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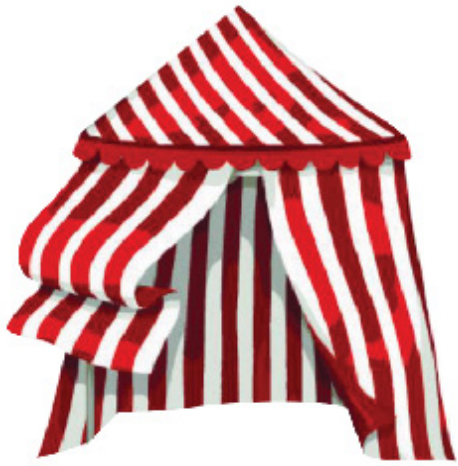

SILK ROAD

A LITERARY CROSSROADS

ISSUE 25 FALL 2023

Silk Road

A Literary Crossroads

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Submissions

The editors invite submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, translations, first chapters of novels, one-act plays, one-act screenplays, and graphic narratives all year round. Submissions information can be found on our website. All rights revert to author upon publication.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Readers:

We are delighted to present Issue 25 of Silk Road Review: A Literary Crossroads. This issue features poets, memoirists, short story writers, translators, playwrights, and artists taking us on journeys from intergenerational tensions to communal healing, suppression of identity to authenticity and self-love, destruction of land to profound connections with nature and place.

Over the last several years, I have had the great pleasure of serving as editor-in-chief for eight issues of Silk Road Review alongside a stellar editorial staff. This anniversary issue is bittersweet, as I am transitioning out of my editorial role this spring and turning it over to my colleague, Professor Brent Johnson, for the next few years. I look forward to seeing the journal thrive under his leadership.

I have been honored to read and consider the work of brilliant writers across the nation and world. We are lucky enough at Silk Road Review to receive thousands of submissions a year, and while we can only publish a fraction of the pieces we receive, we are grateful to all our submitters for sharing your powerful and courageous work with us. We are particularly proud to publish marginalized and unheard voices and work that explores diversity in its many forms.

I am deeply grateful to our incredible editorial team, including our two brilliant genre editors: Jung Hae Chae, winner of the 2022 Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize, and award-winning short story author and novelist Désirée Zamorano. A special thanks to our fabulous editorial team, Dr. Kathlene Postma for founding the magazine, and Pacific University's renowned MFA program for their support.

I look forward to collaborating with many of you again in the future, and I hope the work of our gifted writers and artists here will inspire your own journey.

With gratitude and warm wishes, on behalf of our wonderful editorial team,

Keya Mitra

Dr. Keya Mitra, Editor-in-Chief
Silk Road Review: A Literary Crossroads

LETTER TO SANDY IN IOWA

John Paul O'Connor

I was thinking about when you were five
and your dad hauled you out to Estherville,
I was with my daughter, a year younger than you,
that summer her mother had left her with me
and I was dragging her around to the shifting party
my friends threw in those days between the town
and that hog farm west of Rhinebeck where the windmill
outside the house that rented for sixty dollars a month
ground an endless supply of corn into meal that Gini's
chickens lived for. It was there that we drank beer
all afternoon and ate Gini's fabulous cooking.
Only one other reckless parent and I had a child
with us and we neglected them as they played
in the barn and around the windmill, running

around the tables arranged haphazardly in the backyard
to grab whatever food they could stand. The days
were long in those summers, so long I half believe
I am still there, pushing my daughter into the green
Volkswagen to make the 16 mile trip back to the college
town my father had chosen as the place where I would wait
to leave my family's house for a world I thought I could
reinvent to my own liking. My daughter, a stranger
from that world, sat quietly through those drifty miles,
while my eyes came under the weight of the beer's tooth
until I looked over and noticed she was sitting next to me
crying. What's the matter?, I asked and she told me she had to pee.
I pulled over and suggested she get out and pee by the side
of the road while I stood guard on the highway side
of the car without realizing that a girl who had never peed
by the side of the road does not know to squat on her feet
and not just sit down in the dirt and produce a puddle
that she would end up soaking in. What small humiliations
your parents inadvertently conjured for you in that strange
Midwestern decade following the American war I can only guess.

I was charged with something of which I knew nothing
(should we call

it love, or at least intelligence?), ingredients that Iowa boys

in their early twenties so sadly lacked. Even now, I struggle

to absorb that which might make me less neglectful of that
same

daughter who now waits far away from the fields of Iowa to
bear

her own child into the world. And here you are, considering

your long ride back to Iowa and a cancer-ridden mother, your
heart

both dying and being born. Many years have blown through
the fields,

kicking up black dirt so it will spend another century remak-
ing

the same fields that wave with uncertainty and promise,

both of which when pollinating, taste confusingly the same.

THE LITTLE FLOWER

Molly Biskupic

It only took three days of rain to flood the church of Saint Therese. The water came up a few inches, but the smell of mildew and mold crawled up the painted walls and stained glass windows, seeping into the highest arches of the ceiling. It's Friday night when Sister Pete calls and asks me to bring a jug of white vinegar. The walk to the church is so familiar, I don't need to look up from my feet.

When I arrive, Sister Pete is tearing up the carpeting of the sanctuary. She's wearing denim overalls tucked into bright purple boots. Her frizzy gray hair is tied back with a scrunchie.

"Father Quinn is visiting his mother. Deacon Enrique is holding a vigil for the unborn at the capitol. Deacon Tony and Brother Mark didn't answer my calls," Sister Pete says without looking up. The roll of old carpeting sweats brown water.

"I brought the vinegar." The jug looks minuscule in the mess of the church. The large imitation chandeliers throw gold light on the water. The darkness outside obscures the stained glass images. Stagnant brown water winds its way among every pew and aisle.

Sister Pete tears up a long strip of the carpet. She used to build churches in the Dominican Republic. "Start off scrubbing the saints, then you can mop the aisles." She finally looks up. "Thank you for coming, Frankie."

Besides the carpeting, the altar escaped the flood. The massive stone crucifix gazes unbothered over its church. The sacristy to the left and the confessional to the right also remain untouched. My dad started making me volunteer as an altar girl when I was ten. I've served for three weddings, ten first communions, five quinceaneras, and four funerals. I have both the Nicene and Apostolic creeds memorized. I got my first period in front of that stone Jesus. The entire congregation saw the stain on my robe before I noticed. I thought I'd only had a stomachache. Over the course of the mass, a server has to bow no less than three times to the crucifix, displaying their ass to everyone in the pews. Father Quinn's face turned the color of wine. Sister Pete dragged me to the sacristy during the preparation of the gifts to explain what was happening.

"Okay Frankie, Frances, take a deep breath," she knelt down in front of me, "You just gave everyone a reminder of the difference between the blood of mortals and the blood of Christ."

Sister Pete and the Sunday school teachers hide the pads in the women's bathroom, in a drawing of the changing table. "Ask your dad if you can come over for ice cream after mass."

After mass, I carried the wadded up robe against my stomach as we walked to her apartment. It smelled like my dad's iron pills. The extra pressure against my abdomen helped ebb my cramps. Sister Pete showed me how to rub sea salt in the stain until it fades.

"No harm done," she said to the faded brown mark, "you'll have to do the same for your own clothes when you get home."

I'd worn khaki pants and a red polo under my robe. My dad picked up a new pair from Kohl's while I was at Sister Pete's. I didn't even ask.

We each ate large bowls of raspberry ice cream. The pink looked so much softer than that brown stain. Sister Pete sent me home with a stack of cloth pads.

"I have dozens of them lying around. Whenever I have extra time, I try to make a few. Every month, I send a batch to a different school

sister on their mission. Believe me, Frances, you're far from the last girl that God sent the gift of menstruation at an inopportune time."

When I hugged her, Sister Pete smelled like the ocean.

The only statue of a man in the entire church is the crucifix. On one side of the sanctuary stands Our Lady of Guadalupe in her pink dress and green veil. The water muddied the cherub at her feet. I squat down to look eye to eye with the chubby face.

During the celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the statue is moved right in front of the altar, blocking the crucifix. The celebration includes an elaborate reenactment with dancers and drummers in traditional Aztec clothing. The whole church smells of roses. Sister Pete whispers translations of the narration and chants, but I can never hear her over the echo of the drums.

The squat strains my hips. The baby looks like he doesn't even mind that he has the weight of a full grown woman on his shoulders. The glaze feels rough and cracked beneath my fingers.

Beside Our Lady of Guadalupe stands Mother Teresa, hunched and wrinkled. Sister Pete takes the most pride in this statue. She ordered it for the church the day Mother Teresa was canonized. Her wrinkled toes collect clumps of dirt. Her eyes stare down the congregation as if she knows more than she should, who believes, who sins, who lies. I hear Sister Pete tear up another long piece of carpeting.

Sister Pete was a missionary for more than thirty years. When she retired to our parish, it was only the second time she'd worked at a church with electricity. She's delivered one hundred and twenty-two babies—five during hurricanes. Our church makes her feel restless.

This time, I bend at the waist to reach the statue's feet. The saint's toes smell of earth and manure. I wonder how Mother Teresa got clean water in Calcutta. Once, the cistern for one of Sister Pete's churches became contaminated with flies. The missionaries had to hike two hours every morning to the next village for water until the

cistern could be sanitized and replenished. In school, we watched a documentary about flesh-eater algae polluting the Ganges. I can't remember if the Ganges goes through Calcutta, though. Three of my vertebrae crack as I stand.

On the opposite side of the sanctuary stands the patron statue. Her gaze rests gently on the kneeler in front of her. The face is of a postulant, teenage Saint Therese. I try to imagine her walking around at my school, sitting next to me at lunch. The statue holds dozens of pink flowers in her arms. They almost obscure the cross.

I give up and kneel in the muck. The dirty marble presses against my knees. I squeeze my rag between the folds of her robe. At a museum field trip, a girl teased me for staring too long at the naked statues of women, but with the patron and all those warm layers of plaster, you'd never know what her body looks like. You could only imagine. That has to be different than the real thing.

I feel the flush in my ears first.

"I'm running to the bathroom," I tell Sister Pete. The women's room has been spared from the flood by a few steps. The pink tile has faded to a peach. The walls are papered with bilingual signs about bathroom etiquette.

Please throw your trash in the bin/*Tira la basura en la canasta por favor*

The inside of the stall door contains more explicit instructions.

Do not flush your feminine products!/*¡No tira sus productos femeninos en el inodoro!*

The seat is cracked but cool against my bottom. I imagine the postulant Therese lifting her skirts and draping them over my head. The light would be pink and soft. I am pink and soft against my cool fingers. The statue would place her hands on my head. She drops the flowers. The smell of the leavened body fills my head.

flush!

¡femeninos!

I turn the color of wine.

At the sink, I wash myself off of my hands with extra soap. The space between my legs feels electric and alien. I've never felt inside myself before, not even for tampons. A knot settles against my heart. Sister Pete will know I've done something wrong.

I imagine the flood had been bigger. That the entire church had been washed, the statues crushed against the waves, everything beaten to smooth sand.

My body feels foreign and plastered. I stumble down the steps back into the chapel. The roll of carpeting oozes by the door. I dip my fingers in the cistern, but it's dry.

"I'm going to order some pizza, is mushroom okay?"

I nod without looking at her.

"You okay, Frankie?"

I can still feel the hum just below my belly. "I'm fine."

The sponge head of the mop flattens against the marble tile without picking up any dirt. On my knees, I grind the squeegee into the grime. The cold water seeps from my knees up my thighs, cooling the electricity between my legs.

This is one of the oldest churches in the world whose patron is St. Therese of Lisieux. This is another point of pride for Sister Pete. Both my parents and half of my grandparents were baptized here. Every year they say a mass in honor of my grandfather. No one bothered my dad about the divorce.

I crawl through the aisles, scrubbing away the dirt that's settled on the tiles. Soon my skin feels numb. I hear the slosh of the water, the beat of my heart. My shoulders arch into the work.

My dad never talks about what he actually believes, though. He has to be the stable one, the one with a routine and a community. We never discuss homilies or readings. Our Bible's spine still cracks when you open it. We recite rosaries instead of coming up with our own prayers.

And I turned out to be a freak who touches themselves in the church bathroom. During my first reconciliation, I confessed to copying my math homework from the back of the book and arguing with my dad over chores. He gave simple penances: Three Hail Mary's, five Glory Be's, fasting on Fridays. I have no idea what penance I'd have to do for my real sins.

I've only made it through half of the church. Sister Pete bails rain out the window using empty wine jugs. She seems impatient with the water. It empties so slowly. If only things could work as quickly as she does.

"Frankie, why don't you give that a rest and give me a hand taking the carpet to the dumpster," Sister Pete says.

I leave the mop in the middle of a pew. The muck swirls around my feet as I walk. We stand on either side of the roll. It was once a deep crimson but looks more like rust now. I have to squat to get my arms around the roll. The wide stance makes me feel exposed.

"Alright," Sister Pete says, "One, two, three."

Water soaks through my shirt as I squeeze the roll. Already, my arms strain against the weight. Sister Pete pulls me along.

"A little to the left, Frankie, now up." Her voice sounds light.

I press my fingernails into the fibers, but it keeps slipping down my torso, from my chest to my belly, to my crotch. The water gathers between my legs. Sister Pete pushes against me, directing me to the back of the church. The pressure chills my body.

She must know. The roll slips even lower. I shuffle backwards. Maybe she always knew, that's why she took me in. I'm a project for her restlessness, a sinner to make holy. She's always lecturing me about turning to God with even my worst sins. The roll slips to the ground, splashing water on the ninth station of the cross.

Sister Pete sighs.

"I'm sorry," I say. My fingertips throb with carpet burn.

"There was a time when the whole congregation would've turned up to help their church," Sister Pete pauses, "but I shouldn't have said that. It's for God to judge our deeds."

She counts to three again. I thread my fingers together under the roll. We pass the threshold of the chapel. The loading dock is just behind the sacristy, but the halls are thin with sharp angles.

"To the right, Frankie, up," Sister Pete says, "no up the steps, then I'll be able to flip around."

My back presses against the door to the women's bathroom. I swear I can still smell myself in there. I wonder if Sister Pete can—if she's ever. But she'd never give in to her baser needs like that. It's like the muck of the earth never touched her.

Sister Pete pushes forward, down the narrow hallway, past the steps that lead to the boarded-up school, past the bricked-over windows, to the loading dock door. The roll lands in the dumpster like a belly flop. Trash water splashes up the wall of the church.

My body feels soaked and rusted. I massage my palms with opposite thumbs. Sister Pete has already hurried back to the chapel. She must wish that a stronger body had answered her calls.

My steps echo down the hallway. I try to avoid the stoic faces at the front of the church. Sister Pete is cleaning the wooden pews with vinegar. When I try and pick up the mop again, it slips through my fingers.

Sister Pete's hands grip her mop firmly. This work is nothing. Only a person of weak mind and body would be so exhausted by this work.

I sit down for a moment in the pew. The mop rests against my shoulder. The air is sour with vinegar and mold. The knot in my stomach crawls up my throat. I can feel the eyes of all the statues on me.

Today at school, a girl gave me a flyer for the Gay Straight Alliance. She wore a jean jacket peppered with enamel pins and

smelled of charcoal and incense. I wanted to ask her how she knew. It couldn't have been an accident.

Sister Pete sits beside me. Her hair has become so much whiter in the past year. I can't remember how old she is.

"Okay Frankie, something's bothering you. You can sit here and pray about it alone or you can tell me and I'll pray with you."

"I'm not praying."

"So, are you going to talk then?"

My ears are burning. At school there are Baptist and Mormon kids who talk about the sin of homosexuality. Sometimes they hand out flyers. Our church only ever seems concerned about the evil of abortion and the importance of immigration. If I'd had an abortion, then I'd at least know I was a sinner.

"I think about women," I say, "I don't know how to stop."

Sister Pete nods slowly.

If I were the kind of person who came up with my own prayers, I'd pray to shrink down and crawl into Sister Pete's brain. I'd find the corner of her cortex where all her opinions are knotted away. I'd untangle the answer I needed and neither of us would have to say a word.

"Why do you think you need to stop?" she asks.

I can feel the water seeping through my sneakers. The muck has stained my jeans a reddish-brown.

"When I was your age, if you didn't want a boyfriend, if you weren't going steady with someone, people just assumed you were going to be a nun," Sister Pete says, "you could get away with so much more as a sister than as a wife."

I stare at the veiled women at the front of the church. They only make statues of virgins.

"I thought by now, things might be different, looser," Sister Pete says, "but the Church is so stubborn. You can't waste your time waiting for it to love you."

As she puts her arms around me, I hear both our hearts pounding.

Somewhere at the back of the church, a door opens. Men's chuckles bounce off the high arches. Sister Pete pulls away. Deacon Tony and Brother Mark splash through the center aisle.

"I should have worn my waders," Brother Mark says.

"Father told us to stop by and assess the damage," Deacon Tony says.

"But, it looks like you've got everything under control."

"Mark's eager to get to his brother's poker night, so I can take all his money again." Both men laugh. The Deacon continues, "the church is blessed to have two humble servants like you ladies."

"The work is a blessing," Sister Pete replies.

The men chuckle and continue splashing to the front of the church. "See you on Sunday, ladies!"

When the door slams again, Sister Pete shakes her mop in the air like a warning.

"Why do you waste your time?" I ask. I can't remember the last time I asked an adult a question.

"What?"

"You said I shouldn't waste my time waiting on the church, but that's exactly what you're doing." The words spill like coins into a basket. Like the words are a prayer.

Sister Pete stares past me. "This is where I know I can find God. I'm afraid I'll lose Him if I leave."

For a moment, I am afraid too. I have always believed in Sister Pete, but I can't say the same for God. I let go of my mop and the splash breaks the water.

As I leave, Sister Pete props open the back door of the chapel. Water rushes down the road. The city is purging itself. Our own flood pushes over the threshold. It immediately blends in with the rest of the brown torrent. You'd never be able to tell it dirtied the soles of saints. Father Quinn always jokes that he could bless the whole

Atlantic Ocean if he wantd to. I'm sure it's just as easy to unholy the water.

MAYBE (THOUGHTS IN A BATHTUB)

Stepy Kamei

Maybe I'll magic this high fever

Into something like delirium; like a

Heroin hangover, like

The alchemy of transforming my eye into a purpled peach.

It's not like painting red jet streams down my cheeks; like

Saying sayonara to my happiness like I really could be careless.

I left it all behind, like a mother who didn't know how else to say, "I regret making you."

Maybe the candle will collapse;

I'm so close to its pitchfork promise.

This ache in the back of my neck is starting to throb thoroughly.

Maybe I was Marie; a once and future queen.

Maybe a French future is all I can hope for anymore.

