already said good-bye, good luck and hugged you both, but the day nurses are there, and grab slices of pizza to eat at the nurses desk. The primary nurses who bore the main responsibility for your son bought him a book called the treasure chest which they present when the cake is cut. They laugh and tease that your son that with his newly repaired leg he'll be the fastest kid on the block.

This is the rare happy outcome and everyone celebrates.

Then it's time to leave this room. Winnie the Pooh sits in the red wagon with your son stretched out, toes hanging over the edge. The rest of the stuffed animals will stay here. All the parents wish you luck, said they knew it would turn out this way. They plant kisses on your son's cheeks. You all exchange telephone numbers. You get into the elevator which will take you from this room to your husband's car, waiting



in front. As the elevator door closes, everyone waves and you know you love everyone on the other side of the door almost more than you've ever loved anyone else and you know also that

# CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

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**Cathy Barber** has an MFA in Poetry, Vermont College of Fine Arts, and MA in English, CSU East Bay. Her work has been published in a wide range of journals including *SLAB* and *Slant and Kestrel*, and in anthologies including *Fire and Rain: Eco-poetry of California* and *The Cancer Poetry Project Vol 2*. Her poetry has been nominated for a Best of the Net. Her chapbook (Dancing Girl Press) is titled *Aardvarks, Bloodhounds, Catfish, Dingoes*. She makes her home in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

**Aryn Calvo** is a local artist in the Portland area. They work full time as a property administrator while also running their small business selling art. They established their shop Flint and Fern in the summer of 2020 after videos of their art went viral on social media. They are mostly known for their watercolor paintings with gold leafing but enjoy working with all mediums and art styles.

**Marisa P. Clark** is a queer writer from the South whose work appears or will appear in *Shenandoah*, *Cream City Review*, *Nimrod*, *Epiphany*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Foglifter*, *Potomac Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Indianapolis Review*, and elsewhere. Best American Essays 2011 recognized her creative nonfiction among its Notable Essays. A fiction reader for *New England Review*, she makes her home in New Mexico with three parrots and two dogs. Her first name is pronounced Ma-REE-sa.

Numerous short stories and poems written by **Jack Donahue** have been published in journals such as: *North Dakota Quarterly*; *Takahe* (New Zealand); *Laldy* (Scotland); *Stand* (U.K.); *Poetry Salzburg Review* (Austria); *Amarolla* (Cyprus); *Bindweed* (Ireland); *Opossum*; and others throughout North America, Asia and Europe. His book of poems “InsideOut” was published earlier this year.

**Ginnie Gavrin’s** work has appeared in *The Literary Review*, *The Worcester Review*, *THEMA*, *Primavera*, *Slipstream*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Leaping Clear*, *The Greensboro Review*, and will soon be included in *Cold Mountain Review* as well as an anthology on Rewilding by *Split Rock Review*.

**Joan Haladay** studied literature and Portuguese. Her short works have appeared in *The Inquisitive Eater*, *Under the Sun*, *Travelers’ Tales*, *The World Is a Kitchen*, *The Brasilians*, *Small Press*, and other publications. Her novella, *The Book of Men*, was a finalist for the Eludia Award at Hidden River Arts.

**Polchate (Jam) Krapayoon** is a Bangkok native and works for an intergovernmental agency in Tokyo. He received a Master’s from the University of Oxford and a Bachelor’s at the LSE. His work has been featured in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Portland Review*, *Split Rock Review* and is forthcoming in *Whale Road Review* and the *Beloit Poetry Journal*. His poems have been nominated for the Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

**Maya Nordine** lives in sunny Chicago, Illinois, where she organizes and runs an all genre writing workshop called Study Hall. She holds an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles. Her work has been published in *Small Orange Journal*, *Door Is A Jar*, *TYPO*, and *86Logic*.

**David Pérez** is a writer, journalist, editor, radio host, and teacher of workshops on reading your work aloud. As an actor, he has performed in roles ranging from Othello to Santa Claus. He lives in Taos, NM.

**Anita Lakshmi Powell** is a radio-television journalist based in Southern Africa, who has covered conflict and news around the world for various outlets, including *Voice of America*, the *Associated Press*, *The Root*, *The Hindu*, *Slate*, and *The New York Times*' style section. Her short stories have been twice consecutively longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and her first entry to a fiction contest was published by Commonwealth Writers and was their most-read piece of 2018. She has also been published by the *Bangalore Review* and was a finalist for the 2020 Key West Literary Seminar's Cecelia Joyce Johnson Award. She was born in Australia to immigrant parents and now lives in Johannesburg with her family, which stars her four-year-old daughter.

**Robin Schauffler** is a writer and traveler based in Portland, Oregon. In 1997 she and her husband quit their jobs and moved to Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico, where they lived and worked for three years. The vividness and challenge of those years turned her from a constantly-scribbling journal-keeper into someone who wrote with a passion, who worked hard at the craft, who wanted others to read my stories. She has recently completed a collection of essays reflecting on their time in Mexico, several of which have been published. Her writing appears in various literary quarterlies and has earned two Pushcart nominations.

**Chris Shorne** holds an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles and has work published with *Utne*, *Bennington Review*, *Portland Review*, and *Duende*. Shorne spent a year as an international human rights accompanier with NISGUA, Network in Solidarity with the

People of Guatemala, and previously taught at Bent, a queer writing institute.

**Jeneva Stone** is the author of *Monster* (Phoenicia Publishing, 2016), a mixed genre collection. She has received fellowships from the MacDowell and Millay Colonies. Her writing has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *APR*, *New England Review*, *Waxwing*, and *Room*. Her author site: [jenevastone.com](http://jenevastone.com). Jeneva is also a health care and disability rights advocate.

**Sharon Whitehill** is a former English professor, retired after 32 years at Grand Valley State University in West Michigan, who now lives and writes in Port Charlotte, Florida. In addition to poems published in various literary magazines, her publications include two biographies, two memoirs, two poetry chapbooks, and a full collection of poetry.

Recipient of the 2019 Edward Stanley award for poetry, **Rewa Zeinati** is the author of the poetry chapbook, *Bullets & Orchids*, and the founder of the literary magazine, *Sukoon*. Her work can also be found in various journals and anthologies based in the US, UK, Australia and Arab-speaking region. Originally from Lebanon, she currently considers Metro Detroit her new home.

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