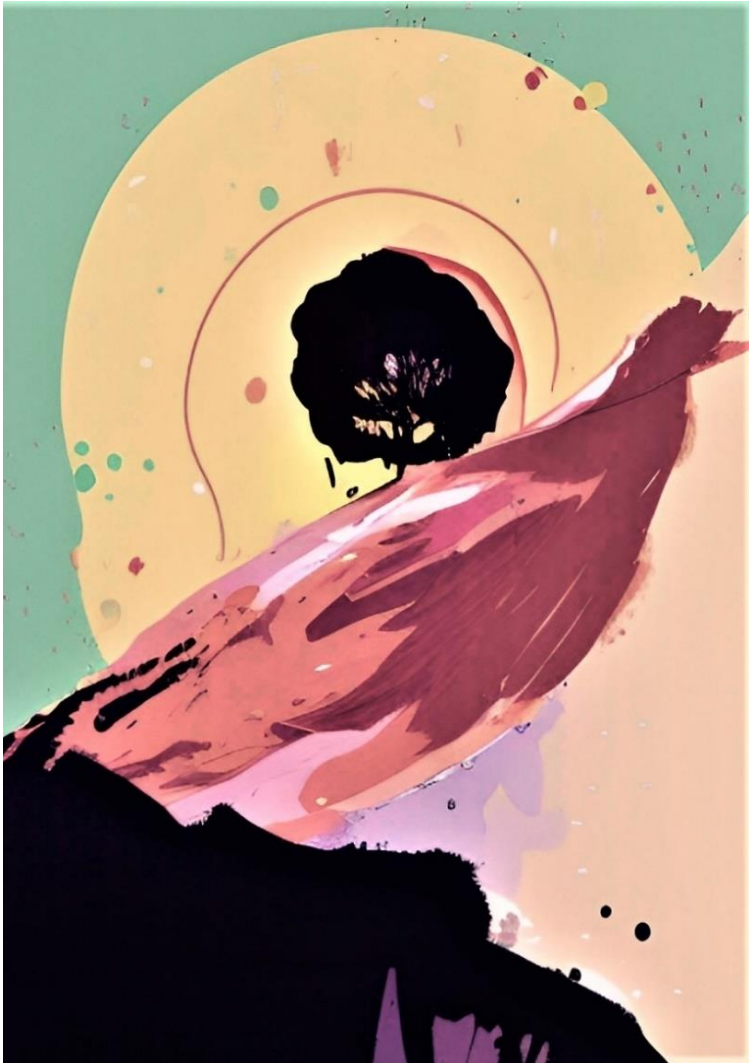


SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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CHANGING THE WORLD
THROUGH WORDS AND ART

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you could be the lake

Marcy Rae Henry

there are places in my house
i want to take you

afternoon light beaming in the center
of prosecco rings on my dresser

palm prints on the headboard
while the moon pulls us inside out

the lake eats everything
but not everything is digestible

you could be the lake
or you could be everything

something chest-level or top floor
or top shelf has me dumbstruck

water is a mystery
in all forms

you paused at my bookshelves
fingering orange spines

though not to scale, a tired map
contains the places we're from

i'm drawn to blue around the world
you move like a day across the week

one of us has to start
the other has to let go



Anthroposphere 1 – Gruyere / Ernst Perdriel



Anthroposphere 1 – Groyere Negative / Ernst Perdriel

Rock-cut

Andrea Lewis

She can't do anything about the sunset—the daylight gone to waste, the darkened hills—or about copper extracted from the earth or sulfuric acid leaching through the soil. She doesn't love him, but she loves disruption. She wants to be the rock-cut the explosion leaves behind.

She can't stop children from crossing the border. Even now, they thread their way north, shoulders black against the sunset orange. She doesn't love him, but they park here by the darkened hills, windows open to the famished heat, the brazen air, defeated smell of dust.

She wants the hands that know explosives to know her. And to salvage anything that's left behind: vertebra, clavicle, metacarpal. She tastes the crevices of his neck and asks what chemicals leach through him or settle on his skin. He says: *You really want to know?* A rattlesnake of copper on his keychain drags across her thigh.

She can't do anything about the desert tortoise in its burrow, stunned and smothered in the shock waves. She can't protect the incubating eggs, the ancient line.

She can't stop the children from sleeping in the graveyard, where detonations rearrange the skeletons. *Ammonium nitrate*, he says. She doesn't love him, but she loves his downcast eyes, the narrow thumbs that graze her breasts, the knuckles skinned raw, his slow pulse. *And fuel oil. Nothing happens until you bring the two together.*

Now she rides the sunset, high above the darkened hills, above the pitted earth and ruined day. Above the final vein of copper-red before the night.



Pool 2 / Lior Locher

Rhubarb

Róisín McIntosh

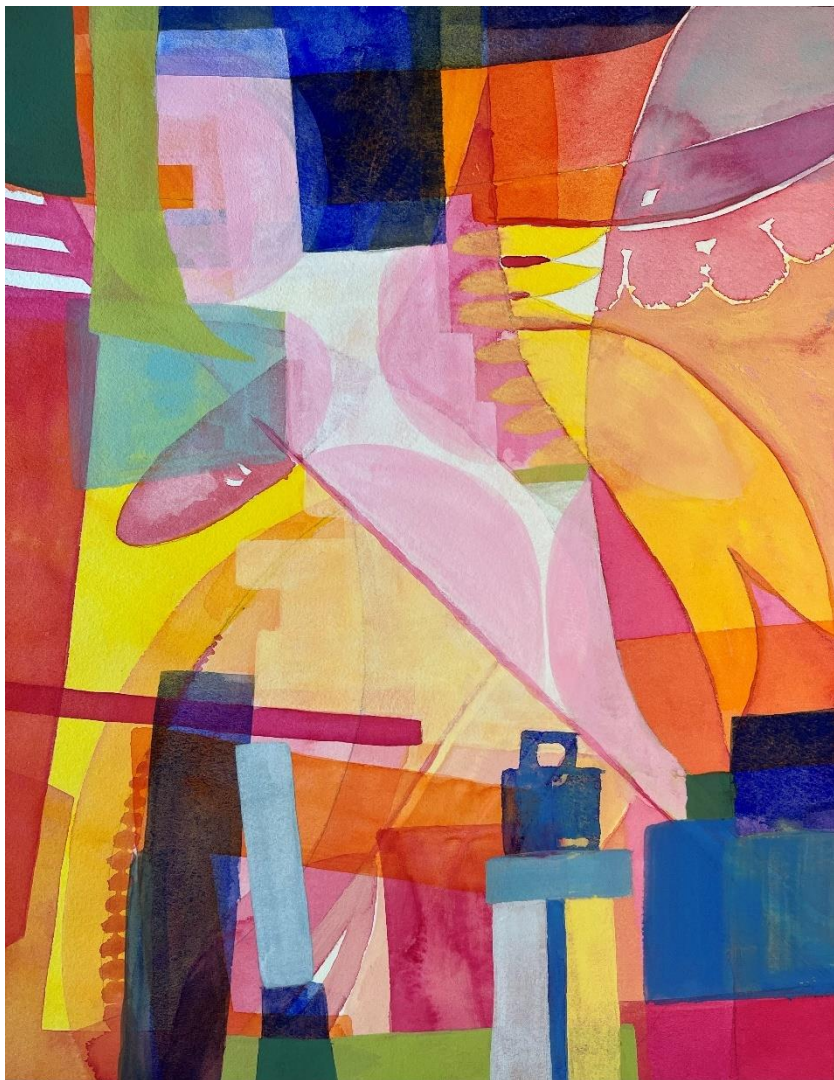
My husband is planting sweet eff all in the garden, but he lets on that it's rhubarb. Every morning, I peer out over the sink, ready to catch him as he stoops and kneels, chanting and invoking in the back garden. Thursday morning, I slip a sopping plate onto the dishrack and use my apron to wipe Fairy suds from my hands. I want to pounce, but he's up and striding to the tool shed, pulling out rakes, toeing at plastic plant pots, grabbing a fistful of compost. A war correspondent before he retired, he's never gardened in his life! This chanting is some voodoo, a darkness buried under our poplar and ash, cultivating in the dry muck.

More of his odd behavior. He spoke about the Juba witch doctors in South Sudan following that bit of bother he was in and the blood-black paste they smeared across his forehead in a smoke-filled tent outside the city. They were high on shared tobacco and fear, his jalabiya stained red. He'd cut his steak, reaching for the salt as he recounted how this voodoo man slowly cut the heart from a screaming fighter's chest and flung it into a fire before his eyes. Scooping a forkful of petit pois, he'd imparted that he was ordered to bury the ashes when they were finished, still hot and smelling of barbeque. He'd salted his potatoes and chewed, eyes fixed on the bare patch under the trees where the next day he would dig, having bought tools, a wheelbarrow, some crowns, and seeds, delving down with that blunt-as-bread spade. When I challenged him why rhubarb he'd paused and offered why not rhubarb, so I reminded him that as my husband he should know I don't like it, had never had a taste for the bitter stringy tendons disguised as palatable under a horror of sugar. He sighed that his mother prescribed rhubarb for constipation when he was a child, which is all well and good, but it disgusted me to hear him say it out loud.

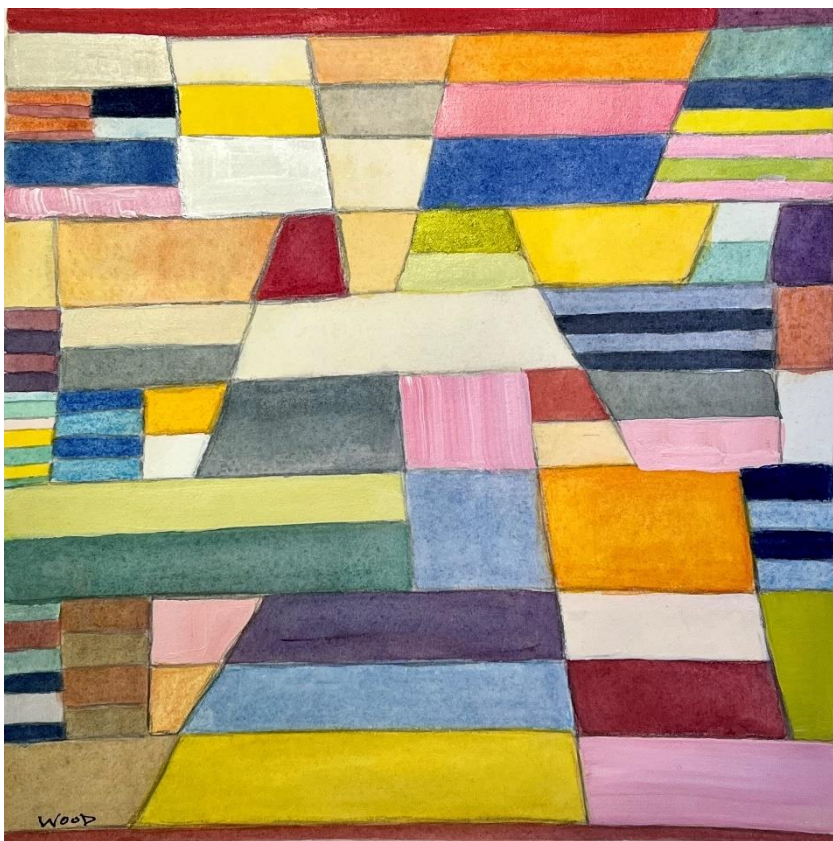
When he absconded to Cape Town or the sweatshops of Mumbai or reported live from punk-infested Berlin or what have you, my home was orderly, and the children were raised as I liked. I didn't have to hear about constipation or make a man's dinner or starch his whites and separate out his darks. I could return to my lace coverlets,

my unwrinkled cream linen pillowcases once the school bus had roared towards St. Gabriel's, leaving dishes to soak until half one with the receiver off the hook. The occasional Wednesday we could have fish and chips on my Royal Tara if I liked the idea. He only existed through hissing phone connections as the children took turns holding the receiver for infrequent calls that cut out just in time. On Sundays, the Joyces and Gilsenans would gush. How proud we must be of him, they'd paw, pushing past the children after Fr. Furey's eleven o'clock mass. That suited me fine. Then one evening he drops a beaten holdall on the front step, white-haired and retired mar dhea! Now he never leaves.

And this! When he's chanting on his knees I wonder if he is Buddhist; did they convert him in a Tibetan cell or was it when he interviewed the Dalai Lama that he got the notion to invoke Jesus? It turns my stomach to observe his paunch in the dirt, hands to the sky threading beads that he thinks I haven't seen, pathetic empty words on the wind. I'm just praying the next doors don't see him from the top bedroom, but I know how it is and they have. The next morning he's down at it again. I fly out, apron billowing, hands dripping wet, my house slippers sinking into the mud until I have him, and all the while the dead leaves whip round and the skeletal branches are soughing as they claw in the rising gust. I shout at him to tell me, tell me, what is this voodoo over the rhubarb, but tears hang in his throat as if to strangle him and he sobs in a voice no one has ever heard that it is penance.



Road Trip / Sheree Wood



The Fields / Sheree Wood

The Courtyard, or A Man Named Victorious

Reema Rajbanshi

The News

1.

The papers that did not report my cousin's death might have said this. Rubul Das died November 26, 2012 in Lakhimpur, a town at the edge of Assam, a state at the edge of India. He was thirty-five, a civil engineer, husband for a year and a half, father to a son of five months, son to a cancer survivor of nearly eighty, blood to two brothers and a sister, friend to the laborers who walked miles to honor him. At the Dhemaji hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival, the doctors wrote that he'd had a heart attack. At the Lakhimpur pharmacy where his driver had rushed him, he was given painkillers and an antacid. His body was brought back to my uncle Mirza's courtyard in a plastic bag.

