



Elsewhere Lit:
A Journey of Art and Literature

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Elsewhere:
A Journey for Art and Literature

Cover Art: Chris Abramides

Elsewhere Lit : A Journey of Art and Literature

Masthead

Founding Editors: Dena Afrasiabi

Nandini Dhar

Web Designer: Lissa Kiernan

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Poetry

FEATURED POET: SAHAR MURADI

SIX POEMS

GATES

The one that belonged to her
The one where the light hit for the first time
The one between our houses
The one I crawled through to sleep on his chest
The one the dog squeezed through
The one at three over the candle and cake
The one at three at the checkpoint
The one between the earth and the sky, the refrigerator with wings
The one where he met us after one year and was a stranger
The one at the park, the one at Up Park, the one at Down Park
The one that pierced my face and they pointed and laughed
The one that took them away from me in a tube and sent them back to me tired
The one he went through, hairs shooting out
The one she went through, blood turning up
The one we all went through to get to the blinking lights with the cherries
The ones we put up when she was born
The ones we passed to leave for good
The ones we paid quarters to get through
The one they learned the names of Presidents for
The ones they needed social security numbers for
The one I touched in the dark of my room
The ones we couldn't talk about, ever
The one we had to close behind us to stay in, to keep neat, to not be tempted
The one we tried to jump and failed
The one he jumped and wasn't forgiven
The ones in the books that made animals of us
The ones that told us who we weren't
The ones that hurt, that swung and cut and rattled long after they left
The ones that kept flowers
The one I went through to go north, to go abroad, to go east, to find my cardinal ways
The one she went through too tired to find her way
The one they have chosen to give them purpose
The different one I have chosen
The one I haven't yet found
The one I am looking through now with the narrow slots and passages unseen

TIMBUKTU

Salaam alaikum

Once, when I was a girl

I ni sógóma?

I believed in morning,
like a hot, yellow apple

Manda nabasheyn

We never tired. Father said,
God is good

Héré sira?

We slept in twos and threes

Famil chatoor ast?

It was a matter of everyone

Sómógó bédi?

Someone had work, someone didn't
Someone always offered something

Owlada khoob astan?

We were kids but we knew everything
We belonged to everyone

I sigi na

After prayer, there was tea
After tea, there was fruit

Befarmayen

Mother taught us to draw our feet
To let others go first

Aw ni tile

In time, day gave way to night

Jan e tan jor ast?

Someone would show up asking for my body
Then another

I dógó cé ka kéné

We would exchange brothers
who were not our brothers

Khudaya shukur

The earth met us in different ways
For some, it rained
For others, there wasn't water for the stones

A barika Allah ye
We thanked God for blessing us
and not our neighbors

Khuda hafez
History was the first to leave
and without a trace

Aw ni wula
Father said the night has hands
Mother reminded me of the apple

Shab bakhair
In the dark
I held nothing

A PLACE TO LIVE

It's a place to live,
he said
looking out over the cranes
frozen in the sand
like seagulls with still wings

There was the glass whale
standing up in the water
a dolphin facing God

There was the cigarette skyline
blank-faced buildings
tall, white, and widowed
or blue and mirrored
hundreds of them
vacant
beaded gloriously gold at night

In between were low cubes of stores
car dealerships, jewelers
and invisible trades

There were shopping malls
with arches and sea life
supermarkets built for disasters

There were convention centers and expos
and festivals that began at sunset

There were museums for other places

There was the old city
with stout white blocks
bleeding with short brown men
who worked construction

There was sudden grass
bougainvillea on the walls
hyacinths in the sand
miles of manicured walks
blue ones and red ones
black-eyed peacocks
and falcons perched on covered hands

There was no trash

There were cars and cars and cars
big tires for the dunes
diamond caps for the night

and boys like him
laughing behind sealed glass

Everywhere
a cape of fine azure
Tall men and women
in white cotton
and black rayon
men with sinful watches
women with silver faces
who loved to shop

There was fresh fruit
bottled water
expats
pilgrims
and prayer on the side of the road

There was refrigeration

There was the Qasba
with its French seats
and flat desserts
a Ferris wheel called The Eye

We went up
and in the glow of the city
before I could say it,
he said,
this is where I grew up

A PICTURE TIN

(after Charles Simic's "A Book Full of Pictures")

Father learned exile by television
And this was wartime.
Mother washed. I sat quietly with a tin
Full of pictures. Night drew.
My hands grew warm touching their faces
In youth.

There was a roll of bills
 in a pocket in the closet.
But why had she shown it to me?
Mother's hands made rough
sounds on her uniform.
It was green
Like the tips of my eyes, now bedtime.

The corners I touched felt like tusks.
"We say 'elephant tears,'" he once said.
In my picture tin
The war raged on: black and white
A fugitive zebra on the street
With my heart pulsing red in its mouth.

VARIATION ON VARIATIONS ON A POEM BY VALLEJO

One Sunday the sun came
said you are bright dead
few friends, strangers
anything still quivering
in spite of
childhood by the grave
cousins speaking softly
a Sunday no one knows yet
in the eyes: glasses, newspaper
wife and son, your dog
turning away, out of
respect, all the little
kneel down
not understanding
a few clods of dirt, white
smoke began to lift
to write
over—as we
scattered and shone

LISSA KIERNAN AND MAUREEN ALSOP

GRANDMOTHER TRAINED WILD HORSES

The certainty of your absence patterns the valley. Inside my name: strange birdsong, hesitations, roses cast at the temples. In the dream, I wore her nightshirt. When stars, red carnations, slid the sky's cerulean streams. Words offered introduction. As much yours as mine.

*

Your voice, in erasures, at last abandons rain's black swells. Clean arrangement, the little mouth sneer. The shoals corridor of weeds deepen to crimson when I am near to the cloth her body touched.

In the land of lost earrings, there are so many colors, but its thousand veins. We lose them or they lose us.

Until she went it only was only the thought of her dying.

The thickened phone-line, unforgivable, *She didn't eat her crusts*. I take the exuberance held in the bloodclot, every will your sounds would render.

*

I can't hardly remember her now; bolts sparking deep within the dimming cornflower blue. One ear diamond-studded. Excuses proliferate, self-protect. A human margin, a gold hook held listening. Orange in a flinted glaze behind rock & bottlebrush, across earth's burgundy flat lobe, a lit bridge beyond the sea. Lately the blood stains. Separate how the sun now goes. I don't deserve diamonds. And what will be writ. And remembered whole. Whose hand she held over the trough of breath. A consciousness the sun skein' snow in the mirror. 'But' became a favorite word.

*

Conch shelling my cochlear, so far from home my hackles rise, I hope only to be pointed in a certain direction; promise to navigate this blasted vessel alone. Let's check the winking air go out. Can I forgive you yours as you forgive me mine. The cord-grass' cut. My message in a bottle, did you get sucked into the rip tide's swallow, spun near lung-burst a few too many times.

*

This blackout hour when the doorbell's milk colored certainty shines, wherein no visitor dwells—and against her death, my mind enters. On purpose: asymmetrical.

*

R. FLOWER RIVERA

MUSTARD SEED

for R.V.

A sand road like a paper sky. We will all become relics.

A kerosene tank, a rusted kiln,
a line of dust-white trucks and vans.

All threadbare. There is a lilted sign that touts

Cold Drinks. That is what
this landscape is. Fertile pines and wind.

Even now, in this beatific moment, a miraculous depression rides me and death has lovely wrists.

A small oasis. Mud and mosquitoes
force me back to the pen. Such fruitless questions.

Pollen and germination. One speck of truth buried beneath conjecture.

But I am left wondering if anyone ever thought to, could have been bothered to, hold her until she could calm her body down? Did she have breathless adrenaline dreams of never being rescued? Night whispers its lie:

God never gives you more than you can handle.

Whatever. In the workshop ahead awaits the continual moan of the fluorescent lights. Like an accusation,

the rhythmic logic of the blacksmith clangs. This image. Singular. A reminder of how persistent is the nature of shame. Shame on me, seeking an answer there is no pattern. I blink.

Insect bites ignored. I pad back to my rented room. I resist the urge to scratch, to dial anyone who has ever treated me well. Each busy signal, each recorded voice, each silence becomes another shovel of dirt.

SIGHTLINES

While driving, I continually force myself to see what lies afore and behind.
Landmarks, edges.
Time, space, distance. I am constant
in my distractions. Blessed with eyes that cannot see
the sense of always running
to serve an unrelenting wreck of small favors
that busies us all—until death. This thought, fleeting as clarity: my soul I must guard.
An obscene wind whips my car
toward the center line. My grip tightens
on this wintry afternoon; it's almost night.
I venture the horizon, bleak joy of midlife. I follow
the crosshatch of wires racing the landscape.
My mind narrows down, chasing a gaudy riot of flowers,
a pushpin holding down a memory. A life made concrete by this paltry marker
hidden on the graveled shoulder of a north Texas road. So, this is eternity. Plastic flowers.
No name.

JUAN PABLO DUBOUÉ

LUNCH

I.

The curtain of white smoke feels like
An intravenous painkiller
Rather than a blackening,
Arsenic based narcotic. Such is the calm before the storm.

II.

She sleeps in a fairy tale slumber
Dyed in white and pink
Unaware of the turmoil going on around her
A faint ray of light enters the scene,
Damn you mischievous poltergeist!
Bell rings, the couple arrives.

III.

The rattling of pans, silverware and bowls
Seems to be lost in the greeting ritual of
Her and her husband. Such joy, worthy of envy
By the usual latecomers.

IV.

Banshee screams in her cave as
A display of delicatessen is arrayed
In a fashion reminiscent of the 80s cuisine
Meat, potatoes, gravy, a procession of salads
And gruyere.
In the living room, he talks politics.

V.

She enters the cave with a homemade pie
Leaving her fruity scent behind as
She crosses the threshold
And exchanges some daggers and flowers
With her matriarch.

VI.

He sits silently, either lost for words
Or choosing to remain chivalrously mute
As the T.V. shows a top ten of tennis matches
And the patriarch talks politics,

Then a little soccer
A little golf, a little tennis...-
He makes some polite remarks.

VI.

A delicious mixture of coffee and tobacco
Drips down the stairs
Enveloping the living room with her presence
Dressed in her usual gray and black
Bell rings again, twice.

VII.

As he complains about his ill fate
She walks ceremoniously with an air of superiority
Discussing her latest creation
And her newly acquired award.
I do not envy her: I want to be like her.

VIII.

The husband's scruffy appearance
Seems to contrast her pristine look-
Opposites do attract-
For as he plunges into the nearest sofa ungraciously
I am appalled by this weird match made in Heaven (?)

IX.

As the ladies commune in the cave
She is woken up at the arrival
Of her protégé
Dressed a bit too sexy for her age,
Her parents evidently tired by her imposition.

X.

Drag myself down the ivory stairs
To the usual weekly routine
Of fake smiles and sharp comments
Much resembling an intervention,
A high school reunion, even.

XI.

These people actually love each other
Love
Can take many shapes and forms
Can't it?

SARAH THURSDAY

YELLOW

I am seven
yellow-blonde girl
with missing teeth
wearing someone else's clothes
I smile for the camera
I don't remember
where I am
there are so many rooms
so many stops
I am never there long enough
to know if I will miss it

I keep following my mother
my brother, too, in the car
we drive for days and months
I forget the names
of all my teachers
just shadows of school yards
they say I need glasses
I have too many absences
I think this is normal
don't all children hold secrets
like packs of gum
at the bottom of their pockets

I love my mother
I believe her implicitly
I walk in my sleep
in every different house
to find her
I am empty without her
so we keep our clothes in bags
and in the car
they are my sister's clothes
or someone else who outgrew them

she cuts my hair short
to get rid of the lice
it's up past my ears
I cry like a widow
yellow-blonde hair
corpses lying under my chair
I can go back to school now
the fourth one this year

twenty years later
I will return here
it will be so much smaller
the rooms will have moved
and ghosts of yellow-blonde hair
will wander in the shadows
of school yards

FRUIT OF YOUR OFFSPRING

You were so damn handsome
in nineteen forty-two.
Dark hair and brown eyes
and that long Swedish nose.
You always stood upright,
taller than your own frame,
Navy man in an impeccable uniform.
Your native tongue was Testament
both the Old and the New,
always dressed in humble blue jeans
and that humble plaid shirt.

I was enamored with you—
we all were, the fruit of your offspring.
I laid at your feet and
pulled on your long eyelids.
The silver-gray brows hung like
eaves from your Swedish forehead.
You taught me calculator tricks,
I thought you brilliant and soft-spoken.
I loved the way your words trickled
out like a creaky faucet,
vowels lingering around the spigot.

I never believed in Santa Claus
so I believed in you,
in a man of few words
except what Jesus spoke.
When I remembered you,
you lived in a trailer-shack
on an orphanage in Mexico.
We would drive four hours
to see your leathered hands
and oil stained fingernails.

Then I grew up, just like three
of your five daughters.
I became a boy-kissing girl
with breasts and summer legs.
(Did they all disappoint you like this?)
The man who married your middle
child gave me his green eyes and more
than half of my bad memories.
So I looked to you to show me
your God's unconditional love,
but you had no words—
I could not make you creak.
Instead you typed letters
on a silver-gray typewriter,
single and mechanically spaced.

There is no treasure here on Earth
but store all your treasure in Heaven.
Love not this world or anything in it.
Love not the woman who wants to be held.
Love not the girl who wants to wear lipstick.
Love not those who want to love this life,
who love their physical bodies,
and the pleasures of this Earth.

Ten typed pages sent as a reply—
verse by verse you sentenced me
to my worldly life, an unchosen child.
Love me not, my holy grandfather
for I was born the child of your daughter
who also once believed in you.
So, I turned your faucet off tight—
we all did. Your spigot left dark and dry.

GLORIA AMESCUA

BIRDS ON CANVAS

For years, two sketchy paintings of birds
hung on the wall of the covered patio
he had built. His wiry arms had somehow
wrestled huge flat stones into place.

We'd sit talking about the heat
and his garden while snapping green beans.
He never mentioned and I never asked
about the paintings.

The birds were penciled in, profile views,
only the backgrounds painted—
one, strokes of black, the other, flat sky.
Inside the lines, only blank canvas.

He'd brought them from the apartments
where he'd last worked as a groundskeeper,
from the trash perhaps or left outside
someone's door. He was not an artist

and they were an amateurish attempt,
but invisible birds called to him.
We did not fill in the outlines,
could not fill all the white space

of what he'd left behind in Michoacán,
although we tried to make him proud,
his little family growing on a plot of land
on this side of the border.

When we dispersed the contents of
my parents' house, two grandsons,
who had often sat with him on that patio,
asked only for one of the unfinished paintings.

CRISTAL ROTO

Having nothing else to mark
la muerte de la madre,
they placed medicine bottles
on her grave—*los remedios*
that had failed to save her.

Perhaps they were jaundice
bitters, a balsam to rub on
or prescriptions from a doctor,
when it was already too late.

The white November sun
lit blue bottles, paler than the sky,
glossed even the brown vessels,
glass of mercy placed at her head,

The bereft *Papá*, his ten children,
including the three-month-old *niño*,
left her to rest under a pecan tree
in a country cemetery.

Thanksgiving was stark:
a demarcation in memory
no mother
to gather her children in her arms,
to gather the grandchildren
she would never know.

Near her grave,
now marked with a headstone,
Yo, su nieta, find a broken piece
of watery glass rising from the dirt,
corners rubbed smooth.

But the jagged edges of our hearts
still bear the scars through
generations: remembering
is the only remedy.