Maybe the shimmering shadow on the tile

Foreshadows my dance into dusk, into twilight town;

Breathing all that dusty blue until I forget about you.

SOMETIMES I GET SO TIRED

Stepy Kamei

I'll keep

The kettle on.

Okay?

I'll let it boil

Over. I'll sing myself sore

Until I don't hear the whistle anymore.

How else can I describe; even orcas

Dream of leaving the sea sometimes. They

Arch their ache into a wave-

Break,

Fluttering their fins at the ferry-mongers.

(They miss the punch of pavement at their feet.)

I'm saying, everything stops.

I'm saying even the belly

Balks at oxygen

If you know

How to knock it right

SLEEPLESS TO THE SOUND OF RAIN

Zhang Zhihao

失眠听雨声
雨在空中是没有声音的
我们听见的
都是大地上的事物
对雨的反应
及时，精确，七嘴八舌
雨落在树叶上
树叶打了个激灵
雨落在凉棚上
凉棚发出脆响
我听见过的最奇异的雨声
是雨落在雨上的声音
同样的命运反复叠加起来
汇成了命运的必然
有时候雨行至中途
会有风加入进来
原本要落在蔷薇花上的

SLEEPLESS TO THE SOUND OF RAIN

Translated by
Yuemin He

In air rainfall is soundless

What we hear

are mere things on earth

reacting to the rain

instant, accurate, cacophonous

Rain falls on a leaf

the leaf quivers

Rain falls on a balcony shed

the shed raps

The canniest rain sounds I've heard

are from rain falling on rain

the same fates compounding

and converging into destiny

Sometimes in the middle of falling

结果落在了桑树上
这么多的大叶子树
和小叶子树
都在雨中跳荡
有人看见了悲伤
有人看见了欢喜
但没有人能看懂天意

intrudes the wind

What is to drop on a rose

lands on the mulberry tree

So many broad leaf trees

and small leaf trees

jumping in the rain

Some see sadness at the sight

and others, joy

but nobody knows heaven's will

IN THE SPRING RAIN

Zhang Zhihao

春雨中
大姐发来一张照片
蹲在自家的油菜花丛中
金黄的春光放大了她的笑容
我正在炒菜，用她给我的菜籽油
看一眼照片，再瞅一眼
热气腾涌的不粘锅。我想告诉她
这菜籽油香极了
外面在下雨
好多天了。这雨时断时续
落在我们目力所及的地方
该开的花都开了
该说的话总是欲说还休

IN THE SPRING RAIN

Translated by
Yuemin He

My big sister sent me a photo
of her squatting among her family's canola flowers
the golden sunlight amplifying her smile
I am cooking, with canola oil from her
One look at the photo, and another at
the steaming pinguid pot, I want to tell her
the oil smells delicious
Outside it has been raining
for days. It falls intermittently
dropping wherever our eyes can reach
Plants that should flower are blooming
words that should have been said are yet to be uttered

BEAU TEMPS POUR LA SAISON

by Monique Debruxelles

Dimanche après-midi

Dans le jardin, les prunus en fleur avaient un air nigaud. Cela n'a aucun sens, se dit Romuald, des arbres fleuris en février. Il mit son loden, enfonça son vieux chapeau sur sa tête et prit une canne au hasard dans le porte-parapluie. Sa claudication ne le gênait pas trop en ville, mais par les chemins boueux de Carcanille, il préférait aider sa marche. Sur le pas de la porte, la température le surprit. Il jeta un coup d'œil au thermomètre : il affichait vingt degrés. Il faisait gris, mais l'air était lourd. Romuald retourna suspendre son manteau à la patère, traversa la cour et ferma soigneusement son portail à clé, une habitude de citadin qu'il apportait à Carcanille chaque week-end.

Dans leur potager, les Rebours s'occupaient à quelque tâche de jardinage. Ce n'était pas un couple sympathique et au village, on ne les aimait guère. Romuald ne cherchait pas à en savoir plus, mais des rumeurs couraient sur le père Rebours. Il était sournois, méchant et pingre. On s'accordait à penser qu'il avait un cœur de marbre. Quant à sa femme, elle possédait, disait-on, une langue de vipère. La maison des Rebours n'était qu'un taudis : des murs de bois recouverts d'un papier d'argent goudronné et un toit de tôles ondulées. Un poulailler vétuste se dressait à quelques dizaines de mètres de l'habitation et deux granges à demi écroulées occupaient le fond de la cour. Plutôt

FINE WEATHER THIS TIME OF YEAR

Translated by Laura Nagle

Sunday afternoon

The cherry blossoms in the yard looked silly. It makes no sense, Romuald thought. Trees shouldn't be in full bloom in February. He put on his Loden coat, plopped his old hat on top of his head, and grabbed a cane at random from the umbrella stand. His limp didn't bother him much in town, but he appreciated some support on the muddy roads of Carcanille. He got no further than the doorstep before being stunned by the temperature. He glanced at the thermometer: twenty degrees Celsius. It was a dull, gray day, but the air was heavy. Romuald hung his coat back up on the peg. He crossed the courtyard and carefully locked his gate, a habit he brought with him from the city to Carcanille each weekend.

Mr. and Mrs. Rebours were at work in their vegetable garden. They were an unpleasant couple, not well-liked in the village. Romuald didn't care one way or the other about them, but he'd heard plenty of rumors about old Mr. Rebours. He was sly, malicious, and stingy. The consensus was he had a heart of stone. His wife, meanwhile, was said to have a viperous tongue. Their house was basically a hovel: wooden walls covered with tarred aluminum foil and a roof fashioned from corrugated sheet metal. A run-down henhouse stood a few dozen meters away, and two dilapidated barns took up the back of the yard. Rather than walking past Eulalie and

que de passer devant Eulalie et Gaston Rebours, qu'il n'avait pas envie de saluer, Romuald prit à gauche. Le trajet serait plus long, mais la marche lui était recommandée par son orthopédiste.

Carcanille était un village sans charme. Quelques maisons plus coquettes que les autres l'égayaient un peu, mais, dans l'ensemble, rien ne retenait l'attention et c'était d'ailleurs pour cette raison qu'il avait choisi d'y acheter un bien. Un lieu touristique et plus vivant n'eut pas convenu à son besoin de tranquillité.

Les habitants devaient être encore à table, car le promeneur ne croisa qu'un garçonnet assis sur un mur, mangeant une part de tarte. Il détourna les yeux et accéléra l'allure. L'ancien cimetière se trouvait à la sortie du village, sur la route de Torne. Plus personne n'y allait, prétendait-on. Les nouveaux défunts, on les enterrait maintenant dans un autre endroit, sur la colline d'Estignac, et les vieux morts, on ne s'en occupait plus. Il n'était encore jamais allé jusque-là, choisissant d'habitude d'autres lieux de promenade, mais il le trouva facilement. Le portail, tout rouillé, était fermé par un cadenas et une grosse chaîne. Déçu, Romuald faillit faire demi-tour mais, par acquit de conscience, il longea le mur qui s'enfonçait dans un petit bois. À cinquante mètres de la route, une brèche s'était ouverte. Il fit dégringoler quelques pierres et put alors se frayer un passage. Une végétation dévorante avait pris possession des lieux. Des tombes délaissées, parfois entrouvertes, se dissimulaient sous la verdure. Certaines étaient vides, mais, dans d'autres, on distinguait des humérus, des mâchoires, des crânes. Les allées n'existaient plus. Romuald allait à l'aventure, repoussant du bout de la canne des ronces ou des branches, tentant de déchiffrer quelques épitaphes sur les pierres moussues. Il transpirait comme en été.

Quelque chose frôla sa joue gauche. Il sursauta, regarda autour de lui, ne vit rien. Il reprit sa marche, s'appuyant de tout son poids sur sa canne. Quelque part dans les airs, un oiseau lança un cri, aigrelet comme un rire. Un caveau se dressait à l'écart, entre deux gros chênes. Il s'approcha, dérangeant un serpent endormi devant l'entrée.

Gaston Rebours, whom he had no desire to greet, Romuald headed left. That made for a more circuitous route, but his orthopedist wanted him to do more walking anyway.

The village of Carcanille was devoid of charm. The view was brightened just a bit by a handful of houses that were prettier than the rest, but overall, there was nothing to hold a person's interest, and that happened to be precisely why Romuald had chosen to buy property there. A lively tourist destination wouldn't have satisfied his need for peace and quiet.

The residents must still have been eating, because the only person he encountered as he walked was a little boy sitting on a wall, eating a piece of pie. He averted his eyes and quickened his pace.

The old cemetery was on the road to Torne, on the way out of town. No one went there anymore, supposedly. When people died these days, they were buried in a different spot, on the Estignac hill. And no one looked after the dead from years past. Romuald had never been there before—he usually went walking elsewhere—but he had no difficulty finding it. The rusted gate was held shut by a thick chain with a padlock on it. Disappointed, Romuald nearly turned around. But, just to be sure, he walked along the wall, which disappeared into a small woodland. Fifty meters from the road, he found a gap. He knocked a few stones down and managed to make his way through. Vegetation had taken over the place, devouring everything. Abandoned graves, some of them partially open, peeked through the greenery. Some were empty, but others revealed glimpses of bones: a humerus, a mandible, a cranium. The paths were gone. Romuald walked about in no particular direction, using the end of his cane to brush aside brambles and twigs, trying to make out some of the epitaphs on the moss-covered gravestones. He worked up a sweat, as though it were summer.

Something brushed against his left cheek. Startled, he looked around but saw nothing. He started walking again, placing his full weight on the cane. Somewhere up high, a bird shrieked, sharp hello

L'animal leva la tête, le considéra sans manifester la moindre peur ni agressivité et s'en alla paresseusement se cacher sous les feuillages. Plusieurs membres de la famille Rebours logeaient dans le caveau, qui semblait mieux entretenu que les autres. Par contraste, il avait l'air presque pimpant. Somme toute, se dit Romuald, la promenade ne manquait pas de charme.

Au moins, personne ne lui adressait la parole. Il pouvait laisser ses cordes vocales en repos. Si, à Carcanille, il se forçait le samedi soir à fréquenter les villageois, tous les dimanches, Romuald faisait en sorte de parler le moins possible et se mettait à la diète complète. Un jour sur sept pour jeûner et se taire. Du lundi matin au samedi midi, directeur des ventes d'une entreprise alimentaire, il s'efforçait de convaincre ses prospects de la qualité de ses produits. Pour cela, il les leur faisait goûter et, par devoir, mangeait avec eux. Il prenait jusqu'à six repas par jour. L'entreprise commercialisait presque uniquement des conserves et des salaisons vendues en épicerie fine, des produits du terroir, riches en calories et en cholestérol. Dès 9 heures, Romuald avalait, en compagnie de clients japonais, des brioches vendéennes, des canistrelli, des croquants aux amandes trempés dans un bol de chocolat crémeux. À 11 heures, il servait l'apéritif à des Hongrois qui s'empiffraient de tapenade noire ou verte, de gâteaux au goût fumé, de saucissons d'âne, de moules à l'escabèche. À 12 h 30, il ingurgitait face à des Belges enthousiastes des tartines de foie gras, du cassoulet et une ou deux parts de gâteau aux noix. Et jusqu'au soir, Romuald, gavé, écœuré, parlait sans cesse, entre deux plats, entre deux bouchées, entre deux haut-le-cœur. Il avait appris à se faire vomir. Il revenait des toilettes l'estomac vide, mais plein de rancœur envers son travail. Un absolu dégoût ne le lâchait pas de toute la semaine. Il ne pouvait plus voir ne fût-ce qu'une fraise des bois sans ressentir aussitôt de la nausée. Parler lui était devenu insupportable. Les sons vibraient de façon écœurante contre son palais, ses pommettes. Son front, son crâne résonnaient

as a burst of laughter. A vault stood off to the side, between two hulking oak trees. He approached, disturbing a snake sleeping by the entrance. The creature raised its head and weighed him up without displaying the slightest sign of fear or aggression, then lazily made its way to hide under some leaves. Several members of the Rebours family had been laid to rest in the vault, which looked to have been better maintained than the others. It was practically elegant by comparison.

All in all, a rather pleasant stroll, Romuald thought. At least nobody was talking to him. He could rest his vocal cords. On Saturday nights in Carcanille, he forced himself to spend some time with the villagers, but on Sundays, Romuald ate nothing and spoke as little as possible. One day out of seven for fasting and silence. From Monday morning through Saturday at noon, as the sales director for a food company, he strove to persuade potential clients of his products' superior quality. That meant offering them tastings. And it would be impolite not to join them. He ate as many as six meals a day. The company's product list was made up almost exclusively of the traditional preserves and salted meats one might find in a high-end delicatessen: regional products, high in calories and cholesterol. Starting at nine in the morning, Romuald would join his Japanese clients in devouring some brioche from the Vendée, a few canistrelli, and almond cookies dipped in a bowl of creamy hot chocolate. At eleven, he'd serve an aperitif to Hungarians as they all gorged themselves on black or green olive tapenade, savory cakes, donkey sausages, and mussels escabeche. At twelve thirty, he'd sit across from some enthused Belgians and gulp down a few slices of bread with foie gras, some cassoulet, and a piece (or perhaps two) of walnut cake. And into the evening, stuffed to the gills and sick to his stomach, he would talk. He talked continuously: between dishes, between mouthfuls, between regurgitations. He had learned to make himself throw up. He'd return from the restroom with an empty stomach and a heart full of resentment toward his work. He'd spend

douloureusement sous ses mots. Il confondait paroles et nourriture et avait parfois l'impression de vomir ce qu'il disait.

Au-dessus du cimetière, le ciel s'assombrit tout à coup. Romuald était arrivé près d'un caveau baroque, autour duquel avaient été rassemblées plusieurs tombes d'enfant. Toutes étaient béantes, les couvercles s'entassaient un peu plus loin, au pied d'un arbre. Il ne s'expliquait pas la raison de ces profanations. Qui avait ouvert ces sépultures ? Mal à l'aise, le promeneur se força à regarder les petits corps momifiés, assez bien conservés, vêtus de lambeaux d'étoffes qui avaient dû être belles.

Il y eut comme un mouvement dans la tombe la plus proche, tandis que l'oiseau faisait de nouveau entendre son rire crispant. Romuald se demanda s'il avait bien vu bouger une petite main. Un coup de tonnerre claqua tout près. La gorge sèche, il fit demi-tour. Il était temps de rentrer, s'il voulait éviter la pluie.

Les Rebours bêchaient avec ardeur. Sans s'en rendre compte, ils avaient adopté un rythme de travail identique. Leurs deux pieds droits se levaient en même temps, les outils s'enfonçaient, ressortaient, les mottes de terre étaient soigneusement rompues et de nouveau leurs pieds droits assaillaient la bêche. Parfois, Eulalie Rebours observait son mari à la dérobée. Ils s'étaient encore disputés pendant le déjeuner. Gaston refusait de faire installer l'eau courante. Elle en avait plus qu'assez, Eulalie. Ce n'était pas lui qui tirait l'eau du puits, qui rapportait le seau plein à la maison. C'était tout juste s'il avait accepté de faire installer l'électricité. Mais, bien sûr, c'était pour avoir la télévision. Quand il s'agissait de son plaisir, Gaston savait ouvrir sa bourse. Eulalie, malgré ses doigts déformés par les rhumatismes, pouvait continuer à remonter l'eau glacée du puits, il s'en fichait. Un cœur de pierre, se dit-elle, peut-être pour la cent millième fois.

La Roussette picorait non loin d'eux. C'était une poule au chant tout à fait particulier : elle ne caquetait pas, elle émettait un son mélodieux, frais, surprenant. « Elle a un diamant dans le gosier

the whole week in the grip of disgust. He couldn't look at anything edible—not so much as a wild strawberry—without nausea hitting him straightaway. He had come to find speaking intolerable. It was repugnant, the way the sounds vibrated against his cheekbones and palate. His words echoed painfully in his forehead, in his skull. He couldn't distinguish between words and food; speaking sometimes felt to him like vomiting.

Above the cemetery, the sky suddenly darkened. Romuald had approached a baroque vault with several children's coffins arranged all around it. All of them were wide open, their lids piled up a bit farther down, at the foot of a tree. He couldn't imagine a reason for this desecration. Who had opened these graves? Feeling ill at ease, he forced himself to look at the little mummified corpses. They were quite well preserved, dressed in scraps of fabric that must have been beautiful once.

It seemed like there was motion in the nearest tomb, just as the bird once again made its nerve-rattling cackle. Romuald thought he might have seen a small hand move. Thunder crashed nearby. He turned back, his throat dry. It was time to go home, if he had any hope of avoiding the rain.

#

Mr. and Mrs. Rebours were digging vigorously. Without realizing it, they'd fallen into exactly the same rhythm. Their right feet rose at the same time; the tools sank into the earth and rose back up again; the clumps of earth were carefully broken up; and again their right feet struck the spade. Eulalie Rebours occasionally stole a glance at her husband. They'd argued again over lunch. Gaston refused to have running water installed. Eulalie was sick and tired of it all. He wasn't the one drawing the water from the well and lugging the pail back to the house. He'd barely agreed to have electricity put in, but of course, that was to get television. When his own pleasure was at stake, Gaston was perfectly capable of opening his wallet. But Eulalie could just go on carrying the icy well water with her arthritic fingers,

», disait Rebours à qui voulait l'entendre. Il n'était pas question de la faire cuire un jour. Ce gallinacé réussissait à attendrir Gaston. Dès qu'il sortait de la maison, la Roussette se précipitait pour le saluer. Produisant des vocalises de diva, elle le suivait pas à pas dans la cour, le potager. De toute la basse-cour, c'était la seule poule laissée en liberté.

Eulalie reçut une goutte de pluie. Le ciel était aussi sombre qu'aux abords de la nuit.

« Il pleut, Gaston. Rentrons. »

Il ne se retourna même pas pour lui répondre :

« Moi, je continue. Qu'est-ce que tu crois ? Que ça se fera tout seul ?

— L'orage éclate. Mieux vaut se mettre à l'abri.

— Fais comme tu veux, la mère. »

Elle alla ranger son outil dans la remise et décrotta ses souliers devant la porte de la maison. Un éclair claqua, suivit presque aussitôt d'un violent coup de tonnerre. Une grosse pluie se mit à tomber. Dans le potager, Gaston bêchait toujours. « Vieil imbécile ! » murmura-t-elle. Elle mit de l'eau dans une casserole et chercha sa boîte à tisane. Deux minutes plus tard, tout trempé, son mari vint se mettre à l'abri et réclama un bol de café bien chaud.

#

Romuald, dégoulinant, entra chez lui, déposa sa canne et son chapeau dans le hall et se rendit à la salle de bains. Malgré toute l'eau qui venait de lui tomber dessus, il n'envisageait qu'une douche brûlante pour réconfort.