The relatives I met on my week-long December trip to Assam told me this. His older sister said: *I touched his face to be sure he had died. They had cut his forehead so that blood ran out. Our father, his wife stood on the side of the courtyard, looking away.* His closest brother said: *I went to the postmortem and looked into his open chest. His lungs were black, his heart and ribs covered with fat. I don't understand how this happened.* His mother said: *I told him so many times, don't eat so much meat, take your pressure pills, but I couldn't save him. In such old age, did such bad days have to come?* His father said: *They left him alone on a sofa in the pharmacy and found him with foam coming from his mouth. The one who should have died is me but the one who died was him. He must have been destined to end like this.*

I will begin telling you about my cousin like this. I called him Rubul Dada, Older Brother Rubul, but everyone else who loved him called him Ranjeet. Which means there were many people who called him He Who Wins in War.

2.

My mother had given me the news over the phone, calling from the Bronx, New York to La Jolla, California. I did not expect my own sobbing, between my low bed and papasan, my stuffing a gamoosa into my mouth.

“Reema,” my mother said after a few minutes, “Reema. Listen. They already cremated him, but someone should go to Mirza.”

I went beach running, but all that sand and moon and mansion sank my spirits. I gloomed out at the curling dark tide, which had washed over the eastern archipelago of rocks and anemone, and prayed for my cousin’s spirit. As I shuffled back to the pavement, I crossed an older white couple sitting on the divider between sand and lot, and the woman motioned to me. “Come here.”

I stood warily, barefoot on the boardwalk, and said, “What is it?”

“I just want to ask you a question,” the woman said. “Are you peaceful?”

I could barely make her out in the moonlight, and the man kept his back to me, but I laughed. “I hope so.”

She waved me over again. I waited.

“We were just talking,” she said, “about our relatives. You see, they were complaining that they’re only worth two million dollars. Well, we’re only worth five hundred thousand.” She stepped towards me, smiling. “What would you have said to them?”

I thought of my cousin, foaming in the back of a car, and took another step back. “I’d say money isn’t everything. Money can’t buy happiness or love or longevity.”

“Money isn’t everything,” the woman beamed. “Money can’t buy happiness.”

“If it makes you feel better,” I said, turning to go. “You’re worth more than I’ll ever be or people I know.”

The man turned. “We’re also a lot older than you are.”

You are, I thought bitterly. The woman looked ready to speak but I began walking away. “At least,” I waved, “you’ve got great company. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Back in my room, I listed the passport and visa I would need for a return I had not imagined. Eight-and-a-half years earlier, I’d

visited India on a year-long college fellowship to research family history. In the years after, I had left New York for California, patching together a writing life in what felt like another country. Now, I was returning to the Old, my first book undone, my mother home from a mastectomy, my sister three months pregnant, my father too close to seventy to go alone. I guessed at other questions that would greet me on that other shore: *Reema, what did you write of that year? Reema, why did it take you so long to return? Reema, how could this have happened?*

3.

All day as I waited in Indian airports—Delhi, Kolkata, Guwahati—the TV showed Delhi protests. A young woman named Damini had been gang-raped in Delhi, one of many rapes unresolved by police, but this time, Delhi exploded. Women in saris and salwars shouted in streets, holding up signs that read *Death Penalty for Rape, We Want Justice*. The Gate of India had been surrounded by furious men and women, and they in turn had been surrounded by police. Protestors were arrested; the rapists were not caught; Damini died a few days later. In each airport, closer and closer to my cousin's bone, the TVs glowed orange-red with flames in spare, fluorescent rooms.

A few months later, at a Toronto panel, where I spoke on the witch-hunting of Rabha women in Assam and Meghalaya, I listened to two other writers who had grown up in Northeast India. The non-tribal writer spoke about Irom Sharmila, a Manipuri activist who had been fasting against AFSPA in the Northeast. The tribal writer spoke about various Naga and Khasi poets who'd written about the insurgencies. Both spoke to the frequency of rape in Delhi, in India; and we all spoke about Damini, a name that meant lightning, which had been given by the public because the case had drawn so much attention.

One writer, turning in the golden light of the café, said suddenly, *It's one thing to theorize about this, it's another to live it. You have no idea.*

Which is true: I am not a tribal woman who has been raped in Delhi or another Indian city.

True too: I am Oxomiya diaspora, raised in New York City, whose luck in education and opportunity brought her to this page.

Also true: I am Rajbongsi, which means my father's people are native to Lower Assam, and live there still. As an Asian-American woman, I have an idea or two about size and silencing.

In the end, true: I can only speak for who I was, traveling for a year through Northeast India on fellowship, and who I'd become, nine years later, saying goodbye to the cousin who'd wanted to ensure I would have no idea about violences I'd learn anyway.

4.

The family had stored my cousin's hip bone in a bamboo reed stuck into a pot. The bone was where he had fallen. The pot was kept in the back of a thatched shed between the house and the garden. In this shed, in front of my cousin's bone, there is a dheki, that quintessential Oxomiya beam, perched on a peg, which works like a pendulum to grind food. You must pump a dheki with your leg while the other end mashes whatever you place in a smooth earthen hole. Rice, sesame, dal. It was only after I watched my cousin's oldest brother pump the end with his leg, while my aunt (facing my dead cousin's bone but not facing it) swept spilled ground flour back into the hole, that my female cousin pointed out the pot.

"That is your Rubul Dada," she said.

I started and she pointed to the clay lamp beside the pot. "Every morning, his wife lights it. You can photograph this if you want."

But after photographing my cousin nine years before, warm and bubbling, how could I record him, like this, now?

Trysts

1.

The photo I remember most of our Upper Assam trip, Rubul Dada hadn't known I'd snapped. A shy photographer, I'd shot from the back

Rubul Dada and his friend, Chintu, walking down a wooded Sibsagar road. Rubul Dada wore a white jacket, Chintu a purple one, and the road ahead was a black ribbon, the arc of trees high and green. We had just come from looking at our first Ahom structure, a reddish dome that, the sign read, the Ahom had made from a mortar of clay and eggshells. *Look how it has lasted hundreds of years!* we said.

Not just that dome but Talatal Ghar, the Sibsagar fort with its Mughal-style arches, its buried levels, its sprawling bends that maybe hid soldiers, spies, princes. The fort was a miracle—made from a humble mortar of eggshells and rice grain that had withstood the stalwart empire before the Brits’—and zigzagged in a maze that hinted at cunning war choreography. We walked along the few levels above ground, and it was like passing through haunted corridors, other levels hidden below us, other bodies hidden by time. We ran our hands along the black cannons, the bumpy red walls, the creviced brick where perhaps poetry as well as politics had been blasted.

I ran into Chintu on my goodbye trip, nine years after that Sibsagar outing. I was walking down a local Mirza road buzzing with folks and dogs and scooters, when he turned from a roadside stand. There was only the dim light of the stand that threw its circle on us. We stared. We said nothing. My sister-in-law introduced him to me, then we nodded, said we knew each other. He had married too, looked about the same with a few extra pounds, but now we stood in an unexpected corridor, a new ghost between us.

2.

The first broadcast that went across a free India had been Nehru’s, right after the British withdrew, August 14, 1947:

“Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially . . . A moment comes which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance . . . We think also of our brothers and sisters who have been cut off from us by political boundaries, and who unhappily cannot share at present in the

freedom that has come. They are of us and will remain of us whatever may happen, and we shall be sharers in their good and ill fortune alike.”

I had seen Nehru, in an elegant kurta with that buttonhole rose, uttering this promise as a kid in the Bronx, on some Indian TV channel. Even then, his triumphant English, the crackling bass under the repeated *tryst-pledge-freedom* made me shiver. Where was my maternal grandfather that midnight, my Ata who had been jailed by the British for being a freedom fighter, a Communist? Had my parents, my Peha and Pehi, who must have been country babes then, tingled with a whirring sense of change?

All those trysts with my cousins in their Mirza courtyard, I had not thought of Nehru’s words but our own, heated in what seemed simple games. Mostly, my cousins had twisted and swung slender limbs to the rhythms of cricket, a game I learned most Indians adored, a game it seemed my cousins could master. I had to beg the boys to let me play, and when they ignored me, pitching low balls that made wobbily runs past the shed, into the back garden, I sulked on the courtyard steps. The one time they relented to my scowls, Rubul Dada pitched the ball into my jaw. Of course, I ran off wailing-all-hell, and my cousins scattered across the burning courtyard. To hide the culprit ball, to tiptoe sheepishly round the kitchen, to wait till my aunt stopped scolding from the meal table. There I sobbed, betrayed, as she patted me down with black tea, a warm towel to my swollen cheek. It was Mintu Dada who brooded over first, sitting beside me and crying at my tears. And it was Tapan Dada and Rubul Dada who went out and brought bangles back to where I curled, behind a mosquito net on their bed.

So sorry, Rubul Dada said in English, offering in his palm the heavy cricket ball. *Take this. You hit back. But please, if you stay mad, I will feel bad.*

3.

The biggest spat Rubul Dada and I had—and we had several—erupted when we went to visit tea gardens in Upper Assam. All along the jeep

ride through the gardens, green expanses on both sides, he and his friend giggled about the surprise they had in store for me. Each time I demanded they tell me what the surprise was, they knowingly glanced at each other, said, *No, she'll get scared*, then laughed again.

The surprise was that the professor had arranged a Christmas Eve visit to a Naga village. The village chief's son, who would show us around, was once a member of the insurgent outfit, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim. I wasn't scared, I thought resentfully as I huffed behind the two boys up a hill; I was unprepared—no gifts, no questions, no nothing. The village was at the top of a foothill and, on our two-hour trek there, we paused several times to gulp in air. The soil was muddy, with steps sometimes cut into it, sometimes not, so that when we slipped, our jeans were brushed with swaths of ochre. Halfway up, we came upon a gazebo, which gave us a view of the plains we had left, and the contrast between that flat tan maze and these palm-and-sun dappled hills was startling.

On our excursion back up, the chief's son met us—a slender, solemn-faced guy, in his thirties—who said we were late, he had worried, he had in fact made the up-down trip twice to find us. With our tomato faces, our sweaty limbs, we laughed. Did a revolutionary look so utterly ordinary, so surprisingly delicate?

What filters as important now about that trip is how my cousin too wandered about in wonder. Through the long log school newly built for the village children, strung up with Christmas lights and shiny paper words, where the children would also learn English. Across the field where we finally sat under a tree and watched children playing traditional games: spearing grapefruit, shooting bows, and watching us strangers back. Then settling in the drawing room of our Assamese driver, who had been our go-between, enjoying me strike up a chat with the Naga girl who spoke English.

Maybe he remembered how much ragging I'd gone through at my Guwahati hostel, mostly with the Upper Assamese tea garden girls. How only the Naga girls had befriended me, bringing hot jilabi to my room, taking me out to eat momos, watching movies together in all our rooms, whether in English or Hindi. *Look at her go*, my cousin smiled. *She's never that excited with us*. I'd rolled my eyes at him. But what I remember now is how the girl, named Seven in Sema, told me about her brother who had died in his twenties. He had contracted

malaria and been taken to Guwahati Medical, she said, where he had been given the wrong medicine. She said it so plainly, as we stood before the mound where his body had been buried.

My cousin's sister later said, to my stunned face those first few days back, *It's like a fast-forward cut in a film reel, isn't it?* Yes, except this was suddenly life and the schoolhouse lesson learned late was some of us do not walk away alive.

What I remember now too, and regret, is the essay I wrote and published, in *Luitor Pora Mississippi* in 2006, detailing that trip. I do not regret recounting the generosity of our Sema Naga hosts, the tragicomic food bumble between the professor, the other Assamese guests, the Naga chief's son, but how I had berated my cousin for letting his friend pull such a stunt without asking me.

It's my time, I had cried as my cousin slumped on a bed in the tea estate. *And my money!*

Yes, yes, he said quietly. *I'll talk to him. You're right.*

No, I would say now. *Why didn't you call me out?* Why didn't you say it's *our* stories, *our* time you're borrowing? Because look, how for no good reason, I again ended up with more of both. How that Christmas Eve, strangers took us in, tea garden girls draped a gamoosa round my neck before they danced jhumur for me, how the singer came and sang, full-throated, though he had been sick in bed for days. How I have no idea as I write this where any of you are.

4.

Here are two women Rubul Dada found beautiful: Aishwarya Rai, Kareena Kapoor. He and Chintu sat in their friends' empty bedroom, on mornings we lounged about before exploring Upper Assam, and watched Bollywood films that constantly ran on TV. I slurped my spicy fried noodles on the bed while they gushed on the floor about Aishwarya, as long as a crane (and about as limber), dancing to the lemon song.

She's so lucky, my cousin said. *Born beautiful and talented and rich.*

Kareena Kapoor, he had actually seen, in his time traveling through Mumbai. We were walking through Upper Assam ruins on yet another hill when I asked what she looked like.

Very beautiful, he said, shaking his head as if it were a disturbing truth. *More beautiful than even in cinema. But it was hard to see her with the cameras around her.*

I watched him walking about the circular stone remains of Aniruddha's house. Short and dark like me, he'd always liked the light, North-Indian looking girls. No surprise, then, when nine years later, I met his widow: a pale, willowy creature who seemed to transfer her iron grief to her dark, twisty-lipped baby.