CHANGMING YUAN

MARPOLE, VANCOUVER: FOR LIU YU

It rains a lot in Vancouver
Often does this rain remind me of
The days when you sojourned here
With my family, after Father left all of us

While walking in the rain, you would
Recall, under my big umbrella
How you once waited in a drizzle
With me in a broken basket on your back
To cross the widening river, not far
From our village when I was crying hard
For a large spoonful of flour soup (you were too
Weak and too hungry to produce any milk)

Seeing you do nothing about my hunger
The ferry man asked, *Where is its mom?*
I am his mother! You replied, tears rolling down
With the raindrops on your childish face
How old are you then? – Almost 17.

It is raining again in Vancouver, and beyond this rain
Your voice echoes aloud on the other side of this world

CHILDHOOD SECRETS

When I was three or four, I buried
Several hard-gained marbles
Near our rented room, hoping one day
They would grow into magic trees

Half a century later, I dug them all out
On a dull afternoon. The moment
I put the first one on my table, a flock
Of crows flew up; when I thought of
The second, it burned like a forest fire

Now I hesitate to write the word 'immortality'
Lest my last marble should melt with diamonds

ALICIA ELKORT

URBAN PRINCESS

I saw Cinderella
on a city bus,
the east blue line
heading west.
Everyone saw her,
stared,
knew
a real princess,
not only the photos
in every magazine from
Los Angeles to Calcutta
but the regal
step and delicate
smile, her pink
mini-skirt and bloodshot
eyes notwithstanding.
When she leaned
forward,
pulled a mouse
out of her leather
satchel,
her blouse –
some black lacy thing—
slipped down her shoulder
and we all saw the tattoo,
 a purple pumpkin,
stars in the night sky.

No one on the bus
moved because
what do you say
to a princess out of
place who's imbibed
a little too much vodka
and rattled the cage
of decorum?

Nice tat?

Then, a silver-haired
hag pulled an apple
out of an embroidered handbag,
took a bite, laughed so hard
I thought the windows
would shatter, instead
she crowed,

Ain't you a sight Cinderella, what ya doin' on public transportation?

Cinderella, a perfect vision
with her green eyes and
pristine skin
twisted
the four carat diamond
on her wedding finger,
kissed the mouse
on its dappled head,
rubbed its pink-tipped ears.

When she stood,
teetering atop
her black leather
boots with 5-inch
heels, a young boy
jumped up
and steadied her
on his arm.
She blushed three
shades of tea rose,
caressed the boy
on his crown,
then turning to the hag
explained that she preferred
urban transit.

The driver depressed
the accelerator, the bus
lurched forward,
crossing the boulevard
where a crowd
had come together
to demand
marriage equality for all.

Cinderella,
still standing and
gaining confidence
in her feet
spoke on about
worker's rights,
global warming,
ecological bio-diversity,
but nobody paid her
much heed, now that
her slippers were
no longer
made of glass.

THE FULLNESS OF ELEPHANTS

Standing at the kitchen sink
placing sencha leaves
in the teapot, listening
to the cadence of boiling water,
I glance through the window
and notice my neighbor's bougainvillea
cascading down the redwood fence,
the papery, pink blossoms,
tender and muted, looking
like a chorus of seraphim singing out.

There have been moments
I have tried to remember something forgotten, something higher—
the elegance of the grain in a floor board,
the sun rising through blustery clouds,
a burst of pomegranate juice as I bite down,
the look of peace in grandma's eyes.

I have walked many roads looking
to string these moments together, but like the blind man
who touches the elephant's tail
and thinks
he knows the fullness of elephants,
I have curled myself into a ball
crawled to the back of the closet
behind the winter coats and cashmere sweaters
and counted pills, wondering
how many and how long would it take,
not yet awakened to the only thing
that could truly describe the elephant,
the miracle of my own beating heart.

And so I am here in the kitchen
surrounded by oatmeal and saltshakers
tears flowing knowing I have opened at last.

J.D. ISIP

DOLL

For sixteen years she was ephemeral like dust lifting
itself into the sunlight, ascending, gone—

it was exile, visitors were scarce and mostly unwanted
now and then a knock would come, every face turned

to her body on the dining room table, the glycerin still
holding up, dust in the shafts of light twinkling

only children asked and received the childlike answer
La Prensa is a doll, now apologize for wanting to know.

SAMANTHA DEAL

DINNER WITH FRIENDS

So unfair—this attachment to your body. At the restaurant, wedged between Matthew & the mute stone wall, you are wishing for home.

Keep thinking of red flannel pajama pants—all the dusty comfort of vacant libraries. It is not so strange for you—this occupation

with elsewhere. The side effects are subtle, a symptom of chronic loneliness—they will rise like storm water. They will linger like sleep.

When you were ten years old, your brother carried you on his back across a sunken gap in the gravel road. You are picturing it—the snow.

The swollen creek behind your first house—his black hair dredged

in watershed—his careful wade through the flood. Didn't you think to yourself—*This must be what gray tastes like*. Didn't you forget

how to be afraid? These days, you are lost in ceiling tiles, submerged in piles of dead leaves. You are remembering an old English teacher—

his way of saying exactly what you needed to hear. You are thinking—

God bless Matthew's blonde hair. It's absurd—you could just reach out and touch it. The way it barely licks his shoulders.

Flash Fiction

WHITEBARK WOMAN

BY NATANYA ANN PULLEY

That's her singing. She sings from the mountains and on the windy days more so than others. She lights a fire now and then, but mostly she sings and watches and sways. The last group of hikers said they felt the mountain move and I said it was my Netta. She sings the language of the mountains and the mountain moves with her. The hikers give me orange juice and some quarters. They tell me to sit right here.

"Sit right there and we'll find some help."

They don't know I have found help in the mountain song of my Netta. She wasn't always a song, but she's taken the mountain by surprise, I think. Some say she would take it over eventually. "Her story would be everywhere," they had said and told me to hush it down and hold to her picture instead. But my Netta took the mountain by surprise. She is a lush girl of fourteen and though she no longer ages, she has room in her to grow. She began as a simple voice along the paths. *Stay to the right, hug to the rock. Sit under the dead trees*, she warns even though the live ones seem to give more shelter. But some of the living trees are liars and only grow on the tiring of travelers. Your dreams and memories whisper to the trees and they eat them up. *Stay true to my song*, my Netta warned. But no one listened and three or five now have fallen along the rocks to meet the ground in a rush.

My Netta she sings the mountains higher, I tell people. She lived in the dying Whitebark trees and under the stars. And on the rain days and the storms and the snows, she huddled with smaller creatures into their furs and parts of her scampered out every few days to find a little more food. She lived in the ants, even then, and built worlds of walking under the ground and into the living things around her. She built walkways in the air and traveled them in her breath and voice. They say my Netta could be living anywhere, and they are right. She lives in the rivers.

My Netta she will tell you all when she will be here. She is coming back, after all. She cannot live there forever, only a girl of eternal fourteen. She does not come yet because she does not desire to do so. Though some say she hasn't the path home or the feet or legs for walking it. They do not know her like I do.

When Netta was thirteen, she was a champion of letters made into words and she knew every story of the world. When she was twelve, she could slump into her chair long enough to become invisible and this was another secret power. When eleven, my Netta saw the future and she said to me, "You need help." My Netta at ten was a fully formed being, though she didn't wear it. She had all her grown up moves in her and she kept them quiet for as long as she could. My Netta has a way with ways. She susses them out and coaxes and asks politely. My Netta at four was polite and at five she wouldn't scare, but waited for her punishments and rewards.

My Netta will bring her justice to this town as well. All those that said I hush it up in the summer times when folks around the world stretched out on our greens and blues, they will be punished. The smaller ones (now grown) who said "I believe you, Rose. I believe you," will be rewarded with Netta's careful know-hows.

In the earliest moments of this mountain, before it jut itself out from the ground, before it told the ground it needed to believe in things higher and better, and, most importantly, it needed space to grow all the things it knew it had to grow from within it out into the branches and animal kinds—before all of that, the ground didn't know of Netta. It didn't know what it was like to not want to be so flat and careful. But the mountain knew, the way my Netta knew and when they met at the top of themselves, they knew they couldn't just come right back home.

The dinner uncooked in packages in the pantry. The bathroom light still flickering. Me, a thing of worms still. Back then a thing of worms and the liquids to keep them wriggling and moving these bones and flesh around. Some said she had nothing to come home to. Some said, "No wonder." Those ones say she went up, up, and away. But it is all a wonder, my Netta. They did not know my Netta loved me and would never leave. And though she may have been quiet the first decade or so on the mountain, reports of her came in. A woman in the Whitebark pines. She tended to stay near them. Sometimes leaning in so close that she mistook herself for the curves and bend of the tree's trunk. She learned to sway her arms about and her hair grew into knots. The reports of hikers finding a way back down the mountain and never finding it again. A child lost in the meadow, only to return three days later singing a song only my Netta would sing. My Netta stays close the ones she can save.

THE LADY OF THE HOUSE TRAINS ESPERANZA

BY MARIANNE VILLANUEVA

I give Esperanza 500 pesos to purchase river crabs from the wet market.

See how she looks at me, that lazy girl, fear lurking at the edges of her eyes. I make sure she sees my husband's belt, resting across my lap.

If she comes back with less than 20 pesos, and I see that she has bought only the smallest crabs, I will whip her with my husband's belt. It is a large leather belt, almost two inches wide, cracked in places. He has used it on the farm workers from time to time, but only when they have been particularly lazy.

After, I will make Esperanza prepare for me the most delicious *torta*, using the roe from 10 crabs and four well-beaten eggs, with just a pinch of sugar.

I will make her stand and watch while I finish my breakfast.

When I am satisfied that she has suffered enough, I will dab my lips with the linen napkin and bid her remove the dishes. To make sure she does not lick the plate, I will spit on it, two or three times. I will smile at her, deeply satisfied.

WHERE WE'RE GOING IS NOT WHERE WE'VE BEEN

BY SUE B. WALKER

We pulled off the road and coasted into "The Flying J Travel Plaza." Transmission fluid covered the van's back window, covered the chassis with rust-red residue, and mingled with the smell of smoke. A boy came up to the stalled car, raised the hood, poked about, then crawled under the car to look around. "You've got a problem," he said. "A big problem. Should'a got a Hyundai 'stead of a Ford." It is 5:26 p.m. and three hours away from where we're going, that is if we could go anywhere at all.

Hena calls her dad. He'll be on his way to pick us up. It will take him three hours. $3+3 = 6$. We measure distance in hours, the time it will take him to rescue us and then the time it will take to get home.

"Are you in a safe place?" Roadside Assistance says. "We'll be there in about 40 minutes. We work hard to get you and your loved ones back on the road."

Roadside Rescue says it will cost a minimum of \$400.00 to tow the van to Mobile, so they'll take it to the nearest shop for repair. Cost is measured in miles and misfortune.

I stand outside Denny's restaurant that like a Siamese twin is connected to the Travel Plaza. I'm trying to call home when a boy comes up. He looks about 17. "Can you help me?" he asks. I tell him "No." I tell him we're broken down and point to the car smeared with transmission fluid. "I have a phone," he answers. "I do too," I say.

Hena and I go in Denny's and order a cup of coffee. Hena says "Decaf." "I want mine straight-up," I tell the waitress whose name is April. "Your month," I say. It's April 13. April breeds lilacs out of the dead land. I am dead-tired. We left home at 7:00 a.m. for a meeting in Birmingham that ended just past noon. Then Hena went to visit a niece in nearby Children's Hospital. The child has cystic fibrosis. She's dying.

I wait in Burger King, order fries, a medium-size too-sweet Peach Tea, and read *The Pink Institution*. "*Beautiful Woman Are Haunted Houses*.

Watching." I watch for Hena, watch for an hour-and-a-half. On the sidewalk, women come and—all shapes and sizes, tall and squat, wraith and rotund as old cauldrons.

When Hena arrives, we decide to drive a bit before stopping for lunch. She'd had breakfast; I had fries. We drive awhile, stop at the Olive Garden, and eat pasta soup and salad. Little do we know that in another hour, the car will break down. Down the road, around the bend, over the hill; nobody knows what will happen one minute to the next.

Outside the Travel Plaza, forty trucks, maybe more are lined up like they're an ad for the American Way of Life. Hena says a driver came up and offered to help her. She says the way he turned his hips this way and that, she thought he might be hitting on her. She tells him her dad is coming. "Not dark quite yet," the driver replies. "The crack-heads come out when the sun goes down."

April comes up, and we order a second cup of coffee, check our cell phones, and Hena calls her dad to see where he is. He has another hour and a half to go. "Time is NOT the

shortest distance," I say.

"The truck driver says we coulda been stuck in the middle of the Interstate. We coulda been hit. Coulda died there."

Hena's dad arrives, and we set out for Mobile. I phone my husband and tell him we'll be home by 10:00 p.m. "I made soup," he says. "Are you hungry?"

"Just want to get home," I say and stare at the highway. The sky is mauve moving toward gray. Almost dark. Car lights are turned on. In the middle of the road, a dead dog is splattered before us. We swerve and drive around the guts, the bloody remains.

SMOKE, IOWA

BY CHAUNA CRAIG

Deepest hue of indigo to the east, pale peach streaks on the western horizon. The sun bedding, hanging round and hot like a promise that still appears full. Railroad tracks stretching from my vantage point in either direction, infinitely. Tracks long unused, overgrown with clover, ties splintered with rot.

She told me to pick a small midwestern town, to find the railroad tracks that are never far away. *Stand in the middle*, she whispered as she stroked the nape of my neck in a way that made all my skin tickle, like a thousand salmon brushing past on an urgent upstream journey. *Pretend you are the zero point on an infinite number line. To the west are all the negative numbers, to the east the positive numbers. That, my dear, is what forever feels like.*

She said that after we'd made love for the last time. I'd made the fatal error, the one I'm prone to make over and over. I'd asked if she would love me forever.

Women the world over ask that question, and I want to believe that most of them get the simplest answers: "yes" or "no." Or sometimes a hem and haw, which is the coward's tilt to "sorry, but no." I don't think any woman ever got the answer I did. And if so, I hope she chose tracks that were still in use.

Four months after she disappeared from my bedroom, I drove a short way out of the city. An hour or less. Smoke, Iowa. A nothing town like so many other places in middle America. I drove the greenish gravel roads until I found the tracks. I stepped from my car and stopped to breathe the air that hung thick with pollen and the odor of ripe vegetables. But the air choked my lungs and tickled my sinuses, so I hurried to a sturdy tie in the center of the tracks.

I balanced, arms out the way I'd posed long ago on the balance beam in our elementary school playground. I'm a tall woman. I was a tall child. Sometimes I looked like a crane, elegant, posing for the still photographer. Other times I appeared gangly but earnest for take-off. Those were always the times right before I overcompensated and landed in the dirt, a small puff of dust pressing out from beneath my sneakers.

I like to think I looked like a crane on that day.

Facing west, I studied the slow sink of sun, red and round as a perfect wound. Warm feathers of orange and pink bled into clouds that bled into sky. All that bleeding, endless. The ties on the tracks before me were notches, notches on the number line she told me about. But I couldn't remember whether they were positive or negative numbers. I still thought that mattered.

I turned east to where the earth and sky blurred in a swirl of navy and black. So dark I thought a storm was approaching until I remembered that weather moves west to east on the plain. That much I depend on, though always there are cyclones whirling every which way.

Still balancing on the railroad tie, remembering Fern, the only girl who could make me lose at "chicken" because she always looked me right in the eye, I heard a rumble like

thunder from the west. I turned. I wavered on the beam.

A farm truck, aglow with the last of the sun, came racing over gravel, crunching it up to get to me. I listened to it roar, then purr, then cut out altogether right beside my hatchback. The driver rolled down the window and ran her fingers through short silvery bangs. She squinted, measuring me as I stood tall, an indivisible integer on an abandoned number line.

Finally she called to me: "You want a ride?" Her voice, rich, husky, the voice of a radio deejay or expert in phone sales, someone used to speaking mostly to herself, someone who enjoyed that.