Dehors, l'orage redoublait.

#

La pluie mitraillait la tôle ondulée. Par superstition, les Rebours coupaient l'électricité pendant les orages. Éclairés par une vieille lampe à pétrole, ils se tenaient contre la cuisinière à bois. La température avait chu brutalement et Eulalie frissonnait dans son paletot mauve.

for all he cared. A heart of stone, she said to herself for perhaps the hundred-thousandth time.

Not far from them, Roussette the hen was pecking at the ground. She was known for her extraordinary voice; she didn't cackle but let out a surprisingly sweet and mellifluous tone. "Girl's got a diamond in her gullet," Mr. Rebours would say to anyone who would listen. Slaughtering this particular chicken was out of the question because Gaston had a soft spot for her. She always hurried to greet him as soon as he walked out of the house. She'd follow his every step through the yard and the garden, doing vocal exercises like the diva she was. She was the only hen to have free rein of the farmyard.

Eulalie felt a raindrop hit her. The sky was dark, as though night were approaching.

"It's raining, Gaston. Let's go inside."

Without bothering to turn around, he replied, "I'm not stopping. What do you think, it'll get done all by itself?"

"The storm is about to break. Best to take shelter."

"Do what you want, old woman."

Eulalie went and put her tool back in the shed and cleaned the dirt from her shoes by the front door. There was a crack of lightning, followed almost immediately by a violent clap of thunder. A heavy rain began to fall. In the vegetable garden, Gaston was still digging. "Old fool!" she muttered. She put some water in a saucepan and looked for her tin of herbal tea. Two minutes later, soaked to the skin, her husband came inside and demanded a nice hot cup of coffee.

#

Romuald walked into his house, dripping wet. He put down his cane and hat in the foyer and went into the bathroom. Even with all the water that had just been falling on him, the only source of comfort he could imagine was a piping hot shower.

Outside, the storm intensified.

#

« Ce temps, c'est quand même pas normal, en plein hiver ! Ce serait pas le père Breumet, des fois, qui nous le détraquerait, avec ses façons de Satan ? »

Son mari haussa les épaules. À chaque événement incompréhensible pour elle, Eulalie accusait de sorcellerie l'original du village, leur voisin Breumet.

« La mère, tu dérailles. Qu'est-ce qu'il y peut, lui ? Il fait le temps qu'il fait et puis c'est tout. »

— Il faudrait prévenir les gendarmes, insista-t-elle. On ne peut pas le laisser faire. Si ça se trouve, c'est lui qui a envoyé la maladie sur nos lapins, l'an dernier. Et peut-être aussi qu'il a tué la fille Magloire, celle qu'on n'a jamais retrouvée. Il l'aura ensorcelée.

— Tais-toi donc ! Tu ne sais dire que des méchancetés et des menteries. Tu es la plus mauvaise des commères de Carcanille.

— Regarde ce qui tombe ! » fit-elle remarquer sans s'occuper des propos de Gaston.

Des grêlons comme des œufs de caille jonchaient la cour. Elle n'en avait jamais vu d'aussi gros. Un aboiement plaintif se fit entendre derrière la porte.

« Mon pauvre Pataud ! Va vite à ta niche.

— Fais-le entrer, dit Gaston. Tu ne vas quand même pas le laisser dehors par ce temps. »

Éberluée, elle ouvrit la porte au chien. C'était bien la première fois que son maître l'autorisait à pénétrer dans la maison. Même quand il avait failli crever d'une fièvre inexplicable, il n'avait eu droit qu'à une couverture dans la grange.

« Et la poule ? » demanda-t-elle, en frictionnant l'échine de Pataud avec un vieux chiffon.

Ensemble derrière la vitre, ils fouillèrent des yeux la cour et le jardin. La brouette abandonnée dans un coin, les roues en l'air, était déjà toute cabossée.

« Elle est sous le poirier. »

The rain was strafing the sheet metal roof. Mr. and Mrs. Rebours always cut off the electricity during thunderstorms; they were superstitious like that. They sat beside the wood stove by the light of an old kerosene lamp. The temperature had plummeted, and Eulalie was shivering in her mauve coat.

"This is hardly normal for the middle of winter!" she said. "Might it be old man Breumet making the weather all unsettled, with his satanic ways?"

Her husband shrugged. Any time Eulalie didn't understand something, she'd go and accuse their neighbor Breumet, the village oddball, of black magic.

"You're losing your marbles, old woman. What's he got to do with anything? The weather is what it is, and that's that."

"We ought to tell the police," she insisted. "We can't let him get away with it. Who knows, maybe he's the one who brought disease on our rabbits last year. And maybe he killed the Magloire girl, too, the one who was never found. He could have cast a spell on her."

"Oh, shut your trap! All you know how to do is spew your nasty lies. You're the worst of all the gossips in Carcanille."

"Look what's falling!" she cried, paying no mind to what Gaston had said.

Hailstones the size of quail eggs were strewn across the yard. She'd never seen any that big. The dog could be heard wailing plaintively on the other side of the door.

"Pataud, poor thing! Go to your kennel, quick!"

"Let him in," Gaston said. "You can't be leaving him outside in this weather."

Flabbergasted, she opened the door for the dog. This was the very first time his master had ever allowed him to enter the house. Even the time he nearly died of an inexplicable fever, the only concession Gaston made was putting a blanket in the barn.

"What about the hen?" she asked as she wiped down Pataud's back with an old rag.

Elle dansait une sorte de ballet disgracieux pour tenter d'échapper aux grêlons qui tombaient dru. À quelques mètres d'elle, un violent coup de vent brisa la branche d'un sapin qui s'abattit avec fracas sur l'ancien abreuvoir.

« Va la chercher, Gaston. »

Il hésita. C'était vraiment un temps de cochon, mais la Roussette avait une si belle voix ! Un diamant dans le gosier, se dit-il avec fierté. Il n'existait pas deux poules comme celle-là. Il mit une veste et ouvrit la porte. Dès le seuil franchi, il fut mitraillé. « Ça me rappelle la guerre », soupira-t-il. Il se mit à courir en zigzag, sentant son crâne se déformer sous les balles glacées. Il atteignit le poirier, saisit la Roussette, la fourra sous sa veste. Elle se laissa faire docilement. Rebours reprit sa course sous l'orage. Les projectiles frappaient de plus en plus fort. L'un d'eux transperça son bras. Gaston voyait le sol défiler à travers le trou. Je serais beau en passoire. Il s'amusa de cette image tout en évitant une grande flaque d'eau. Il était arrivé devant la porte que sa femme tenait ouverte. Il entra, posa la poule à terre. « Voilà ! » dit-il d'un ton satisfait. Et il s'écroula. Eulalie observa son mari avec curiosité : son visage, le haut de son crâne, ses épaules étaient percées de mille trous, comme par un poinçonneur dément. Elle ne put réussir à le déplacer. Il mourut à côté de la porte, la joue gauche posée sur le sol de terre battue, la poule rousse perchée sur son mollet. Voyant qu'il ne répondait pas à ses cot ! cot ! inquiets, celle-ci émit un tragique contre-ut. Elle s'étrangla à demi, toussota et finalement cracha sur la jambe du défunt un petit caillou scintillant.

L'orage et la grêle ne cessèrent que vers 8 heures du soir.

#

Lundi matin

La nuit avait été agitée. Romuald, dans un sommeil malsain, avait entendu des grincements, des éclats de voix, des rires sournois. Il avait rêvé d'une petite momie qui le pourchassait en patinette. Il se leva, songeant qu'il devait être encore tôt, car aucune lumière ne filtrait à travers les rideaux. Il les tira, ne vit rien, de l'autre côté de

The two of them stood at the window, scanning the yard. The wheelbarrow, left upside-down in a corner of the garden, was already full of dents.

"She's under the pear tree."

She was hopping about, as though performing a clumsy ballet, in an effort to dodge the abundant hailstones. A few meters away from her, a violent gust snapped a branch off a fir tree. It fell with a clatter onto the old trough.

"Go get her, Gaston."

He hesitated. It was dreadful out there . . . but Roussette had such a beautiful voice! A diamond in her gullet, he proudly thought. There wasn't another hen like her. He put on a jacket and opened the door. From the moment he crossed the threshold, he was bombarded. "It's just like in the war," he sighed. He started running, zigzagging. He could feel his skull being mangled by the icy bullets. He reached the pear tree, grabbed Roussette, and shoved her under his jacket. She obediently complied. Mr. Rebours ran back out into the storm. The projectiles were striking harder and harder. One of them pierced straight through his arm. As he ran, Gaston could see through the hole to the ground passing beneath him. I'd make an awfully nice colander. He laughed at the thought as he dodged a large puddle. When he reached the house, his wife was holding the door open. He walked in and put the hen on the floor. "All set!" he said, pleased with himself. And he collapsed. Eulalie, baffled, looked upon her husband. His face, the top of his head, and his shoulders were pierced a thousand times over, as though a crazed ticket taker had assaulted him with a hole punch. She tried to move him but couldn't manage. He died beside the doorstep, his left cheek resting on the dirt floor and the red hen perched on his calf. When he failed to respond to her anxious cooing and clucking, Roussette let out a despondent high C. She sang herself hoarse, cleared her throat, and finally spit a tiny sparkling stone onto the dead man's leg.

la vitre, qu'un mur blanc sale. Il ouvrit la croisée, posa la main sur des pierres légèrement suintantes. Il courut à la cuisine. Derrière la fenêtre se dressait le même mur, comme derrière celle du salon. La porte d'entrée ne s'ouvrait plus. Romuald était emmuré chez lui. Il prit le temps de réfléchir. Ce qu'un mauvais plaisant avait pu bâtir, il pouvait, lui, le démolir. Peu bricoleur, il ne possédait guère d'instruments capables de l'aider, mais en cherchant bien, il finit par dénicher un gros marteau dans le placard de l'entrée. Quand il donna le premier coup, un bruit léger se fit entendre et son outil s'enfonça comme dans un ventre mou. Puis la pierre reprit sa forme. Il frappa plus fort, sans plus de succès. Pendant une demi-heure, il s'acharna. Une petite tache rouge apparut sur la pierre, alors que son bras commençait à faiblir. Il reprit courage. Des gouttelettes glissèrent. Bientôt, un ruisselet rouge sang serpenta dans la maison, entre les pieds des meubles et les tapis. Pour autant, le mur ne tombait pas. Il n'était même pas ébréché. Épuisé, Romuald s'affala dans un fauteuil. Il était temps de chercher de l'aide. Il appela la gendarmerie et raconta son histoire à un dénommé Lelong, brigadier-chef, qui l'écouta en soupirant.

« Prenez un comprimé contre la gueule de bois, lui recommanda-t-il. Dormez un peu. Quand vous vous réveillerez, le mur aura disparu. »

Romuald trouva dans l'annuaire le numéro de son voisin Breumet. C'était un homme étrange, perpétuellement vêtu d'une toge. Romuald et lui n'avaient jamais échangé plus de trois phrases. Le téléphone sonna longtemps. Enfin, Breumet décrocha. Il écouta toute l'histoire sans l'interrompre.

« C'est curieux ce que vous me dites, voisin. Figurez-vous que, quand vous avez appelé, je regardais justement du côté de chez vous. »

Après un petit silence, il ajouta :

« Votre maison, votre jardin, tout a disparu.

— Quoi ?

The storm and the hail did not stop until eight o'clock that evening.

#

Monday morning

Romuald had slept fitfully. Throughout that restless night, he had heard creaking, shouting, and devilish laughter. He had dreamed of a little mummy chasing him on a scooter. He got up, thinking it must still be early, as there was no light peeking through the curtains. He drew them back and saw nothing through the window but a dirty white wall. He opened the window and reached out, touching some damp, oozing stones. He ran to the kitchen. Behind the window was that same wall. And the same was true of the living room. The front door wouldn't open. Romuald was walled up in his own house. He took a moment to think. If some practical joker could build this, surely he could tear it down. He wasn't terribly handy and didn't have many tools suited to the task, but he took a good look around and managed to unearth a big hammer from the hall closet. With the first strike of his hammer, he heard a faint sound. The hammer sank into the wall, which had as much give as a soft belly. Then the stone regained its shape. He hammered harder, with no more success. For half an hour he persisted. Just when his arm was starting to tire, a small red spot appeared on the stone. He found the strength to go on. Droplets slid down. Before long, a blood-red stream wove throughout the house, between the rugs and the legs of the furniture. And yet the wall was not coming down. It wasn't even chipped. Romuald, exhausted, slumped into an armchair. It was time to seek help. He called the police station and told his story to a Sergeant Lelong, who listened to him and sighed audibly.

"Take a pill for your hangover," he advised. "Get some sleep. The wall will be gone when you wake up."

Romuald looked up his neighbor Breumet in the phone book. He was a strange man, perpetually dressed in a toga. Romuald hadn't exchanged more than three sentences with him. The telephone rang

— À la place, il y a un champ de coquelicots. On se croirait en juin.

— Mais où suis-je, alors ?

— Je ne sais pas, voisin. Votre maison s'est peut-être enfoncée dans le sol ? Vous semblez victime d'une mauvaise plaisanterie. Qu'avez-vous fait, ces derniers temps ? Avez-vous défié les puissances occultes ? »

Romuald raconta sa promenade à l'ancien cimetière. Il n'avait eu l'intention de défier personne, mais Breumet affirma que cette incursion dans un jardin maintenant réservé aux ombres avait sans doute suffi à déclencher leur courroux.

« Que vais-je faire, Breumet ? »

— Vous préparer à mourir, répondait-il, catégorique. Hélas, je ne vois rien qui pourrait vous sauver. Je vais tout de même tenter quelque chose, mais je ne vous garantis rien. »

#

Mercredi soir

Eulalie Rebours rentra chez elle vers 18 heures. Gaston lui avait souvent exprimé sa préférence pour l'incinération. « Je ne veux pas servir de casse-croûte aux asticots », disait-il. Eulalie, ça lui était égal qu'on le mît dans une petite ou une grande boîte. Mais elle s'était sentie mortifiée quand les employés du funérarium lui avaient remis un coffret contenant les cendres et un autre, dans lequel ils avaient rangé le cœur de Gaston. Un beau cœur de marbre blanc.

Elle posa les deux coffrets sur le buffet, mit sa soupe à chauffer. Dimanche, elle se ferait une poule au pot avec la Roussette. Maintenant qu'elle caquetait aussi mal qu'une autre, il n'y avait pas de raison d'attendre plus pour la manger. Elle alluma le téléviseur mais l'éteignit aussitôt car, comme la veille, les images étaient brouillées. Quelque chose gênait la réception, comme si un ours funambule marchait en équilibre sur les ondes.

Le diamant craché par la Roussette, elle le vendrait au bijoutier. Il lui rapporterait sûrement assez pour installer l'eau

for a long time. Finally, Breumet picked up. He listened to the whole story without interrupting.

"This story of yours is bizarre, neighbor. It just so happens I was looking over toward your place when you called." After a brief silence, he added: "Your house, your yard . . . it's all gone."

"What?"

"Where your house was, there's a field of poppies. Might as well be June."

"Well, where am I, then?"

"I don't know, neighbor. Is it possible your house sank into the ground? It seems you're the victim of a sick joke. What have you been up to lately? Have you trespassed against the occult?"

Romuald told him about his walk in the old cemetery. He hadn't intended to trespass against anyone, but Breumet concluded that the wrath of the dark forces had surely been triggered by his foray into what was now the shadows' domain.

"What am I going to do, Breumet?"

"Prepare to die," he answered flatly. "I'm afraid I don't see anything that could save you. I mean, I'll try something anyway, but I make no guarantees."

#

Wednesday evening

Eulalie Rebours returned home around six in the evening. Gaston had often expressed a preference for cremation. "I don't want the maggots making a snack of me," he used to say. It made no difference to Eulalie whether he was put in a big box or a little one. But she was mortified when the people at the funeral home gave her two small cases: one containing the ashes and another in which they'd placed Gaston's heart. A beautiful heart, made of white marble.

She placed both cases on the sideboard and put her soup on the stove to heat up. On Sunday she'd make herself a nice boiled chicken. Now that Roussette cackled as badly as the rest, there was no reason to put off eating her any longer. She turned on the television and

sur l'évier. Le cœur de Gaston ne valait rien, probablement. Fichu bonhomme ! se dit-elle avec humeur.

Elle regarda rêveusement par la fenêtre. Breumet, vêtu de sa toge orange, marchait à travers le champ de coquelicots, le pouce gauche vissé au milieu du front. Il était vraiment bizarre, ce voisin. C'était sûrement lui, avec ses manigances, le responsable des perturbations télévisuelles. Dès qu'elle aurait avalé sa soupe, elle descendrait au village pour prévenir les gendarmes. Et bon débarras !

Tandis qu'elle prenait les couverts dans le tiroir, sa langue bifide s'agitait frénétiquement devant sa bouche.

turned it off again right away. Just like the night before, the picture was scrambled. There was something wrong with the reception, as though a bear were doing a tightrope walk over the airwaves.

She'd sell the diamond Roussette spit out to the jeweler. That would surely bring in enough money to install running water at the kitchen sink. Gaston's heart was worthless, in all likelihood. Rotten old man! she petulantly thought.

She looked dreamily out the window. Her neighbor Breumet, dressed in his orange toga, was walking through the field of poppies, his left thumb planted in the middle of his forehead. Such a kook. The television disruption had to be his fault, one of his little schemes. Once she'd finished her soup, she'd go down into the village to tell the police. And then, good riddance to him!

As she took the utensils out of the drawer, her forked tongue writhed feverishly in front of her mouth.

KNOWN THIS STORY ALL MY LIFE

Gunilla Kester

He was just a boy then, alone, leading the giant stallions
—Thunder and Lightning—pulling timber from the forest

to the road. He saw three branches sweep
an empty sky and knew his future son would die.

When it started to rain, he unbridled the horses
and took them down the stream to drink

and huddle under a bridge. Later, when he
couldn't do it, he remembered. His hands cut

down his favorite cherry tree, white blooms
falling on a cross of honey almost too heavy—

brought it north into the mountain, above the snow
line, where his son's plane crashed during the war.

Isolation by Natalie Christensen

DEVIL IS THE NEXUS OF SEVERAL UNCERTAINTIES

Charlie Clark

I've yet to have an uncle who could play "The Arkansas Traveler" on the fiddle, his mouth emitting smoke as he goes stomping through wild timothy. And yet I've decided to believe in this life

there is still time,

that anyone in this life could be my uncle.

You could be, if you so choose.

You need only have patience, time, and a pair of hands

whose composure resembles the wings of a captured napping peregrine. Hands that when struck suddenly

one against the other

sound adamant, mutable, and likely to remain

a thing that will not make me tremble

fast as faith; someone at a window, shouting my name;

lightning in the nighttime, lightning in the day.