Rubul used to say, she told me, *we'll have to pay this one ek lakh to see his smile.*

He had told me, nine years before, about a girl he had known for years, a love at first sight thing that it had taken several years of courage-and-courtship to make real, but I hadn't met her then. Goalpara was not pressing on my itinerary, and there had been violence between Assamese purists and Assamese who had absorbed some Bengali culture. Now here she was, by day solemnly bathing and nursing their son; by night, weeping over her inexplicable fate, a love of sixteen years gone, a baby of five months left, a young widow about to start a government job.

How could my cousin and I have foreseen all this, walking about one of the most fabled architectures of Assam's City of Romance? It was in Tezpur, legend has it, that the princess Ukha fell in love, in a dream, with Aniruddha, Krishna's grandson. Her artist friend, Chitralekha, cast her magic to call Aniruddha to Ukha, but Ukha's father, the Bana Raja, built a fort to keep the lovers apart.

It was in that fort, nine years ago, Rubul Dada told me about the woman he hoped would become his wife. Nine years later, it was in my uncle's courtyard, circled by a brick wall, where I walked with my cousin's widow and son.

Who is the Bana Raja in this story? Is Chitralekha real?

Rajdhani Express

1.

Every marginal Indian's favorite "terrorist" movie, *Dil Se*, is also the only Bollywood movie I've seen with a train running through Assam.

The movie's first song has the good Delhi boy Raj, played by Shah Rukh Khan, dancing *chaiya chaiya* on a train moving through mellow hills, next to some sexy-naveled girl, against a backdrop of Assamese natives and their japis. It is a morning train that brings Raj, still hopeful, still naïve, to what will turn out a deceptive paradise. For the romance between the North Indian patriot and the Assamese insurgent Moina, played by Manisha Koirala, can only end with a hug that blasts them to bits. Raj, it seems, dies because his heart is too big, but what of the impossible loves at the nation's edges, like the one my cousin's widow bears? What if Raj dies not because Moina's heart is so disfigured but because it has been broken so badly?

It is a scene nothing like a train blocked by protestors lying on the rails. I had first seen that image on Indian news sites, summer 2012, while home. After violence broke out between Bodo people and Bangladeshi Muslims in Kokrajhar district, and after the Center had once again responded too late, thousands of folks had blocked the passage of the Rajdhani, a train that connected Delhi, the Indian capital, with Guwahati, the state capital. The papers framed the event as typically disastrous of the Northeast, yet I found the image remarkable, a testament to the people of the region stopping, for a few hours, the brutal brush of "Royal Rule" past them.

The incident, which ended in the largest displacement of South Asians since 1947 Partition, made it to the New York Times front page about a month later. By then, anti-Northeast violence had spread across India, with some Muslims arguing they had to retaliate for the regional attacks on Muslims; and so millions of panicked Northeast Indians boarded trains from major cities back to the edge, back to home. I remember copying the front-page story for my parents in our local Bronx library, the Dominican librarian bragging to the lady librarians how he had once dated a half-Muslim girl, the mostly black and Latino students clicking diligently on computers, the mostly Jewish old-timers gossiping over chess boards. I folded the warm paper into my knit bag and wondered: how many of us had landed to this city edge by such violences?

At our kitchen table, my parents mused over the story, noting that for once the description was nuanced, mentioning land as much as religion. Then they parted for the rituals that comforted them each:

my mother washing the dishes, my father googling the week's weather.

Now they're blaming, I joked to my mother, *Rajbongsi manu for the violence.*

We laughed as my father, half-smiling, focused on the digital clouds.

Ey, did you hear, my mother asked my father.

They'll blame whomever, my father said scornfully, and we laughed again.

What else was there to do?

2.

I found out about the other deaths, deaths I had not even heard of in California, when Pehi handed me the photo album. There was a photo of Rubul Dada, leaning slyly against Peha's mother, who inexplicably wore shades with her white widow's sari. He had draped his right arm about her tiny shoulders and crossed his legs, debonair and grinning. Then there was a photo of my cousin standing behind a sofa of people: two girl cousins married in Tihu. Again, he had draped his arms about one center woman, resting his chin on top of her braided hair. He was not smiling impishly but even in those large, gentle eyes, there was light.

What happened to Bhindeu? I asked my cousin's closest brother, and I pointed to the dark-skinned man beside the center woman, her husband. I remember him at two different points: once, in grade school, when he had served my family tea with the jittery hands, rheumy eyes of a drinker; again, in 2003 at a wedding, when he came with my cousin and his two children, looking gaunt but sober.

Didn't you hear? Tapan Dada said, pacing the verandah. *He was hit by a train and died instantly.*

What? When?

Last year. The Rajdhani. It goes so fast you don't hear it until after it's passed you. He was climbing back onto his train after getting something to eat, and it killed him.

Instantly?

Tapan Dada stared at me and circled a hand about his head.
Shaved off the whole back part.
Where was he going?
The Rajdhani always comes from Delhi. It goes to various cities.
This one was going back to Gurwahati. If only he hadn't gotten off to eat.

3.

Back before I understood this history, Rubul Dada had seemed like any traveler on their way. More clearly now, he had been the trickster Dada at whom I raged even as I craved his attention. The Dada who had eyes so large and lashed, they looked like a girl's. The Dada who loved eggplant, as I did, eating it any way my Pehi made it: sliced and fried with turmeric, or mashed with mustard oil, onion, and cilantro, or grilled and spiced alongside river fish fritters, mopping it all with his expressive hands. The Dada who always wore his button-down shirts outside his pants, so that they seemed nighties on his small frame, with the long sleeves rolled up, just as my father wore them. The Dada who clowned so incessantly, teasing me about my accent, my looks, my temper till I blew up, yet who ran to the well to hide his tears as I was about to leave for the airport. The Dada who made his parents and mine brag about his engineering job, the first on his father's side to mix and stay in the middle class after centuries of farming land that had once been Kochari but had then been owned by upper-caste zamindaars. The Dada who had spoken more languages than us all, seen more of India than we had, a cosmopolitanism Northeasterners were assumed too shy, too poor to possess. Yet he had, like my father and uncles, tried to go back, something Oxomiya people, even if they won't say so, couldn't overlook. Rubul Dada was loyal and loyalty, as Northeasterners know, is a material and mystifying mark of love.

4.

I'd rather not end by imagining what it was inside that may have killed my cousin. I'd rather end by imagining my cousin enjoying a train like Shah Rukh Khan had, when he toured the nation that sometimes

claimed us, sometimes didn't. I'd rather see him finally as in those photos of him and his friends in Goa, in Mumbai, in Jaipur, relaxed and aligned before those marvelous forests and sands and palaces that, at least in those moments, he could claim back. I'd rather imagine him being—as he too flirted with strange girls, drank his fill of chai in the rain, felt the freedom of coming and going—just another ordinary body along for an ordinary trip.

Boat Brothers

1.

Let me tell you a story about brothers and sisters.

My mother's oldest brother was a tall, handsome guy who flitted about town, chatting up the ladies, milling with men around fires. He took his youngest sister, my mother, out to lunch to curb the disdain of the other girls, who would not speak to this astonishingly white, well-off girl, and to ward off the eyes of other guys, who always asked why his sister wasn't yet married. Mama himself flirted with every tempting woman, a regular Krishna, but for whom did he save the choicest concert tickets, the latest saris, the freshest sweets?

Like this, Ma and Mama attended a concert Bhupen Hazarika gave after his own brother, Jayanta Hazarika, died at thirty-four. My mother remembers sitting beside her brother, in the red sari he had given her, as Bhupen Hazarika sang the verses he had once sung with Jayanta. He wept as he pumped that harmonica, singing to a brother also gifted, also a drinker, but who had not made it.

How did it happen, I asked my mother. Assamese people say it was drinking but the Internet doesn't list a cause.

People say it was food poisoning, my mother said. But he died in Kolkata, not Gurwahati. When someone dies far away, people can say anything.

A couple months after that concert, my uncle died. The truck he had been driving crashed and he came home not knowing his gut ache was a burst kidney. By the time he pissed blood, by the time my mother and grandmother rode with him to the hospital, he was too full

of poison. He died in my mother's lap. He had had the rare love marriage, and his two girls were still infants.

When Rubul Dada died, it was the daughters-in-law who picked up the first calls for identification; but the commissioner called Tapan Dada and that's how everyone knew it was grave. It was Tapan Dada, who had been like Rubul Dada's shadow, who learned that his other self had died. The light-skinned, green-eyed brother learned that the dark-skinned, brown-eyed brother had died. The serious, practical brother learned that the emotive, prankster brother had died. The home-bound, teacher brother learned that the roaming, engineer brother had died.

It was Tapan Dada who had called me in La Jolla, so I might speak to the driver who had come to Mirza for the last rites, an apologetic man who kept saying, *sister, I did my best*. It was Tapan Dada, curt and quiet on the phone, who read the names of the medicine the doctor had given Rubul Dada, mostly unrecognizable, mostly antacids. It was Tapan Dada who described his brother's open chest, black and fatty, as I ironed my salwar in his room.

Have you gotten the final report? I asked.

Nai powa.

Why not?

He kept watching me iron. *That's the way things are done here.*

Call me when you get it. Are you sure it was just a heart attack?

We talked about opening a case. But our father said, what's the point? That won't bring him back.

2.

In the 60s, to allay the bloodshed between the Assamese and Bengalis, Bhupen Hazarika penned an Assamese variation on his friend Paul Robeson's song, *We Are In The Same Boat, Brother*. Bhupen Da, or Older Brother Bhupen as people called him, wrote hundreds of songs about Northeast India, an upside-down heart of seven states most Indians cannot name. As a girl in NYC, I remember only the Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art showing the Northeast within whatever gilded frame showed India. But Bhupen Da not only sang about the Assamese, he sang about who we were in our bones: a rural people, a

folk culture, a mixed nation of tribal and non-tribal, a people losing land and life to many kinds of wars.

I had heard my father singing this song with two uncles, in half jest-and-joy, when some wedding or convention threw our small numbers together. Like many of their generation, these three were professionals who had come to America after the 1965 quota on Asians had been lifted. Men like them, lucky as well as scrappy, often return to the places that haunt them. My father: a civil engineer to a village where kids chased down drivers, crying *car!* Das Uncle: a surgeon whose toilet humor was the only thing that had my father rolling off the couch, to an even sparer village in Pathsala. Lohit Uncle: an electrical engineer and adrenalin junkie, who'd been found, as a baby, by the edge of the Brahmaputra River.

So my father flew us to Assam every few years, mostly to Pehi, his youngest sister. What I remember first is the monsoon in Pehi's courtyard. It fell like a barrage of bullets—the house shook—my sister and I ran out to the courtyard slashed a hundred times with sideways rain. We clutched the columns, shivered in our dresses, and wondered: how were we supposed to play? How were we supposed to see India? How were we supposed to see anything at all? My cousins, used to all this, laughed.

We played game after game of karam or spinning top or U.S. versus India, in my cousin's bedroom. The Mississippi versus the Brahmaputra, the President versus the Prime Minister, two hundred fifty years of history versus thousands. Rubul Dada, in those days, built house after house of paper and cardboard, which he'd spend weeks painting. They were variations of houses he'd seen in the city, far bigger than my uncle's, though no dogs because, Dada complained, they ate better than poor people did. My father and uncle shook their heads at my cousin's houses, which lay about in corners of the real house, unfinished. *Engineering*, everyone told him, *was like architecture but more stable*.

What grew clear over the years was how we'd grown alongside and away from each other. Tapan Dada would swing onto his truck, heading to Meghalaya for lumber, or onto his scooter, zipping to Bijohnagar to teach. Mintu Dada, my melancholy brother, my favorite brother, would be holed up in his room, mooning over some lost job or girl or song. My sister receded completely from these

scenes, ensconced in her Manhattan commute-and-company, while I wrote stories in California, between teaching, waitressing, nannying, and library-servicing. But Rubul Dada, my Pehi's favorite, was still tweaking her ears, still tampering with dishes in the kitchen, still skipping easily between courtyard and street and back. So many friends to see, so many boys calling from the road, on the phone: *Ranjeet ase na? Is Ranjeet there?*

Because no matter where else bombs were bursting, my uncle's courtyard was a country of air and light. About a 10 x 20 rectangle of concrete, it had a shifting cover of sun-rain-star, a brick wall that kept it neat from the street. The other three courtyard sides were made of the wall to my cousin's game room, the wall to the family drawing room, and an entire side of steps to the other connected rooms. Smooth grey steps where my aunt would sit shucking rice or descaling fish, while Rubul Dada hung off a column, joking or singing or muttering. His good-time energy buoyed up the place when he was there, and when he was not, the house was waiting, its courtyard awash with sun but not his sweetness.

That *goodbye* visit, my female cousin and I lingered by the courtyard gate, as she explained how Bhupen Da's boat song came to be. Bhupen Hazarika, she said, was asked to pen something right there at the concert, and the Robeson he riffed on became the song asking for reconciliation. This my cousin said with eyes burning up at a house with broken windows. Stones had been thrown during those Assamese-Bengali language riots, and my aunt and uncle had not repaired them. They had chosen the spaces left by shards to tell a story. My cousin, playing this song, was choosing hope over hate.

We're in the same boat, brother.

If you shake one end, you gonna rock the other.

It's the same boat, brother.

Except I no longer believe we are in the same boat, or that some folks have a ticket onto anything in the first place, or that a song as melodious as Bhupen Da's could have saved a man named victorious. I'm a wary woman, rarely forgiving, and nine years has taught me that plenty of us, given a thrilling enough horror show, will pause our oars to watch our own kin drown. Yet in that winter of protests alighting old cities, of ashes blowing through open squares, I felt moved, alive on a boat propelled by so much remembrance, such surprising faith.