I shouted back that I had a car, and she laughed, the sound echoing back to me in a whirl of cricket song.

"That's not what I asked."

She shook her head, still laughing, silently, like she was waiting for me to fill up the cartoon bubble of her mouth. Then she gunned the engine and pulled away in a spray of gravel that pinged my car. I stepped off the railroad tie, scaring some small mammal back into the tall prairie grass, and I watched her go, that stranger who'd looked me in the eye and offered a ride. I could almost imagine the way that seat would smack my rear over every bump as we sped away from the zero where I'd planted myself, waiting for a nudge in the right direction.

I watched the taillights of that farm truck shrink until I could no longer see them. Still, I *had* seen them. I'd missed the moment the sun had plunged the horizon, but I'd seen those small red lanterns, and I knew they still beamed at me from the dark. Whichever direction I turned, they would always flare, markers for where I'd never be.

Non-Fiction

WITH A VIEW

BY CHILA WOYCHIK

I've seen these hills since time began yet still they ring, yet still they ring. They conjoin—these hills—in a lush valley run-through with an intermittent stream. This means the cattle can drink after heavy rain without trudging up the hill to the stock tank. They trample the muddied scenario, sink ankle-deep, and beller.

In the winter, I snowshoe and leave my own sets of prints, up and down the hills, across from side to side. This winter I'll set up a tent and build a fire. I'll listen to the coyotes howl over and over again throughout the starry night. I'll bed down in a minus 30 degree mummy bag, use a light stick to read by.

A friend from India visited a few weeks ago and took in this scenscape, stood admiring, shaking his head, admiring some more. Finally after a long pause, he said, This is a fine place for raising a family. I want a place like this for my family. It's only, what, fifteen minutes to town? That's not far for this, for this place.

Then he asked a million and one questions; I gave him a million answers. The last, the one he didn't ask aloud, I couldn't answer; he would have to work that out himself.

I move a lawn chair to the middle of the pasture, near the small wading pool. The ducks notice me and quack, rise, and preen in the shade of the barn. The sun beats down and the 85 degree temperature may be too much for their white feathers and light skin, because animals can sunburn just like us. Sheep, dogs, cattle, all of them, the light-colored ones, can redden, burn, and blister. I wait for them a few more minutes but they stay comfortably in the shadows, and continue to quack.

Take a lesson from the waterfowl (and the sheep under a back shed roof), I tell myself, and move to a shadier spot under the trees, evergreens that three years previous were overgrown and underlain with wild mint, feral saplings, and poison ivy. It took two years to trim the trees. I'm still working on the ivy.

The orchard is north of me, the house to the south. A few orange and yellow peaches hang from the southerly-most tree but the other fruit—pears, apples, plums—have yet to ripen. My concrete garden is there, newspaper covering the dirt between the plants to keep cats and raccoons from digging or, worse, defecating in the fertile black soil. The top row of blocks are lined with geraniums, the red in stark contrast to the gray of the concrete.

There are no bad days at this latitude and longitude, no ugly meanings. Trees topple during tornadoes, 80 mph straight-line winds flatten acre upon acre of tasseled corn, small sheds, weak structures, and floods and drought take their toll, but in a lawn chair overlooking this valley and the copse of trees on the adjacent hillside, listening to animal calls at night when the moon is waning gibbous, this brings perspective. There are no bad days here, only wildness, mosquitoes, and encounters.

One night a fox crossed the road in front of our house. We had the loan of a pair of night-vision goggles: a marvel of technology. We saw no black bears or mountain lions, no buffalo or ibex, but a red fox was enough to engage our imagination and pique our curiosity. Sometimes all it takes is a night and a reclusive animal in our sights, at the edge

of our fantasies.

We lived in southern Missouri several years ago, had a house on thirty treed acres abutting the Mark Twain National Forest. It was an economically-repressed area and land was cheap, with mountain lions. We heard one cry of a twilight while sitting in our driveway once. The cry was long, wailing, and screeching like pain. We yelled to our son to return to the house but before we could yell much he flew out of the woods, hid behind us, his face white with fear. These experiences shape us, shape me; I run miles around the competition.

Rain is forecast today and the barometer rises. A moderate wind flings itself across my *mise-en-scène*.

I talk often of views and nature. Of sunsets and sunrises. This is where I live, the real within the epicenter of the unreal, or at least the unseen, and perhaps the undiscovered. There are mysteries here to make Agatha Christie proud, and to rival the movies that touch our two dimensional psyche.

Are there ideas here, in the viewing of the cosmos, in a cool August zephyr racing across our arms, legs, face? Are there lessons to be learned? Will our eyes grow stronger from this, our heart courageous? Philosophers rest and talk is anything but cheap. Sit and listen hard. Give it time to speak, to sow and reap. Leave distractions far behind, pocket them with preoccupation; tune your mind to the milieu just outside yourself; it instructs and calms, and breaks glass ceilings, scratches gemstones on knuckles, foreheads.

We rush. We reason. We forget all but the urgency. Ducks know no urgency and sheep are oblivious. A downy woodpecker lights on a nearby pole; he carries me to a land free of ornament, for the bird is ornament in itself. My cares fall off for those fleeting seconds and peace beckons. Desires winnow down to barest metal, soft and vital.

There are gods in this space, a god, some god. There are good angels shimmying up a sequence to heaven. I'm not sure I deserve this holy ground, so I whimper at the lack. There are stories here, I tell myself, there are songs here. Go with the music, the hills reply; go with the song.

POWER

BY KAYLA PONGRAC

As the rush of cold water poured down upon my shivering body, I tried looking up and signaling for help. So loud and heavy was the water that I could barely see or attempt to move. I began hyperventilating and thinking to myself that I was bound to die of a heart attack at age 23 while hanging suspended in the middle of a waterfall in Ecuador.

Minutes earlier, a friendly tour guide named Angel gave me and my boyfriend thorough instructions that included safety precautions, helpful hints, and all the reassurances we needed to successfully rappel down our first waterfall. This, by the way, is a sport that Ecuadorians call “canyoning.”

“Remember that you always want to keep your head down,” said Angel, who learned English in part to attract English-speaking tourists to his Baños de Agua Santa-based travel agency. “Let the water hit the top of your helmet so that it doesn’t hit you in the face. If you need my assistance, raise your right arm up in the air. If everything is okay, tap the top of your helmet twice. Check in with me, okay? But don’t worry—you both will be fine. It will be fun.”

Fun is not the adjective I would’ve used describe the time I was having. Instead, I was in panic mode; I was certain that Angel and Eric couldn’t see me from where they were standing at the top of the waterfall. I was certain that they were thinking that everything was all right—that maybe I was taking so long to reach the bottom because I was admiring the beauty of the sculpted wall against which both of my feet were pressed. Then there was the waterfall itself, its uncontrollable movement so intense that it turned water into the most fitting synonym for the word “power.”

Considering that we had four more waterfalls to descend that afternoon, I knew that I either had to make a move or wait to be rescued. I hesitatingly looked over my left shoulder and estimated that I had about 15 feet to go. Fearing that I would disappoint Angel, who kindly plucked two ripe granadillas from a tree during our walk to the designated canyoning area and handed them to me and Eric with a smile that made me want to call him my big brother, and Eric, who—bless his soul—had never underestimated my athletic ability, I began to let portions of the rope slide through my palms. I finally felt my body regain control of its inner ropes, cables, and pulleys.

You can do this, I said to myself. You know you can do this. Bend your knees.

With each partial slip of the rope through my trembling hands—and careful to continue using my brake hand—I descended to the bottom of the waterfall and immediately craned my neck upward. There were Eric and Angel, smiling and waving and giving me four thumbs-up.

Eric’s first rappel didn’t involve much hesitation. He traveled down the waterfall with ease, stopping only for a brief moment when he seemed to think that he was going a little too fast.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked.

“I think that I panicked a lot,” I said. “I wasn’t sure if I was going to make it. But look at him!”

I pointed at Angel, who was traveling down the waterfall so swiftly that he looked like a melted slab of butter gliding across a dinner plate.

“Good job, guys,” Angel said upon reaching the bottom. He gathered the ropes and led us north toward our next waterfall. “Four more to go!”

For a moment I wondered if I could handle four more waterfalls. I barely managed to rappel down the smallest, and during the course of doing so I had entirely forgotten

every important instruction that Angel communicated to us.

My wetsuit clung to my skin. My helmet, dense with water, made my head feel heavy. Before I knew it, it was my turn again.

“Ladies first,” Angel said. “This waterfall is a little longer, but stay to the right and you won’t run into much water.”

Stay to the right. Got it.

I bent my knees, straightened my back, and pushed my feet away and off of the wet slabs of rock in front of me. I kept my head down as I entered the waterfall, this time letting the water slide off the front my helmet. As I grasped the braided rope with my bare hands, I was reminded of the blood that moves incessantly through my veins . . . how it moves without questioning and without hesitation, and by force. Just like a waterfall.

This time, when I got to the bottom, I admired the massive waterfall in front of me. And then I tapped my helmet twice.

Fiction

COLCA CANYON

BY NATALIE BICKNELL

Thirteen thousand feet deep into the earth and a hemisphere away from the Quinault coastline she called home, Bethany listened to the guides rumble from tent to tent, waking the hikers and telling them to prepare for the climb out of the Colca Canyon. She listened to them with her head sunk between her raised knees; her nerves bundled into the pulse of her racing, anxious heartbeat.

She silently rehearsed the lie, what she would say, how she would say it, as her breath condensed against the heat trapped in the raised collar of her vinyl jacket, rising in little white clouds around her matted hair. From outside a shadow flashed across the tent's pea green walls and a hand slammed against the tent flap, peeling back the Velcro with a forceful snap.

"We're awake," said Bethany, her voice breaking against the half-dollar size lump in her throat. Within the zipped up warmth of the sleeping bag, Rose, her tent-mate, groaned.

"Be at the trailhead in thirty minutes. No excuses." Leilani's voice cut through the dark, louder and shriller than necessary. She wasn't a guide, but she liked to be in control and acted like one. The too sweet scent of her mango coconut perfume delivered a fresh shot of nausea into Bethany's queasy stomach.

Bethany's backpack sat next to her on the tent floor, neatly packed, and ready to go. She had repacked it several times during the limited hours they had been given to sleep, her fingers restless, tracing over folds in her wrinkled clothes, wrapping and rewrapping the woven finger puppets of llamas, condors, and snakes she'd bought in the fair trade market in Arequipa, which she planned to donate to the tribal preschool center when she returned home. She should have never applied for the Amistad scholarship. Never begged her parents to allow her to attend the indigenous youth leadership retreat in Peru. Never convinced her tribal elders that at sixteen she was worthy of representing the Quinault Nation.

For two days the trail had loomed over the riverside campground at the bottom of the canyon as an uneasy reminder of what it had taken Bethany to arrive at this beautiful, desolate place, and what it would take to leave it. The trail had been carved into the sandstone cliffs in a near vertical pitch, each switchback notched into the rock like vertebrae on a spine; as if its white impression on the umber rocks formed the backbone of a gigantic prehistoric creature fossilized into the soil.

The rumbling of the guides continued outside the tent, stirring the exhausted hikers from sleep. "Ugh, it can't be time to get up already," said Rose, still deep within her sleeping bag.

"Rise and shine. The princess already stopped by."

"Can't we tell Miss Aloha to shove it?" asked Rose as she surfaced from her heavy covering. "God, its cold!"

"And risk bringing on her volcanic wrath?"

Rose hummed a dreary cover of the theme song for Hawaii Five-0 as she stuffed her clothes into her pack while Bethany closed her eyes and listened. Since their arrival in Lima everyone had noticed how Leilani, and her boyfriend, Kai, the only designated couple on the retreat, spoke nonstop about Hawai'i, emphasis on the long "eeh" at the end and don't you forget it! The sunshine. The surfing. The parties. It was enough to make the other Indian teens foam at the mouth with jealousy. But as much as Bethany envied Leilani's glowing tan, pearly shell necklaces, and muscular boyfriend with a genuine

tribal tattoo across his chest, she knew that while her reservation tucked along the rainswept southern coast of the Olympic Peninsula could be lonely and boring, it was also achingly beautiful--- and her own. She could never wish to be from somewhere else.

But during these two weeks she hadn't lived up to the image of her land and people she had wanted the outsiders to see. The hushed comments and rolled eyes had begun in Lima, and by the time they reached the Colca Canyon all the other Indian teens had laughed openly as she skidded her way down the circuitous trail to the canyon's bottom, surrounding her with claps and whistles that turned to wagers: Let's count how many times Bethany falls. Can she get to ten, twenty? No way, she's wiping out *every other second*. I'll bet ten Peruvian soles that she'll make it to thirty, said Leilani with a toss of her glossy ponytail. And Bethany did-- knocking down two other kids with her spectacular last fall. Hilarious, Leilani had said. Better than TV.

With the western trail rising like a spine on the cliffs, the hike out would be worse. Much worse. She had to protect what little dignity she had left, even if the thought of the lie-- if she should do it, and if she could even pull it off-- had kept her fidgeting through the night, her hands, feet, and armpits sweating in the cold.

"Can you take a look at my ankle?" she asked Rose, rolling up the cuff of her pant leg, scattering dirt and debris on the tent floor. There were bruises all over her legs, but the worst was an egg-shaped purple and green bruise swelling up from the flesh beneath her shin. It looked painful, but it was really just a surface level injury that barely hurt when she jabbed her thumbs down against the discolored skin.

"Yuck," said Rose inspecting by flashlight, "You're really messed up. Oh my god, you must have sprained it. Do you want me to ask Javier about the mule?"

"Yes, please."

She hadn't needed to say a word. Rose had said everything for her, softening her culpability. The words she'd rehearsed all night vanished into the unsettling idea that now she would really have to go through with the lie.

"It doesn't require so many words to speak the truth," her grandmother had often said when Bethany returned home as a little child with a meandering story about why her shoes were caked with mud or her new coat was missing.

Bethany's grandmother, a member of the Nisqually who married outside of her tribe, never left behind their traditional stories, which she told to Bethany along with the Salish coast tales she'd learned from her husband's people. Young Bethany was most captivated by Salish stories of the Basket Ogress, a mythical giantess who lived in the darkest corners of the forest and trapped deceitful and naughty children in her enormous woven basket so she could carry them back to her lair and feast on them for dinner. The Ogress was a powerful warning of what could happen to a child who lied, stole, or wandered off into the woods alone, and sometimes when Bethany and her grandmother stood gazing up at the overhanging moss-choked trees, listening to the wind and raindrops creep through their branches, her grandmother whispered in her ear, "Never ever lie to me again, or else the Basket Ogress will come out and eat you up." Usually she would pinch Bethany's cheeks as she said the last part, her dark eyes lighting up like embers, full of warmth and kindness, and Bethany knew deep down that the Basket Ogress would never come, but also that if she lied, she would break her grandmother's big and gentle heart, and so she weaned herself from her false stories.

But here she was, only sixteen and representing her tribe in a country far away. She couldn't continue to let them down, to appear so clumsy and fearful. She had to lie. Even though she knew it would break her own heart to do it.

How could someone so surefooted as a dancer-- Bethany had once even won second place in a competition not just among the Quinault, but all the Salish tribes-- be so hopeless hiking with a heavy pack? Why did she feel her feet turn to putty the moment Leilani's light brown eyes flashed over her? Leilani was just another mean girl.

To shut out the taunts during the descent, Bethany concentrated on the remarkable vista surrounding them; the dusky cliffs carved into terraces by ancestors of the Inca, and still used as narrow ribbons of farmland by their descendants; arid land made lush with green stalks of corn irrigated with water from the river below. What a feat of ingenuity. No wonder Amistad had chosen Peru as the destination for their annual conference. The indigenous people, land, and culture were rich with both tradition and surprises.