DEVIL'S OPUS MINOR

by Charlie Clark

My origin story couldn't be more boring. Induced by Catholic prayer calendars

and Mötley Crüe, only once have I woken in a French cemetery,

letting distance make nesting dolls of the headstones.

It's an interesting way to learn about perspective, though not recommended

by the guidebooks. If it sounds like I'm bragging, well, just know

the birds there were nothing more than pigeons, their music too stupid to be mournful to wake to,

the air so hot I don't know how their feathers didn't simply burn.

Do I really need to explain how that is where my imagination turned?

It's best to admit your luck to have lived like one of
Shakespeare's minor funny drunks,

the ones who die off to no real effect except to signal, for the
principals, things are getting serious.

It means you're like the light when it changes and the
mosquitoes all stop sleeping.

Best to admit each day you approach the moment every
sacred name escapes you.

It's just another thing you're born into, like paper cuts beneath
your fingernails or your questionable

conviction that when come night you will jump into this river
and not drown but gleam.

BEFORE THE FALL

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL: *THE FALL OF GUJARAT*

Jenny Bhatt

Historical Note: In 1299, the Delhi Sultanate, led by Alauddin Khilji, destroyed the kingdom of Gujarat and ended the rule of the Vaghela dynasty. Karandev Vaghela fled with his young daughter, Deval, and their family was torn apart. She was eventually captured, taken to Delhi, and married Khilji's sons, one after another. The novel covers Deval's coming of age in Gujarat and the Delhi Sultanate. Through her own brand of statecraft, she survived three dynasties and four murdered husbands. Yet, history, written by victors and learned men, has either dismissed her existence or barely footnoted her. The excerpt below is from the beginning of the novel.

*

1. Warrior Goddesses and Famous Queens

September 1298 C.E. in Anhilwad-Patan, the capital of Gurjar-bhumi (present-day Gujarat): *The start of the nine nights of the Maha Navratri festival celebrating the Goddess Durga. The start of the waxing moon period, known as Padvo Sud, in the lunar month of Aso.*

Decades later, when Deval will stand on a body-strewn battlefield and roar for her life, she will remember the heft and weight of this

day. She will look back on it as the beginning of her journey from an artless child just shy of her ninth birthday to the mutinous daughter of a runaway king and a traitorous queen, and the complicit wife of four powerful rulers with even more powerful enemies.

For now, she takes her place in the Durga Mata temple's inner sanctum, which is thick with acrid incense smoke, resonant holy chants, and fragrant food and flower offerings on overflowing thalis. With no windows, this holiest of holy places would be pitch dark if not for the lights flickering from hundreds of brass and copper lamps nestled in wall nooks, or hanging from the ceiling off sturdy chains. And straight ahead, inside the black stone-carved alcove, the life-size statue of the warrior goddess with her ten arms wielding ten weapons—even on this day when she's been decorated in the best bridal finery—sits astride a stone lion. Always that expression in those ruby-embedded eyes, as if the goddess is about to stand and open her mouth wide like a lion's maw.

Deval's parents are seated in their usual place before the havan square with a sparking and crackling blaze rising from the pit. Sweat beads on her father's plump brow, and gold glints on her mother's delicate nose. Yet, they're like distant divinity in their festive, red-yellow-green silks and jewelry shimmering from head to toe. The three chanting priests sitting opposite them are so alike with their shaved heads and orange robes that they could easily be just mirrored images of the same man refracted through plumes of smoke.

On this first day, the Navratri rituals started at dawn and will go on all day. But the usual court crowd that accompanies such occasions has been missing, including Prime Minister Madhav and his new wife, Roopsundariba. At their first meeting, the young bride had given Deval such a bright smile that even its memory now brings warmth. Instead, the royal family is surrounded by more guards than she has ever seen. They lurk in the shadows like heavy, impenetrable drapery and make the space feel even smaller, even more stifling.

She doesn't hear him enter, but Deval sees the Commander-in-chief stooping beside the King. Yogendra Dandanayak is a tall, rope-thin man who never smiles. People call him Yamdoot, a messenger of death, so dour is his countenance. Now, as he whispers into her father's ear, he wipes away the half-smiles on her parents' faces too. Then her father gives his famous royal nod. Not so much a nod, really, as a sideways angling of the head. Which is enough for Yamdoot, who then twists his entire torso into a deep bow and disappears.

Had she imagined his coming and going? It had been that quick. But then the pot of ghee skips out of her father's bejeweled hand and tumbles into the havan. The flames leap higher so that her mother lets out a gasping cry and looks at her father. Thankfully, he pulls that errant hand back before a fiery lick can claim it. The thought comes to Deval like the raking of fingernails down her bare back: the warrior goddess is displeased, not just with Yamdoot for disturbing the prayer rituals, but with all of them.

Outside the inner sanctum, the rasp of her milk mother's voice gets louder. Bhanuba is a mace-shaped woman—her round head is twice as big as it should be for someone her size. More importantly, just as the mace weapon can be wielded in at least twenty different ways to bludgeon an adversary to death, Bhanuba has various skills to batter her challengers, little and large alike, into submission or defeat. Now, she's warning the chattering servant girls to keep their empty heads down and focus on their cleaning work or forget about going to the garba-raas dances for the entire nine nights of festivities. Deval wants to run outside, grab Bhanuba around her soft, fat middle, and ask: can I go too? But she knows better. So she remains seated beside Kanak, who takes her older sister's role seriously enough to pinch Deval if she so much as squirms or squeaks. All while the shroud of armed guards surrounding them parts and closes, parts and closes.

*

That evening, outside the old Bhimnath Mahadev temple, an earlier rainstorm had drenched all the birds into a stunned daze and left them like wet black rags hanging on tree branches. Deval stands beside Indu, whose flickering torch throws their long shadows onto the flowing river so that the two of them seem to be rippling and dancing instead of silent and still.

Then a shudder goes all the way from the top of Deval's scrawny frame to the tips of her toes as a bodiless hand floats across the water's surface. Its long-nailed fingers are curled as if clawing at something. When she cries out, wild rabbits dart out like flights of arrows from the tall, swaying grasses nearby.

"Hush!" Indu whispers and grabs Deval tight against her waist. The servant girl, only a few years older and not that much bigger than her royal charge, is also trembling. "If the palace finds out about this little escapade of ours, it'll be bad enough. If anything happens to you, princess . . . Bhanuba . . ." There is no need to finish this sentence. Both of them know what Bhanuba is capable of.

Perhaps it was a mistake to pressure Indu into this? Somewhere out there, the body that was once attached to that hand is probably drifting away into deeper waters. The untethered soul is likely fluttering above their heads, staring at their every move. Deval's blood turns to leaping flames. "Let's go back, Indu," she whimpers. "There's no boat. Gumabha isn't coming."

"Hush. Baapu told me to wait right here. I swear on Ambe Maa, he will come."

And, as if Indu's words alone have conjured it from the shadows, a small craft glides toward them. It's the second prahar after sunset and, running along the shores of the Saraswati with its dry, pebbly path crunching beneath their steps, the night pulses sharp through every fiber of Deval's being.

Indu gives her father a glare, eyes glinting from the torchlight like she's some otherworldly creature. Between the two of them, they lift Deval to place her into the rocking boat with care as if she might

come apart in their hands. Indu jumps in after her with a practiced maneuver that makes Deval envious.

Gumabha shakes his head and takes a deep breath. "Beta, they had closed the Champaneri gate again. There was another big fight. The jeweler's market this time. I had to stay and help with the bodies—I mean, the people."

Deval holds onto Indu. Sometimes, on nights like this, it's as if the entire world around her is throbbing and beating with one mind and one heart.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" Indu murmurs, stroking Deval's head but staring into the distance, beyond the clouds and the stars.

"I have never seen the Nagar and Jain communities fighting so frequently at the slightest provocation. As if there aren't enough problems with our neighboring kingdoms. Then the news today about the Prime Minister's fruitless visit to Medpat and the King raising taxes—"

"Bhanuba says history is going to repeat itself—"

"That hand!" Deval jumps as something hits the side of the boat.

"It's nothing, Devalba," Indu says with more urgency than courage. To her father, she says, "There was a severed hand in the water over there."

"Jai Jagdambe!" Gumabha opens his mouth to say more and stops, peering at Deval as if she has ordered him to stay quiet.

Clutching Deval close, Indu makes light of it. "What would the brave Queen Naikidevi do now, Devalba? Or the beautiful Queen Udayamati? Or even the clever Queen Minaldevi? If you want to be famous like them—"

"I will be the most famous queen of all, Indudi!" Deval pushes the girl away.

Laughing, Indu grabs Deval's thin wrists and tells her to sit still so they don't all drown.

It comes to Deval more like the physical sensation of water closing over her: that, beneath their world of palaces and forts and

boats and rivers, there is a mysterious older world, where amorphous beings plot and plan, and their soundless conversations are like the vibrations and undulations that shape every mortal breath.

As the boat nears the Kalika Mata temple grounds, the musky, earthy smell of water, mud, and grass is interlaced with the heady fragrances of dhoop and incense from the temple's always-open doorway.

Indu stands and prods Deval. "Alright, let's forget about all that now. Devalba, you wanted to see some real garba and dandiya dancing. And we don't have too long before they find out we've slipped out of the palace. Bhanuba will have me flogged if that happens."

"Jai Jagdambe!" Gumabha says again, shaking his head at both of them. "If anyone finds out, I'll lose my job. And then there will be no money for your wedding, Indu." A common refrain from a widowed father's common refrain, to which no one pays any attention.

As they lift Deval out of the boat, something falls away from Deval's person. It shines brilliantly for a brief moment before the waters cover it greedily.

"Wasn't that Kanakba's necklace? She's going to get so mad at you!" Indu cries out.

"She doesn't even know I have it."

"Had it," Indu corrects her with a sigh. "Well, let us prepare for another of your sister's tantrums tomorrow when the whole palace will be sent to search for this one necklace."

Though Indu is trying to make a joke of it, a strange heat churns up inside Deval and rises to her throat. In her mind's eye, the fingers of that disembodied hand uncurl one by one, grasp the necklace by its thick gold pendant, close into a fist, and disappear into the river's depths.

2. Dancers and Dealers

"*Eh haalo!*" This welcome booms from all corners as the three of them arrive at the large field on the other side of the Kalika Mata temple. It is followed by the thumping beats of the dhol and nobat drums, the crashing bangs of the jhanj cymbals, and rousing shehnai flute lilts. A popular raas dance song begins, and a rhythmic clacking of dandiya sticks adds to the harmony.

Deval's chest swells and bursts with each wave of sound. Her blood thrums in her ears. In all her life, music and dance, like the garba happening before her now, have been the biggest feast of the senses. All the more thrilling because she shouldn't even be here. And certainly not without any guards.

The field is done up like a wedding pavilion with countless flickering clay lamps of all shapes and sizes, either hanging from overhead ropes or secured to wooden posts. Near the entrance, Gumabha fixes Deval with his cross-eyed scrutiny, strokes his waist-length beard with one hand, and points his cane at her with the other, laboring his jaws like he's grinding stones.

She can't hear what he's saying, but Deval juts her chin toward him as if to say: *who are you to give me any orders? I'm a Vaghela princess, don't you know?* Her muscles tingle with the recall of the favorite dance formations she has practiced with Indu these past weeks till exhaustion. "It's alright, Indu," she yells back in response to the servant's shrill pleas and lets go of her clasping hand to surge toward the throng.

It's not that Deval doesn't understand the trouble they could get into if found out. But it is entirely ridiculous to have to sleep quietly inside the citadel when every pore of her body is prickling in joyful response to the magic of this first garba night. And when all the grownups are having their own fun, which she is never allowed. Almost the entire citadel—royals and commoners alike—has gathered in the western courtyard to dance until sunrise. The maidservants always giggle and whisper how King Karandev certainly knows how to celebrate with style and ceremony. That he

makes the royal bards spend all nine days putting on performance after performance singing epics and eulogies, tossing them bags of gold mohurs at regular intervals. That he has Mohinidevi, the beautiful chief Somnath dancer, travel to Anhilwad Patan every Maha Navratri to lead young men and women into frenzied garba formations all night long. She, Deval, is her father's daughter, after all. Why can't she also appreciate song and dance as much and as often as she wants?

She is now as close as she can get to the center of the field, where the largest group of alternating male and female dancers is circling rapidly, doing the garba. It's already so crowded that the ground beneath her feels as if it's in constant, heaving motion too. She tries to sing along with the words: "*Room-jhoomti gaa.un maa no garbo . . . garbo aavyo re ramto-ramto.*"And, with every repetitive exhalation of those "ra" and "ga" syllables, she feels like she herself is the sacred garbo pot come to life to spin and play the night away.

The dancers are swirling and whirling about in a manic frenzy, their fine clothes spinning streaks of dazzling colors as reflections of light spark off the metal sequins and mirrored embroidery like leaping flames. Though she can identify almost all of the graceful steps and sequences—*dodhiyu, ek/bey/tran taali, hinch*—there is a different kind of energy in this prancing and preening. Even the framing is not of the traditional kind. There are no lit clay lamps or stacked ornamental pots anchoring the center of this spiraling circle. A teenage couple romps at its heart. Instead of the usual coy worship of divine fertility, theirs is a spirited flaunt of a callow sort of sexuality. The bare-chested boy slides, skips, jumps, and crosses with such skill, that his feet barely touch the ground. The laughing girl dips, sways, stretches, and leans into him before pulling back mockingly, leaving only her palms out to clap against his. He grabs her hands by locking their fingers together and tosses her up and onto his back. She flings her legs apart for the heavens, then pivots to land her feet on the other side. His plum grin bursts open, wide as

the flare of her sweeping red ghagra. Her back arches low, the stretch of the veil covering it falling sideways to reveal her backless and garishly-embellished blouse held together by a couple of thin cotton strings. She tugs his weight onto herself in a similar manner—for just a couple of beats before throwing him off. Lusty cheers ring all around as they perform this set piece again.

Deval is dizzy from taking rapid, shallow gasps of stale air with its mingled odors of perspiration, manure, smoke, tobacco, perfume, incense, excitement, and something more pungent that she cannot place. She aches for the pulsating circle to smother her in its sweat-soaked, opening-and-closing folds. She throbs for the graceful boy, so godlike under those lights, to send her flying up to the star-studded skies. But a swarm of giggling children pushes her into the night's inky edges, and she is thrust apart from a world that has no place for the likes of her.

Catching up, Indu grasps Deval's hand again, tighter this time. "Devalba," she yells close to Deval's ear, "Let's go back. If anything happens, my father and I will be flogged and our own family will black-letter us forever. Mercy."

"Who are they?" Deval yells back, pointing at the cavorting couple.

"Hansraj Baradu, a stableman's son. Spends his days wrestling and doing nothing else. That brazen two-bit girl is likely from his community too. Keep your distance, Devalba. If a low-caste touches you . . . Shambho, Shambho! A month-long purification ritual, remember? We should go back. You promised you only wanted to watch for a few moments!"

Deval knows all about the purification ritual. The lengthy bathing process doesn't sound so bad. It's the isolation with the priests in the royal temple that worries her if she ever has to go through it. Mostly, of course, nobody dares to touch her except for the few maidservants who take care of her. And her parents. And her sister. And her apar-ma. . . just the thought of Bhanuba, who doesn't know

that Deval has sneaked out of the palace, is enough to make the entire world around her come to a thudding, blurry stop.

As they turn away, Deval's last glimpse of Hansraj Baradu remains forever in her memory like a scorching brand left by a red-hot iron: leaning forward to grab his knees, he flips himself off the ground in a forward motion, twists and rotates like a ball while in mid-air, and lands on his feet triumphantly with bare, muscled arms raised high and a smile that lights up the moonless night.

*

At dawn the next morning, Deval stands in the doorway of her apar-ma's quarters watching Bhanuba turn onto her side, and moan a prolonged "Jai Somnath." When the woman sits up and slithers her legs off the swing bed, it sways from its hanging ropes for a while before she steadies it with both hands. For a few moments, Bhanuba sips from her copper bowl until the water's sharp, cool taste forces her eyes wide open. Looking over to the window, she peers into the murky blackness beyond. Registering the early fog, its wisps curling high through the tops of the trees, she turns that formidable head in every direction—up and down, left and right. Only after she seems satisfied that there is nothing different about today's fog and that it will clear soon enough to reveal a fine, normal day, Bhanuba places her thick white veil onto her head with another "Jai Somnath" and adjusts its folds past her shoulders and back. Smoothing her saree folds and the patka tied around her waist, she hawks up the mucus from her inflamed sinuses and aims it perfectly into the spittoon by her feet.

Deval knows better than to address her apar-ma, who has been more than a mother to her, until spoken to. But, when Bhanuba moans again, "Shambho, Shambho. Morning is brutal for a woman my age, it's brutal," Deval ventures a soft, "Namah Shivaay."

Bhanuba squinches her eyes at Deval and the black dog beside her in the doorway. Balu is strutting back and forth with his crooked front legs and brush-like tail sweeping the dust behind him.

Poor-sighted, hard of hearing, and on the extreme verge of eternity—Bhanuba often says of her dog and herself. Now, she responds to Deval with an affectionate, growly "Shivaay Namah."

Their first exchange every morning involves so many invocations to the gods and goddesses that Deval often wonders if those divine beings are even listening anymore.

At the sound of his mistress' voice, Balu pauses erect, twitches his floppy ears, and turns around to gaze past the fog into some clear distance. As if he, like Bhanuba, can look into worlds past.

In that comfortable silence of longtime companions, they feed Balu leftover, crumbling *bajra no rotlo* from a clay pot left outside the door by one of the kitchen servants. Deval's mouth waters at the thought of eating it herself with some fresh ghee and jaggery.

Once he's done, Bhanuba looks Deval over with a frown. "Eh-li, Devli! Look at your loose hair and uncovered head. Like some fatherless child on the streets. Have you no shame? Your father has been the King of Gurjar-bhumi for only two years, and you've forgotten almost everything I taught you before you became a princess. You don't even pay your respects properly to me anymore."

Deval bends immediately to touch the older woman's feet. "Pranaam, Bhanuba."

Grunting in return, Bhanuba smooths Deval's thick locks and places one of her own veils over them. "Devli," she sighs, "you've inherited your looks from your mother's Kathi ancestry with that khajur-brown hair, those amber eyes, and limbs like tambula trunks."

"Hain? Tambula trunks?" Deval sticks her tongue out at Bhanuba, for which she receives a sharp smack on her back.

"So I pray to Goddess Brahmacharini on this second day of the Maha Navratri to give you your mother's patience and forbearance as well, for this world will require that and more from you. Even more than from your older sister and all your half-sisters and half-brothers."