3.

Sunny afternoons, my cousin's widow, Ona Bou, bathed their son, Baba, in the courtyard. She put out a tie-dye-colored plastic bin and washed him in the clear sun. A somber baby who hardly made a peep, he livened up at this excursion, splashing his paws in the water, blinking the large dark eyes that were my cousin's. Ona Bou seemed easier in these moments too, smiling once in a while, waving at me to come closer, snap a pic.

I had taken many pics, nine years earlier, of Runuma Ba's son, the first baby born to my four Mirza cousins. I was the one with the Pentax, the nebulous aim of writing about Northeast India, and here he was, this lotus-eyed babe as round as a frog, as prized as life. So I'd shot him, Baba then too, as the Assamese call their baby boys, as my cousin had always been called by his family: taking his first bath, in his naming ceremony, watching his first bihu, that dance of our new year. Bhindeu, my brother-in-law, stood patiently in so many of these pics, eyes shining as he held up his son. But in these new photos, my cousin was the ghost, the one who should have been there, instead of his widow with her pink eyes, his brothers with their grave faces, my uncle with his sudden gaunt frame.

The other three boys felt it too, though only the oldest, the Baba of nine years before, understood. Mintu Dada's nine-year old son was the chatty one who had taken a liking to me, bringing me back half his school lunch, visiting me in my room to try my fingerless gloves, my lotion, my comb. He was the one who leaned over the baby's crib and declared—*your father's not coming back, did you know that?*—till my cousin scolded him away. The other boy, only two, looked like a Kochari with his tipped eyes and moon face, and unfortunately, acted like the tribal stereotype. Whatever you want to call it, naughtiness or daring, he ran everywhere, tumbling down those steps, wailing over egg-sized lumps before he tried climbing out a window or swashbuckling a knife longer than he was.

But my sisters-in-law loved those babies so hard, never spanking them, hugging them as if that would help them breathe, letting them run free, free, free. The rare time they put the Kochari in the bamboo crib in the courtyard, he screamed as if his life depended on it, and I joked that he was crying *Azadi! Mujhe azadi jahiye!*

Freedom! I want freedom! Which made me wonder, glancing at the bedroom where either Ona Bou or Baba would cry, can you love someone hard enough for two? Would Baba learn to stay quiet or to scream? Would he always be different, and did he already sense why?

The only origin story that became clear was this: my cousin's home name, Rubul, had been given by my Communist uncle after the Russian currency. That when Rubul Dada had been born, my uncle had been hopeful, in an India about as old and independent as my cousin would be when he died in it.

4.

On a 2003 bus ride out from Majuli, once the world's largest river island, I sat beside an Assamese man who asked me about my trip. I told the stranger about visiting a Mising village, about going into a sang-ghar (a traditional tribal house built on sticks above the river), about bargaining for hand-woven shawls, about photographing two Mising women, one young and beautiful, the older one's defined cheekbones and nut-brown skin reminding me of my grandmother's face.

What do you think, the stranger asked, *aren't they pigs?* I started at his bluntness, even though I expected this in India, but still . . . really?

Their homes are cleaner than Guwahati's, I said.

He squinted at me, the way I'd sometimes seen Upper Assamese or general assholes do when I flipped the script. *Traitor!* (Which I'd heard.) *Kochari!* (Which I'd also heard.)

What is important now about that conversation is how, the next time I'd see a sang ghar, it would be to honor a more dire crossing. My sister-in-laws wanted to commission for me a metalwork picture of a sang ghar, but carrying that memory felt impossible. Rubul Dada and I had sat together in the Majuli sang ghar's shaded bedroom, over a delicate floor through which we could see the hungry river. He had sat haggling with the Mising boy who'd brought us there, while I'd nagged Rubul Dada to leave it alone, to let them take whatever price they could get.

Even this one flash of firmness from my cousin seemed funny, he who had mocked things more than usual on that first river crossing. He had mocked our auto-rickshaw driver who, when the rickety auto chortled to a stop, knelt on the ground and prayed to the auto god. He had mocked the sinuous bamboo bridge that was the only visible way to cross a sudden tributary flanked by heavy trees. We stood, me-my cousin-his loud friend, gazing out at this exquisite antiquity.

Let's go, I said, setting a foot on that bridge.

Bye, my cousin said cheerily. *And when you fall into the middle of that water, I'll be standing here waving. Bye!*

He mocked the satra members who woke, every chilly morning, at six to bathe in icy water. *No heating*, he announced to me that first morning. *Wake up and experience the authentic Assam!*

When I made a face and mumbled I'd rather wait, he pinched his nose and said, *oh-, ho-ho, you want everyone to be saying, who is that pretty, stinky girl?*

But he didn't mock me when, on the way back, we ran into a Spanish couple who could speak neither English nor a single Indian language, but whose navigational phrase was *I love India!* Good enough for my cousin, who grinned *yeaahhh*, gave a thumbs up, and said, *we love India too!* So I spoke slowly in Portuguese to this couple who spoke slowly in Spanish. We spoke about Vaishnav Hinduism's founder, Sankar Dev; we spoke about how Indians picked up quickly on foreigners, but differently; for the blonde, blue-eyed Spaniard, he'd been touched and questioned, the object of fascination; for his brunette girlfriend, she'd been shepherding them like a determined pilgrim through this other holy land; for me, who got derided on the street by boys who called me an Assamese pretending to be American, till I opened my mouth; we spoke about new year's rituals, how the Spanish put twelve grapes in their mouths for each midnight stroke, how the Assamese celebrated by another calendar entirely, in the spring and for a whole month, but burned tall huts and ate pithas for January's Magh Bihu. The whole time, my cousin, who spoke Assamese, English, Hindi, and other Indian languages, but not these European ones, watched me with his eyes shining.

But it is my cousin's crossing, not to that eroding island but away from it, that has made me feel, most unexpectedly, the Portuguese word *saudade*. How you can miss something with deep

blueness, how you can learn only in missing how much you loved, so that months later you will be driving in sunny San Diego and suddenly, for the long pause of a red light, you weep, the water your cousin threatened washing your face.

Destiny

1.

Back in my San Diego apartment, cross-legged in a square of sun, I sat typing in a sudden FB chat with a Guwahati friend. He had visited my Mirza week, sitting in the drawing room and sipping tea while my uncle and his own father talked about the political and economic rubble of Assam. Eight years earlier, I had sat with Rubul Dada in drawing rooms much like that one, in Assam, in Arunachal, and had listened about other boys lost to war or poverty or drugs. I had not imagined I would be hearing my cousin's name among theirs.

Over FB, across oceans, my Guwahati friend launched into what he had held back in that drawing room. *You have to write*, he said, *about the real India.*

I'm trying, I said.

Now with the Delhi protests, he said, *the world will see how sick this place is.*

You mean the rapes?

Everything. The only way to survive here is to be corrupt. Good people either end up begging on the road or dead.

2.

The third night of my *goodbye* visit, my eldest cousin, Mintu Dada, scootered me and his four-year-old son to a nearby kabadi game. A wrestling game of touch-me-not, marked by a simple chalk line, I had first played this in my uncle's courtyard. It had seemed alarmingly raw—no props, not much strategy, just the brute agility of your body—and I always lost. That night, at least a hundred boys scuffled across rectangles chalked off in a green school field. Though these

teenagers strutted up and down, wrangled and thumped limbs and heads, they seemed so unjustly outweighed that I found the spectacle, through all the kicked-up dust, disturbing.

Mintu Dada led us to the front row, where I gripped my nephew on my lap, first before a game of Tongla versus Silchar, then before a game of Mongoldoi versus Nalbari. The boys tussled hard, cheered on by their mates, and sometimes crashed out of the rectangle right into our row. Not only was the game removed from the American imagery of hulking footballers, tall tennis players, it was like an easy array of the Northeast's bewildering diversity. There were the tribal boys of Tongla, perhaps Bodo, against the Bengali boys of Silchar. There were the Upper Oxomiya boys of Mongoldoi, perhaps some Ahom among them, against the Lower Oxomiya of Nalbari, not far from my parents' hometowns. Of course, there must have been somebody on each team to throw out easy essentializing, to point to how much we moved to-and-fro across lines, like the wild skidding of kabadi.

On the way back to his scooter, my cousin talked about being Koch. *You know that's what we are, right?* he said. *Of course*, I said. It had been one of the unforgettable discoveries of my fellowship year. He expanded on how we were part of that indigenous group but that some of us, like my father's family, had been mainstreamed into Assamese society. *There are still Rajbongsis*, he said, *who speak their own language. But not us*, he laughed, tossing his son onto the scooter. *We've become Assamese*. I could understand why, thinking of so many groups in so many places who had made this choice. *But*, he said as he waited for me to get on behind his son, *the mark is still there*.

3.

Maybe it boils down to accidents all along. If I had been born not to my father but to my aunt, the sibling who was pulled out early from school because she was a girl, she was needed at home, she was to be married, and if my cousin had been in my stead, would he be alive? Would I?

My father, on my return, said fondly as he washed the dishes, how my aunt had had the sharpest memory of them all. How she hadn't

wanted to leave school at all. I told him, as I tore the crumpled kolasapori pitha he had made, how she had wanted to learn to read English while I was there. How she had remembered my long feet and long nose as a baby. How she had recited the story of me being *botmas*, at three imitating a neighbor who'd daily call the lame villager to eat. My cousin had had my aunt's twinkly humor, though his was laced with a boy's jabs. How many times had we fought, him fuming and muttering off to his room, me throwing myself sullenly onto a hard bed? He resented me, I knew: the luxury of my rage, what must have seemed my unearned coldness, when he'd had to deploy far more charm to approach half the things I was given. He adored my sister, I knew: she who laughed at his tricks, she who was fair and floaty the way he liked, she who was always game to ride behind him as he scooted off from friend to friend on dirt roads.

The last week of that goodbye trip, my uncle took me into the drawing room alone and told me this last story of my cousin's love for my sister: how he had been so excited to meet her and her husband, a Goan-American who'd never been to Assam, that he'd talked about taking them to Kaziranga. Kaziranga, Assam's famous wildlife park for riding an elephant to spot the tigers, the rhinos, is a place we'd all gone to together; though we hadn't gotten the elephant ride that winter because, as was typical in India, some "VIPs had come that day and wanted them." My sister had hung a photo of her and Rubul Dada, hands on hips, mugging before the bulbous red sunset.

He was supposed to go there, my uncle said, the week he died. He had made plans to be there, but when your sister cancelled coming, he went to work instead.

I mentioned this to my sister, who said, *yes, it's been a long time, but I have sweet memories of him.*

I didn't tell her what my uncle said, for which I had no reply. *So I think, if your sister cancelled, if your parents couldn't come, then this was his destiny.*

4.

The evening before my flight back, I sat again on the courtyard steps, watching new boys playing cricket. Mintu Dada and Tapan Dada

threw the ball to my oldest nephews, nine and four, who kept missing and shrieking. Runuma Ba sat beside me, watching as I slumped in that courtyard, all of us steeped purple and grey in the quick-falling dusk. She thumbed through her phone and paused on a Bhupen Hazarika song I had heard growing up, a song I had not noticed was sung with his brother, Jayanta. The gentle lyrics, the husky voices took on, like that yard and sky, startling shades.

Chitralekha, Chitralekha, chitra ekhon akana. Chitrapatot chintasil ek chintanayak akana.

Chitralekha, Chitralekha, please draw a picture. On your canvas draw a thoughtful leader.

Jane jibonore rong shukula. Mane jibonore gabhi neela.

The people's life in color and white. The mind's life in deep blue.

Patra duti sajai loa. Duyoti rong milai loa.

Decorate the two pots. Mix the two colors.

Tulika tuli loana.

Please pick up the painting brush.

Eti duti rekhare, sabadhanatare

With one or two lines, carefully
nayan aka durodoroki.

Draw sharp-sighted eyes.

Onagota dinor abhinaba purwa.

Of days yet to come, an unprecedented morning

Xima aximor xima buji poa

Which understands the limits of the limitless.

Bakhya ekhon aki diya, lakhyajone lakhya porwa.

Draw a heart so millions can reach their goal.

Tulika tuli loana.

Consolatio

1.

They say *consolatio* is an old genre, and rightly so, for what is older than death, than grief? They say Seneca consoled mourners with

Adam's sin, that death is ordained to humans. But what of mourners who know only Krishna, the god who never truly dies but is born again and again to save mankind? Krishna, the boy so dark and charming, they painted him blue, playing his flute and tricks to reel in the milkmaids, the villagers, every anxious heart?

They do not say, in *consolatio*, how to move through a house in which the most magical boy has been whisked away. They do not say how to approach his oldest brother, who sits alone in a bedroom, playing a bamboo flute. They do not say how to answer the widow who hands you her son, dark and round-bellied, and says *this is the reincarnation of your cousin*. They do not say what philosophy to offer parents too Marxist to believe in religion at all, who've known wars with the British, the Bengalis, the Indian government, but whom you've never seen quite as stricken as this.

2.

The image that encircles my nine-year story is this: a boy, clearly American with his new sneakers and black suitcase and lanky limbs, hunched on an airport chair. That Oxomiya cloth, the red-and-white bordered gamoosa, was draped around his neck, as it is done warmly for all *good mornings*, all *goodbyes*. He was sobbing into the embroidered end, his face hidden from his relatives, who circled him, wordless.

3.