But it was also surprising to Bethany that she hadn't formed the friendships she had expected to on the trip. She was supposed to be surrounded by Indians like her: youth leaders, people who cared, yet she still felt like the outsider she'd always been.

As they had sunk deeper into the canyon, her steps had grown more ragged and uncertain. Listening to the bets mount, an awful feeling had returned to her. The same nagging sense of having been decisively cast out from the group that had followed her through elementary school, middle school, and now her first two years of high school on the rez.

Why could she fancy dance with the best dancers of all the Salish tribes, teach preschoolers how to count in Quinault, earn straight As, and still not understand why she was a social reject? She wasn't stupid. It wasn't as if she hadn't tried. The hours she'd spent with her eyes glued to MTV in the tribal youth center should have taught her something. But as long as she could remember she had felt like an animal in a zoo; a strange life form that people gawked and made faces at through glass.

She understood her lack of popularity on the rez was related in part to the hours she spent sitting with the tribal elders at the longhouse; listening to them banter and tell stories of the past; watching them weave beautiful, durable baskets from dried grasses, seaweed, and cedar bark; remembering her grandmother's laugh and strong brown hands. But she loved those languid, idle hours.

She knew it wasn't cool to speak Quinault at school or at the general store, or to wear the ceremonial dress her grandmother had given her to potlatches. Basically she couldn't show she gave a damn about being Quinault because the cool kids didn't give a damn about *anything*. Or at least they pretended not to. But Bethany couldn't imitate their disinterested stares or let the tribal language die on her lips.

Maybe in the weeks since she had arrived to the Lima airport from Seattle, the tug of homesickness she'd felt had made her little overzealous in her description of Quinault life to the other Indians. Maybe she shouldn't have told them so many of the stories about Raven or Coyote around the campfire; shouldn't have gone on about how to smoke a salmon on planks of Alderwood, or how delicious moist salal berries tasted as their blue juices burst onto your tongue. But as they sat at their cramped tables, she was reminded of all the things she had wanted to say at the potlatches back at home and she couldn't help herself.

Why was it that everyone whispered behind Leilani's back about how annoying it was when she gabbed nonstop about Hawai'i, while they could openly roll their eyes at her and bet on her to fall? What was it that made Leilani so special, so different that whenever she spoke she commanded the attention of the group? She was nothing special. They had all been chosen as youth leaders.

Waiting for Rose to return with the guides, Bethany took a deep breath of the cold early morning air, and looked up at the stars, so tiny, so distant, as if the distance the canyon sunk into the earth's crust wasn't just thirteen thousand feet, but light years. She was separated from the surface by light years. Separated from the gray Quinault coastline by something more. She thought about how her grandmother would feel if she knew about the lie. For a moment she felt a cold draft of air pass through the lining of her coat and she wondered if her grandmother's spirit had drifted far south from the grove of cedars where she rested in order to warn her to stop before it was too late.

Rose's headlamp surfaced from the dark. "Javier's at the trailhead. He said he'll be

over to get you soon.”

“He’s fine with me riding out?”

“Seems so. I guess Princess Leilani will have to be content to watch you ride above her.”

“Leilani wanted to ride?”

“Yeah, she’s trying to get riding practice for some Aloha Scout thing,” Rose laughed as she spoke, but Bethany remembered how she had caught Rose laughing not with her but at her when they had viewed the Ice Maiden mummy in the Arequipa museum and Leilani had whispered under her breathe that the Ice Maiden, with her shrunken face, dark as bronze, brittle as dead leaves, could have been Bethany’s sister since the resemblance between them was *so uncanny*.

“I didn’t know she wanted to ride.”

“Don’t worry. You’re the one who’s hurt after all. Do you think it could be broken?”

“Well I can’t stand on it,” said Bethany, looking away. As she waited for Javier she traced the outlines of the Incan sacred animals with her finger in the dirt: snake, puma, and condor, but then she rubbed them away before anyone else would notice. Being interested in the mythology of the Inca was probably not something should she advertise. It would just be something more to tack onto the litany of things that made her uncool.

When Javier arrived he offered her a calloused hand and helped her to her feet. Together they limped across the cleared campsite. She thought about how her grandmother would have reacted to her lying to such a kind man. How her grandmother would have sucked air in through her teeth in irritation; how the warm light would have evaporated from her eyes. But when she and Javier reached the trailhead, she knew she had had no choice. The cliffs rose above them in a wall of unobstructed black. The light of her headlamp vanished only a few feet into the dark. Far above the moon was a dull half circle, fogged over by clouds. It would be hours before the sun rose.

“Are you sure it’s safe to ride on a blanket like that?” asked Rose, eyeing how the ropes dangled from the metal bit in the mule’s mouth as Javier helped Bethany settle on to the primitive saddle.

“Seems fine to me.” But as Bethany spoke, she dug into the interior pocket of her coat and pulled out the frayed beaded bracelet her grandmother had given her many years before. Her lucky bracelet. Stiff with cold, her fingers fumbled to attach it to her wrist and the bracelet dropped to the ground. She bent down and peered after it in the dark, startling the mule with her sudden movement.

“Looking for this?” A hand clasped her own and deposited the bracelet in it. It was Kai, Leilani’s boyfriend.

“Oh yeah, thanks,” she said, grateful he couldn’t see the embarrassment flushing her cheeks. The mule brayed beneath her.

“You said your grandmother made it, right?”

“Yeah. Kind of a family heirloom.”

“Cool,” he said, and she braced herself for a sarcastic remark, but without another word he disappeared back into the line of hikers waiting at the trailhead. Before she returned the bracelet to her pocket, she took a deep whiff of its cedar smell, the scent of home temporarily blocking out the canyon’s odor of dirt and dried leaves. The cold air so lacking in moisture, so different than the fecund humidity of the Peninsula, that it felt like the atmosphere of a different planet.

Riding on the mule was much rougher than Bethany had expected. The mule dashed to the end of every switchback on the trail, planting its hooves where the soil trembled, letting the gravel shake into the void beneath. With a swish of its tail it would back step and then race up the next switchback, repeating the same action over and over, twisting in all directions, forcing her to lock her legs down against its rib cage, just as she had when she’d put dimes and nickels into the slot of the creaking Bucking Bronco at the

rez gas station, where she'd gripped onto the rusted handlebars, shrieking with her younger cousins as the springs moved up and down.

"Everything okay?" asked Javier from ahead in the dark, but he didn't seem to hear her when she said she wasn't sure. She repeated herself, but he said nothing in response. Maybe she just needed to remain calm.

She tried to picture a photograph she had once seen taped on a cement wall of the tribal schoolhouse in which a line of tourists dutifully bumped up the trail cut into the reddish walls of the Grand Canyon on the backs of scrawny mules. The mules never fell, her teacher had told her as she gazed in wonder at the steep and rocky ascent. But it had been easy to believe her teacher's words then, and it was much harder to believe them now.

Soon the hikers gained ground on the erratic pace of her mule. Only a few hikers at a time were able to pass her on the trail and despite the tight fit, she was grateful for the company of their lights, which made the mule's fitful progress more bearable.

Despite her best intentions her vision kept straying across the broken landscape, almost lunar in its rocky lifelessness, to where the cliffs disappeared into blackness, where the light of her headlamp couldn't travel far enough to reveal a landing. If she fell then it would be a straight drop into the river, or into a crevasse where her body might never be discovered. Where her skin would wither against the remains of her skeletal form, and like the Ice Maiden, she would turn into a brown husk of a corpse. She began to regret the lie. Surely walking on her own two feet, clumsy as they might be, would be much better and safer than this. As if she needed further convincing, the mule began to release low guttural cries, huffing and snorting and raising its ears.

Because of the noise of the mule, Bethany didn't hear them moving through the patches of brush trail's edge. Not at first. But by the time the dogs surfaced from the crackling dry leaves there was no mistaking their barks and bared teeth. The two of them headed straight toward her mule and as their shining eyes grew close, she screamed, her voice piercing the cold air, the echoes of her scream reverberating off the canyon rocks, sending the mule into a fit of panic.

First the mule bucked violently back and she dug her chapped hands into the ropes to hold on. Then she clasped her arms around its neck and buried her face in its knotted mane as it took off down the trail through the hikers crowded on the narrow switchbacks, continuing all the way to where Leilani stood next to Kai.

Bethany raised her face just in time to see Leilani's bright pink parka. Register the flash of Leilani's face. Then Leilani was gone. No sound. No scream. For a sickening instant Bethany felt sure that Leilani had fallen to where the trail bottom was so distant not even a faint thud would mark when she spilt open on the rocks.

There were voices all around her, swirled into a rush of sound. Pushing back against the mule's stocky neck, she raised her face from its mane. A burr had cut into her cheek. She'd bit her tongue in panic. The metallic taste of blood gathered in the folds of her mouth.

"Are you hurt?" asked the group huddled around her.

She shook her head, unable to speak. One of them grabbed the ropes. Another rubbed behind the mule's ears and calmed its anxious pacing. But there was a strange tone to the hikers' questions, and as she became more lucid she realized that they were struggling not to laugh. She'd just made a fool out of herself. Again.

"Have you seen Leilani?" she asked, remembering the bright flash of Leilani's pink parka.

"I'm right here," said Leilani, sauntering through the crowd. "I would have thought from all your stories about coyotes that you wouldn't have been so afraid of two little dogs." Her remarks sent out a frisson of electricity, releasing the crowd's suppressed laughter.

"What's this?" asked Javier, his element-hardened face, etched with worry, surveying the crowd.

"Oh, Javier, it was just something Bethany said," answered Leilani, "You know how funny she can be."

Javier looked to where Bethany sat slumped on the mule. "We've got a lot of trail left. All of you get moving, except for Bethany."

She nodded, her eyes growing damp as she watched the hikers' lights blur and shrink as they returned to their climb.

Without their lights for company the trail became very dark. To calm her nerves, Javier offered her steaming hot coca tea from his canteen.

"You like coca tea?"

She didn't exactly like its strong leafy flavor. But she didn't want to say so. She was too grateful for its warmth and the temporary respite it provided from the cold.

"It's wonderful," she said, wondering if this lie made her a worse or better person.

"You gonna be okay on the mule? We never have dogs before. Never in my twenty years we have a problem like that."

"I'll be fine."

He stood and returned the canteen to his pack. "One last thing," he said turning back to her, "We gotta turn off the lights. Much better for the mules. The flashing light scares them."

"Are you sure about that?"

Without hesitation he reached out and removed her headlamp.

The mule, the rocks, the trail, all vanished into the dark. She waved her fingers in front of her eyes, but she couldn't see them. She couldn't see anything around her; nothing but pitch black, punctured only by the faint glow of the headlamps moving above them on the trail, not much brighter than the pinpoints of stars overhead.

The mule was calmer as they continued, but in the dark all Bethany could think of was the mummified corpse of the Ice Maiden in Arequipa. Her tiny body resting in the glowing refrigerated case set to a perfect thirty-two degrees. Her vacant eye sockets. The coils of black hair that had grown out of her dented skull long after the landslide washed her body out of the burial site and into the bottom of the glacial cave. Her immaculate white teeth.

There had been a strange aura to the Ice Maiden. An eerie vitality had rested in her stillness, reminding Bethany of the Nisqually ghost stories told to her by her grandmother. Stories in which the bones, hair, and skin of the dead would reconfigure back to living people in the dark of night. How if you disturbed the bones, you would hurt the ghost. Maybe even cause it to die. She had never seen a mummy before. Never really understood the vulnerability of the ghosts in her grandmother's stories until she stared at how fine and fragile Ice Maiden's bones were, wondering if the empty eye sockets on Ice Maiden's time blunted face searched the dark after the lights went out.

The Ice Maiden had been a willing victim, said the museum guide, a pudgy middle-aged Peruvian woman with bright red dyed hair, who was at least four times the mummy's size. The Ice Maiden was happy to be sacrificed because she would join the gods. It was nothing to cry over. Nothing to fear. She hadn't hesitated; voiced no questions or regrets as the priest gave her a leather flask of chicha to drink during the hike up the sacred mountain. No one helped her walk the long distance, even though her stomach was empty of food and her vision was blurred by the chicha's potent alcohol. By the time they reached the site where the sacrifice took place, her mind had already left this world. All that remained was her body, which was taken care with a single expertly planned blow. She was glad for the strike of the chiseled rock on her skull. Welcomed it.

The story troubled Bethany as much as the frozen corpse. Between sips of Inca Kola from a plastic bottle, the guide told them that the Ice Maiden was the best and most

beautiful of her peers. Her parents would have been delighted to have their daughter chosen. They lost no tears when the priests took her to live with the other special children. Instead, they had rejoiced because their daughter would bring good luck to the family for generations.

But what parent would want that for their child?

In Bethany's view the other chosen children must have felt a shiver of relief when the Ice Maiden was selected for the sacrifice; assured that they would live through one more season, and maybe one day leave the temple walls behind.

Bethany could imagine her, a small girl, made quiet by her burden, shying away from the others, except for when she couldn't bear the loneliness anymore. And what had those other children done when she had reached out to them? They'd rejected her. Pushed her aside. She wasn't a symbol of the ideal to them; she was their worst fear made flesh. A girl not yet dead, but already proclaimed dead, walking amongst them.

Would the priests really have chosen the most special child? Or would they have chosen the child they could let go? The one who kept to herself. The outcast. The one whose voice echoing across the temple corridors wouldn't be missed.

The Ice Maiden must have lied when she said she was ready for the climb up the mountain. Told the priests that things would be fine when they would not. Smiled when they told her how she would join the gods, when she really wanted to scream.

On the trail in the dark and cold, Bethany felt very small and very alone. By now the some of the hikers could have finished the climb. How good it must have felt for them to reach level, solid, ground and rest their aching legs? Stretch out on the sandy patches of grass and wait for sunrise without a care in the world. She thought of Rose and wondered if Rose thought of her. If any of them thought about her.

A strange sound ahead on the trail pulled her from her thoughts. A light flashed from behind the boulders. It disappeared, but then returned, brighter.

"Stay back," called Javier, reaching into the inner pocket of his coat. There was an edge to his voice. Robbers. Bandits. She'd heard such stories whispered around the campfire when they made it to the canyon's bottom. But they'd had the colorful language of tall tales.

Two figures emerged from behind the rock. Bethany craned her neck upward to get a better view. There were familiar voices. Leilani--- and Kai. Why hadn't they crossed over the top of the canyon? Usually Leilani was determined to remain at the head of the pack.

"He needs help," said Leilani. Kai leaned on her shoulder for support. "We lost his inhaler. He dropped it over the side of the switchback."

While Leilani and Javier searched the bushes, Kai sat on the trail gasping for breath beside Bethany's mule.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

He stared up at her, his eyes bloodshot, lips tinged with blue. What was she doing sitting up there, waiting? She could practically feel her grandmother's gaze on her as she fidgeted on the saddle and considered how best to jump to the ground.

But, then there was a cry from off in the shadows.

"Got it," yelled Leilani, rushing to Kai, and Bethany was saved again, although she couldn't help but think that she should have also crawled through the brush and dug her fingers through the dirt and leaves.

To the east a band of peach clouds nudged over the horizon. The morning light quickly filled the canyon, revealing the crumbling cliffs that remained, the final notches on that terrible spine, so distinctly pale on the brown rock.

Leilani and Javier had gone ahead for help, disappearing up the switchbacks. There had been reluctance on Javier's lined face as he asked if Bethany could manage alone with Kai. But still he had gone. He had had no choice.

Although Kai turned down her first offer of the mule, Bethany persisted.

"Give me your arm," she said, as she pushed herself off the saddle blanket. Her feet hit the earth like blocks of ice.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm giving you the mule."

"But aren't you hurt?"

"I don't want to talk about it, but I'm fine. Here," she helped him up onto the saddle blanket and gave him the fraying ropes of the harness. They decided he would take the mule until they reached the last leg of the trail. Then they would switch back to their original places and no one else would know what had happened.