In response, Deval grabs the hand that had smacked her a moment ago, and they set off with Balu trotting unevenly alongside.

"Older sister! Kanak is only patient when it suits her, Bhanuba. Otherwise, she acts like she's the Queen of the whole world. The other day—"

"Yes. Your sister may only be six years older than you, but she knows well how to make people jump at her slightest gesture. You would do well to learn some of her tricks, Devli."

It's getting lighter, though there are still some patches of mist. Deval looks at the sky, wishing yet again that Kanak wasn't always described as the better sister. "It's going to be a good day."

"The goddess' mercy, Devli," says Bhanuba.

They walk steadily and unhurriedly for a while down the wooded path, their heads bobbing past trees whose tops are invisible and whose roots loom large with masses of wildflowers. The pungent-sweet smell reminds Deval of Bhanuba's father, Bhattji, the royal astrologer who used to gather flowers from here daily for his morning puja. They say that his soul had entered the dog, Balu, who had appeared on the day of the old man's death and become inseparably attached to Bhanuba. And this is why Bhanuba had never shed a single tear at the final rites of her father's mortal remains. And why she refused to ever marry and leave the small home where she had lived with this widowed father.

Glaring at Deval through round black eyes, Bhanuba asks, "Where's Indu? She may be new, but she knows her duty is to be with you at all times."

"Still sleeping, ba."

Bhanuba says nothing at first. "I can't take much more in my older years. All you insolent young ones are going to be the death of me," she ventures in the end, biting her lip.

"Nonsense. You'll live forever. Everyone says you'll be apar-ma to my children too," Deval replies instantly because this is part of their parry-and-thrust conversation routine.

Another silence. It's too early for the birds, or too foggy above, because they are quiet. Then, like a sheet of golden silk falling upon them, the sun comes through for a moment. It shimmers through the leaves and branches of the oaks on either side before the fog descends again in pale swathes to cover them.

"I can do all the garba dance steps as quickly as Kanak. Do you want to see?" Deval asks after a short while.

"Na, ben bha," Bhanuba replies. "What do I want with song and dance at my time of life?"

"But am I not old enough to go to the palace garba now, Bhanuba? Learn from Mohinidevi—"

"Look, you've already been doing as you please these days. If your parents find out where you were last night, it will end badly. Going secretly to places with low-caste, polluted people . . . When you were born—"

"I know, Maadi. Your Bhattji saw my horoscope and said I would either become an important queen or die before my sixteenth year. I know."

"He was the greatest astrologer of our time. Everything he ever saw and forecast has come true. See what is happening these days with our neighbors, our allies, our own feudatories who pledged loyalty for generations only a few years ago to your father's uncle, King Sarangdev. They say our Prime Minister failed to secure allyship at both Medpat and Ranthambhor. Those barbarians from Delhi will take any opportunity to invade. My father warned us about all of this. And yet you take stupid risks like you did last night."

"Bhanuba, I will be a famous, fearless queen. Like Queen Udaymati or Naikidevi. And I will build many tall temples and big stepwells and—"

"Fearless? You? Who trembles at the mention of getting up even on a horse?"

Deval's heart drops through her stomach all the way down to her feet, rooting them to the ground. She tries to change the subject. "Balu caught a rabbit again!"

"I'll do a deal with you, Devli." Bhanuba stops and clicks her fingers at Balu. "You learn to ride a horse by the end of Navratri, and I won't tell the King and Queen where you went last night. Or," Bhanuba bends to look into Balu's eyes as he ambles over, "I tell them, and Acharya Damodarji will get to decide whether you need a purification ritual or not. You know how our new head priest loves to preside over that himself from start to finish."

Deval looks at the shivering creature held in Balu's teeth by its neck fur and feels a sudden, sharp sensation on her own neck and back as if the head royal priest has grabbed her. Balu is a gentle beast, yet Deval sees the rabbit as a kindred spirit, trapped helpless by someone much bigger and more powerful.

"You would tell?" Deval asks in a small voice.

Bhanuba takes the rabbit from Balu's mouth and turns it over and across to examine it carefully. Then, tossing the little animal into the hedges behind them, she pats Balu's head and replies, "Make your choice, Devli: the horse or Acharya Damodarji."

3. Moon and Mare

"Stay close and never let them know your fear." The voice is now so familiar that Deval doesn't even have to look at Kapuriya's face to gauge the expression on it.

Blood blooms sour in her mouth, a bump throbs on the back of her head, and she staggers forward on all fours. Dirt and dust make her throat itch and her eyes water. Staring at the mare's hooves, she edges closer along the animal's side even though she senses, from the snorting noises, that the next kick could catapult her into the air again.

From the corner of her gaze, Deval sees the infamous horse trader's arms signaling her to touch the animal. His peacock-colored

robes shimmer and swish with every motion. The black turban resting on his head glitters with more jewels than even the King's own. In his singular getup, he is more like an exotic, otherworldly creature than the Arabian mare. With her veil and saree tossed aside, and her petticoat pulled up between her legs like a dancer's *chalanaka* wound tight around the lower body, she herself looks like a low-caste commoner instead of a Vaghela princess. She should have asked for properly-fitted riding trousers.

"Up, girl, up!" The man hisses. "Even a poor temple mouse has more courage than that. Are they teaching you nothing at the palace besides pretty words and empty gestures?"

She rises, steadying one foot, then the other. Breath in; breath out; three times, just like Bhanuba instructs her when she panics about something. Bhanuba, who has left her to the whims of this wild beast and its merciless master.

The odors of the mare's musk and manure fill Deval's insides. She lifts her right hand, wills it to stop trembling, and places it against the creature's hot flank. Next to the mare's silken whiteness, her own skin is desert sand.

"She's frightened too, child. See?"

Frightened by what, Deval blinks in confusion. When the mare could easily flatten her small body under one foot? Sliding her fingers wider apart, Deval grazes them along the animal's quivering muscles and leans in so that her forehead also rests against those muscles. Listening to the rise and fall of the mare's breath, she matches it with the beat of her own heart. A cool stillness washes over her, and she feels both rooted and airborne at the same time.

"As easy as eating sweet *laadu-laapsi* for dessert, eh, Deval? Maybe you'll amount to something after all. The way things are going these days, even you may need to ride into war to protect your kingdom from your own so-called allies and feudatories." His betel-reddened smiling lips look like luscious mulberries—tart and sweet at the same time—against his creamy skin.

If anyone could see them now and hear how this lowly horse dealer and descendant of even lower-born oil pressers—and as slippery as all of them—is addressing her, a daughter of the great King Karandev Vaghela, swords would be unsheathed in response.

When Deval takes a step back, the mare moves her long face, with its steaming nostrils and liquid brown eyes, closer. Captivated, Deval runs the tip of her index finger down the black star on the mare's forehead and then, emboldened, all the way down to the muzzle. Girl and mare stand still for a few moments as if they are fused together by that single touch.

In one corner of Deval's vision, Kapuriya places the saddle blanket back on the mare and heaves the saddle onto that broad back. The mare only shuffles quietly in place.

"Yes," Kapuriya murmurs. "Jump. Now."

Keeping eye contact with the mare, Deval steps onto the mounting block, places both her hands on the saddle, and pulls herself up. Swinging her right leg over the mare's back, she slides herself over until she's sitting squarely. Leaning forward, reaching along the mare's back, and running her fingers through that gossamer mane, Deval whispers into the soft pink of the left ear, "What is your name?"

"Veerangana," Kapuriya laughs and shakes his head so that his own curly black mane bounces on his shoulders.

For a moment, the man reminds her of one of those graceful temple dancers—so sinewy and fluid in their movements that many consider them to be half-snake, half-human.

"Bhanuba's gift to you, girl, so that you may learn to be a brave veerangana too."

Before Deval can reply, Kapuriya slaps the mare's rump. Startled, the animal trots a couple of steps. Kapuriya clicks his tongue against his teeth twice. The mare bolts forward. Deval tumbles onto the animal's neck and clasps her arms around it as the galloping picks up.

Kapuriya shouts something, but the wind carries his words away before Deval can make them out. From all directions, there is rising music and song as tireless men and women fling themselves about in another night of garba and raas celebrations.

The mare races on, hooves barely touching the ground. When the only sound left to hear is her own roaring of "Veera, Veera," Deval looks up. A luminous half-moon silvers her vision. We're flying to the heavens, Deval laughs, as one being.

THE END (of the excerpt)

Vekkai by Meera Vijayann

VEKKAI

Meera Vijayann

When February turned to March in Sivakasi, there was only one word in the streets: *Vekkai*. It was a word that spread through our town like the plague, a word that made all the women in the colony throw buckets of water in their front yard to cool the mud, to stop it from cracking, to avoid scalding their feet. It pushed people to the stores to get extra fans and, if they had enough money, buy noisy portable generators that'd keep their air-conditioners running. Our home had an old rust-green Kirloskar diesel generator hidden away in a shed near the compound wall. My dad would heave and push and crank it like a wind-up toy until it thundered to life and cool air filled the house again. On days the generator didn't work, there was nothing to do but collapse on the couch under the formidable weight of our own sweat-soaked, leathery skin and watch the clock. Wait for the blades of the fan to turn. Or the TV screen to flicker. Or feel the hum of the fridge.

In Tamil, *Vekkai* didn't just mean heat—it was a blistering, all-consuming torridity that rose from the depths of the earth, radiated from the walls of our houses, and forced factory workers to tie their *lungis* high on their waists so they could wipe grime off their bodies. It was the kind that set off explosions in the firework factories around town. The kind that made us sit indoors for months because swarms

of mosquitoes would rise from open sewers and sink their mandibles into our arms and legs to satiate a manic hunger.

Shelter—an indoor dwelling place of any shape that offered shade from the intractable heat—was not only necessary but critical to our survival.

Yet even our homes seemed like lungs deprived of oxygen, deflated and dungeon-like. By mid-April, there was no water. We filled buckets when we could. Soon, long lines formed outside water lorries, with poor women holding plastic pots up on their heads, fighting to get ahead, their bare feet gray and dry as asphalt. I sometimes climbed on our compound wall and watched them. One drop more, they always cried, please, just a little more! In time, I knew *Agni Nakshatram* would be upon us. Tamil families considered this 21-day-long stretch of blinding heat, the pinnacle of summer, so inauspicious that all they could do was do nothing. Wells dried up. Marriage halls sat empty. Children didn't play outdoors. *Intha Vekkai-la yenna pannamudiyum?* People grumbled. What can anyone do in this heat? For Sivakasi, our industrial town known for its fiery 110° F weather, water in any form was merely a mirage.

Then came one summer when all that changed. It was in the mid-90s, just as I turned eleven, when the single hotel we had in Sivakasi made an announcement. It opened a swimming pool, our town's first.

One afternoon my cousins and I, together with our mothers, all of us fighting to stay out of the punishing sun, walked over to the hotel to inspect the new pool. The hotel staff pointed this way and that, and there it stretched before us, just like we'd seen in the movies.

It was a simple pool, yet thrilling all the same; the rectangular vessel, filled with water, was deep enough for us to dive in and play all afternoon. Markers on all sides let us know the sliding depth:5 ft to 9 ft. We were immediately ecstatic, dreaming up cannonballs and diving routines and coin hunting. My older cousin had a bunch of paisas—flat, roughened, out-of-circulation coins considered useless—that he'd brought in his pocket. I took one and threw it in the water

and watched it sink, eager to see it shimmer at the bottom, a treasure for our first dive.

There was one problem though. We couldn't see through the water—it was blue-green and murky, as if someone had thrown a bucket of paint in it. So we squatted and stared at it from the sides. No luck; it felt like peering into a large, luminous basin of algae-colored milk. I slid my feet in and wiggled my toes. But where were my toes? A tad worried, I tried to talk to my mother. Dressed in mismatched cotton *salwars* and flip flops, our mothers sat in the corner chatting each other up about how the one swimming pool would change our summers and Sivakasi forever.

"Now the kids can come here and play," my mother said, leaning back in a plastic chair and shielding her eyes from the sun, "*Yenna Vekkai.*"

"It's *something*," My aunt replied, straightening her salwar kameez, opening her purse, and handing us some bills. "I think you pay there—" she pointed to two skinny guys standing at the counter, looking bored. "Ask if they have Pepsis. Who can sit out here in this heat without a fan?" She let out a deep exhale and sank back into her chair.

We ran over and thrust the cash at the men. One of them gave us a few coupons and asked what we wanted. It cost ₹10 (about 13 cents in USD) to use the pool for an hour, a reasonable price for middle-class families like ours—the price of three bags of potato chips. I asked one of the attendants why the water was so murky and he said they'd just added something called chlorine. We shrugged. Okay, we said, but would the water ever clear up? We wanted to find our coins, or at least see our own feet. He shook his head.

There was another problem. The pool sat empty for months because no one could get accustomed to the idea of men and women swimming together. For this reason, my cousins and I had a virtual monopoly on the use of the pool for weeks. We didn't complain. We showed up in swimming costumes that clung to our odd, adolescent

bodies. I was developing breasts so I borrowed my mother's old swimsuit, cut out the padding, and pretended I was sexless. My cousins wore their swim trunks, little matchstick men in elastic. Having the pool to ourselves was luxurious—it was our own little private indulgence.

Our jaunts to the swimming pool were the closest we'd come to living in the city. All our earlier getaway attempts to escape the heat involved stripping down to our underwear and piling under a single pipe in an old orchard out in Sattur that belonged to my father's family, or going to my grandmother's house where we'd jump into a water tank made of concrete, all thrown in together with our dogs. My dad would sometimes take us to Kuttralam, the waterfalls famous for their ayurvedic healing properties. At Main Falls, we had to walk along metal guard rails until we had a chance to stand by the rocks and let the water pummel down on our tiny heads. But by the time we got there, hundreds of people stood at every level, bathing, washing, soaping, or scrubbing hot oil off their bodies. The falls were soapy and frothy, and my dad told us they probably contained human feces. That didn't deter us from wanting to stand under those falls. Sometimes, we tried to explore other, less-touristy waterfalls. At Five Falls, we made do by snacking on mangosteen and guavas in the car because my parents didn't like the idea of standing skin-to-skin with groups of bare-chested pilgrims, wound up together like water snakes. The other waterfalls were all hard to get to, one reserved for VIPs and two others tucked away deep in the forest with few parking options. Our circumstances were bleak and boring. Swimming in the pool meant something more than cooling off. It meant that people could gather somewhere other than the temple or the traveling circus or the theater. Bharath Circus came to our town just once a year and set up a large tent on a piece of land near my grandmother's home. The few times my parents took us, however, we had to sit on metal folding chairs in the heat and watch skinny pre-pubescent girls swing from one trapeze to another, or Pomeranian dogs sporting sunglasses

walk on their hind legs in a circle, or men in clown-suits and face paint that made them seem wet with perspiration and panic.

The 19th-century Bhadrakali temple, where my family sometimes went to pray, was no better. We walked barefoot on hot sand and stood arms folded, sweating and grumbling and begging our mothers to take us home while the priest performed the *puja*. If they didn't, we looked around for fruit from the monkeypod trees and nibbled on it. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could compare to a visit to the swimming pool.

The swimming pool also promised something wild: partial nudity. In the afternoons, we'd see women, mostly mothers with their sons and daughters, feral little creatures in frilly frocks and silver anklets and oiled hair, come by just to look at the pool. They'd walk past it, dressed in their cotton salwars, cautiously assessing the water. Was the pool real? Did it hold real water? Was there any possibility of drowning? Was it really cool to the touch? One or two women would dip their feet in hesitantly and watch as their kids swam. No one dared get in. No one dared to wear swimsuits. The rules were vague about bathing gear, costumes, and showering. The only thing they cared about were caps. All the women had hair that fell to their waists in long braids, and the hotel didn't want to deal with cleaning clumps of hair from the drains. Rules meant little in towns like mine though, because the young men who were staffed at the pool were too shy to ask the older women to get out of the pool if they slipped into the water fully clothed or with their braids loosened, their black hair inking the green waters.

Soon, the kids got used to the murky water and grew more confident bobbing up and down, only half their bodies visible. More mothers stopped by and began to congregate in the corners of the pool. My mother and my aunt eventually got in too, fully clothed and delighted. There were no men—no fathers, grandfathers, uncles or brothers—seen around or inside the pool. I imagine they didn't care for any of it—the domesticity of caregiving and really any activity

that would fan their childlike curiosities. My father always went to work and came home at midday to nap for an hour before he left for work again. I seldom saw my uncle.

Without men around, time slowed. The pool, and the women, were set free from all scrutiny. Without watchful eyes, the women gleefully clung to the sides of the handrails and flopped their legs, and dunked their bodies by holding their noses the way they did in temple tanks, peaceful places they relied on for rejuvenation and blessings. Most central temples had a small open tank that served as a reservoir for long spells of summer heat. In some temples, the tanks were used for bathing and cleansing after prayers. Men and women walked down a steep stairway and immersed themselves in the cool, green water, the mythologies around this practice ever-changing. Some people believed the water cured them of chronic illnesses and fevers and purified their minds. In reality, I suspect, most people just came for some respite from the intense heat. It cost nothing to use the tank. The swimming pool was like the temple tank, save for one rule: for 13 cents, women could also have fun.

"*Yenna vekkai*! Ah!" someone would groan, and the others would nod. Yes, this *vekkai* could drive anyone insane.

"Thanni nalla jillinu irukku!" they would call out to their friends, "Vaa! Vaa!" *The water is so chill, Come! Come!*

Soon, word spread, and it seemed practically everyone in Sivakasi descended on the pool. To beat the *vekkai* that pounded down in April and May, women came to the pool dragging their shy little girls in frilly, knee-length bathing suits and chubby, pre-pubescent boys in skin-tight water shorts. My cousins and I invested in a pair of goggles and a foam board, considering all the time we were spending at the pool. There were now swimming coaches with ballooning bellies, teaching the kids how to do the breaststroke and hold their breath underwater. One-half of the pool—the shallow end under 5 ft. deep—was the popular side, reserved for smaller children.

And with time, the water cleared. Sometimes, we threw in loose change in the deep end and dove in, competing with each other, to locate it on the pool floor. With goggles on, I could see clearer than ever the volley of legs and midriffs, the swaying of hair against thighs and down to the blackened feet. I would come up for air only after bumping into quite a few people trying to swim the breadth of the pool. Occasionally, drowning would suddenly strike me as a possibility; there were no lifeguards or hotel staff, or anyone overseeing the pool. The two guys who sat behind the counter to sign people in didn't even know how to swim.

After spending hours at the pool, we would at last haul ourselves outside, throw our clothes on, and head back home for lunch. My mother usually left bowls of cold curd rice and fried mutton in the fridge, and as soon as I ate my fill, I fell asleep. I lay that way—smelling of chlorine and sweat and wet hair—hoping that it'd take time for the heat to get to my damp body. By evening, the *vekkai* would slide back in me as I'd run to answer the phone.