The last event my cousin photographed with his family was Diwali, that pan-Indian Hindu festival of lights. In the photos, he had alighted sakis on a banana tree someone had brought into the courtyard. There he stood, on the very side of that courtyard where, weeks later, his body would be bagged. He smiled before a tier of lights that promised to call Lakshmi, the open-armed goddess of wealth who sits upon a lotus, before elephants who shower the land with coins.

It was with my cousin's camera that I photographed the one-month rite commemorating his passing. It was through the lens he once used that I saw his family gathered in two rows under a yellow canopy, to listen to the townspeople who had come to read the Geeta.

Strangely, it wasn't a dismal affair: the day was fresh and bright, the yellow canopy filtering swaths of light, even through the smoke. Everyone wore light cotton clothes, styled in the simple Sankari way, and the middle sister-in-law had wrapped her own mekhla around me. The bhokot, a shiny-faced man who looked much younger than seventy, read passages I couldn't follow—but his rhythm was measured, as if reading a poem, and every now and then he paused to ask the audience a question. Folks answered openly, even joked, and a yellow butterfly flitted all afternoon between ground and canopy, between canopy and sky.

My uncle, that old Marxist, stood off to the side, and I rose beside him to photograph the scene: women sifting the raw rice and chickpeas for Prasad, smoke rising from chips in a low stand, my cousin's wife, his mother, the bhokot in a tier of anxious faces. Still, I couldn't photograph some things: my uncle, that old Marxist, who stood off to the side, all of us prostrating at the end of the courtyard, where the body had not been, even my uncle kneeling in prayer. And that yellow butterfly on that strangely peaceful day, flitting between ground and canopy, between canopy and sky.

4.

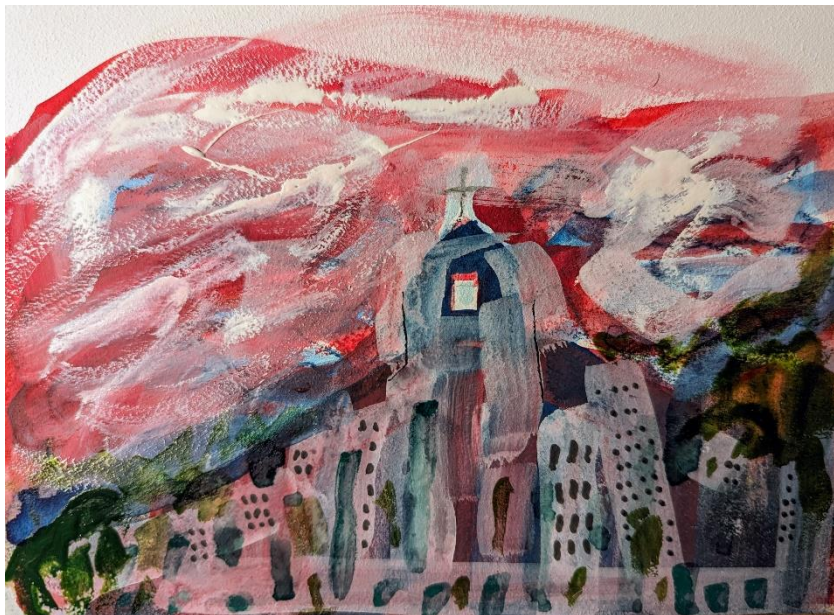
I am angry that it took me nine years to return, and that I will never see you again in this fucked state of affairs. I am angry that you ate yourself to death, and left us too shaken to read the body you left. I am angry that there was no one to treat you when your heart seized, that being in the wrong place at the wrong time helped kill you. I am angry at all the policies, all the histories that dictated you would die early in an outpost of an outpost. I am angry that, given the insurgency and corruption in the Northeast, we cannot be certain it wasn't foul play. I am angry that I had to hold, one by one, your weeping family in my arms. Your mother who has my father's face. Your father who outlived the zamindars but may not outlive this. Your stunned widow who handed me your son in the courtyard. Your sister who said over and over, I can't believe I'll never see him again.

I am angry that I ever imagined you would escape the ruthlessness of circumstance, that instead, I am writing this. I am

angry that you were not there, slight and dark and glossy-eyed behind the glass of Lokhinath Bordoloi Airport, waiting for me. All those trips across continents and you were always, always there. I am angry that I cannot chew you out again for a joke or cricket ball gone too far, resent you for preferring my sister to me — things that were my right as your *bhonti*, what you yourself called me. I am angry that I could not say *good morning*, as I did to everyone on this *good bye* trip, to you who were the most promising of the house. The one who got to leave Assam, the one who chose to go back, the one who had had many choices. I am angry, I am angry, and there you are in the bamboo reed in the shed. You who will be given back to the Ganga, and neither my belly fire nor anyone else's can retrieve you from time or pump back your blood or spark you up to us, whole and sure of a boy.



Lament / Bill Schulz
Digital Editor's Prize



After the Storm / Bill Schulz



In the Desert / Bill Schulz



The End? / Bill Schulz

Bed Move

Liam Keller

There had been a rumour that Enroy's bed moved in the night. That was all. Enroy went to sleep to one side of his unclean and sort of dark and generally disagreeable bedroom and woke up on the other. Like, it was unmistakable. His bed had moved at least eight or ten feet to where it blocked his door, as if he'd barricaded himself in, and his nose was practically jammed up against the brass knob when his eyelids shot open that a.m. and it was just unmistakable. Roommates heard not a thing. That was all at first.

It's important you know about Enroy though, he doesn't tell tales. Doesn't make that stuff up. He's a depressingly truthful person. I'm not sure Enroy knows how to invent whatsoever, and if he tried he'd be terrifically bad at it. It's unthinkable Enroy could render the story he rendered about the, just, abject horror of waking with his bed to the wrong unpleasant side of his sort of dim room and his nose being jammed up to brass, the smell of brass utterly suffusing his nostrils first thing as his eyelids flashed open and registered the wrongness of his entire situation. To render such a tale, for Enroy to manage it so earnestly, so endearingly, to spin such a genuinely unsettling yarn, would be more *off* by itself than any nighttime bed-moving could be, ever, and I personally and many others would be perturbed. As soon as I heard Enroy himself vouch for the rumor, that was all for me. Besides, Enroy was only the first.

Hallewell Academy is many great slabs of dreary stone. It is coated in ivy like rivulets defacing a huge plate of melting ice or snakes crossing over one another. The silver maples that line Hallewell's imposing, north-facing front gates have a tendency to whisper at you from overhead in the fall. There is a sense of something namelessly old, and unfriendly, and possibly dangerous that hangs about the place and its narrow halls. There is a sense of something clinging to your back as you walk. It rains or snows perpetually, like the sky is spitting on you for being here, and yet something abstract holds you in place, and the grounds have a harsh, uncommon beauty to them.

This is an academy where we ski. There are the alpine skiers and the Nordic skiers, who are generally considered vaguely lower and when possible not considered at all by the Alps. Enroy is a Nord. There is academics, too, of course, interspersed between athletics. I am also a Nord, but I was an Alp before and I think that's caused a stir. Switching sides isn't so much a bad thing as it's confusing and an apparent step backwards. But I just found I liked the flats. I just developed a dramatic fear of falling down on an incline. I simply got tired of sitting on the chairlift up Collingwood Mountain and staring at, two thirds of the way up, the same rusty disfigured cedar tree I'd picked out specifically to stare at and that never died no matter how much I willed it to or thought it might. I'll be sick of the flats soon, too, and I'm definitely sick of the whole business of things moving inexplicably, and I guess I'll drop out of Hallewell before long.

The second business had to do with what they call the Top Shack, on Collingwood Mountain. The Top Shack is an unimpressive wooden structure next to the clearing on top of Collingwood where the main lift deposits skiers, and where unsavoury things are known to be done on nights off between Alps, events that cause the Faculty to purse its lips and pretend it hasn't heard a *thing* while maintaining disapproval, somehow. The Top Shack is no man's land. It's an unhinged and sort of lawless area.

On February 14, Valentine's Day, last week, the Top Shack lost its floor. The event was disconcerting and not whatsoever romantic because it essentially made the little space unlivable and encouraged clothing to be layered on rather than stripped off, given how nastily cold it was now.

I'm relating things strictly as they went down: the Top Shack lost its floor. No one could say where the floor went—when Jonathan Lockhart and Ben Almoznino were deposited first by the chairlift on the 14th and wandered into the Top Shack probably to share a joint before plunging down the mountain, the floor was absent. Gone without a trace. That students could have pulled off something like that was inconceivable. Just the previous afternoon there had been people inside the Top Shack, people who confirmed vehemently and independently the presence of a floor. The Faculty declared with glee the building's structural integrity had been compromised and cordoned it off by noon. It was a Saturday, meaning it had been a

Friday yesterday, presumably when the floor vanished, and also the 13th day of the month. Which really gave people the willies.

I was talking with Mallory Goff last Tuesday. The two of us made up one of three groups remaining in the caf this late past one in the afternoon, the caf which was filled with dull wintry light that had arranged itself in oblong patterns across linoleum. Mallory is an Alp. “What will I talk to Mirrie about?” she pleaded with me, as if I were forcing her to interact with Mirrie. She made a gross face. “Pop culture?” The words practically dropped from her mouth to the floor like stones.

“Mirrie has the face of a stork,” I said, meanly. I have to be mean around Mallory Goff or else she won’t take me seriously. I’m very conscious of these things. As it stands I am very mean and she takes me perhaps more seriously than anyone else.

Mallory giggled. She said, “Mirrie knows forty-seven words and has run out of possible arrangements for them. I heard her repeat the same sentence four times yesterday.”

I considered this seriously. I thought of which forty-seven I might choose.

“If you only knew forty-seven words, which would you choose?”

Mallory scoffed. The question didn’t seem to interest her at all. “I wonder,” she said. She sort of picked at the remains of her Greek salad. I mused silently on the consequences of choosing just four-syllable words.

“So what’s with the lower gym equipment?” she asked, after the silence had stretched out and started to get boring.

“Hmm?”

The shift was immediate: Mallory’s eyes widened visibly and there was suddenly an excited tension between us. “You haven’t *heard?*” That I hadn’t heard was a fact she clearly relished. But I didn’t care much and shrugged. “The lower gym equipment,” she said, and her eyelids lowered to frame something like malice playing beneath them, but something innocent too, a medley of things in the blue eyes like jewels that Mallory Goff possessed effortlessly, “the treadmills and everything, not just the weights, it’s all in Boucher’s classroom.”

And I felt, very slightly, like shy hands in a classroom, the hairs on my arms raising.

I confirmed it later. Boucher, who taught French, had entered his classroom earlier that day to find his world, the world he inhabited for so many of his daylight hours, upended. Formerly tidy rows of desks had been displaced and in their wake was equipment from the lower gym. The rowers and kettlebells and racks and cages, et cetera, the weight plates, everything, had been arranged into an utterly neat and interlocking spectacle that maximized use of space and demonstrated, it was hypothesized, something obscure. It couldn't quite be said what was being demonstrated, but the event went beyond pure chaos. There was something being said here. The equipment arranged so delicately, balanced so deftly, nothing so much as scratched, the precision and utility of the act—it took hours to disassemble—like a complex puzzle that had been expertly made up. The whole arrangement of it formed an almost perfect cube, I heard. There was a message in there surely.

The desks are gone. They have yet to be found.

It was the next day that Hallewell was stormed on and I got caught in the snow walking home with Marlon Nabi from dryland training in the lower gym, which by then had regained most of its equipment. The flakes were so fat and fell so heavily that I was sure they'd overwhelmed me to an extent. I was no longer working through them; they worked through me. The snow was not an obstacle through which I had to make my way home. I was an obstacle to be struck down by the snow in its unvarying drive to the earth.

Marlon and I pushed ahead in silence, our labor focused and grim. I remember lifting my eyes briefly at front campus, glimpsing neo-gothic hints of the Hadfield building ahead, all frigid towers and its huge clock like an eye, its arches like raised eyebrows conveying judgement. I remember thinking how truly beautiful the fog of snow was. The silence it had bestowed.

And when I arrived to my dorm, wet and sullen, I found the first note. Slipped under my door. Without a name, paper with only three words scrawled childishly on it:

You're like me.

This morning I am speaking with Marlon Nabi in the back of Calc I. We're supposed to be learning to integrate but I've already written that off. I've asked every person I know over the age of thirty when he or she last integrated something manually, by hand, and not one of them could give me a date.

Marlon is back on about the lower gym equipment. The Faculty, tight-lipped as of yet, will finally face these strange happenings head-on: there will be an official address next period in the auditorium. Something has to be said. But I already know the line they'll take; students are to blame. What else could they say? I hear Marlon mention something about Who do I think is behind it, just now. I grab him physically by the shoulders and shake him, and say, too loudly, "Don't you see, man? It's not some prank. It *can't be!*"

I really believe that. Marlon is shocked for a moment, but then breaks into a grin and takes it as a bit of theatrical hyperbole. He takes it as a joke. My being grandiose for his benefit. Parsons, our teacher, from the front, tells me to sew my lips shut and discard the notion of ever undoing that act, in more or less words.

After class we glide down long busy hallways to the auditorium and I watch my feet landing one at a time, again and again, on dull, speckled vinyl flooring designed for thousands of feet to trample it every day. I've decided after some thought to stay quiet about last night's note, slipped under my door. I'd woken uneasily this morning, thrown on a black Cranberries t-shirt and jeans, slipped into the bathroom I share with three others. There I'd splashed water on and regarded my face in the mirror. A bit red-eyed. But at breakfast no one seemed to notice. I couldn't bear to bring up the note, for whatever reason.