The upward strides felt oddly good as Bethany climbed. She could feel her leg muscles stretch with each step and soon she unzipped her coat and worked up a light sweat. The guides were right about the heat of the trail. It was less than an hour past sunrise and already the sun reflecting off the rocks had warmed the air. And this was winter, the depth of winter. She could hardly imagine the how hot and dry the trail would be in summer. Now wonder the trees were so small, the gravel as fine and brittle as egg shells under her feet.

As they rounded a particularly narrow switchback, some small rocks tumbled down from above, showering dust over Kai's shoulders. He began to gasp. A single cry pierced the air above, louder than even her scream. It was a strange cry, shrill and urgent, followed by the sound of more falling rock.

The mule arched its ears in panic, and began to fumble down the trail. Bethany ran it behind with Kai's inhaler in hand. When they reached a flat swath of earth some twenty feet below the mule stopped. Bethany stopped. Everything overhead was silent. As she handed the inhaler to Kai his chest buckled, and she caught him and helped to ease him to ground.

She had gone back to grab the shaking mule by the rope when she saw the first dog approach. It had dingy yellow fur and even as it slunk out from the brush it revealed its rotten teeth in a snarl. It was followed by another dog, black and white, puny by comparison, but still the first to leap toward Kai, ears pressed down against its balding head, brownish scabs covering its neck and snout. Kai panicked and dropped the inhaler and it rolled down the sloping rocks, stopping just at the trail's edge.

Two more dogs, gaunt and gray, emerged from the brush. They encircled him, paws kicking up dust. Pacing. Licking their muzzles with hunger. When he reached out, the yellow dog snapped at his hand, and although his face crumpled into a grimace of pain, he couldn't cry out. His lungs were failing him. His legs thrashed for an instant and then his whole body went limp.

"Help," screamed Bethany. But only the sound of her voice echoed back from the canyon walls.

Near her was a long gnarled branch. She reached out and snapped it off the trunk. Her hands trembled as she crept toward the dogs. Using all of her strength, she snapped the stick down on the skull of the first dog and a sound like a human sob followed the sharp intake of air that came after the blow. For a moment she worried that the cry came from Kai, not the dog. That she had missed. But then she saw the dog raise a milky eye toward her and she knew she'd hit her mark. So she moved closer and cracked the branch down upon the dogs again until the snarls were directed at her instead of Kai's motionless form.

One of the gray dogs bit down on the edge of her stick, its grip surprisingly strong despite the bulge of its rib cage through its scarred coat. But she pulled back at the stick and the dog let go. In a cloud of dust, they disappeared one by one down the trail, all but the smallest, which still clung by its yellow teeth to the torn fabric of Kai's hood. The inhaler, covered in dirt, lay on the ground just beyond its paws. The trail's edge was inches away and the drop was deep.

Avoiding eye contact with the dog, she moved closer, keeping the stick low. She poked the stick out in an effort to move the inhaler away from the edge, but the dog began to shuffle its feet at her approach in a heartbreaking approximation of the movements of a pet, but this creature was starved and abandoned; it had turned as wild as the disease ridden raccoons that overtook the wood pile behind her neighbor's trailer no matter how many times they set out poison for them.

She reached out slowly toward the inhaler. Just as she felt its smooth plastic case beneath her fingertips, the dog dropped the hood and bit down on her wrist. Bit down harder than she would have expected from such a small pink mouth.

She pulled back reflexively, but never let go of the inhaler, and the dog was so small, so frail it moved with her across the dirt, what teeth it had sinking further into her flesh. Dragging it along, she crawled to the trail's edge, and then pushed her arm out, launching the black and white dog into the clear morning air.

She didn't see it fall. Didn't hear it cry out. It was simply gone. With the inhaler gripped in her hand, she returned to where Kai lay, pale and motionless. She unzipped his coat and placed her ear against his chest, listening for a heartbeat.

It was then that she heard crying from behind the brush. The distinct noise of a person sobbing. Maybe it was this sob she had heard after the first blow she had released on the yellow dog.

"Hello," she called. But there was no response.

As she grabbed onto the lining of Kai's coat, she saw for the first time the blood dripping from her wrist and felt the first throb of pain. It was in this instant, as she pulled Kai away from the cliff's edge, that she understood what force had compelled the Ice Maiden up the mountain despite the hunger in her stomach and the fear in her heart. The Ice Maiden had walked so that no one else had to. This knowledge had given her strength. There had been nothing false about what she had done, even if she had lied to hide her fear.

A twig snapped in the brush. "Who's there?" asked Bethany again as she poured water over Kai's face. "We need help!"

At the water's impact Kai regained consciousness with a heaving, sputtering series of breaths. He seized the inhaler in his fingers and pushed it against his lips. Bethany held it steady for him until she was confident that he could hold it on his own. Then she walked slowly over to where she'd heard the crying, listening, but hearing nothing. Had it been her imagination? Some sort of mental trick?

It was no trick. Behind the boulders sat Leilani with her head between her knees.

"Leilani?"

Leilani turned toward the sound of her name. Her glossy black hair with its bleached blonde tips hung in disarray at shoulders. Her clothes were ripped and covered with streaks of dirt.

"Does this make you happy?" she snapped, flashing her swollen eyes toward Bethany.

"No...I...do you need help?"

"Of course not," said Leilani, struggling to stand, "I just needed a minute to compose myself." She straightened her torn clothes.

"What happened?"

"How's that any of your business?"

"Kai is on the trail and I'm not sure if he's okay."

Leilani pointed up at a gravel slope above them on the trail, "Just so you know, I skidded all the way down. So don't go thinking I'm some kind of wuss. 'Cause I'm not."

"He's breathing, just barely breathing."

"Oh my god. Baby, are you okay?" asked Leilani as she flung herself down at Kai's side on the trail.

Bethany watched from a few feet away. "I called for help," she said finally. "You must have heard me."

"But, I didn't."

"You were right there. You must have heard me."

Leilani narrowed her eyes, "Aren't you supposed to have an injured ankle?"

Leilani draped her arm over Kai's shoulder and whispered into his ear.

"What happened?" asked Rose as she raced toward them, the first of the group of hikers rushing down the trail.

Leilani made a feeble attempt to smile, "There were dogs--- and I fell and Kai had an asthma attack and, look, Bethany's now feeling just fine. She didn't really hurt her ankle at all. She lied."

Conscious that the group was staring at where she stood next to them, Bethany felt a hot flush of irritation mixed with shame. She raised her wrist for them to see, "Does anyone have a first aid kit?"

No one asked her about her ankle, although she sensed disappointment from Javier as he cleaned her wrist and wrapped it in gauze, while Bethany watched Leilani arch and stretch her back in some sort of yoga pose; for a moment Leilani's amber eyes caught Bethany's gaze, and Bethany realized that behind their hard sheen was a soft pleading look. Leilani was desperate for Bethany not to expose her. Not to the group. Not to Kai. But why should she protect Leilani from embarrassment? She didn't owe Leilani anything.

The last portion of the trail revealed some of the most beautiful scenery Bethany had ever seen. The landscape was barren. Desolate as the moon. Arid plains on all sides of the canyon rose off into purple and grey hills in the distance. Some of those hills would rise higher and higher until they became the snow peaked Andes in the east. She could just barely distinguish the outline of the Andean peaks in the distance, wondering how far away the mountain was where the Ice Maiden had been sacrificed.

Nothing could have been more different than the verdigris conifers of the forest Bethany called home than this dry rock-strewn earth. But there was beauty here in the bleakness. Black winged condors hovered over the wisps of clouds in the distance. Yellow grasses glimmered under the wide reaching blue sky.

Bethany was the last to leave the canyon. She deliberately slowed her pace, letting the others go ahead so she could have a few moments alone to take in the vision of the cliffs on the other side of the Colca Canyon, cliffs that were streaked with orange and yellow sediment, which vanished into shadow long before they descended into riverbed.

Staring out at how the canyon snaked off into the distance, an incision deep, wide, and lengthy enough to remain visible at both ends of the horizon, she reached into her coat pocket and removed her grandmother's beaded bracelet, attaching it carefully over her bandaged wrist.

Her grandmother had lived through years of watching her ancestral land shrink to a fragment of its previous size, while the rivers emptied of salmon, the forests emptied of wolves, and the longhouse emptied of people she knew and loved. She had seen all of this and still managed to believe in a future that never quite belonged to her. Never lost sense of who she was. And she'd given that gift to Bethany.

Pushing her hair away from her face, Bethany greeted the hikers gathered near the brightly colored tour bus, their backpacks already stored in the luggage compartment beneath. They were ready to return to Cabanaconde and then head off to the next destination, Cusco and the Sacred Valley.

Leilani stood next to Kai as Javier helped him down from the mule, the sun catching the opalescent shine of the shell necklaces wound around her neck. There was an excited buzz in the crowd as the hikers gathered near her, while Bethany watched from a distance.

"You must have been so brave."

"How many dogs were there? I heard there were five."

“And you scared them all away. Alone?”

Leilani opened her mouth to speak, flashing her usual toothy smile, her hands spread confidently over hips. But Bethany knew behind the hard shine, there was emptiness beneath; Leilani was as hollow as the shells on her cheap necklaces. All it would take was one single, expertly planned blow, and Leilani would be shattered, her glossy exterior left in brittle pieces. And the best part was that Bethany didn't need to lie. The truth alone would break Leilani.

Bethany stood there for a moment, listening to Leilani's act, considering how she would get the group's attention and what she would say, when she noticed Kai. Without a word, he walked away from Leilani. A pause followed as the group watched Kai's defection in confusion.

The truth doesn't require so many words. It was as her grandmother had always said. Just because Bethany had learned how to strike out didn't mean she needed to, especially not at someone as breakable as Leilani.

Trying to squeeze her pack into the remaining space in the undercarriage, Bethany felt someone standing beside her. It was Kai.

“You were great,” he said. Although there were bags under his eyes, the color had returned to his face.

He reached out and helped her shove her pack into the small space. By watching him, she was given a gift that the Ice Maiden had never received. The Ice Maiden's last sight had been a stark view of the sacred mountain rising up from the earth. She was never able to see gratitude for what she had done.

But certainly, the Ice Maiden had understood what her sacrifice meant to the other chosen children in the temple. The children who had stood gazing up at the position of the sun in the sky, waiting for the exact moment of her death. She must have known that they were thinking of her as she looked out for the last time at the snow on the sacred mountain; her entire body filling with fear and deceit as she told the priests she was ready. She must have felt the warmth of their thanks as the rock struck her head and the whole world went black.

On the tour bus, sunlight filtered in through the grimy windows from the cloudless sky outside and the gravel road rolled beneath its wheels in steady waves of motion, lulling Bethany into a luminescent sleep, erasing thoughts of the dark canyon trail. As the bus continued north, past shanty towns painted red with advertisements for Colca Cola and farms where alpaca chewed on stubby grasses, behind Bethany's closed eyes were visions of steel gray waves lapping against bleached stacks of driftwood on the Quinault coast, her coast, and when hours later she awoke, she felt as weightless as the fog drifting out to sea.

HEIRLOOM

BY ANUBHA YADAV

Disha returned on a particularly memorable day. The weavers had been asked to leave. They were sitting on their haunches. Overworked fingers were knotted together on their knees, jagged finger tips pointing towards the sky. The older ones blinked continuously, the only sign of life on their sun-burnt faces. Their creased foreheads partially covered by the traditional turbans.

My father had inherited the handloom factory from his father, who in turn got it from my grandfather. We weaved carpets, rugs and fabrics for supply to the big cities. For many decades the livelihood of the men who worked in our factories had been our concern. Father was sitting on the jute cot asking them to understand; "Krishna wants this"- he said more than once, without looking at the weavers sitting on the floor. "Remember I am not doing it, it is the modern world," he explained. "China is spoiling the prices; I have to supply what they want or I can't feed my children."

We had shifted from handloom to power-loom. Automatic machines were bought to keep with the latest trends. Father had retained five handloom machines out of thirty; these were shifted from the factory to a room upstairs at home. Only eight young men were retained to work on them. They were to supply to Japan, Sweden and Britain, for customers who still preferred handwork- the broad stitches, not-fine-stitching.

I was walking amidst the handloom machines upstairs. The machines stood like people stand when in new surroundings- unsure, huddled close to each other. Sunlight poured into the room from the windows on one side, it covered the machines. The silence in the room was only disturbed by my father's laments from the verandah. I could hear the rhythmic sound of weaving even when the machines were quiet. I had grown-up with that sound. The sound was like that smell I called home.

Father had just signaled mother for tea. Usually the weavers were never entertained at home. Today tea was a peace maker with lots of sugar. Someone knocked as tea was being served. The knotted iron string hit the door. It made a jangling sound- not like temple bells; this was a solid sound, much like an iron chain tied to the ankle of a prisoner. The sound meant a stranger. Neighbors and customers knew that our house was never locked during business hours. I don't remember that day past the knock. Although I do remember the two paintings Disha had carried with her, tucked under her arm. What I also remember is a feeling that came home forever, with her, after that day.

Disha was the third daughter born in our family after Nisha and Vibha. A request had come from Delhi, from an old customer who was a bulk buyer of carpets from father's factory. The childless couple wanted to adopt a child, a girl or boy was immaterial. Disha was given away to them three days after her birth, without any legal documents or ceremony. My parents did not want another daughter, a third one. The neighbors were told the baby girl was a still born. Things were kept quiet. No one in the family ever spoke about it. I was born two years after Disha. The son who would inherit the weaving legacy.

My parents didn't really acknowledge her return. Nobody asked her what happened to the other family. The ritual of creating her absence meant no talk with her or about her. Saying

Disha was a feat we could achieve in our thoughts. It was clear that befriending her would be an act of betrayal. At times after school I sat alone amidst the handloom weavers and said her name aloud for fun. I raised my voice every time- "Disha, Disha, Disha!" - the weaving sound faithfully drowned my indiscretions. One afternoon she walked up to me. "Yes, Keshav?" Her hands were smeared with paint. "You called me Keshav?" She used my name like we spoke to each other every day. That was the first time we ever talked. Although we didn't really talk that afternoon too, because I scurried downstairs without answering her questions, scared mother might see us together. Next time we met I showed all the letters and pictures her parents had sent over the years. The enthusiasm of the new parents was not appreciated by my mother. Mother had requested father to ask them to stop- "tell them to stay away from us." But the letters kept arriving. Cheerful photographs of Disha were always enclosed. The little girl walking, sitting, pigtails, bob cut for school and her first bicycle. Whenever a letter was delivered by the postman mother became crazy, perhaps it was guilt, or something else. I never understood, nor were such questions asked in our household.

Mother burnt the first few letters and photographs on the cooking stove. They burnt quickly, cackling to life amidst the amber flames. The roti baked slowly as my mother sat before it and mumbled-"these childless couples lose their minds." I witnessed many photographs burn as I ate my dinner sitting next to her. The one that stayed with me was the first one; she was riding a red tricycle; the redness leapt to life, made amber reflections on mother's pale skin. That night when mother was asleep and the coal in the chulha cold I retrieved the leftover picture. Crooked burnt edges encircled a toothless smile. Her body and the tricycle were consumed by the flames.

The letters had stopped a few years before her return. No one in the household noticed that they had stopped. I knew because I was collecting them from the postman. He gave them to me at the steep price of Rs. seven per letter. I knew a lot about her by the time she returned because of the letters: she loved painting; she went to London when she was 11-years old and she had chicken pox in the ninth summer of her life.

Unlike us who had grown-up in the small industrial town of Panipat, Disha had lived with her family in Delhi. She had studied in expensive convent schools. She spoke fluent English, talked of pasta and cakes and wore skirts. Disha was completely out of place everywhere in Panipat: in the house, the sunflower fields, the vegetable market, around the weavers. She looked a tourist all the time. So that is what we told the neighborhood.