"Do you want to go there early tomorrow?" my cousin would ask, "Before everyone else shows up?"

"Good idea!" I'd squeal, hoping that we'd have better luck tomorrow.

Sometimes, we set off to the pool at odd times, hoping to outsmart the pool crowd. We had no such luck. There would always be crying toddlers in tow with families that insisted on standing around for hours, just watching people swim, or mothers sitting around ordering Limcas and Fantas, talking and talking. Then there were complaints and questions that the staff had no answers to: *How did a frog get in the pool? Can you fish it out? What's that yellow stuff in the deep end? How do you know if someone peed in the pool? Why do we have to wear swimsuits? Why can't I swim with my hair untied? Why do I have to shower before I get in?*

Soon, another announcement followed. There were new time limitations allocated for pool use. I knew that this may have come

after the mothers complained about the crowd at the pool. Everyone wanted their time and space in the water. The same mothers who once claimed the corners with the handrails now flapped their arms around, trying breaststrokes and front crawls, unperturbed by the sagging weight of their salwars. The few men who began to show up clustered around the deep end where my cousins and I usually played, unsure how to claim territory. During swimming lessons, a tyranny of children descended into the pool, screaming and leaping all over each other with their water skirts and anklets, and swim caps. Suddenly it didn't matter where we were in the water; it seemed as though we were being farmed like fish, unable to move without kicking or bumping, or shoving. We needed respite from the blinding heat, but also from each other. The pool no longer had the lingering smell of chlorine and disinfectant; now it was dirt and sweat and salt and talcum powder.

"We should just go to Ayamma's and play with the dogs," my cousin said one morning. "This *vekkai* is unbearable, but I don't want to go to the hotel anymore."

I nodded. By this time the municipality had begun load shedding, the process of shutting out the central power grid to save energy, which meant that our homes were without electricity for eighteen hours a day. Sweating is a tolerable, human thing, but we weren't sweating. We were molting. Some afternoons my mother would mix gram flour and curd and lemon juice into a paste and we'd sit in the bathroom, caked from head to toe like mummies, hoping to save our skin from burns and pigmentation. The earth and sky became one, fire-hot no matter where we turned, so we stayed indoors. Without a purifier, water had to be boiled on our stovetop and poured into an earthen pot so that it remained cool and sweet throughout the day (water evaporated faster in clay pots and therefore lost its heat quickly). It was an ancestral tradition that predated the world of air conditioning and electricity. But soon enough, we tired of that too.

We longed for water *and* fun. Along main street, walls were painted with figures swimming, announcing that the pool was open.

So, there we were again, the three of us with our dogs under a pipe in the old water tank outside my grandmother's house. This time, we turned on the gardening hose and took turns spraying water on each other until the skin on our fingers shriveled like prunes. Then we ate ice apples and mangoes and rice and beans and sat around the dining table until our bodies cooled, and we were ready to brave the heat again, if only for a few hours.

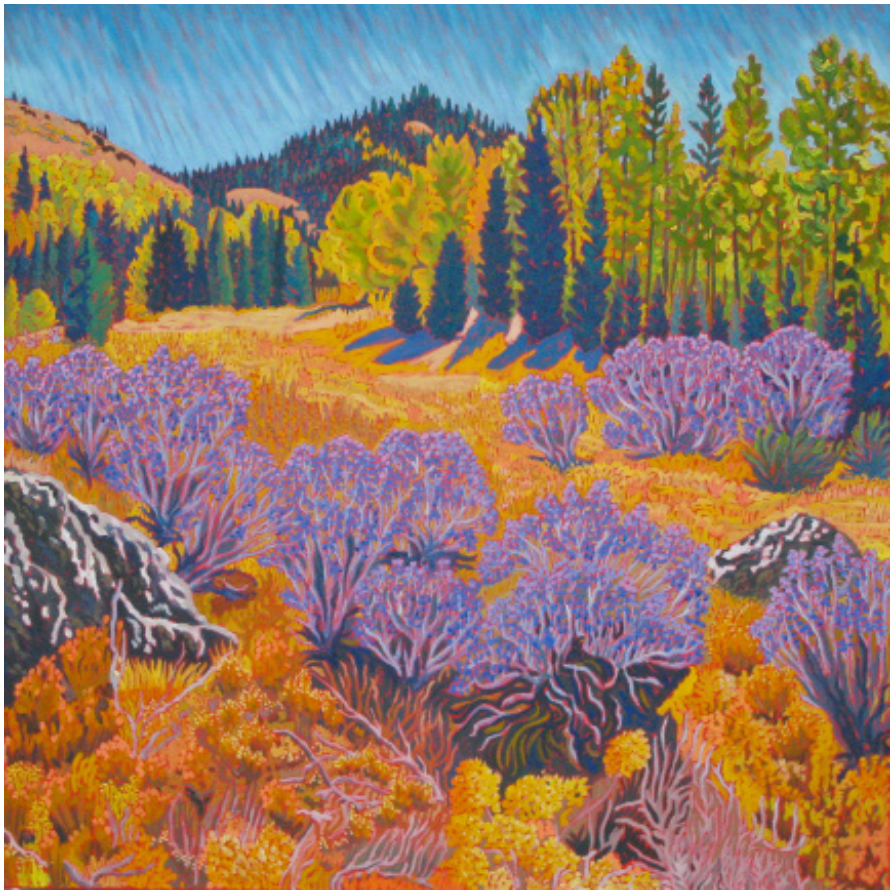
I KNOW RURAL POETS ARE SUPPOSED TO WRITE ABOUT RURAL VIOLENCE

Aurora Shimshak

squirrel flay, cow tongue, and bulls,
and yes, I could speak antlers, repeat
what I heard about knives, bad shots, confess
to the horse unable to stand, the rifle
in Mom's shaking hands. It would fulfill
expectations, make the right person shiver
in a comfortable kind of way., Tthe practicing
of ax swings, the chicken's pupil flit.
Story is Dad chopped their necks without flinching
when Mom brought him home. Story is
my sister raised a duck and my stepmom
made her eat it. One summer with Mom we painted
the deck spearmint, Pepto-Bismol pink, omelet yellow—
hearts, peace signs, wrote our names and Mom,

Grandpa, Grandma. Same deck we dunked the chickens
in a pot of hot water to loosen feathers,
picnic table plucking, my hands on the bumps
of breast skin. But what am I trying to prove?
Can't remember anymore the smell of hot wet bird.
First gunshot of November, all I can think is Dad hated guns,
wouldn't even buy us super-soakers, crossed arms
at cops and robbers, wouldn't even spank us.
When I was seven, we went walking.
Hunters out. Bowl of the valley. Shot sound
lodged in the high-up clouds. Dad shook
his head and I asked why. An uncle's gun,
he said, not yet telling of his grandfather's close-
range aim that ended his life, not yet
his own father's threats of doing the same.
Dad's smile made his words stop.
Still don't know the details of my great-grandfather—
did Dad know him, was there dialogue, a note?
But maybe he told me once, a basement,
so I see a stairwell, a walking to get there,
last air of cellar mold, cold touch of canning jars.

I want to say this is as far as I go,
that I rewind instead to the boy,
my great-grandpa, but the truth is my mind's
in clean-up, soaking rags, sweeping glass,
Great-grandma clutching apron corners
by the clothesline. Truth is fighting
with my suspect desire to turn to fireflies,
a boat ride, late summer, one of those sandbars
that spine the Mississippi—is it suspect to wrap us
in healing too soon? My great-grandpa's boy hands
digging for colder, darker sand, his hands
which are my hands and Dad's and his dad's
and all our hands clawing deep into earth.



Along the Cumbres and Toltec II by Kathleen Frank

THERE IS NO ONE

Leila Farjami

Jubilant children,
alley pebbles and castaway slings—
the martyred sparrow
sprawled on the pavement.
The red siren of a familiar,
imminent bombing.

I am watching the top of a weeping willow
brush the clouds aside.

Two in the afternoon.
Even God in Siesta.

The man with the unkempt hair,
long black mustache,
and grimy fingers

inspects his surroundings,

circles me on his bike,

and asks me for directions.

I step closer,
he presses down his kickstand,
reaches up my little-girl blue skirt,
touches the cold sweat
gathering on my thighs.

My body starts to shiver, chilled.
He tugs on my panty.
Before I freeze,
I bolt,
run home.

Panting,
I tell my mother,
The man touched me!
The man touched me!
Mother, always busy,
glances out the window.
There is no man.

There is no one out there.

Wordless mealtime,
muted moon.

I lean to the mirror,
Toward my reflection.
Her small face,
her sadness.

I don't notice anything else,
except the sensation of

unwashed fingermarks
seeping through the skin,
digging the flesh,
staining the bones.

IN ANOTHER LIFE

Martha Silano

In another life my name was Cocoa Rockledge.
I was sweet but dangerous, my legs thick
with arithmetic, my arms like the birth

of Venus, like a blabbermouth at a house party.
My breath sprawled across a row of peaks,
attuned to the burgeoning melody of schist.

When I was Cocoa Rockledge, each night astounded me
like the climax of an opera by Puccini.
Each morning I'd waken

like a three-sided stem aspiring to be grass.
When I let out my breath, my mouth
was the mouth of the Thames,

my hands two speckled leaves beneath the Whitehall Bridge.
My song what you wake to
at Gulch Creek campground

in June: hick-three-beers (a flycatcher on steroids).
Steadfast and dependable, Cocoa was never
an obedient cow, never raised a sponge

or mop. From her, I learned to never recoil
or constrict. To gather windfall walnuts
from a pile of crumbling bricks.

LA LLAMADA: OIL ON MASONITE, REMEDIOS VARO

Aurora Shimshak

I have come alone to the house of my ancestors. They show themselves to me, weary mouths in the bark of trees. The men back there wanted me to act the child. My hair frightened them, snaking itself back to the moon each night, running loose to that dusty homeplace. Some crater. You wouldn't know it. See how my eyes hold fire. I learned that trick from myself. It isn't safe to glow. But I heard a woman singing and then I couldn't stop. At night, I become a limbic system. Hungry flap of birds. Feel what it is to be called. I wear a mortar and pestle around my neck. My walking grinds the powder. Rhythmic clink of marble raising fog: wet of spider's eggs, clack of fiddler crabs. I have learned how to make myself. When I do, there's proof: I know what it looks like when cities burn. I curl the madder orange clouds around Venus. When I sleep, I hold out one hand to catch currents of cold, cradle in the other my distiller of rose blood. Days without eating, I remember the recipe for soup that disappears all quicksand from under the bed. I laugh. You have to laugh. Look. I have cloaked myself in fabric with the warmth of charred pumpkin meat. How could I act the child? The trick is to listen. Even on the sidewalk. Even as you enter the smoke of advertising rooms. When the color comes, stand in its streak.

CONFINEMENT

Ada Cheng

A TEN MINUTE PLAY

BREAKDOWN OF CHARACTERS:

JOHN	Late 40s, Male, Asian American (Chinese descent)
JOY	Mid 30s, Female, Asian American (Chinese descent)
DA YEN	Early 70s, Male, Chinese immigrant
CINDY	Under 10, Female, Asian American (Chinese descent)

Setting: Dinner time at an apartment at Chinatown in Chicago
Time: 2021 *(The door on stage opens. JOHN, JOY and CINDY enter the apartment, carrying bags and boxes. CINDY starts running toward DA YEN, who is watching TV in the living room by himself.)*

CINDY

Yeye, look at this gift Daddy bought me.

JOHN

Cindy, be careful. People downstairs will complain… Help Mama with the bags to the kitchen, please… Baba, hi.

(CINDY stops running and walks back toward JOY grudgingly.)

JOY

Help me with this bag. You can show it to Grandpa later.

(JOY hands the bag to CINDY.)

Not too heavy, right?

JOHN

What are you watching, Dad?

DA YEN

(*Without looking up*) Wo Bu Zhi Dao… Some soap opera. I lost track. Wuliao, I'm very bored.

JOHN

Are you hungry? Joy is going to cook dinner in an hour or so… Want some sweets? We got some from the bakery.

DA YEN

No. Wo Keyi Deng… I would like to go for a walk.

JOHN

After dinner, OK? We will go after dinner. Yi Qi. The whole family together. Cindy needs a short nap… Give us a couple of hours, OK?

DA YEN

I want to go out now. I haven't been out for days. I'll come back in an hour for dinner.

JOHN

You've been out. We went for a walk yesterday. And the day before

yesterday. We ate out last night, remember? We still got some leftover duck from the restaurant.

(JOY walks from the kitchen, carrying a tray filled with sweets. She puts the tray down on the living room table.)

JOY

Baba, Chi Chi Tien Dien. Your favorite… Fish sound good for dinner? Anything else you want to try? We still have some duck.

DA YEN

Anything's good. I just want to go for a walk… NOW.

JOY

We just got home. Cindy's tired. She might need a nap. I need to cook too.

(JOY turns to JOHN.)

Maybe after dinner? Right, John?

JOHN

That's what I told Dad.

(CINDY walks over from the kitchen.)

CINDY

Yeye, look at this figurine. Can I show you-

JOHN

Cindy, it's not a good time.

DA YEN

I want to leave the house now. By myself… XIAN ZAI. NOW.

JOY

Cindy, please. Go to your room. Take a short nap. I'll wake you for dinner.

(CINDY stomps and leaves the living room.)

JOHN

Dad, we've had this conversation. Joy and I-

DA YEN

I want to see my friends. I want to have tea with them. I haven't seen them for days.

JOY

We can do that after dinner. Together.

DA YEN

I don't want company. Wo Zi Ji Qu. I'll go by myself.

JOHN

Dad, I'm sorry. I don't feel comfortable letting you out by yourself. I just can't…. It's not convenient for us right now. You need to listen.

JOY

(*Whispering to JOHN*) Maybe we should tell him the truth now?

DA YEN

You can't keep me at home forever. I'm not your prisoner. I've been through that back in China. I didn't escape that place for this.

(DA YEN stands up enraged. He paces back and forth in front of the TV.)

JOY

(JOY physically positions herself in between DA YEN and JOHN.)

Dad, that's not what John meant. He's worried – John, it's best we explain –

DA YEN

It's the holidays. Tons of events at the center. I want to go there. I want to see my friends.

JOHN

Dad, it's not safe. It's during the pandemic. Better to stay home these days. Cindy's not vaccinated, so –

DA YEN

I wear a mask everywhere. I just want to walk around. That's all. OK? I promise.

JOY

John's not being unreasonable. He's just concerned about everyone's safety. Yours too.

DA YEN

I can't even leave the house by myself...? WEI SHE ME?!! WHY?! I promise I will wear a mask.

JOY

How about this? You can have people over if you want, OK? Right, John?

JOHN

OK, we can plan something. I can ask your friends to come over…

Tell me the people you want to invite. I'll invite them… We'll do that next week.

DA YEN

That's fine. I still want to go out. Like I used to. NOW.

JOY

When we have time to walk with you. When we – Just wait for a couple of hours. After dinner.

DA YEN

NO. BY MYSELF. XIAN ZAI.

JOHN

Dad, please understand –

DA YEN

Understand what?! I can't even walk around anymore?

JOY

There's a reason. (*JOY whispering*) John, we should tell him. You can't keep him in the dark forever.

JOHN

Baba, it's not safe right now. I just want you –

DA YEN

I wear a mask.

JOY

It's not that, Dad. John, we should just be honest with him about what's going on.

JOHN

Baba, it's not just about the virus. There're other things, OK?

JOY

John, let's treat him like an adult. He'll understand. We can't keep him inside forever. He's getting upset –

JOHN

He's MY DAD. I'm responsible for his safety. Our safety. I'm the man –

JOY

He's MY DAD too. What's wrong with you? I know you're under a lot of pressure trying to protect us. I'm simply saying – We're in this together.

JOHN

I don't want to burden him. It's too much for him.

JOY

He's going to find out no matter what. He watches TV for God's sake.

DA YEN

She Me Shi? Tell me. Tell me now.

JOHN

Dad, the world's not safe right now. Particularly for you and Joy. I need to protect you.

DA YEN

I understand, but I can't live my life like this. We just need to be careful, wearing a mask –

JOHN

Not just the virus. It's not safe right now. It's my job to –

JOY

Dad, what John's trying to say is –

JOHN

We're the target, OK? Chinese people. Asians. Chinatown. When we're out and about – People are being harassed. Attacked. It's not safe. I can't –

JOY

Dad, people see us as responsible for the pandemic. (Sigh) Hate crimes have shot up. We don't want anything to happen to you. Elders and women have been the target. We're worried. That's all.

DA YEN

Did something happen again? I know things. My friends and I at the bakery, we've been talking about this for a year. Do you really think I know nothing?

JOHN

I'm sorry, Dad. I should've been honest. I –

JOY

WE should've been honest. WE. Both of us. John didn't want to worry you. He feels responsible. He –

DA YEN

What happened this time?

JOHN

Not too far from here. Woom Sing Tse. About your age. I don't think

you knew him. (Deep sigh). Shot 22 times. Like an execution. He was on his way to the newspaper stand. I can't take a chance with your life.

JOY

We went to the vigil a few days ago.

DA YEN

How come you didn't tell me? I would want to be there. What's wrong with you two? You think so little of me?!

JOY

I wanted to be honest, but John –

JOHN

I'm sorry, Dad. It's my job as a son to keep you safe. Our elders are being attacked. I can't do a damn thing as a man. For two years now. I feel like I'm failing- I don't like feeling this helpless.

DA YEN

How can you be so naïve? You don't think I have experienced racism before 2020? You don't think I know what it's like to be targeted? To be attacked?

(DA YEN sits back down on the couch.)

I kept quiet. I kept my mouth shut. To protect YOU. I say nothing, so I don't burden YOU…You think I'll be safe if I don't go out by myself? How about Cindy's and Joy's safety? How about YOUR safety? You can be attacked too. You don't think I worry about you as your father?.... Am I that useless to you now?

JOHN

I don't know how else – I can't protect you when I'm not around. I'm sorry, Dad.

DA YEN

I understand. But you can't keep me inside forever. If people want to do harm, you can't stop them. People can come for us anywhere. We aren't safe at home… and I still need to live my life.

JOY

Dad, maybe we can talk about how to keep you safe. Or keep us safe. Together as a family. We should've consulted you. It should've been a family decision.

JOHN

Thank you, Joy. I'm sorry. I dismissed you… I should've listened to you. I'm sorry.

DA YEN

We can talk later. Let me help you with dinner, Joy. I'm good with fish.

JOY

Sounds good. Thank you.