As we walk the halls now as a class, I think of it again. You're like me.

Then I am seated. The auditorium is large and cool and fills impassively, as with a tipped hourglass being fed sand. Students chatter in groups as they drift by. Nabi is to my left; to my right was an empty seat until just two moments ago when Mallory Goff spotted me and wound her way here to fill it. She's chewing spearmint gum. "Zombie" has been going in my head all morning because of this tee that I'm by now wearing under my collared white shirt, covertly, because we can't wear tees during school hours, we must all wear the

same clothing, and I'm beginning to sweat a little, almost imperceptibly.

Then someone is addressing us, all 300 of us or nearly. It's Larsen, an actual Norwegian who is hilariously (people agree) an Alp and not a Nord, and who is also vice president at Hallewell. Larsen is saying something but I can barely understand it. I have the strangest sense of lying underwater, in a shallow kind of pool and looking up toward the sun, someone standing before it, blocking it slightly and looking back down at me. A couple bubbles escape my mouth and fly zantly to the surface. I smell spearmint.

And then we are in English. Benhabib. *A Clockwork Orange*. Benhabib is facing us and is leaned back against her desk, providing a pretty casual air, but ultimately she retains the innate authority lent by a height advantage, her being upright and the rest of us seated in tidy rows facing her and looking, for the most part, up.

"But could we say that Alex is truly good? He had no option to be good; he was forced. He was made to be good. And what are the consequences of that?" Benhabib points one lethargic digit in the direction of Tremblay, who blinks incredulously. "They," Tremblay begins but fades off. Then he declares, "No one is safe."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If they can do that to Alex, they can do it to anyone. He's just an example."

Benhabib wears what appears to be not one, but two cardigans, the one over the other, and is visibly perspiring. She says, straightening slightly, "But Alex was a criminal. If you're not a criminal, you've got nothing to worry about. Right?"

But this proves beyond Tremblay's improvisational dexterity and he just shrugs. Then he laughs a little under her continued gaze. "I guess."

Benhabib's apparently voluntary decision to dress herself in multiple cardigans is baffling and climatically inappropriate. No one else seems to have noticed. She is looking right at me now; she says my name and I keep my composure. Although, I'm jiggling one leg and it's causing my desk to vibrate—nervous habit. "What about you?" she says. "What do you think?"

I feel, very suddenly, a revulsion for my surroundings. Everything about the setting is all at once abhorrent to me; the order

in every dimension. Us, an even twenty students, uniformed and hair combed, arranged so meticulously in four rows of five and Benhabib, perched on her desk now and facing us down with such flawless symmetry. That's it maybe, the symmetry of the scene. I almost can't take it. I want to pick the class up in its entirety and shake it, I want us to fly from wall to wall and cry out and kick chairs aside and flip tables and kill that pulselessness. Manically, violently untuck our shirts. I want to smile like a shark.

The words seem to arrive fully formed. I don't even have to create them; they've always been there. They propel themselves from me.

"They took his humanity when they cut the evil out of him. They flayed him and coated him in rubber. It makes me sick. Evil is a facet of humanity. Would you choose to be evil, or inhuman?" People are looking, mildly interested. Something in the tone of my voice, the word *sick*. I say: "I would rather be evil."

At the back of the class, somebody giggles.

Later, I swallow cold water in huge gulps. I can't recall the last time I had water; I just forget. I'm feeling very weird. I'm so horribly thirsty. I'm leaned against the raised wall panels of Gersham Residence's west wing hallway, which are of oak and are stained dark old, wealthy shades. I can hear the polished and echoing click of someone's shoes very far down the hall, but I can't see anyone else. It's curiously empty here. I've never seen it so empty.

There's something I need to do. But I don't know what.

I wake up the next morning on my hardwood floor and still in my jeans, with muddy boots by my bedroom door, under which the second note has been slipped. I'm wearing a Sonic Youth t-shirt. I sit up groggily and grind the palms of my hands into my eyes and retrieve the note. It's a bare minimum thing once again: no address, no greeting, only scrawled words on a plain, lined sheet of paper. The thing is folded in half diagonally. It's very eerie, actually, that fold, because no one folds paper that way.

I read:

You're like me because you know frenzy.

You know the smothering and mundane calm. You know frenzy is a release from that. I see that you feel it. The calm isn't what's fragile. The calm isn't what's delicate, what's threatened. The frenzy is threatened, always gasping for air, fighting against the thick deadening quilt of harmony, of logic, of tidiness and rules and symmetry thrown over it, that tries endlessly to kill it at birth.

Be frenzied, brim with purpose, be utterly absorbed in the moment, exist from instant to instant, as you are meant to. Feel ecstasy.

Frenzy is creation that must be created. A circle.

As I fold the note back along its diagonal and stand, finally, I notice I am no longer myself. I am slightly removed from myself. Do you know the feeling of being beside yourself? That's where I am, a little to the side, still tethered to my physical self in a funny way but no longer in total control of him. I am only a viewer. And it isn't funny, really, it's actually horrifying. Because I know there will be repercussions for the actions of my body, surely there will be, though I'm no longer totally in control of them.

I can hear excitement outside my door. Running, raised voices. Heavy steps flowing down my unit's hallway, all in one direction, mad, weird scuffling. I hear someone yell in a tone I've never heard, something almost like joy and terror together, from someone still deciding which to choose, "No it's floating. Like, hovering. It's literally fucking impossible. It's literally—" Then they've run past my door too and their voice is lost. It sounds like bulls going by. A scared herd. A parade.

I burst through my door—or I see myself do it, from the side, and I understand I've done it—and grab Enroy by the shoulders, arrest his intense motion, give him a good shake.

"Kid, what is it?" I practically scream at him. Something is making me exceptionally nervous here. Something even beyond the situation itself, which is strange at least.

Enroy is wild-eyed like I've never seen him. "Hadfield," he says to me, and I know he's incapable of lying, "it's in the air! It's *floating*."

I try to respond but only gape like a dying fish, and in a second Enroy has wriggled free from my grasp and resumed his sprint, and there are others flying past me too, fully running. It's not hard for me to follow the crowd. Though I do so more slowly. Timidly, almost.

I follow the crowd down this hallway, and then down two flights of stairs. I follow it through the reception of my residence, where the receptionist is absent although that's almost never the case. I feel the excitement of the others rushing past me and carrying me forward in huge waves, building my own anxiety until I think I might collapse.

I am outside now. It's late February and biting cold. I have on no coat; none of the bodies passing me seem to in fact. No one appears to notice the cold. My boots leave dirty imprints in the white below them. I am following those other bodies down Moore Street and then onto College, and through Kensington Park onto Back Campus, which looks ugly in this light, ravaged by three-hundred crisscrossing sets of tracks. Snow churned up.

Front Campus is worse, when I reach it. It looks like it's been dug up. In fact, the snow is barely there, replaced by slushy mud, one grotesque brown pool. But that's not what draws the eye.

It seems every student at Hallewell has arrived here and has stopped. Together we've formed an approximate ring around Front Campus, depositing ourselves in mismatched, shambling groups. A few of us stand alone—I do. And above us, thirty feet above, maybe, quivering slightly as though held delicately between a massive, invisible forefinger and thumb, is the Hadfield building. There's no reason for it to be there, so high over us, when it's never been there before. And yet.

It's as though Hadfield gazes at us, at me, and it looks like it might drop at any instant but doesn't. It isn't only students here; everyone is here. The huge building's arches of time-darkened stone are somehow more pointed now and somehow meaner than they ever were, and it's looking at me. I drop my eyes and look down to my boots, which are still caked with mud.

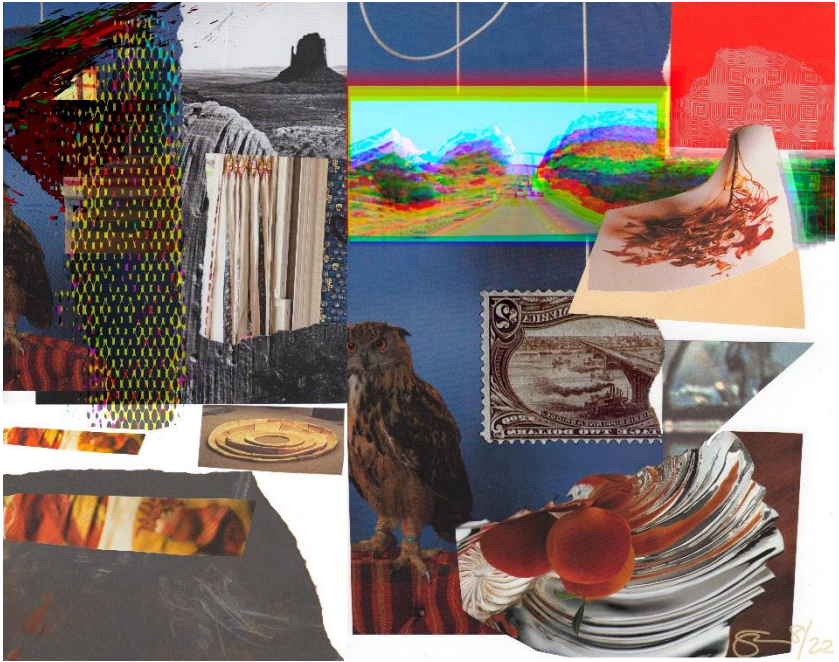
I notice my apprehension is gone. I feel a sudden calm. I look at the mud around me, the slush and the filth of it all, for a long time and I barely feel the cold.

I have the strangest sense that I'm being watched.

But that can't be. Every face is riveted to the grotesque floating display that looms over us like a seam in reality come undone. Every expression is dumb, or giddy, or scared. Hundreds of cheeks pink from the wind and every chin, every one, is tilted up. And mine too; now I'm looking up, no longer at my boots. From the side, I've been watching the body I would normally inhabit and I've seen myself look up. Only, I'm not looking at the display as those others are. I'm looking past it and to the sky and something serene is happening to me.

It's just the sky is blue like I've never seen, and it's crisp, like a sheet that's been plucked from the line and spread deftly and tucked so evenly and severely the idea of a fault, even, a wrinkle, is unthinkable. And I know that spring is coming soon. It's just around the corner. The chattering and hushed voices around me falls back like I'm on a conveyor sliding away from it all. I have a feeling like spring as I breath in and fill my lungs to their maximum and I almost can't bear it. The cold is utterly absent. I feel, suddenly, the infinity of this single moment.

And I almost go to pieces, with the ecstasy of it all. Just something about it.



Westbound and Rolling / Gina Maranto



Under the Skin / Gina Maranto

Buddha Blesses LA

Jon Cohen

Inception 2022 Finalist

It arrives out of nowhere, as certain as smog and the tiny Lakers flags that pop up in SUV windows when the team makes the Finals: The Buddhist bracelet with its polished tiger eye, turquoise, and forbidden lava rock beads.

How did this spartan jewelry end up on the wrists of Hollywood power brokers and balding executives across Los Angeles, replacing gold Daytonas and Pepsi Submariner Rolexes?

One bracelet, three bracelets, does one wear them on both wrists? Why the fuck not?

Some say a great wind blew in from Tulum, Mexico to Los Angeles, a sirocco of positive vibes whipped up from a yoga summit, fueled by Ecstasy and Molly, and small-batch Tequila. Was the Buddhist jewelry a recent improvement on those fabric wristlets that Mexican street vendors and expats weave together from colorful thread that summarily fall apart in ocean water? Perhaps the more durable bracelet originated in Tibet.

In the end, does it really matter? Does *anything*? Buddha would plainly say “no.” The vibe in L.A. has gone from relaxed, to terribly relaxed, Buddha might even say “complacent.” If a string of polished beads infiltrates this crazy world, one region at a time, who should question the reason why?

Certainly not Pharaoh Goldberg, the doe-eyed Hollywood actor from New Jersey, son of a renowned tri-state orthodontist and an eighties supermodel. As the hottest property on the market, Pharaoh openly eschews his fame.



Day at the Park / Joy Kloman

Inception 2022 Finalist

Carnal Conversations

Cynthia Close

Inception 2022 Finalist

“The new art will be an art where everything is ground up, mixed up, broken up, piled up, scratched, hacked up and blown up. Everything will be used to create art: the complete furnishings of a room, stoves, tables, beds, chests, scraps of cloth, padding in short everything will be used and mixed up pell-mell...” Otto Mühl, November, 1961

Richard said my first post should be written when I'm drunk. Reminds me of the day he put a lined notebook with a Harvard U. logo on the cover and a pen in my hand twenty years ago and said, “write” or the day in my studio after a very satisfying evening in bed when he asked why I never use green in my paintings. Now I'm a grandmother. Then I was a mother, but the daughter part of me causes the most distress. My mother is still alive. I'm one of those workingwomen in the middle. I knew my great-grandmother; she died on my 14th birthday. She was an only child. My grandmother, born in 1900, was an only child. My mother was an only child. I'm almost an only child, my daughter is an only child, and now her first born (she tells me she wants one more) is a girl. This genetic pattern may or may not hold any scientifically objective significance, but what Richard jokingly calls my “*irrational self-confidence*” in being female is deeply rooted in the past.

Henricus

Cristina Bryan

Inception 2022 Finalist

“You are bone idle,” my mother-in-law Mrs. Perrotts remarked when I arrived home from work one Saturday evening shortly before Christmas. The night was cold, and the paving stones were slick with filth and frost.

Mrs. Perrotts had been pretending to sleep. “Been at the tavern?” she croaked.