Disha- in- Panipat is marked in my memory as one time. She was given a room with the handloom weavers upstairs. Mother sent the food to the room itself, before time, a way to tell her to stay away, in hiding. As if waiting for the family to reach a tipping point of indifference, then one night, after six years, Disha ran away from home, from Panipat. She took all the paintings- the full moon that slept beside the weavers, the mustard fields under the jute cot, the hidden pond.

No one noticed she had vanished except me. I never told anyone, kept it a secret, perhaps because I was used to keeping her as my secret, in presence and in absence for me she remained my secret. Mother continued to send food upstairs for the next two days after her going. I gave it to the weavers on both days, all the three meals. Mother made halwa, sweet pudding, the evening she knew she had run away from us.

I cried alone sitting behind the same empty places where we used to hide the paintings. I sat in the wheat fields for long hours wondering why she treated me like the others in the

house. "Waterwallas' she called them, this collective name for the whole family. When we fought she would call me the same. "Waterwalla! You are on their side, another Waterwalla." When I bought paints and canvasses for her from my lunch money she smiled- "Keshav the only person in the whole world I really love is you." Often she corrected my English homework. I taught her to tell the difference between the sound of a goods train and a passenger. Just before it was time for it to pass we stood with our heads pressed gently to the wall, ears towards the direction of the station, palms on the wall. Often the spell was broken by the loud whistle. That is when Disha giggled, her palm next to mine.

Mother ignored us for a long time before she started stopping me from going upstairs. The more she tightened her hold on me the more desperate I became to spend time with Disha. On occasions Disha finished my whole homework, especially when she wanted to start a new painting, then my job was to sit with her. I mixed paints for her, removed the caps from the tubes. She used green often.

Once while walking back from school with the neighborhood boys I had an argument. Soon it turned into a brawl. The small group of boys attacked me. The blows were continuous at first and then they just stopped. I lay there soiled in mud when I saw her chasing them. She abused them in English for me. She never asked the reason for the fight. I think she knew. They had called me her playboy: "randava hai tu," Rakesh teased, hitting me with the end of his slingshot. I couldn't disclose. She is my sister! My mother would have killed me if it got out of the family.

At times at night we carried the canvasses to the fields. She liked doing such things: painting the sunflower fields on a full moon night, painting mother when she was asleep in the veranda, painting the finger tips of the weavers as they slept on the floor. After one such night she asked me the question. "Will you pose naked for me Keshav?" and explained, "All painters should try it." We were standing near the stairs at the back of the house; the stairs led to her room on the first floor. A faint yellow bulb lit the steps and the street. A small oval patch of light and then there was the vast open night. Before I could answer she laughed. I had never heard a girl laugh like that in the dark. She never asked the question again. I never told her I would have done it.

In just a month of her running away that awkwardness left my family. I could sense the relief. No one mentioned her. I waited every day for a letter for the first two years. And then it didn't matter till the first letter arrived. I read the letter many times; it seemed I was reading it even when I wasn't. I replied telling her about home, how much I missed the painting sessions. I also wrote tales of my family, who she still called Waterwallas. I criticized their rustic ways in the letters. I knew that would make her happy.

*

We decided to meet in Delhi. I stood at India Gate on the morning of 9th January. She didn't come for an hour. Then another hour passed. I was equally sure she could forget or remember. The thick Delhi winter fog encircled me in a new way every time I moved on the moist grass. The morning dew clung to the lower edges of my white pyjama. Relief came when I saw a figure emerge from the fog. She looked thinner, wore oversized spectacles now. I ran towards her, she smiled lazily and didn't increase her pace. We hugged.

I was supposed to return to Panipat.

*

Disha lived in a single room. She called it her karkhaana, factory. It was a small place with a tin roof on the third floor of a house. Most of the floor was covered with canvasses in various stages of completeness. I was given the small cot. She slept on the floor. Just the next day she bought me my first denim jeans. I learnt how to eat with chopsticks, even tasted whiskey. She took me for many films. If we watched English films she whispered every dialogue's meaning in Hindi, for I didn't get the accent. I did miss mother at times. I wondered if she still made halwa. I wondered if she burnt my photographs too. Every time I told Disha that I missed home she encouraged me to go, "Go immediately." Her willingness to let me go made me stay for the first year.

We stayed in the same room for a while. Disha painted in a corner, her face peeped now and then as she stood before the mounted canvas, the canvas facing the wall, she facing me. She stopped painting around twilight, every day. I cooked, cleaned and waited for her to finish. I always wanted to see her day's work, it was as much what I had earned by waiting on the other side of the room. But Disha believed an incomplete painting was a secret. She covered it with a white muslin cloth every evening and never allowed a peep. Curious, I saw every frame at night, every night: removed the thin white muslin cloth and saw it with a torch. The torch only illuminated it in round circular patches. The whole canvass came together in my head. One night as the circular light illuminated the frame in patches I saw my own oval face on the canvass: the scratchy dry knees, the hair on my chest, the big eyes, the limp penis. I was lying naked in a cloth swing which was tied between two trees. I knew those trees. They were from the sunflower fields back home in Panipat: a Neem and a Mango. We had painted many moons sitting under those trees in Panipat. A train was approaching towards the cot; if it kept racing it would slice through the centre of the swing. The setting sun in the background imbued the sunflower fields with an eerie golden. Disha had scribbled 'him' with a charcoal pencil in the corner of the canvass. That night I suddenly missed home and mother. That night I left for Panipat.

*

I entered through the back steps that led to the fields. Mother cried when I came downstairs in the morning. She slapped me all over a few times before she fell over me and hugged me and cried more. She said I had become too thin and looked sick. She warned me to stay away from her. She accepted me like nothing had happened, like time was a lie. "The girl has cast an evil eye on our family." Her round eyes enlarged and looked just like Disha's as she continued to warn me. "Nothing has been right since she returned here. Do you know she even killed the people we gave her to?" Then she gave me details in whispers. "The factory has closed. The weavers upstairs have gone. " It took me a while to realize that silent tears were flowing from her eyes as she spoke. "Your father has started a small shop, and no boy is ready to marry your sisters. That girl has done black magic on us Keshav." I noticed my mother never took her name even now.

My father ignored me. The next day he called me to his room and stared at me for long before he spoke. "Will you stay?" I nodded. "You have started shaving is it?" I nodded again. "Take care of the shop...I can show you the work this afternoon." Every few hours my sisters asked if I wanted tea or food. That is the only conversation we could manage now. At night I slept upstairs in Disha's room. Although mother wanted me to sleep with her in the open verandah like before.

Panipat seemed small and very different from Delhi. I missed Delhi, the painting sessions, the evenings with Disha when we went out for dinner and cinema. I willed to stay, to take over the shop slowly, slowly become a part of the family again- father could rest and retire in sometime, and grooms could be arranged for my elder sisters. My vanishing had been

explained to the neighbors with a lie. "How is your engineering course going?" asked a few elders in the neighborhood. I told them it was interesting but quite difficult. They all noticed my trendy trousers and shirts. Some teased me and called me 'sahib'. Other boys came close and asked, "How's the girl?" They believed Disha and I were together.

This time I stayed for three months. I struggled to settle, but life in Panipat made me realize I belonged with Disha now. So I took the night bus from Panipat to Delhi again. This time I left an address for mother, kept the small paper just under her pillow. Disha took the same night bus when she ran away from me the first time.

*

Disha welcomed me back. She did not ask me why I left. She requested me not to mention Waterwallahs in front of her. I agreed. That summer we moved thrice, every time after an exhibition of Disha's work. We finally settled in a small three room apartment overlooking a public park. This was our last house; the house we both loved at first sight. I took care of her exhibitions, her canvasses, her travel, our house. I thought less about mother and Panipat. I knew mother might be posting letters on the old address, the address I had left under her pillow when I visited Panipat last. I never went to check. Just at times I imagined her sitting in an inter- state bus with my father, walking up the steps of the house so she could take me back to Panipat. On some days the thought scared me, on other days I had a strong urge to find out if mother was fine, if my father was alive, if my sisters were finally married.

*

Disha had come back from an exhibition in Paris that winter. Her paintings were being exhibited there. My sister wrote to a gallery owner after reading about Disha in the newspapers. Mother is unwell. Keshav come home. It was a full moon night, the night I reached Panipat from Delhi again. Some strangers were sleeping upstairs in my room; perhaps the whole floor had been given on rent for some extra income. It was a family of six: a mother, a father and four children. I sat on the back-stairs the whole night: practiced my lines for father, searched for reasons for mother. As the first few signs of morning found the granite sky I entered the house. My mother was making tea. My elder sister eyed me from a corner. "I don't want you to come if you will run-away again," She hissed as she gave me a glass of water. That morning itself I was taken to an astrologer. My father, a believer, had a family astrologer since many years. As we sat there they told him about my attachment with this girl. After an extended silence the astrologer spoke. He had some papers before him. He was reading from them as he did some calculations. "It can be traced back to their last life," he declared finally, with surety. He told mother to feed crows for six-months. I was instructed to keep a green cloth in my pocket all the time. The astrologer also asked me to wear a topaz ring on my fore-finger. All of it would keep me in Panipat he said. I ran away the same night.

I visited the first house where Disha and I lived, where it all started. The land lady gave me a bundle of letters that had come over time from Panipat. I sat with the letters in my lap, not sure if I wanted to open them. I recognized my sister's handwriting on top of the blue envelopes.

After my return, I requested Disha to paint my nude. On some days she would paint seamlessly into the night. On other nights when we were not working I lay awake in my room, finding solace in baring everything to Disha. She painted me with one breast and an

anklet. I never understood the painting, but I declared my love for it more than once.

Most mornings were the same for us. Disha painted in her corner. I sat arranging the next exhibition or doing the accounts. "Keshav," Disha said one morning, a Filbert No. 10 deftly moving on the canvas as she spoke. "Disha!" I answered. She looked-up from the canvas and smiled before she spoke. "Do you think I have done to them what the Waterwallas did to me? I have taken their son from them, without reason, much like they gave me away." I looked up from my planner. Our eyes forgot years of knowing as they met.

WYOMING WINTER

BY LORRAINE JEFFREY

(based on an actual story)

The mare rolled her eyes and shifted in her stall. "Son of a bitch," said John under his breath as he tried to bend the ice-cold wire around the board. Just what he needed: damn horse to break the stall board today, in the middle of a Wyoming blizzard. John mentally chided himself. Yes, it had been loose and yes, he should have fixed it but there were so many things to do on the old homestead.

The house and outbuildings were owned by Big Bear Corporation, which financed hunting excursions into the Absaroka Mountains east of Yellowstone. John had been hired as camp cook, and offered the one-room house as living quarters. He welcomed the opportunity to have a place for his family to live, and had been repairing the outbuildings for the animals. The hard winter had required extra hours chopping firewood, caulking windows with rags and wading through the unending snow. He wondered if people would talk about the winter of 1919 in years to come.

"Whoa Babe," he said as the horse continued to move nervously about the stall. What had spooked her? He listened to the moaning of the wind. Like an old woman groaning in her sleep, he thought. He was glad he had taken the precaution of using a rope to yoke the house to the barn when the sky had turned soot gray. Nebraska winters had taught him how quickly beautiful flakes became blinding and how easy it was for a man to become totally disoriented, even in the short distance from a house to a barn. He had seen entire yards crisscrossed with ropes, on the outskirts of Cody. Nebraska winters had been good preparation for the even colder winters of the high Wyoming plains.

Snow drifted in through the cracks of the barn and settled on his light red hair. John Rowlett was a small, wiry man, only thirty-years-old and yet worn by horse-drawn plows and icy winters. Worn by many days when he was so tired he fell asleep before he could eat supper.

It took him longer to secure the board than he had hoped. Fool horse, he thought. If he didn't get her settled she would kick around in her stall, knock it loose, and get into the winter hay again. He couldn't afford that. The winter hay had to last. It was all they had and all they would get. He knew the livestock would be in trouble if spring came late to the Wyoming plains.

He was about half way through milking when he felt a blast of icy air and looked up to see the bundled figure of his wife, Ellen, come through the door. The coal oil lantern hanging from the beam flickered, but didn't go out. She struggled against the wind to fasten the door shut and walked over to him. Her gray coat was worn and she had tied her mother's heavy, black scarf over her hair. He liked her hair, especially when it was loose at night. But he had never told her that.

She stroked the cow's head. He continued his rhythmic milking and the warmth from the foam rose to his face.

"Did you have trouble with the cow?" she asked quietly.

"No, Babe knocked the stall board loose and was in the hay."

"Did she eat much?" she asked, with concern in her voice.

"Naw. Caught her early and whacked her a good one."

Ellen said nothing and although the cold wind continued to whisk down his back collar as he bent to the cow, he felt a warmth. Ellen had come all the way to the barn in the

blizzard. Didn't that mean she cared for him?

"I had one of those feelings," she said with her hand on the cow's back.

The wind reached through his thin coat. Her "feelings" made him uncomfortable. It was like living with a damn fortuneteller. And the problem was that her feelings usually amounted to something. Time and time again, something had happened -- and it wasn't usually good. Her feelings scared him, but he couldn't tell her that.

"Huh," he grunted.

"Something bad is going to happen," she said simply. "When you took so long I thought maybe it was you."

He shook his head and continued to milk. "Kids asleep?"

"Yes. The storm doesn't seem to bother them."

John thought of his two blond little girls -- their round faces chapped by the winter cold. He would rather have had sons. Wyoming winters called for sons. Yet he couldn't deny the pleasure he felt when his three-year-old daughter, Elsie, fell asleep in his arms. She was his oldest and she gave her love freely—but her mother . . .

Well, he didn't know what Ellen felt. He remembered the first time he had seen her. It was the first warm day in May that he had walked over to the Wilson's house to get Stan, his younger brother. Ellen was shelling peas in the front yard and Stan was talking to her. John noticed her soft brown hair but couldn't see her face because her head was bent over the peas.

When Stan introduced him, Ellen looked up and he saw a pretty woman with green eyes, a straight mouth and firm chin. She didn't smile but her green eyes appraised him and he felt uncomfortable.

"Stan said he had an older brother," she said. "Come for a visit?"

He nodded and shifted his weight. Her busy hands continued. "I've been working in Missouri," he said.

She nodded. The afternoon sun put a golden glow to the brown hair she pushed back from her damp forehead. John had never been good around women. He couldn't seem to think of witty things to say, like some men he knew.

"Been working almost eight years now," he said to the head bent over the peas. "Got me some money put away."

Ellen nodded but she said nothing.

Was she impressed by this "older" man? He didn't know. Later that night John had asked Stan about her and Stan had smiled and told him that she was seventeen and the oldest in her family. Her mother had come from Sweden and still spoke with a strong accent.

"She doesn't say much," Stan said, "but she is a good worker. I never see her just sitting. She's always busy."

During the days and weeks that followed, John thought constantly about Ellen and tried to arrange time to visit with her. He took her to a church dance but she was even more stiff and nervous than he was. He found excuses to sit on her porch in the evening but quite often he found himself smoking his pipe and visiting with Mr. Wilson rather than with Ellen. She was always working somewhere.

John had come home to Nebraska to see his family, but he had also come to find a wife. By the middle of April he had decided to marry Ellen Wilson, but he was at a loss as to how to proceed. Should he ask Ellen to marry him or should he ask her father? Ellen didn't talk much. Her answers were short and curt. He had no idea how she felt about him and asking her was too risky. The man who had sat on the front porch and proclaimed that a president with the name of Wilson should be able to keep America out of a European war, seemed less formidable.

John remembered how nervous he had been that evening when he had sat with his hat in his hand while Mr. Wilson downed his nightly shot of whiskey. "I've got some

money saved from working in Missouri," John said. "I could support a wife now."