DA YEN

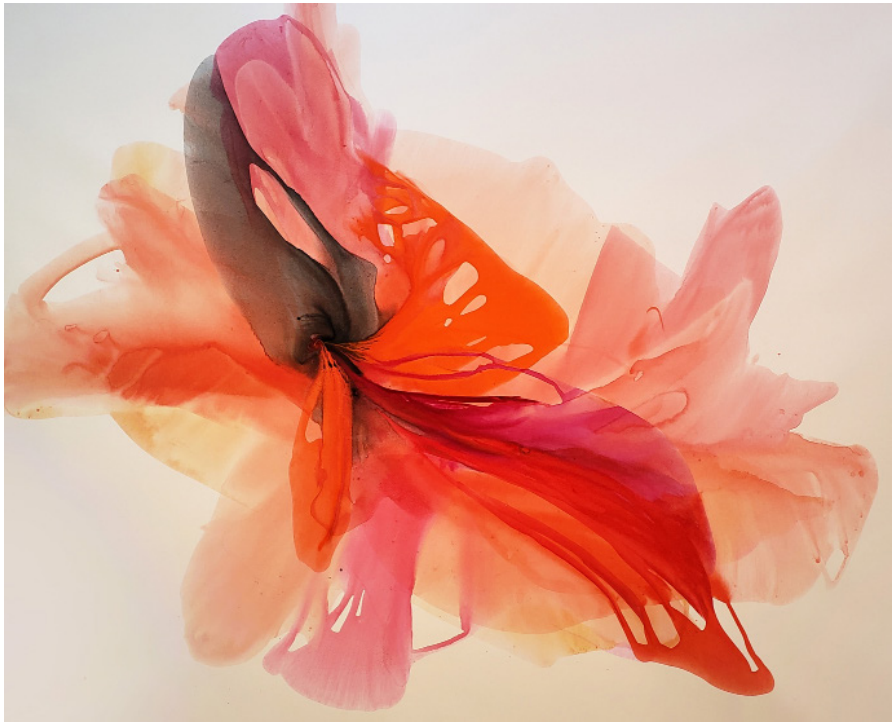
You're still my son, John. I'm responsible for you as long as I'm still alive. Your whole family. That hasn't changed with my age. I'm not useless. I'm not. I'll fight for you.

All of you.

(DA YEN embraces JOHN and JOY. All three

turn around and walk back toward the kitchen in silence.)

BLACKOUT



Hope by Bette Ridgeway

BRAIDED

Michele Rappoport

The barking is excited, high-pitched, almost hysterical. I hear it even before I step out of the car. I follow the yips past the community college trailer, past the cars where I half-expect to see trapped animals lunging at windows. The barking grows louder. I am prepared to smash those windows, but when I reach the cars, no dogs are inside.

Finally, I see the source of all that barking–a ramshackle wooden building more at home on a bayou than at a sprawling state prison. Of course, there are dogs here, and I've just found their barracks–a one-story canine cellblock next to a large agility field where the dogs work out, but their yard is strewn with bar hurdles and collapsible tunnels instead of basketballs and hoops.

I can only guess what these dogs do. They might be used to detect contraband or maybe to track. I push away the image of a German shepherd lunging at an inmate, but they might be here for that, too. I don't like to think of dogs who are trained to attack humans. The only context I have for dogs is loving–pets to be cherished and clients in my animal massage practice.

As I'm mulling this over, a strong wind catches me off guard. It sweeps across the desert as fighter jets from Davis Monthan scream overhead. Between the wind, the barking and the planes, I can't hear

a thing. I want to get closer to the dogs, but a sign warns me not to, and I know better than to break a prison rule.

At the sally port I wait for my colleagues. I try to write a little, but the wind flaps the sheets of my notebook so fiercely it's impossible to get more than a few words out before I have to wrestle the pages down. I study one of the signs greeting visitors–*No paper money beyond this point*. Soon, signs like this will make sense to me. I will learn to think upside down.

My colleagues arrive and we wait for the bus, driven by a trusted inmate. Today we get the cowboy. He takes a swig from his see-through water bottle with one hand and swings the wheel so hard with the other that when we turn, I almost fall out of my seat. We pass the "Complex Laundry" building. I've noticed it often on our way to the units and still haven't figured out what it means. Laundry with issues? Psychologically challenged laundry?

At the guard station for the high-security Rincon unit, we pack our belongings and class materials into gray plastic bins for inspection. We flash our badges, then pass through the metal detector holding our breath. You never know what might set it off. Could be the underwire of your bra, a hairpin you forgot, or the small metal nose bridge on your mask. Or nothing at all. I beep and the guard wands me, front then back, before unlocking the gate.

Two hours later, we're at the Santa Rita unit. The class hasn't started, but Duff is writing already. His hand sweeps the page softly, like a drummer hitting a ghost note. I ask if he's brought something to read.

"Maybe."

***

In the desert, summer arrives like an unwanted relative with a large suitcase. You know she's coming, but you're afraid she'll never leave.

It's September, but the days are still in the hundreds. At the county animal shelter, the sun glints off the huge metal sculpture of

a dog and cat mounted on the entrance wall. Most days it doesn't matter if you brush up against it, but on a day like today, it could burn you instantly.

Inside Pod 1, the dogs are waiting for me. Some know me from previous massages. Others are just eager to greet anyone who might provide a treasured resource–a treat, a walk, a hug. When people ask what kind of dogs I work on, I tell them where I volunteer there are only two kinds: pit bulls and chihuahuas. I'm not joking. That's pretty much all there is. If you believed the bad rap and myths about pit bulls–that they are born vicious, that their jaws lock after they bite, that they are only bred for fighting–you'd never set foot inside those kennels. Of course, there are the sensational news stories of pit bulls committing acts of violence, but those are the exceptions. The ones I've met are the ideal massage clients–polite, earnest, grateful, sweet.

I see a graduate of one of my massage classes leashing up Bruno, a 90 lb. pit bull who could clearly overpower her but instead waits patiently with one of those huge pittie smiles on his face. But when a neighboring pit starts to bark and the whole pod turns into bedlam, even Bruno loses it. He leaps against Kathy like an enormous black ball bouncing off a wall.

"Anyone need a massage?" I ask, and we both laugh, because we know everyone in this high stress environment needs one, animals and humans alike. It's hard to turn any animal away, but in a shelter housing hundreds of animals on any given day, we must triage the cases to make the most of our resources.

Kathy exits the kennel and the heavy barred door clangs behind her. "Well, Bruno, I guess, but first things first," she says, shaking the leash. "Maybe Meatloaf or Betty?"

I've been avoiding Meatloaf. He's another massive pit, like Bruno, but Meatloaf has a bite history. He might have hurt a child, killed a cat, or turned on his owner. All the stereotypes of bad pit bulls come to mind, and I fight them, because I know that in most cases, that's

all that they are–stereotypes. I could get the details about Meatloaf in two taps on the shelter app, but I'd rather not know.

***

I open my backpack. It's prison-regulation clear plastic so the contents have nowhere to hide. I take out some lined paper, mechanical pencil, Staedtler eraser, the good kind that doesn't leave marks. That's all. Listening to men read their stories and poems and critiquing their work doesn't require a lot of equipment.

More students filter in and fill the hard plastic desk-chairs that circle the room. They wear bright orange jumpsuits and their skin is florid with tattoos. Skulls, serpents, arrows, flags, clenched fists, signs, and symbols I can't identify. Some sit in front of a whiteboard with blue marker writing left over from a previous class. The lesson spells out the different dimensions of personality. INFJ, ESTP, ISTJ–*Who am I?*

Duff is still writing. I take in his angular frame, the youthful face with features that seem to reassemble themselves each week. A crooked, broken-jaw smile reveals a dark space where a lower molar should have been. Jumpy eyes. I see Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase"–all sharp angles on reverb, fragmentation, and integration.

Duff stops to read what he's written, but his hands look like they're still moving. They are large compared to the rest of him. Strong, art-making hands that could chisel marble and sculpt statues, but instead they choose to draw delicate natural things. I remember the first time he showed me one of his drawings, a flowering prickly pear in colored pencil, each curve and shadow painstakingly rendered–no shortcuts. He told me he paints, too. Watercolors. Oil paints, even acrylics, aren't allowed, so he improvises, using floor wax to make the colors flow and bread flour as a thickener.

"Morning, everyone." My colleague Evelyn sits a few desks away. She wears an abstract black and white-patterned dress she made herself. "Today I'm going to read you a special kind of story, so listen carefully. There's a lot going on."

Evelyn reads in a soft British voice more suited to singing lullabies than talking about murder and dismemberment. She is calm and measured in the telling, no detail spared, as she weaves that story into another about the knives in her kitchen. It's an example of a braided essay, a way to tell two stories at once, and a craft technique she wants the students to learn so they can deepen their work.

The words leave Evelyn's mouth like a secret hitting the air for the first time. *I'm a murderer*, she reads.

The men listen impassively. Some take notes. It's a mixed-race class, normal anywhere else, but not in prison, where the races self-segregate, and the wrong look, the wrong word between the wrong men could get someone killed. But in this creative writing class, these men are just classmates sharing ideas. I'm the newest teacher, but some of these men have been attending for years.

I glance around the room. All heads are bowed over the page, all eyes on the story they might have told themselves. But I don't want to know what these men did in a former life. I'm getting to know them as storytellers, essayists, poets, and insightful teachers themselves when they critique each others' work. I confess, I've googled a few of them, fingers hovering over the keyboard, hesitant to click. I hear my mother's voice. "Careful what you wish for." But I click anyway and find myself relieved when nothing turns up.

Six knives hang above my butcher's block but the bread knife is my favorite.

The room is hot. I pull the covid mask away from my face to let in a little air.

Yes, but that wasn't why I got thirty-two years. The judge didn't like that I cut the body into eight pieces… The body was dead! Why did the judge think that was worse than murder?

I search the circle of desks for some reaction, but find only blank stares.

When I slice a ripe tomato, the soft flesh bulges before it surrenders to the knife…

Evelyn sets her essay down and waits. This is not a high school English class. No one is doodling or daydreaming. These students are enthusiastic participants. It doesn't take long before the comments pour out of them.

"I think it's sad the murderer didn't get why it was bad to cut up a body, even a dead one. How come he couldn't feel that?"

"Sociopath," a voice calls out from across the room.

"No, man, he don't have to be."

Duff fidgets beside me. He usually has something insightful or funny to say. But this time, he lets the others talk first. I try not to stare at the infant's head tattooed on his skull, but it fascinates me–a baby he's taken with him to prison.

When Duff finally speaks, I can't make out all the words, but his body language, upright and forward like a student bursting to give the right answer, tells me he's saying something significant. A lot of the guys mumble and low-talk, but I haven't learned that language yet. All I can gather is that he was connected to the story somehow. Maybe he knew the inmate in Evelyn's essay. Perhaps he's studying to become an attorney and tried to help him.

After class, the conversation continues along the concrete path back to the main sally port. Desert grit gets under my feet, and I wriggle my toes to release it without taking off my sandals.

Duff rushes to catch up to me as though he has something to explain. His face is tight. When his eyes latch onto mine, I notice they are a gentle gray, the color of walking rain.

"I've been in since I was 18," he tells me gulping air after his short run. "I've only got nine years left, but in some ways, I wish they'd just given me life."

"Really?"

"I'll be 53 when I get out. What am I supposed to do?"

***

Tonight I dream of a large cardboard box. CAUTION is marked on all sides so even a fool would know to keep out. But I am curious.

I peek under the half-opened lid and something cold and muscular shoots out. *Cobra*. It towers above me, hood spread like a cape. It circles my head and attaches itself to the back of my skull. I struggle to pull it off, and when I do, clumps of hair are gone from where it held me. Only a faint impression of banded scales is left behind.

***

A week after the last creative writing workshop at the prison, it's my turn to teach.

"Has anyone heard the term found poetry?"

A few mumbles, but no hands go up.

"Well, that's what we're going to talk about today. How you can find the makings of a poem anywhere."

"Yeah, like from the instructions on a bucket of chemical cleaner." Duff gets it already.

I distribute a selection of found poetry for the students to ponder–newspaper erasures, words and art cut and pasted together, poems created by flipping through books–as well a short email from *National Geographic* they would use to make their own found poem.

Duff drums his fingers lightly as he studies the handout. "Can we use anything on this page?"

"Yes, anything. Let's begin."

Duff sits next to me, close enough to touch pinkies. I steal a look at his paper. Blacked-out words and phrases fill the page. The artist in him is working, too, as he uses space thoughtfully to create a sort of visual rhythm in black and white.

"Okay, time. Who wants to share?"

The students have done a good job following instructions, but all of their work sounds the same. The words overlap and follow each other like verses in a round.

Duff fidgets in his chair. His hair is growing back, taking the baby tat with it. I notice another portrait I missed last week. When Duff looks to the right, I see it tucked under his occiput like a puma hiding below a ledge. An oversized head with bulging eyes looks back. It

reminds me of every alien drawing I've ever seen. My eyes hop from one portrait to the other until the baby's eyes and the alien's eyes become one.

"Duff? You have something for us?"

He reads very quickly, as though he might run out of air before he gets to the end. He's drawn from the same words as the other students, but arranged them in unexpected ways to keep the writing lively and fresh.

Then, out of nowhere, I hear my email address. Suddenly, the room is a large cardboard box, hissing. With no access to the internet and certainly no personal information about us, how could my email address have gotten into Duff's poem? And slowly it comes to me. The answer is so obvious. It was because I'd forgotten to black it out! My email address was at the top of every handout I distributed, for any student to see, but Duff was the only one to use it in his found poem.

The elevator of my stomach bounces up a floor then shoots down to the basement. I am sweaty, knotted. Certainly there are worse things than handing your email address to a dozen convicted felons, but I can't think of any.

***

Meatloaf is on his feet at the front of his kennel, eyes locked on mine, tail up. The tension in his body releases in short, intense shivers, like an earthquake rising from his soul. I check in with myself for calmness (I am not) and let him sniff the back of my hand before entering his space.

Once inside, I stand like a tree, letting him sniff my hand again and all the lower parts of me. He's already detected the treats in my back pocket and starts mouthing for them. I fish one out and he slops it up with a gentle mouth. "Good boy," I say, as I lay hands on him to begin his massage.

Meatloaf plunks his butt down, back toward me like a tawny mountain. Ah, so this is not your first massage, is it, boy? My hands

compress his shoulders as best I can, because the muscles are so large and firm they resist like steel. I think of the volunteers I've trained, all braver than me, who read the same notes but didn't hesitate to let a disturbing event from Meatloaf's past get in the way of providing him some comfort. I feel ashamed it took me so long to do the same.

My hands follow the landscape of Meatloaf's body as he relaxes progressively from sitting to lying on his side, and then ending belly up in a state of bliss. His massive head is turned toward me, eyes shut. If he were one of my cat clients, he'd be purring. I do another check for my own state of mind and find he has calmed me, too.

***

I scan the day's headlines on my phone waiting for the other writers at my Thursday night workshop to filter in. The late afternoon sun is intense. It roasts my back through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Evelyn arrives next and then Jim, who leads our group. They discuss the inmates' work and whether some of it might be suitable for the prison literary journal.

I am still checking the news when I hear Duff's name.

"…and then he just blurted it out."

Oh, no. They're discussing my idiot mistake, the one that could derail the entire workshop if the authorities found out. I want to crawl under the table.

Jim leans back in his chair. He's wearing the same tee shirt he wore last week. He does this a lot, like a defiant kid who won't change out of his favorite clothes.

"So, he told on himself?"

"He did, in front of the whole class."

Slowly, I realize they are not talking about my email address. They are talking about the man in Evelyn's essay who murdered another man and then chopped him up into eight pieces. They are talking about Duff.

***

Houses and shopping centers drop away as open desert takes hold just past the city limits. I drive a little faster now, trying to make up for a late start. When the new shelter was built three years ago, saguaros outnumbered housing developments, but sprawl is quickly closing the gap. Dogs are already on my mind when I see one running flat out on the other side of the road. No harness, no collar, just a blue and white pit bull's sculpted body, legs pumping, rat tail high. Chances are good he's a shelter dog that's gone over the wall. I carry a slip leash in the trunk at all times, but by the time I turn around and pull over, he's long gone.

***

It's been a week since I unwittingly gave my email address to every student in the Santa Rita workshop, but just a few days since I realized one of them was a murderer. I have been thinking about little else since.

I arrive early before my colleagues. The prison wind is up and blowing hard. Dust swirls a few feet away, building into a small dirt tornado. I think of moving, but seconds later it's gone.

Soon the bus will come and take us to Santa Rita. I will be face to face with Duff, or rather the two Duffs I am struggling to hold together in my mind. The artist who draws and writes with such insight and sensitivity and the man who bludgeoned another man to death with a hammer. The one who waited nine days before he stood over the body and decided the best thing to do would be to carve him up like a butcher apportions a carcass of meat. The man who used those strong sculptor hands to hack through the last of the bone and tissue until each body part came free.

Duff is one of the first students to arrive. He takes a seat next to me but turns his back to talk with Evelyn on his other side. I wonder if he's embarrassed to face me. Maybe he thinks something's changed between us, that I may be his teacher but no longer his friend. I am grateful he wasn't there to see my shock when I realized what

he'd done. It gave me time to regain my composure, time to start to process it all, without showing him I was horrified.