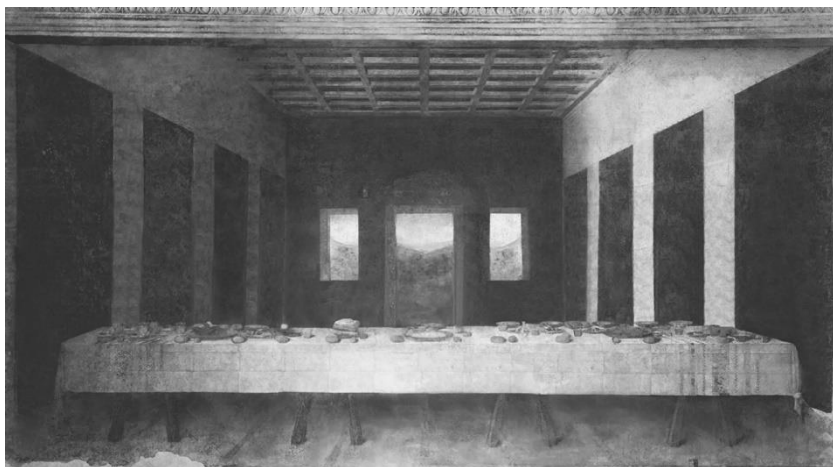
“Nay, Mrs. Perrotts.” I comforted myself by picturing her false ginger hair on fire. I went into the kitchen and didn’t come out.

This was a few weeks before I left the town of Oxford to dwell among wild Savages.

John Perrotts and I had been servants at the college Saint Edmund Hall, and had dwelt quite happily there for three years without having to see Mrs. Perrotts once. My John had died at Michaelmas of the bloody flux. Mrs. Perrotts arrived the day of the burial. She simply said she was tired of living in the country. She set herself up in the bedchamber, letting me make do with the rush pallet in the kitchen.

I want to point out at once that I’d learned how to read, write, and do calculations when I was a child. This is simply to say that unlike other servants I was raised for better things. But I didn’t object to my college work, which involved cleaning and laundering. The six Saint Edmund Hall masters were quiet and kind and their dwellings in the college not far from my own.

This was in the year 1608. I don’t know what the year is now, so don’t ask.



The Last Storm / Jeanne Wilkinson

Inception 2022 Runner-up

Morgan

Ron Pullins

Inception 2022 Runner-up

Our man awakens and finds the world has stopped. Zero at the bone. A sudden, unexpected, deadly kind of silence has wakened him. Everything has changed. The world has altered.

Our man pulls the sheet up to his nose, stares at the ceiling. A winter morning. At early dawn.

Today will be another day of catastrophe. Again, another day.

Things must return to normal. Our man peers out, over frost that has crept up his bedroom window, sees snow outside. The bedroom is cold.

Our man must—again—throw off the sheets and push himself into the day. Yes, he must. He must get to his coffee.

Our man toggles the switch; the lamp doesn't work. He tries again; it fails again. The overhead isn't working. The clock by his bed has stopped. He no longer hears the fridge on the floor below. The furnace in the basement, the clang of steam pipes, all have fallen silent.

The power's off. That's one thing, and it's dangerous, different.

How have such things occurred? How have things happened? Who's allowing this to be the way things are? And what changes will all these changes bring to him? Which is all that is important. Most important. Being, as he is, at the center of the universe. Of course he is. Aren't we all?

Perhaps something from outside has entered his zone, corrupted the mechanism of his being, disturbed the operation of his now.



Rust / Ryker Woodward
Inception 2022 Winner



Debutante's Ball / george l stein

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Finalist

Sunflowers in Soup

Xiaoqiu Qiu

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Finalist

*“Kveld lifir maðr ekki
Eptir kvið norma.”
 (“A man does not live a single evening
After the decree of the fates.”) — Poetic Edda*

In that moment, you're
naked: it did not
present, but disguise
Strokes
after color-
ful strokes, it is always
half and more
than what it stems:
the dying cannot commiserate
the guilt of the dead;
they have their own decay, petal
after petal, to hide behind.
only in the rich, spontaneous cata-
strophe, death becomes meta-
phoric, the tawny seed beds discharge
A dark remorse
of the kneeling figure: the vividness
of it, the dying laid level
with the dead, the discoloring backdrops —
this has always been the painting
Every day, when death comes
with its pre-sketched yellow edges, you
the leaf that grows beside
it, no less bright and full enough
to fall.

Assisi

William Lewis Winston

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Finalist

Last Sunday morning as the shuttered light
began to work its way between the slats and find
a path across the floor and down the
steps, their long flight into the underworld,

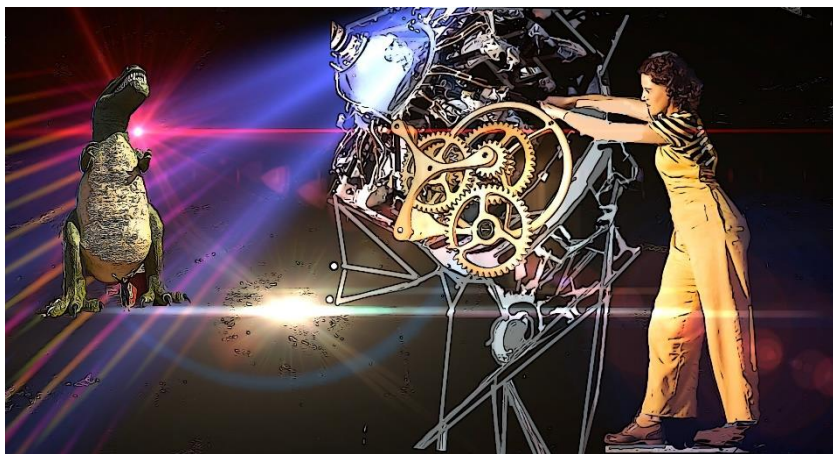
where first was thought the rough stones from the
valley would suffice to quiet there and make a small
place worth staying for a while, worth contemplation
of a sort that men with weapons, crowns and holy books

would not notice in their haste to raise a room above
and then another and a tower, too, and then atop that a
symbol of what they had done, glowing, so it could be
seen from far, in battle and in night and storm,

Francesco stirred from centuries without the keys or need
of them, as he always does on days like this, and stretched and
rose and took a walk around the vast halls under the domes,
glittering with gold and glass as if they could capture

light, some new species hemmed around the edges, and among
the thick columns vaulting into measured branches — so
unlike the real light and the trees always waiting on the
hillsides outside the town and down by the river,

where he was headed for a breath of fresh air and birdsong and
his usual slow dance among the mists to remind him of
something he never could remember, and
where no one would be to ask him.



Chasing Chester / Deborah McMillion

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Finalist

The Weight

William Lewis Winston

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Finalist

I say I would not have
cast the stone, entered the room,
fled the scene, hidden the lie, or
stolen the loaf of bread,
would not have let go the terrible secret, or
taken up arms, crawled from the trench,
would not have crossed the line, and that
I would not have given-up the names. Or
I would have done it all—in either case
a presumption of the pure, the holier-than-thou,
the dogma, the denunciation,
the intention and the pretty design. But
no matter the weight,
tests sit out of reach in a lost past,
judgment fails, and accidents of existence
unfold in places, times or wombs, in
transmigrated souls gone awry,
sensibilities gained, rebuked or blind
not by agency or choice but by
encounter, chance or fortune,
a trip, a fall or an impossible rise—
when nothing is so certain,
no depth of field so secure as not to
dissolve in a moment into its opposite.

Swelling

Raïssa Simone

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Runner-up

Tell me that you love my feral hair
Again
That you are unlike the boys who would gamble me for a
seashell or who would
Coax my mouth open when their wanting ruptures

Why can I not be watched
As steady and honest as rain?
Will you witness me for a little while, dear,
Hold a grandfather clock heart until it is too heavy
Or until the
Golden momentary variation in voltage between us lapses and
Out from your teeth will come downcast words of boredom or
A tickle to flee
And I will
Nod and likely look to the lake and hold myself to its chilled
promise

You can tell the water anything.

Little Box

Kendal McGinnis

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Runner-up

You spend your time after the funeral picking up your life and saying good-bye to it. You do the kinds of jobs that men who give you unsolicited advice say will make you interesting later. So you're in Concord, Massachusetts wearing an orange vest and a walkie and non-slip shoes with steel toes going around saying Mel do you copy and Mel says yes I copy. People have big ideas now. Mel included. TikTok speaks to Neoliberalism so she has the term and can give a small Ted Talk on American puritanical values and how we're all imperialists who fashion ourselves the underdog but no one's going to mention you or how you're in non-slip shoes and an orange vest walking around going Mel do you copy.

Mel's an encyclopedia on juice. She can tell you about the dawn of the company's foundation, where the grapes come from, its exhibition at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. But she's embarrassed by Concord. The city layout is as mundane as any other New England town, a McDonald's, a Starbucks, a stoplight with hanging telephone wires, a spider-webbed Best Western along the expressway. But Concord is a family of lazy settlers. Twenty minutes by car from Plymouth Rock. No one's ancestors or posterity here ever manifest destiny-ing. It's just the spot to live and die.

Anybody, says Mel, can go on Google and search what it is to be a working-class American. Mel says this in big hoorahs through several layers of personal protection equipment. But no one will mention what it feels like to bend over and fixture a gasket between a pipe and valve and pump juice from the tank in cellar nine to the tank in the backlot. That is for sure. Just wait thirty-six years. The vest and the walkie'll become you. The big black shoes, the Levis, you'd never guess we're not all dykes here laughs Mel a hearty jostling sort of laugh. Oh boohoo, don't fret, it's not homophobia, it's just that defense mechanism that saves from waning and aging femininity, something to do with the working-class thing, we'll circle back. You'll hear a variation of this joke another hundred times anyway by the end of the

harvest. Let's be clear, you're making the nonalcoholic alternative to wine. A drink for churchgoers, people with good American values.

Taking to heart unsolicited advice from men becomes a quirky part of your personality. You'll see later. These men are more or less a demographic. They think you're funny when other people think you are too quiet or too crude. You remind them—but of course not too much—of their own daughters. They save you. They take you under their wing. You have a landlord in Leadville, Colorado, where you do another one of the jobs that are beside the point, that takes you out one night and buys you bratwursts at a brewery on the town's main street which is called Main Street. Jim is his name. Three or four beers you drink together.

Jim is handsome in the groomed, cheery, recent-Colorado-property-owner kind of way. A face that says: a positive spin!—an upward spiral! His move from the West Coast has something to do with taxes and also maybe a new hunting law or a wolf sanctuary nearby—you miss that part between sips of beer and the brewery is loud and buzzing with people. No clink of ski boots or gloves being tossed on the table, none of that. It's sort of a dreamy local crowd on this night. Men who plow the runs, college boys who check your tickets, a neighborhood restaurant owner and his wife. Jim's monologuing—it's characteristic of the demographic. You've heard at this point about his divorce from Trudy, the whole thing sort of slow-burn or that's how you read it, probably he tells you too about his daughter in Humboldt County failing out of a Communications major. You notice things are weighing on him and you grab his hand. There's an intimacy between you and Jim. Something you've had before and will again with men that give advice so laudable it transcends whole generational boundaries, job markets, gender divides.

You start sleeping one day with one of these men. Craig or something. He lives in a swanky but minimalist apartment overlooking the Pulaski bridge (on the Brooklyn side, obviously). He's much older than you but jogs and stays away from red meat. His mattress and books are on the floor. The view is spectacular and the books on the floor are all ones that quirky Bushwick girls your age love: the Zadie Smiths, the Aimee Benders, the Lidia Yuknavitches. Craig is a little shamefaced about his studio. He used to work in homeland security, but his conscience gets the better of him. Now he's at a hedge fund in

the city. We're all a little implicit, he whispers to you as you lean with your back against the kitchen sink, his hands gripping the counter on either side of you, maybe his thumb in one of your belt loops (in a hot way not a predatory way). In 2001 he was working in the Pentagon, he says. You try to mimic the expected jaw-drop he's after. Craig was there on the day it all happens. He doesn't ask you of course about your own 9.11 story because you would've been too young to have a personal anecdote. Mostly likely he doesn't care anyway. There's no time for that now. The fact alone that he was in the Pentagon on the day it all goes down, he's using your generation's lingo now, getting really close to your ear, it makes women want to put out for him he says. He says it coyly, sheepishly, he's using "put out" sarcastically—it's ironic, no Greenpoint hipster would use "put out" and mean it. But don't worry, he's not really a hipster, he tells you this before you get to the part where you're between his hands leaning with your back against the kitchen sink. Craig's really self-aware. He shrugs his own narrative to the side in a lionhearted act of humility. You wonder later whether you sleep with him because you too are taken by the sheer valor of his Pentagon story or whether there's a look-at-me-now moment when you're undressing in front of the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the Pulaski bridge, the New York skyline big and bright before you, you can almost see the Chrysler building, the Empire State, the TJs on 3rd Avenue where the organic people go to get their Trader O's, all of it.