Wilson nodded.

"I want to marry Ellen," he blurted out.

Wilson snorted, reached for the bottle of whiskey and poured another glass for himself and then one for John. As John drank he was aware of the appraising eyes on him.

"Think you're man enough for her?" Wilson asked. "She can be as tough as a mule."

John nodded, put the glass down and drew nervously on his pipe, trying to look casual and sophisticated, trying to look as if asking a father's permission to marry his daughter were an everyday occurrence.

Wilson hadn't asked Ellen what she wanted. He simply nodded his head, said "Yes," and poured another drink. John had been elated, but he hadn't counted on Ellen's anger when he told her about the marriage agreement.

"Makes me feel like a cow or horse or something," she spit out as she turned away from him.

Was it the way I asked, he had wondered. Would she have said "yes" if I had asked her instead of her father or was she sweet on somebody else—maybe Stan? John didn't dare ask. He had gone after her and tried to explain his motives, but her face was hard and she stormed into the house.

The marriage had taken place but Ellen had glowered into the camera lens. She had Elsie a year later and Naomi a year after that. She performed her wifely duties, cared for the children, cooked the meals and worked hard, but seldom spoke. That had been four years ago. Was she still angry, he wondered. Did she love him? He could not risk asking. But she had come to the barn.

John smelled hay dust and realized Ellen was using the pitchfork to get the evening hay down from the loft.

She waited until he finished and then, carrying the lantern, opened the barn door for him. He carried the bucket of milk—no longer warm. The force of the wind almost knocked him off his feet. He put the bucket down to help Ellen close the door. Glancing in the direction of the house he could see nothing—only swirling snow.

Heads down, holding onto the rope with their right hands, they trudged towards the house. They were within a few feet of the door when Ellen stopped suddenly. Above the wind John heard a strangled sound. He could see a faint outline of the door. It was half-open and there was no light from inside. They stumbled into the house and Ellen held the lantern high, her frantic eyes darting around the room. John could see Naomi in her crib but the little bed next to it was empty.

"Elsie, Elsie!" Ellen called. Naomi started to cry and John hurried over and scooped her up, blankets and all. She was cold. The door had been open for some time.

Could Elsie be hiding under the bed? They looked behind the stove and then under the bed. The small room offered no other hiding places. Naomi continued to wail. Hurrying back outside they braced against the driving wind and called her name, over and over. John shielded his eyes.

"You shouldn't have left her," he said sternly and then seeing Ellen's face, said nothing more. "Stay here," he commanded, handing Naomi to her. "I'll look for Elsie."

He went back into the whiteness, holding the flickering lantern high, calling Elsie's name. His head filled with a dozen questions. It seemed impossible that little Elsie could have opened the door. She was so small. But he remembered the low oval shaped doorknob. How else would she have gotten out? Could Ellen have left it ajar? No, Ellen was always careful.

John called Elsie's name against the wind. How long had she been out in that freezing world? Where would she go? She probably woke up, realized they were not there and went out to find them. Which way would she go? He headed back toward the barn branching out on each side of the rope. Calling and looking. Nothing. He retraced his steps

and saw Ellen holding the other lantern coming around the side of the house. They both stumbled back in. Naomi was still crying.

"I went around the house," Ellen said. "Oh John, where is she? She has to be close."

How far could a little girl get in the snow? He couldn't bring himself to imagine her in the icy wind—in her nightgown with her little bare feet.

"We've got to get help," he said as he closed the door behind him. "Maybe she went up to the Nelson's."

"That's half a mile," Ellen replied. "She wouldn't go there."

"We have to have help," he said resolutely. "I'll go get Horace and Sadie and their kids. Then we'll all look. Stay in the house and I'll be right back."

Babe snorted as John led her out of the stall. He grabbed a handful of mane and swung himself onto her back feeling her warmth through his wet pants. He dug in his heels and whooped. She launched up the hill in the direction of the Nelson's house.

He banged on the door and a disheveled Horace Nelson opened it. In quick bursts, John explained the situation, and the Nelsons were hurriedly throwing on coats as John rode Babe back down the hill.

As he approached the house he could see a figure through the snow a little to the east of the barn, walking and calling. Ellen hadn't stayed in the house. He hadn't really expected her to.

"We'll spread out from the house and look in all directions," Horace said. "Her footprints will be gone. Look for mounds of snow or anything that moves." John's eyes ached. Everything was white and blinding. How had he ever thought this country was beautiful? How long could someone survive in this weather? The lump in his throat grew with the frantic feeling in his stomach. "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" the blood drummed in his temples. He glanced at the others to his left and right. They trudged heads down, eyes searching.

Horace's voice reached him faintly above the wind. "She couldn't have gotten this far. Let's head back and look again. She has to be closer to the house."

John turned with the others and searched the whiteness. In some places the wind had created huge drifts, in others the snow was only about six inches deep. As the house loomed ahead of him he heard Horace's fifteen-year-old son yell, "Here!"

John ran. Matthew was brushing the snow away from a small mound under a top-heavy clump of sagebrush. It was Elsie, and she was very still and white. John scooped her up and ran for the house. He deposited her in Ellen's lap, which was occupied, at that moment, by Naomi.

Ellen embraced Elsie with her left arm and handed Naomi to Sadie Nelson. Her tears were falling on the white-blue limbs. "She's alive. Thank God she's alive," Ellen breathed.

Elsie seemed to be struggling for breath and didn't respond. Concern replaced relief on Ellen's face. "Get a blanket off the bed," she yelled. She tried to straighten Elsie's rigid legs but they were pulled up tight against her small body.

Ellen undressed her, struggling to remove the wet clothes over stiff arms and legs. All the time she talked, "Elsie wake up. Mama's here. Wake up." The whiteness of Elsie's little body gave John a sick feeling in his stomach. It looked as if even her blood had frozen, and turned white. Elsie opened her green eyes but the pupils were fixed. They didn't focus.

Ellen held Elsie tightly, trying desperately to give the little girl some of her own body heat. "Wake up Elsie. Mama's here. Wake up!" Ellen pleaded. Elsie struggled, but her eyes seemed to roll up in her head. Ellen caught her breath. She moved the blanket and rubbed the stiff legs gently.

John became aware of Horace, his wife and gangly sons standing awkwardly, crowded between the wooden table and the bed.

"Rub her with snow to get the circulation going," Sadie suggested. "And you might try giving her some warm milk."

Horace nodded. Ellen continued to rub the little legs and talk to Elsie while John poured some of the milk from the bucket into a small cup and put it on the stove. Then he went outside to get some snow. He returned immediately with the snow in a bucket but Ellen looked at it doubtfully.

"She's so cold," Ellen said. "I don't want to put any more snow on her. I can't seem to warm her up."

"Don't warm her up too fast," warned Sadie. "It's better to warm her up slow. Frostbite won't be so bad." Ellen nodded, reluctantly rubbed a leg with a little snow, talking to her unresponsive daughter as she did.

John turned and walked abruptly outside. "Christ," he said, slamming his fist into the wall. The door opened and Horace and his two boys filed out and stood looking out into the darkness.

"Maybe she got too cold," Horace said. "It may take a while for her to wake up. We'll go home, but Sadie will stay. Come on up if you need us."

John nodded. He watched them mount the stamping horses and turned back into the small one-room house. Desperation grew as hour after hour passed with little change. If anything Elsie's breathing grew shallower. She wasn't awake enough to drink the warm milk and the blue tinge to her skin had deepened.

John thought about going for a doctor, but the closest doctor was fifteen miles away, and in this blizzard John knew he would never find the town. Besides, what would the doctor do? Probably nothing more than Ellen was already doing.

When he went back into the house, Sadie Nelson was sitting quietly holding the exhausted Naomi, and giving a few suggestions. Following her advice, they dipped Elsie's rigid body in lukewarm water and bundled her up again. John put a few pieces of kindling on the coals to sustain the heat in the stove.

Beyond that, John didn't know what to do. A man should know how to take care of his family. Elsie had made it through the influenza siege of 1918 when so many babies and older people had died. She had been fine, and now she was dying just because she had wandered out into the snow. He reached out to touch Ellen's shoulder. "I'll sit with her," he said. But Ellen didn't hear or feel him.

Suddenly Elsie gasped and stopped breathing. Ellen shook her. "Elsie, wake up. Wake up!" Elsie's ragged breath caught, and she inhaled, but her breath was shallow and irregular. Then she gasped again and was silent. Ellen shook the little body again frantically. "Wake up! Wake up!"

John heard the frenzy and fear in her voice. Elsie didn't respond. Ellen shook her again and called her name. Then her voice choked and he saw Ellen's shoulders shake with silent sobs. It was then that he heard a high cry of anguish and realized that it was coming from his own throat. He clamped his mouth shut and watched Ellen as she held Elsie and rocked back and forth, back and forth. Another emotion flooded his chest—beyond the grief, there was embarrassment. He glanced quickly at Sadie's averted face, opened the door and walked outside. He felt the cut of the icy wind on his neck and he grasped the rope and walked to the barn. His fist slammed into the heavy board of the stall and Babe nervously moved to the far side—eyes rolling. His eyes smarted and he swore. "Should have been a boy anyway," he said as he kicked the stall. "Have to be tough out here."

Then he cried. Deep, wrenching sobs in the darkness where no one would hear above the howl of the wind. Thirty minutes later, he calmed his breathing and forced himself to return to the house.

Sadie had her back to him and was mixing something in a tin bowl. Naomi had finally fallen into an exhausted sleep and the house was silent. The gray, muted light of

dawn was still hours away. How could one night change the whole world? John wondered

Tears flowed unchecked down Ellen's face but she was silent. He ached to reach out to her but he was not sure of her response.

"She was so cold. I just couldn't warm her up," Ellen said brokenly. "I should have stayed with her but I didn't think she could get out. She was sound asleep."

John nodded, knowing it was not her fault. If she hadn't been worried about me, he thought. If she hadn't come looking for me . . .

"I had that feeling," she continued. John said nothing. He touched her hand on the arm of the rocking chair and she let it stay.

INTERVIEW WITH NINA MCCONIGLEY

1. We would love to talk a little bit about the structure of the book *Cowboys and East Indians*. You begin with a flash fiction piece-- "Melting"-- and then go on to longer ones. Incidentally, this story also happens to be the one which deals most directly with racism. So, we are curious, what exactly were you thinking about when you were structuring your manuscript? Did you have explicit thematic and political concerns?

For me, I wanted to start with the flash fiction piece – as it sets the tone for the whole book. The first line, "We were the wrong kind of Indians living in Wyoming" to me sums up the whole book. And I knew I wanted to end the book with *Curating Your Life*, as the story was set in India, and was my talking back to the book *Passage to India*, which is my favorite novel of all time. There are many things in that story directly speaking to that book – the cave, the echo, the idea of seeing the real India. In Forster's novel, the book ends with the idea that East and West have not yet come together. And I suppose I was thinking about that for me as well. I don't think I've yet figured out my two worlds, my two halves. And that's the note I wanted the book to end on.

I don't think I had explicit thematic or political concerns. It was only when the first draft of the book was done and I was really looking at how the stories made a book that I realized that there of course were themes that come up relentlessly in the book. But while I was writing, I wasn't thinking about that.

2. For you, as a writer, Wyoming seems to be a place that is associated with a kind of overwhelming whiteness. And, then, within that, you deal with this idea of being "brown", "foreign", "Indian." And, of course, your stories also make references to the two kinds of Indians-- the "dot Indians" and the "feather Indians." In other words, it seems like you have given a lot of thought to developing Wyoming as a specific place in your stories. How did you land upon that? Did you begin to write thinking about Wyoming as the default setting for all of your stories? Or, did the relationship between this specific place and your stories develop over time, as you kept working on the collection?

I suppose the answer to that is I followed the old adage of writing what you know. I know Wyoming. I know it well. I've lived here my whole life. To me, Wyoming is a character in the book – in every story. Over the years that I was writing the book, most of all of the stories were set in Wyoming without me thinking about it. Again, as it's what I know. I felt too untested as a writer to write about a city or place I didn't know. I also wrote the bulk of the book when I was living in Houston while getting my MFA. I was so homesick. The traffic and largeness of Houston weighed on me, and I think I started this book as a kind of love letter home. I'd drive on the freeway and pretend I was driving down the highway in Wyoming, with nothing but open and horizon before me.

Later, after finishing my MFA, I lived in India, so felt fine writing stories set there, but even in those two stories, the main characters are outsiders. But Wyoming is always my default setting. I think the land and the geography of this place exerts a kind of pressure on my characters. And I like that. I am working on a novel, and it is set in Wyoming as well. But I have started notes on a new project, and it's not set in Wyoming.

3. We want to talk a little bit about the story "Dot or Feather." But, we would like to talk about it in conjunction with three other stories – "Curating Your Life," "The White Wedding" and "Cowboys and East Indians." All three of them are, in some ways, about the perceived and fetishized notions of Indianness. But, at the same time, they are also about the fetishized notions of Americanness. And, of course, place plays very important roles in all of these stories. Or, at least that's how we read them. What exactly were your thoughts when you were working on these stories?

I had such different thoughts about each of these stories. *Dot or Feather* is one of the oldest stories in the book. I wrote a draft of it before my MFA program. Growing up, I was always really intrigued by exchange students who came to Wyoming. I wondered if they were disappointed when they got to Wyoming. Was that the America they were expecting? To me, it's interesting when race or a culture is fetishized. I always think it's interesting what people deem as exotic. But over the years, I have found that Wyoming is more exotic to a lot of people than India. And in all of those stories, there is a concern with that.

I think I am obsessed with notions of what makes something authentic, and how do we know the "realness" of a place. Vikram Chandra has this amazing essay called "The Cult of Authenticity" about this. And I think about this as a writer all the time. The Wyoming I represent is just my view of the place, and what I know. The Wyoming that is represented in say Annie Proulx's fiction is not a Wyoming I know that well. I grew up in a "city" by Wyoming standards, and don't really know the ranch life. Each one of those stories to me is another angle to see the state, to see this place that means so much to me.

4. How would you distinguish your work within the ever-burgeoning field of Indian/South Asian diasporic and immigrant writing?

I think the main way is that I am writing about the more rural immigrant experience. There are so many Indian writers I love. But most of their fiction takes place in places that have a more urban setting – in Boston or Houston or the Bay Area for example. To be an immigrant in a place like Wyoming is just such a different life. And I am interested in talking about that difference. How being different in a place where you never see a reflection of yourself changes how you interact with the world.

5. Humor seems to be a defining feature of these stories, whereas a lot of fiction about immigrants has the reputation of being serious or humorless. Is humor something you think about consciously as you write? Do you think of humor as a way to subvert familiar tropes at the same time as it illuminates the peculiarity of your particular perspective?

Well, the short answer to this is that I like to think I am funny. I actually was surprised when a few people I trust as readers told me that they found the book really sad and dark.

As I think there is a lot of humor in the book. Many of the situations, while being serious, are funny. The first story for example, *Melting* – to me, it's funny that one of the characters thinks they were called after a chocolate bar. I wanted to take something dark, like being called a racial slur, and turn it on its head. And so yes, I think I do want to subvert expectations and show the absurdness of things. I also supposed humor is a kind of coping mechanism. We make jokes when we are nervous. And I think identity and race is something we don't want to necessarily talk about. If humor is a way in, then I want to go there.

6. A lot of your stories feature main characters who are outcasts and outsiders in one way or another, and yet we never get the sense that these characters are passive victims of circumstance. How do you go about creating compassion for marginalized characters without stripping them of agency?