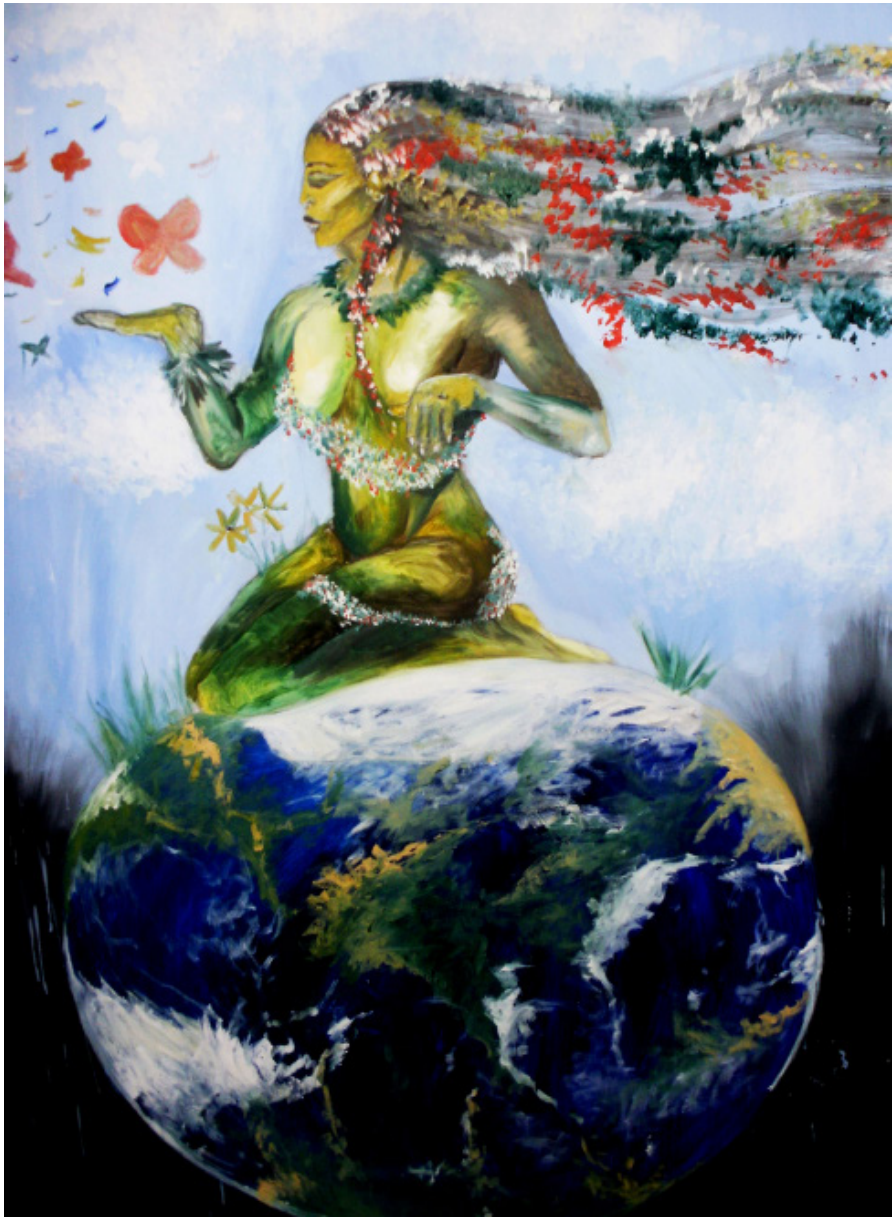
I scan the room, nod at the men I know. Any one of them might have done what Duff did–or worse. As long as I don't know, they are who they've always been.

But I have a new identity, as yet unformed. Its task is to incorporate an artist and a murderer in the same human body–one mind, one heart, capable of two extremes.

I try. I picture the warp and weft of a human braid, weaving through life and the lives of others, sometimes aware, sometimes not, of the mysteries we wear like raincoats.

Duff turns to face me and smiles.

It's the same man who sat next to me last week. I smile back, eyes on his, searching.



Mother Nature by Britnie Walston

ENGLISH WORDS

Jeanine Walker

Sehwan slouches at his desk, a silvery
feather dangling from his earlobe.
Each class he makes me laugh before

he answers my question, "How are you?"
He tends toward a comic
self-deprecation, and I know

that, understand his ways.
"I'm—not so good," he says again.
A small grin. Meanwhile his friend Justin,

who always sits up straight,
who chose to be given an English
name, answers the same

each time I ask how he is: "Perfect!"
And I think it's because
Justin wants an A and I have to say,

it's working, but the fact is
I haven't written their final yet

which means the students are studying

to ace something that doesn't
exist. I didn't teach them
that idiom, "to ace,"

but I taught them a light
at the end of the tunnel
and look on the bright side

and it's not the end
of the world and they've taken
these idioms one by one beyond language

into meaning which is the place
behind the mountain
where the words go to find

their slumber, and where we go
to wake the words, though they
won't be roused by a palm on their

shoulder, nor will they come with us,
just their fragrance, a spritz of their scent
on our skin as we wander back

into the land of the speaking
speechless.

EDITORIAL STAFF BIOGRAPHIES

Sophia Backus is the Assistant Editor-in-Chief of the internationally published journal, *Silk Road: A Literary Crossroads* where she previously served as an Assistant Editor, Managing Editor, and Layout Editor while she was a student. She has been published in *Oregon's Best Emerging Poets 2019: An Anthology* and *PLUM: Pacific's Literature by Undergraduates Magazine* in 2019. She holds a degree in Creative Writing from Pacific University where she minored in Literature and Editing & Publishing.

Jung Hae Chae is the author of the forthcoming memoir-in-essays, POJANGMACHA PEOPLE (Graywolf Press, 2025), winner of the 2022 Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize. Previously, she won the 2021 Crazyhorse Prize in Nonfiction, the 2019 Emerging Writers Contest in Nonfiction from Ploughshares, and a 2019 Pushcart Prize in nonfiction. Her writing can be found in *AGNI, Guernica, New England Review, Ploughshares, swamp pink* (formerly *Crazyhorse*), and the Best American Essays 2022.

Leilani Esperanza is from the Island of Hawai'i and is completing a degree in Creative Writing at Pacific University of Oregon. She aspires to write bestselling novels and is in college until she figures out how to do that. From not reading any books as a kid, her views changed due to a passionate bookworm who sat next to her on the bus. Leilani now cries when her schoolwork gets in her way of rereading six-hundred page novels.

Jazmine Henning received her Bachelor's in English Literature from Pacific University in 2023. She has worked as an writer and editor at her high school newspaper and the Pacific Index. She is currently located in Oregon, but plans on moving to New York with her beloved cat, Autumn, to pursue a career in magazine publishing.

Brent Johnson teaches in the English department as well as directs the First-Year Seminar program at Pacific University. He has published creative nonfiction essays and poetry in journals ranging from *Ascent* and *RiverTeeth* to *Gray's Sporting Journal* and *North American Review*. He is currently working on a memoir based on his travels in an RV with his family through Montana as well as a chapbook of flyfishing poems.

Lane Johnson is studying English literature, editing & publishing, and Spanish language at Pacific University, where he is also the Managing Editor for The Pacific Index newspaper. Before studying at Pacific, Lane was the Editor-in-Chief for The Denali arts and literature magazine at LCC. Hailing from the small farm town of Shedd, Oregon, Lane is a serial hobbyist, forever juggling cycling and outdoor adventures with his passion for literature and language. He is looking forward to a semester of study abroad in Spain, and he hopes to one day work in book publishing.

Kaleb Makimoto is a senior at Pacific University and both an Assistant Editor and Editorial Assistant for Silk Road. He mainly writes in Science Fiction as he attempts to bring his wild ideas and imagination to life for others to read. He has previously worked as an Assistant editor for PLUM and was writer for the Pacific Index Newspaper back in 2020. Kaleb is majoring in Creative Writing with a minor in Editing and Publishing and he has one novel already published entitled *The Cage of Doom*.

Keya Mitra is a professor of creative writing and literature and Director of Creative Writing and Editing and Publishing at Pacific University, where she won the 2018 President's Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching and also edits the internationally distributed literary journal *Silk Road Review: A Literary Crossroads*. In 2021, she was named a finalist by PEN America for the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction for her novel *Human Enough*. Keya is a Fulbright Scholar, graduate—PhD and MFA—of the University of Houston's creative writing program, and Bread Loaf and Sewanee scholar. Her work has appeared in *Best New American Voices, The Kenyon Review, The Bellevue Literary Review, The Southwest Review*, and many more.

Dalton Sikes is a writer born in Southern California but raised in the Pacific Northwest. He currently is a Managing Editor for the internationally-distributed *Silk Road Review*. Dalton's work has appeared in Audeamus and Wingless Dreamer. Additionally, he has presented at the Northwest Undergraduate Conference on Literature, Northwest Undergraduate Conference in the Humanities, and Oregon Poetry Association Annual Conference. Dalton's work ranges from dark to delightful through poetry and prose.

Shian Sparks is a writer born and raised in Hillsboro, Oregon. She is studying English Literature at Pacific University, where she also works as the Associate Editor for the International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity. Additionally, she works with Pacific's English Department as the Visiting Writers Series Coordinator.

Born in Nebraska and raised in Western Colorado, **Zoe Stanek** has found her place among the trees in Oregon's Pacific Northwest. There, she attended Pacific University as a Creative Writing major with a

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Born and raised in Oregon, **Ashley Strobel** has always found a love for the nature around her and the rainy days that occupy the latter days of the year. Even with a wonderful world around her, she found herself diving into many worlds people create time and time again. From fantasy books, to shows, and games, there's no end to the worlds Ashley enjoys exploring. Ashley served as one of the Layout Editors of *PLUM* as well as *Silk Road Review: A Literary Crossroads*. It is her hope to graduate with a creative writing degree and pursue further work on her novels while exploring all different kinds of worlds.

Isabelle Williams is a senior at Pacific University majoring in journalism and minoring in both theater and editing & publishing. She is a layout editor for Silk Road Review as well as the Arts and Culture editor for The Pacific Index. She is also passionate about immigrant justice journalism, and has published work with The Immigrant Story in Portland. She has also self-published her own zine, *Education and Immigration*, chronicling the experiences of Gen-Z and Millennial immigrant students in the Portland-Metro area. In her free time, she enjoys reading novels of all genres and traveling whenever she gets the opportunity.

Los Angeles native **Désirée Zamorano** is the author of the highly acclaimed literary novel, *The Amado Women*. Her novel *Human Cargo*, was Latinidad's mystery pick of the year. An award-winning and Pushcart prize nominee short story writer her work is often an exploration of issues of invisibility, injustice or inequity. A selection of her writing can be found in Catapult, Cultural Weekly, The Kenyon Review Online and Akashic's South Central Noir. "Caperucita Roja" was chosen as a distinguished short story in Best of American Mystery and Suspense, 2022. Her novel *Dispossessed* is forthcoming from Rize.

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Jenny Bhatt is a writer, literary translator, and creative writing instructor. Her 2020 story collection, *Each of Us Killers*, won a Foreword INDIES award. One of her stories was included in the 2021 *Best American Mystery and Suspense* anthology. Her literary translation, *Ratno Dholi, the Best Stories of Dhumketu*, was shortlisted for the 2021 PFC-VoW Award. The US edition of that translation was out in 2022 as *The Shehnai Virtuoso and Other Stories.* She lives in Dallas, Texas. Find her at https://jennybhattwriter.com.

Molly Biskupic is from Appleton, Wisconsin. Her work has been published in the 2015 *Harvard Summer Review*, *Illuminations*, and *Wisconsin's Best Emerging Poets*. You can follow her @mollybiscutie on Twitter and Instagram.

An educator-turned artist, storyteller, and creator, **Dr. Ada Cheng** has utilized storytelling to illustrate structural inequities, raise critical awareness, and build intimate communities. Committed to amplifying and uplifting marginalized voices, she has created numerous storytelling platforms for BIPOC and LGBTQIA community members to tell difficult and vulnerable stories. Dr. Cheng teaches at both Dominican University and Northwestern University. She has been a speaker for Illinois Humanities Road Scholars Speakers Bureau since 2019. Her interests encompass academia, storytelling/performance, and advocacy. For her artistic work, please check out her website: www.renegadeadacheng.com.

Award-winning photographer **Natalie Christensen**'s focus is ordinary settings, seeking the sublime. She deconstructs to color fields, geometry and shadow. Christensen has exhibited in U.S. and international museums and galleries; was a UAE Embassy culture tour delegate; recently was invited as Artist-in-Residence Chateau d'Orquevaux, France; and books include *Minimalism in Photography*, cover and featured artist, *teNeues*, *Düsseldorf*, *Germany* and *007 – Natalie Christensen*, Setanta Books, London. She has work in permanent collections and her photography has been featured in many noted fine art publications.

Charlie Clark was a 2019 NEA fellow in poetry and received scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He is the author of *The Newest Employee of the Museum of Ruin* (Four Way Books, 2020). His poetry has appeared in *New England Review*, *Pleiades*, *Ploughshares*, *Threepenny Review*, *West Branch*, and other journals.

Monique Debruxelles is the author of four short story collections and co-author of three crime novels. Her short fiction has appeared in English in *The Southern Review*, *ANMLY*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *Firmament*. Retired from a career in the civil service, she lives in a suburb of Paris and writes about the mystery and magic that lie beneath even the most mundane routines.

Leila Farjami is a poet, literary translator, and psychotherapist. In addition to publishing seven poetry books in Persian, her work has appeared in *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Hey, I'm Alive*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Nonconformist Magazine*, *Nimrod Journal*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Poetic Sun*, *Poetry Porch*, *Press Pause Press*, *RiverSedge: A Journal of Art and Literature*, *Spotlong Review and Sun*; was published by Tupelo Press for their 30/30 Project, and has been translated into Swedish, Arabic, Turkish, and French. Leila enjoys translating sacred

poetry by Rumi into English and has translated a comprehensive volume of Sylvia Plath's poetry into Persian.

Santa Fe artist **Kathleen Frank** travels throughout the Southwest/West, seeking landscape paintings and vistas. Using vibrant hues, she captures light, pattern and a glint of logic in complex terrains. Exhibitions include Northwest Montana History Museum; UNM Valencia; International Art Museum of America; MonDak Heritage Center| Art & History Museum; St. George Museum of Art; WaterWorks Museum; Sahara West Gallery; La Posada de Santa Fe; Roux & Cyr Fine Art Gallery; and Jane Hamilton Fine Art. Press includes *LandEscape Art Review*, *MVIBE*, *Art Reveal*, *Magazine 43* and *Southwest Art*. Art in Embassies/U.S. State Department selected her work for Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Yuemin He is a translator, writer, and educator. She has published on Asian American literature, Buddhist American literature, East Asian literature and visual art, and composition pedagogy. Her essays and translations appear in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, *Religion and the Arts*, *Teaching Asian North American Texts* (MLA, 2022), *Oxford Anthology of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2nd ed.), *Metamorphoses*, *Ezra*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Rattle*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Copper Nickel*, and elsewhere. She was a recipient of an NEH Fellowship, a JSA Fellowship, and other awards. Currently, she is an English professor at Northern Virginia Community College.

Stepy Kamei's work has appeared in journals including *Gyroscope Review*, *FIVE:2:ONE Magazine*, and *Calamus Journal.* She received her B.A. in Linguistics from San Francisco State University. In addition to writing, she frequently performs in immersive theater productions.

Swedish-born **Gunilla Theander Kester** is an award-winning poet and the author of *If I Were More Like Myself* (The Writer's Den, 2015). Her two poetry chapbooks, *Mysteries I-XXIII* (2011) and *Time of Sand and Teeth* (2009), were published by Finishing Line Press. She was co-editor with Gary Earl Ross of *The Still Empty Chair: More Writings Inspired by Flight 3407* (2011) and *The Empty Chair: Love and Loss in the Wake of Flight 3407* (2010). Dr. Kester has published many poems in Swedish anthologies and magazines, including *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, Sweden's most prestigious literary magazine. A Fulbright scholar, she authored a scholarly study entitled *Writing the Subject: Bildung and the African American Text* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995, 2nd ed. 1997), and published many articles in academic journals and anthologies. She lives near Buffalo, NY where she teaches classical guitar. She has poems recently published or forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Pendemics*, *Slipstream*, *Great Lakes Review*, *San Pedro Review*, *Cider Press Review*, and *I-70*.

Laura Nagle is a translator and writer based in Indianapolis. In addition to her work with Monique Debruxelles, her translations of prose and poetry from French and Spanish have recently appeared in journals including *AGNI*, *Circumference*, and *The Los Angeles Review*. Her translation of Prosper Mérimée's 1827 hoax, *La Guzla*, was recently published by Frayed Edge Press under the title *Songs for the Gusle*.

John Paul O'Connor grew up in Connecticut, New Mexico and Iowa. After a year at a local community college, he earned a living doing factory, construction, custodial and other work until he recorded an album of his original songs on Flying Fish Records and began an unlikely career as a folksinger and songwriter. In the late nineties, he began working as a union organizer and publishing his poems in various literary journals, including *Sycamore Review*,

Baltimore Review, *Columbia Journal of Arts and Literature*, *Indiana Review*, *Seneca Review*, *St. Ann's Review*, *Hanging Loose*, *Cold Mountain Review* and *Poet Lore*. His poems have been nominated twice for a Pushcart prize and he has won the Association of Writers and Writing Program's Prague Prize. His first book of poems, *Half the Truth*, won the 2015 Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry. John lives in Franklin, NY.

Aurora Shimshak is a writer and educator from Wisconsin. Her poetry and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Poetry Northwest*, *The Southampton Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Spillway*. She is currently an MFA candidate in Poetry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Find more at aurorashimshak.com.

Michele Rappoport is an American writer and artist living in the desert southwest. Her work has appeared in a variety of literary journals, including *Delmarva Review*, *High Desert Journal*, *The Centifictionist*, *Salamander*, and *Chautauqua*. When she is not writing, she stares at colorful pieces of paper and makes collages. She also teaches animal massage techniques to volunteers at her county shelter, and several times a year, she teaches a creative writing workshop at an Arizona state prison.

Martha Silano is the author of five books of poetry. Her most recent collection is *Gravity Assist* (Saturnalia Books 2019). Previous collections include *Reckless Lovely* (2014) and *The Little Office of the Immaculate Conception* (2011), also from Saturnalia Books. Martha's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *American Poetry Review* and *The Best American Poetry* series, among others. She teaches at Bellevue College.

Meera Vijayann is a writer and essayist based in Kirkland, Washington. She is drawn to social invisibility within South Asian diasporic cultures, and the influence of mayam, the Tamil word for illusion. Her writing is shaped by the decade she spent as a development professional and journalist reporting on sexual violence in India and has appeared in *Catapult*, *Entropy*, *Electric Literature*, and *The Guardian*, among others. Her essay about how immigration laws separated her from her family won the Medium Writer's Challenge Finalist Prize in 2021. She is currently a Hugo House Fellow working on her debut novel.

Jeanine Walker has been recognized with grants from Artist Trust, Jack Straw Cultural Center, and Wonju, UNESCO City of Literature. She holds a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Houston and has published work in *Chattahoochee Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Ohio Review*, and elsewhere. Her full-length poetry collection is *The Two of Them Might Outlast Me*, out from Groundhog Poetry Press in late 2022. She teaches for Hugo House and Kangwon National University.

Britnie Walston is a versatile Maryland artist, who captures energy through light and vibrant colors. Her work is inspired by nature; often depicting the absence of human presence, liberation, and freedom. She captures the beauty of nature, blending the boundary between reality and abstraction, and creating a unique dreamscape atmosphere, providing the viewers with a multilayered and immersive visual experience. Though her diverse range of work requires different creative processes and mediums, they are influenced by the same subject matter: freedom. She graduated from Goucher College with a BA of arts in studio art major, and studied abroad in Greece. Her art has won numerous awards and is published in magazines such as *Carolina Quarterly* and *Denver Quarterly*. She is forthcoming in *So To Speak*.

At *Silk Road* we are interested in works exploring diversity, migration, immigration, and otherwise internationally relevant writing. We seek work that focuses on the ideas of unity and connection while also emphasizing the richness of individual cultures and the myriad ways of being human in this world.

Take us somewhere.