Jim's hand is getting soggy in yours. This moment means so much to him. Big, hunky conservative men are all softies, overly sentimental. They want the troops to come home or they want the troops to stay there or they want the troops to finish their duty but what the duty is is not the duty of these big, hunky conservative men to say, no. The American flag outside his Leadville log-cabin dream home says enough, doesn't it. Jim is a good listener. It makes him feel good that you take advice from him. He's crying now, babbling a bit, he's saying something like Trudy or troops or Truist—that might be his bank—who knows. You can't tell, he's too wet and too pink. Men with fresh snow still in their beards begin looking over at you at your table, which is elevated. The seats themselves are old whiskey barrels. The bar is original, from the original German pub, but everything else has that manicured renovation feel. A high yellow-lit ceiling with

wooden beams running across it. Young healthy servers from Liberal Arts backgrounds, scruffy and intellectually worn-out but from well-off families. No one's been here before, but we've all been here before. It's just someone's take on an impression of something else. The more you move the more you understand this. Every town or city has a one-dimensionality to it. When you pick up your stuff and load the car and say good-bye, the town itself folds itself flat like the turned pages of a pop-up children's book until it's just a road and then a highway—the I-5 then the I-70 then the Indiana Expressway, all in your rear window. Home is not a place, home is the men who give you unsolicited advice.

A bearded man at the table parallel to yours mouths to you: Is he okay? Jim's mom—you've gotten to the bottom of it—is married and remarried seven times before Jim turns twenty-five. Add Trudy and the loser daughter into the mix and you have a recipe for a big, hunky man to break down at the gentle touch of your hand, the snow falling in silent sheets on the sidewalk outside, the old rickety bar and a sexy modern backslash behind him. Jim leans in, squeezes your hand tighter. The chatter dies off. The brewery blurs away. It's just his puffy pink face. You almost know it's coming and then it comes. He grabs your cheeks dramatically, spontaneously, and pulls you close. He turns your head slightly and whispers into your ear, I have a little box. Jim has a little box and it is filled to the brim with bad and negative emotions. He just puts it, he says, on the edge of a small shelf high in his office and doesn't touch it except on dark days. Put it all in the box, divorce yes daughters yes death of an old touch-football friend him too his mother's marriages yesyesyes. Put it in the box. He looks at you so piercingly you worry he's going to dive into a kiss on your lips. Where is your box, he whispers. Huh. Where do you keep your little box?

Mel invites you to dinner at her house after your shift. It's fall and the harvest at the company is ending soon. Mel lives in West Concord, by the golf course. She looks nice, she has tomorrow off. Her dress is something floral, something silky. Oh this? She'll say. Target. Mel and her ex-husband lose everything in one way or another. A second mortgage taken out on a business gone underwater. Not to the Great Recession but to a corrupt business partner who flees to Florida says Mel's new man Pat. Not tonight Mel says, giving him a look. But Pat won't let up, it's part of his own narrative now. You can't get to know him or eat dinner at their house in West Concord without

hearing the whole shebang. Mel and her ex go bankrupt shortly after the evil business partner—the story's growing in melodrama, you like it. Mel divorces him as a last blow to the man's self-esteem and he dies shortly after. She meets her new man at the funeral, do you believe it? A romance out of dust and ash says Pat.

Mel serves watermelon. It's a cool orange-skied fall evening. Everything this mundane takes on meaning at a certain hour and the hour is now. The clouds seem to be going in all directions. Pat gives you one of his good beers from the refrigerator in the garage. He winks at you, like he's sharing a secret only you can be let in on. You're comfortable here in Concord, sitting on a porch with chipped paint and strung-up patio lights, the smell of something hot and baked in a dish smothered with cheddar. It smells so heavenly. Mel and Pat are laughing at each other. The conversation loses you but they're talking about money in a sort of playful way, writing off the hardship and anxiety with self-deprecation. You don't like when working-class people like you and Mel and Pat complain about cycles of poverty. It's much prettier when fluffy academics do it or you can read it in a book or something. But Mel and Pat don't matter much, they're just characters in one of your stories anyway. Not real people like your dad. The dish is eaten and you are tired and Mel is scrolling Tik Tok in the dark. There are dogs barking coming from the screen.

Your little box is in the passenger seat and you are driving. It's a boring twenty minutes from Concord to Plymouth Rock. You've settled on reverse manifest destiny. The little box and you and the long trek across the country. You park your car in the visitor center parking lot. You're expecting it to be inconsequential and graffitied in something unintelligible but it's beautiful actually. Simple and complicated and holding so much history in its body. The beach before it is gated off because it's sacred to you and your ancestors and your posterity, the ones who make it out west. You hop the gate clutching your little box tight against your chest and walk it out past the shoreline.

Craig isn't all that bad, you promise. The hugs he gives you after you buzz into his loft are big and breathy, all-encompassing. He hugs you like someone who loves your body, not for the body itself. Your dad used to hug you like that. Your dad wasn't perfect: A California transplant from Concord, Massachusetts. Came across as a

reader but was totally not a reader. Made his way across America, stopping, working odd-jobs, becoming interesting. He did that thing that dads do where they compete to make their lives sound adventurous but use self-deprecating language to do it so it shows humility and he was bashfully patriarchal but also a leftist so therefore complex and he was insistent on his Mayflower story, his 9-11 story, his retirement dream home in Colorado, everything subject to embellishment but never for malice. He's the guy that poemed and syntaxed you into existence. You miss the way he hugged. He lives in a little box now on your desk in-between the mascara and the two deodorants you can't decide on.

for me, for you

C. Tai Tai

Goldilocks Zone 2022 Winner

給妳

給我

Ya estoy cansada pero sigo

I am full of aphorisms seeing the reflection of light through the
G A Z E
of others

讓我說不清楚為什麼 así es AHORA ESTAMOS YA
TRATANDO
DE SER MEJOR
MÁS ASTUTA learnt from that stern look of disapproval
已經不夠力量的時候再往前看。

ROJO 熱血的顏色 因為我沒有其他生命來衡量
algunas veces ni siquiera me reconozco
*trato de ver cada momento como una oportunidad de conectarme
al mundo más grande pero me
decepciona el mundo*

TAL VEZ

si no podemos cambiar la escultura estructura,

我每個行動都得...

(poem repeats from top)

Contributors

Cristina Bryan has worked as a professional editor for thirty-five years, and ran a small regional book publisher, Barclay Bryan Press. She is now retired. *Henricus* is her first novel.

Armed with an MFA from Boston University, **Cynthia Close** plowed her way through several productive careers in the arts, including instructor in drawing and painting, Dean of Admissions at The Art Institute of Boston, founder of ARTWORKS Consulting, and president of Documentary Educational Resources. She now claims to be a writer. To support this claim, she is a contributing editor for *Documentary Magazine* and writes regularly about art, cinema, and culture for, *Artist's Magazine*, *Art & Object*, *Pastel Journal*, *Watercolor Artist*, *Art New England*.

Jon Cohen lives in Los Angeles with his wife and sixteen-year-old daughter. He is a writer trapped in the body of a music executive. Despite kicking and screaming throughout his successful and reluctant career in music, he's been left with two invaluable gifts: the ability to stay up past his bedtime, and the unswerving desire to get the fuck out of the music biz.

Marcy Rae Henry is a multidisciplinary artist, una Latina de Los Borderlands and part of the LGBTQ community. She is delighted by tablas, tulips and the theremin. M.R. Henry's writing has received a Chicago Community Arts Assistance Grant, an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, and a Pushcart Prize nomination. Other writing and visual art appear in *The Columbia Review*, *carte blanche*, *PANK*, *The Southern Review*, *Cauldron Anthology* and *The Brooklyn Review*, among others. DoubleCross Press will publish her chapbook this year.

Liam Keller is a technical writer based in Toronto, Canada. He is the recipient of the Meet Me @ 19th Street 2021 First Quarter novel excerpt competition from Arch Street Press. He writes casually, in his spare time, to explore themes of alienation and the surreal in everyday life.

Raïssa Simone is a multidisciplinary artist and writer. She has competed at national poetry slams and performed at venues and festivals. Simone has remained active in social justice causes throughout her career, particularly in working to support others living with C-PTSD. She vigorously fights against domestic violence and sexual assault, and centers healing in her poetry.

Joy Kloman was a tenured associate professor at University of Mississippi, who supervised graduate and undergraduate painting programs and taught drawing in London. She received a Mississippi Arts Commission Individual

Artist State Grant, and had work displayed in The Drawing Center Viewing Program & Slide Registry, NY.

Andrea Lewis' stories, essays, and flash fiction have appeared in many online and print journals including *Prairie Schooner*, *Raleigh Review*, and *Briar Cliff Review*. Her collection of linked stories, *What My Last Man Did*, won the Blue Light Books Prize for fiction and was published by Indiana University Press. She lives in Seattle, WA.

Lior Locher is a nonbinary mixed-media artist, mainly working in acrylic and collage and printmaking. After having lived in six countries on four continents and being homeless at some point, they are now based at the English seaside.

Gina Maranto is a prizewinning science writer recently retired from the University of Miami.

Kendal McGinnis is a master's student in writing at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where she teaches German and does lots of standup comedy.

Róisín McIntosh is a short-story writer working from under the Blackstairs Mountains in Ireland. She holds an MA in Literature and recently completed a Diploma in Creative Writing. She is currently working on her first short story collection.

Deborah McMillion is an illustrator of ghost stories, graphic books, fine art, postales, Artistamps and zines.

Alex Nodopaka originated last century in Kyiv, Ukraine. He speaks, reads and writes San Franciscan, Parisian, Kievan and Muscovite. Mumbles in English and sings in tongues after Vodka. Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. Presently fulltime author, visual artist in the USA but considers his past irrelevant as he seeks new reincarnations.

Ernst Perdriel is a multifield artist (visual art, photography, writing), designer and horticulturist based in Cowansville (Quebec, Canada). His life's mission is to transmit the passion of the cultural and environmental heritage through arts, lifestyle and sharing of knowledge. He has participated in solo and group exhibitions in visual arts since 1995. His works appeared in *Blue Mesa Review*, *pacificREVIEW*, *filling Station*, *pulpMAG*, *Sunspot Literary Journal*, *Meat for Tea*, *Kolaj*, *Into the Void*, and others. Learn more at www.ernstperdriel.com.

Ron Pullins is a fiction writer, playwright, and poet working in Tucson AZ. His works in fiction, poetry and drama have been published in numerous journals including *Typishly*, *Southwest Review*, *Shenandoah*. A list can be found

at www.pullins.com. Pullins won the 2022 Malcolm Lowry award for *Dollartorium*, a satirical novel forthcoming 2023 from J. New Books.

Xiaoqiu Qiu is a Chinese poet who currently is a Black Mountain Institute PhD Fellow at UNLV, a fellowship that counts among its alumni Vu Tran and Alissa Nutting. Qiu writes and translates novels, short stories and poems. His novel *The Man with a Camera Eye* is a semifinalist for the 2021 Autumn House fiction prize. Qiu's poems have been published in *Ghost City Review*, *REED* magazine and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, and his translated poems have been published in *Antonym*, *Lunch Ticket*.

Reema Rajbanshi is a published author of creative and critical work, and identifies as South Asian American with Bahujan and Indigenous heritage. Her debut fiction book *Sugar, Smoke, Song* (Red Hen Press, 2020) is a linked story collection exploring the experiences of Asian/American women and immigrant life in the US. Excerpts were published in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Confrontation*, *Southwest Review*, and *Blackbird*, among others. Rajbanshi is also a scholar of Literature and has a recent film essay published in *Routledge* (2022).

Bill Schulz is a Maine-based poet, editor, and artist. He received a Master's in English from the poetry workshop at The University of New Hampshire and a Master's in Theological Studies from The Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California thirty years later. His artwork and poetry appeared in several journals. His recent book, *Dog or Wolf*, was published in the summer of 2021 by Nine Mile Press. He is the founder and editor of *Hole In The Head Review*, www.holeintheheadreview.com.

george l stein is a photographer from northern new jersey engaged in street, art, rural and urban decay, alt/portrait and surreal genres. He has previously been published in *Wrongdoing*, *Fatal Flaw*, and *Sunspot Lit*, among others. Online; georgelstein.com.

C. Tai Tai is an immigrant artist with roots in various parts of the US, Taiwan, and Latin America. Negotiating freedom in self-expression with the fragility of belonging are key themes in her work.

Jeanne Wilkinson is an artist and writer who shares time between Brooklyn, NY, and Madison, WI. Her work has been exhibited extensively in galleries worldwide. Her writing and artwork have been featured on NPR's Leonard Lopate Show and Living on Earth, in *Adirondack Review*, *Columbia Journal Online*, *J. Mane Gallery*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Sunspot Lit*, and more. Her experimental videos have been screened at BAM, at the Greenpoint and New

York Independent Film Festivals, and a video installation was featured in a play at the 13th Street Repertory Theater in Manhattan.

William Lewis Winston lives in Oakland, CA, where he taught English and history for four decades. His poems have appeared in *Bearing Witness* (Zephyr Press 2002), *Margie*, *Ink Pot*, *Comstock Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Essential* (Underground Writers Association 2022), *Close Up* (Orchard Lea Press 2022), *What Is All This Sweet Work?* (Vita Brevis Press Anthology IV 2022). He received an International Merit Award from *Atlanta Review*. His short story *The Sound of Snow Not Falling* was featured in the Philadelphia InterAct Theatre's 2005-06 Writing Aloud series.

Sheree Wood is a contemporary painter with studios in Milwaukee, WI and Tucson, AZ. From small nature-inspired watercolors to large acrylic abstract paintings, Wood's practice explores color and the way nature affects the human spirit. Wood attributes her manner of seeing the world to a childhood spent camping in the family's red VW bus. Learn more at www.ShereeWoodArt.com.

Ryker Woodward is an oil painter currently located in Monterey, CA. He is known as an abstract expressionist painter who emphasizes experimentation in mediums and compositions. Ryker's current body of work translates video game iconography into a fine art context. Ryker's work has been featured in student shows at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland OR where he graduated with a BFA in Painting in 2022.

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