I suppose I tried to make them all a bit weird. Cindy, the babysitter in *Dot or Feather* is a kleptomaniac, and stealing gives her an odd sense of power. Faith, in *Cowboys and East Indians* likens herself to a llama, guarding and protecting, but not being part of the main group. But I think to answer your question more directly – I have huge amounts of compassion for my characters. I love them. Even though they are flawed and unlikable at times. Delia in *Reserve Champion* to me is the perfect example of this. She so wants praise and validation. And I know what that is like. Perhaps I am a bit of every one of my main characters. I know what they have gone through. And they all do actions or things that they think are going to bring them power. It's doesn't always work. Stealing a doll or killing a prairie dog isn't perhaps going to fix your life, but it's taking some sort of control. But I hope a reader will see why they might do a stupid thing or act a certain way. Every character in the book wants something. They may try to get it in a clumsy fashion, but they want something. And I hope their humanness and flaws in their attempts creates compassion. That is what we are all doing in life – stumbling along, hoping for connection, hoping for a place in the world.

CONTRIBUTORS

Maureen Alsop, Ph.D. is the author of four full collections of poetry including *Later, Knives & Trees*, *Mantic*, *Apparition Wren*, and *Mirror Inside Coffin* (forthcoming). She teaches online with the Rooster Moans poetry cooperative, the space where collaborations with Lissa Kiernan began. www.maureenalsop.com.

Gloria Amescua is a CantoMundo fellow. A workshop presenter for youth and adults, Gloria is an alumna of Hedgebrook's Writers-in-Residence program. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Windchimes* and *What Remains*. Gloria has also been published in a variety of journals, including several di-verse-city anthologies, *Kweli Journal*, *Generations Literary Journal*, several Texas Poetry Calendar issues, *Acentos Review*, *The San Antonio Express News*, *Lifting the Sky: Southwestern Haiku & Haiga*, *Toe Good*, and *Pilgrimage*. In 2013 she won first place in both the Christina Sergeyevna Award and the Austin Poetry Society Award.

Sahar Muradi is an Afghan-born, Florida-grown, and NY-based writer and performer. She is co-editor, with Zohra Saed, of *One Story, Thirty Stories: An Anthology of Contemporary Afghan American Literature* (University of Arkansas Press, 2010). Her writing has appeared in *Drunken Boat*, *DOCUMENTA*, *phati'tude*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *The Poetry Project Newsletter*. She is the recipient of an Asian American Writers' Workshop Open City Fellowship and a Himan Brown Creative Writing Award in Poetry. Sahar has an MPA in international development from New York University, a BA in creative writing from Hampshire College, and is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Brooklyn College.

Chris Abramides is a photographer and videographer. Employed for the past 18 years as a videographer, editor, and producer for the New York City Transit Authority's Emmy and Telly award-winning broadcast/cablecast monthly newsmagazine *TransitTransit*, he was also the videographer and editor for the documentary films *Shakre Lessons* and *Shanty Town*, both broadcast on WNET (PBS/New York) Independent Focus series and winners of a combined ten national and international awards. He has worked for archival stock footage company Archive Films and holds a B.A./Communications from American University in Washington, DC. More at Abramides.com

Natalie Bicknell lives in Seattle, WA, where she is a current fiction student in the University of Washington MFA program. She also has a MEd. in TESOL from the University of South Florida and teaches in the Intensive English Program at Seattle Central College. She is an active member of the Richard Hugo House in Seattle, and her fiction has previously appeared in the Northwest literary magazine, *Poplorish*.

Chauna Craig's stories and essays have appeared in magazines such as *Prairie Schooner*, *Fourth Genre*, and *CALYX* and the anthologies *Sudden Stories* (Mammoth Press) and *You Have Time for This* (Ooligan Press). Her work has been recognized by the Pushcart Prize anthology and as a Notable Essay by Best American Essays. She's won fellowships to Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Vermont Studio Center, and Hedgebrook Writers Retreat. She is Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania where she teaches creative writing and women's studies courses.

Originally from Western North Carolina, **Samantha Deal** received her B.A. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Comparative Literature & Creative Writing. In May of 2013, she received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of North

Carolina at Wilmington. She is currently working towards her doctorate at Western Michigan University. Samantha's poetry has appeared, or is forthcoming, in the following journals: *Cold Mountain Review*, *Inkwell*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Journal*, *Dogwood*, *The North Carolina Literary Review*, *Elsewhere*, and *Rattle*—where she was a finalist for the 2014 Rattle Poetry Prize. In 2013, she was a finalist for the Dogwood Poetry Prize and a semi-finalist for the River Styx Poetry Prize, as well as the Mid-American Review James Wright Poetry Prize. Her unpublished manuscript, "[Taxonomies / Something Opened]," has been named a finalist for several recent contests, including the Anhinga Press Robert Dana Poetry Prize, the Zone 3 First Book Award, and the Omnidawn First/Second Book Award.

Sally Deskins is an artist, art writer and writer. Her art has been exhibited in galleries in Omaha, New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Pittsburgh, Ohio and Chicago; and has been published in publications such as *Certain Circuits*, *Weave Magazine*, and *Painters & Poets*. She has curated various solo and group exhibitions, readings and performances centered on women's perspective and the body. Her first illustrated book *Intimates & Fools*, with poetry by Laura Madeline Wiseman, was published in 2014 by Les Femmes Folles Books. Sallydeskins.tumblr.com.

Juan Pablo Duboue was born in Mendoza, Argentina in 1986. Currently pursuing a Masters in Contemporary English Literature he works as a teacher of English, translator and interpreter. He has had poetry published in several online magazines from Argentina and abroad and is currently finishing his first poetry collection. Apart from being a writer, Juan Pablo is also a ballet student and a singer. He blogs under the pen name of Sylvia Fitzgerald in the following blog: sylviafitzgerald.wordpress.com.

Alicia Elkort is an emerging poet living and writing in California. She has worked in the film industry for over 16 years and is currently producing a documentary on Prayer. She edited and contributed to the chapbook, *Creskaside*, published under the auspices of the Berkeley Poetry Review where she also served as an editor. She earned a B.A. degree in literature from UC Berkeley and a Master's Degree in Spiritual Psychology with an Emphasis in Consciousness, Health and Healing. Her poems have been published in several journals including *Ishaan Literary Review* and *Red Paint Hill Quarterly*.

J.D. Isip writes poetry, short stories, dramatic works, and academic articles. He is the Editor for the online journal *Ishaan Literary Review*. J.D. teaches at Collin Community College in Plano, Texas.

Lorraine Jeffery earned her bachelor's degree in English and her MLIS in library science, and managed public libraries in Texas, Ohio and Utah for over twenty years. She has won poetry prizes in state and national contests and has published over thirty poems in various publications, including *Clockhouse*, *Kindred*, *Calliope*, *Ibbetson Street*, and *Rockhurst Review*. She has published short stories in *War Cry*, *The Standard* and *Segullah*. Her articles have appeared in *Focus on the Family*, *Mature Years*, and *Utah's Senior Review*, as well as other publications. Her mystery novel has been accepted for publication and should be available in 2015. She is the mother of ten children (eight adopted) and currently lives with her husband in Orem, Utah.

Lissa Kiernan is the author of *Two Faint Lines in the Violet*, published by Negative Capability Press in 2014. Her book-length braided essay, *Glass Needles & Goose Quills: Elementary Lessons in Atomic Properties, Nuclear Families, and Radical Poetics*, is forthcoming from Haley's. She is the founder and director of [The Rooster Moans Poetry Cooperative](http://TheRoosterMoansPoetryCooperative), a

leading provider of online poetry workshops. Along with her MFA from the Stonecoast program at the University of Southern Maine, Lissa holds an MA in Media Studies from The New School. She currently makes her home in Brooklyn, New York.

Nina McConigley is the author of the story collection *Cowboys and East Indians*, which was the winner of the [2014 PEN Open Book Award](#) and winner of a [High Plains Book Award](#). She was born in Singapore and grew up in Wyoming. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Houston, where she was an Inprint Brown Foundation Fellow. She also holds an MA in English from the University of Wyoming and a BA in Literature from Saint Olaf College. She is the winner of a Barthelme Memorial Fellowship in Non-Fiction and served as the Non-Fiction Editor of *Gulf Coast: a Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*. Her play, *Owen Wister Considered* was one of five plays produced in 2005 for the Edward Albee New Playwrights Festival, in which Pulitzer-prize winning playwright Lanford Wilson was the producer. She has been awarded a work-study scholarship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in 2005-2009, and received a full fellowship to the Vermont Studio Center. She was granted a Tennessee Williams Scholarship in Fiction at the 2010 Sewanee Writers' Conference. In 2011, she was a Scholar at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and in 2014 was a Fiction fellow.

She has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and for *The Best New American Voices*. Her story "Curating Your Life" was a notable story in *Best American Nonrequired Reading 2010* edited by Dave Eggers. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Salon*, *American Short Fiction*, *Memorious*, *Slice Magazine*, *Asian American Literary Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Forklift, Ohio*.

She was the 2010 recipient of the Wyoming Arts Council's *Frank Nelson Doubleday Memorial Writing Award* and was a finalist for the 2011 *Flannery O'Connor Short Fiction Award*. She currently serves on the board of the Wyoming Arts Council. *Cowboys and East Indians* is a finalist for the 2014 High Plains Book Award, and on the longlist for the 2014 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. She teaches at the University of Wyoming and will be joining the MFA faculty at Warren Wilson. She is at work on a novel.

Edward Murray is the author of *Stranger's Pilgrimage*. *Stranger* has been published in "Dionne's Story, two anthologies of poetry and prose for the awareness of violence against women," as well as several other publications, including most recently, "Uppagus" and "The Brentwood Library Anthology." He is a member, and past president, of the Langston Hughes Poetry Society of Pittsburgh. He is a member of the Pittsburgh Writer's studio, Writer's Playtime and the Pittsburgh Poetry Exchange. He is a member of the Photographic Section of The Academy of Science and Art of Pittsburgh, AgWorks as well as a photographer contributor to Transformazium's log. He is an artist, photographer and poet and his work can be seen and heard at elmurray.com and around The Braddock Carnegie Library. He welcomes questions, comments, or exchanges of ideas by email: edleemu1@verizon.net.

Kayla Pongrac is an avid writer, reader, tea drinker, and record spinner. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Vinyl Poetry*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Oblong*, *HOOT*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and *Nat. Brut*, among others. When she's not writing creatively, she's writing professionally—for two newspapers and a few magazines in her hometown of Johnstown, PA. To read more of Kayla's work, visit www.kaylapongrac.com or follow her on Twitter @KP_the_Promisee.

Natanya Ann Pulley is an Assistant Professor at the University of South Dakota and

Fiction Editor at *South Dakota Review*. She has a PhD in Fiction Writing from the University of Utah and is half-Navajo (Kiiyaa'aanii and Tachiinii clans). A writer of primarily fiction and non-fiction with outbreaks in poetry, Natanya's publications include *Western Humanities Review*, *The Florida Review Native Issue*, *Drunken Boat*, *As/Us*, *The Collagist*, and *McSweeney's Open Letters* (among others). Links to Natanya's publications can be found at her website: www.gappsbasement.com.

R. Flowers Rivera is native of Mississippi, she completed a Ph.D. at Binghamton University and an M.A. at Hollins University. Xavier Review Press published her debut poetry collection, *Troubling Accents* (July 2013), which received a nomination from the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters and was selected by the Texas Authors Association as its 2014 Poetry Book of the Year. Rivera's second collection, *Heathen*, has been selected by poet and literary activist E. Ethelbert Miller as the winner of the 2014 Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Prize (forthcoming from Wayne State University Press, March 2015). Her short story, "The Iron Bars," won the 1999 Peregrine Prize, and she has been a finalist for the May Swenson Award, the Journal Intro Award, the Gary Snyder Memorial Award, the Paumanok Award, the Crab Orchard Series, and the Gival Poetry Prize as well as garnering nominations for Pushcarts. Currently, she lives in McKinney, Texas. View more of her work by visiting <http://www.promethea.com>.

Gazelle Samizay was born in Kabul, Afghanistan and now resides in Los Angeles. Her photographs and videos have been exhibited across the US and internationally, including Brazil, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Indonesia, Pakistan, U.A.E and the UK. In addition to her studio practice, she has taught courses in Afghanistan, Jordan and the US, and her writing has been published in *One Story, Thirty Stories: An Anthology of Contemporary Afghan American Literature*. Samizay is a recipient of the Princess Grace Experimental Film Honoraria, the 1885 Graduate Fellowship in Arts and Humanities, and the Northern Trust Enrichment Award, among others. She received her Master's in Fine Arts in photography at the University of Arizona and is a photography professor at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh-Online Division. She also serves on the board of the Bo M. Karlsson Foundation, which provides scholarships for Nepali women to attend college.

Sarah Thursday calls Long Beach, California, her home, where she advocates for local poets and poetry events in her spare time from her other passion, teaching 4th and 5th graders. She runs a Long Beach-focused poetry website called *CadenceCollective.net*, co-hosts a monthly reading with one of her poetry heroes, G. Murray Thomas, and just started *Sadie Girl Press* as a way to help publish local and emerging poets. In addition, she co-founded *Lucid Moose Lit*, a small press focused on social justice issues, with her poetry partner in crime, Nancy Lynée Woo. Her first full-length poetry collection, *All the Tiny Anchors*, is available now. Find and follow her on *SarahThursday.com*, Facebook, or Twitter.

Marianne Villanueva is the author of three collections of short fiction and a novella, *JENALYN*. Her work has been short-listed for the O. Henry Literature Awards, as well as nominated for the Pushcart. She has work published or forthcoming from *Eunoia Review*, *Prism International*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *PANK*, the *New Orleans Review*, the Santa Fe Writers Project, *Witness* and *Waccamaw*. Recently, she has been featured in *Crab Orchard Review's* "West Coast And Beyond" issue.

Sue B. Walker is the Stokes Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at the University of South Alabama. She has published seven books of poetry, a non-fiction book on the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, numerous critical articles on Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers,

Marge Piercy, short stories, drama, and a critical book, *The Eco-poetics of James Dickey*. She is the publisher of Negative Capability Press.

Chila Woychik writes, edits, and hikes in Iowa. She has creative nonfiction essays published in *The Mayo Review* (Texas A&M-Commerce), *The Milo Review*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Pithead Chapel*, and others. Part German, part Cherokee, she often thinks about nature, the inconsistencies in religious theory vs practice, and the utter wonder of true friendship, animal kind, and a day gone good.

Laura Madeline Wiseman's books are *American Galactic*, *Some Fatal Effects of Curiosity and Disobedience*, *Queen of the Platform*, and *Sprung*. She is also the author of the collaborative book *Intimates and Fools* with artist Sally Deskins, two letterpress books, and eight chapbooks, including *Spindrift*. She is the editor of *Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence*. She holds a doctorate from the University of Nebraska and has received an Academy of American Poets Award, a Mari Sandoz/Prairie Schooner Award, and the Wurlitzer Foundation Fellowship. Her work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Margie*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Feminist Studies*. www.lauramadelinewiseman.com

Anubha Yadav is a writer, academic, and filmmaker based in New Delhi. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Wasafiri*, *Indian Literature*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Elsewhere*, *Reading Hour*, *Jaggery* and others. She was shortlisted for the *Wasafiri New Writing Prize*, 2013. Her short fiction piece has recently won the Dastaan Award, 2014, worth PKR 50,000- the award is given to an emerging writer of south Asia. She is writing a collection of short stories on Indian men & masculinity right now. When not in a classroom, she travels with a backpack full of tea leaves. Her work can also be read on her blog.

Changming Yuan, 8-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Chansons of a Chinaman* (2009) and *Landscaping* (2013), grew up in a remote village, began to learn English at 19, and published several monographs before leaving China. With a PhD in English, Yuan currently tutors and co-edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver. Changming's poetry appears in 889 literary publications across 30 countries, including *Asia Literary Review*, *Best Canadian Poetry* (2009;12;14), *BestNewPoemsOnline* and *Threepenny Review*.