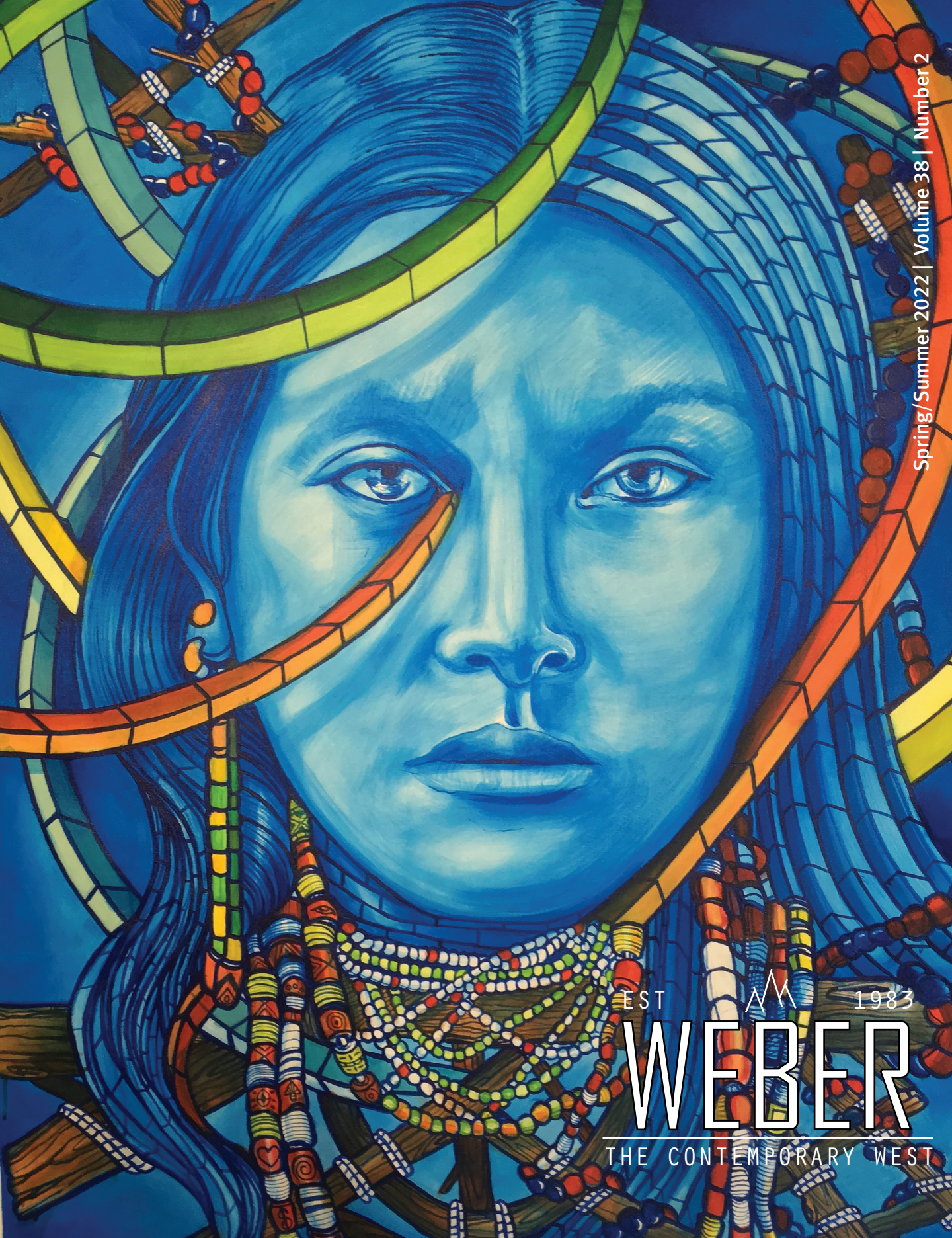


Spring/Summer 2022 | Volume 38 | Number 2

EST 1983

# WEBER

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

EST 1983
WEBER
THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

Deriving from the German **weben**—to weave—**weber** translates into the literal and figurative "weaver" of textiles and texts. Weber are the artisans of textures and discourse, the artists of the beautiful fabricating the warp and weft of language into everchanging patterns. **Weber**, the journal, understands itself as a regional and global tapestry of verbal and visual texts, a weave made from the threads of words and images.

# INSPIRATION

from the editor's desk

I have recently returned from an expedition to scientific societies of the West. Their members exhibited intense interest in delicate instruments of my invention which demonstrate the **indivisible unity of all life**. The Bose crescograph has the enormity of ten million magnifications. The microscope enlarges only a few thousand times; yet it brought vital impetus to biological science. The crescograph opens incalculable vistas.

— Jagadish Chandra Bose

The highest education is that which does not merely give us **information** but makes our life in **harmony** with all **existence**.

— Rabindranath Tagore

The old Lakota was wise. He knew that man's heart away from **nature** becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, **living things** soon led to lack of respect for humans, too.

— Luther Standing Bear

There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the **deliberately silenced**, or the **preferably unheard**.

— Arundhati Roy

Front Cover: Don Rimx, *Visiones y Portales*, acrylic on canvas, Querétaro, Mexico, 2017




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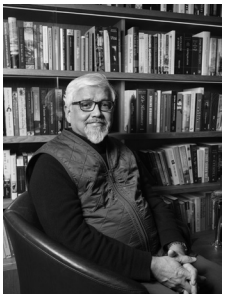
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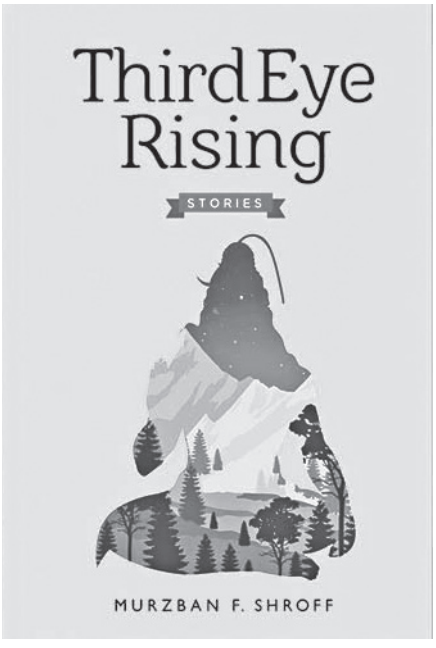
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# INDIA— FROM THE GROUND UP

SRI CRAVEN



## *A Conversation with* MURZBAN F. SHROFF




*Murzban F. Shroff is a fiction writer based in Mumbai, India, whose short story collections and novel have been published in the U.S., U.K., and India. Born in the city into a Parsi/Zoroastrian family, Shroff worked in advertising in a creative capacity. Always interested in literary writing, he left advertising in 2006 to pursue writing full time. Shroff's experience of the city's cosmopolitanism – in language, culture, community, and everyday life – informs his fictional explorations of individuals' actions as evidenced in his first short story collection,* Breathless in Bombay *(2008), shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (2009), and his novel,* Waiting for Jonathan Koshy *(2015), nominated for the Horatio Nelson Prize. His most recent work is the collection of short stories* Third Eye Rising *(2021), which featured in the* Esquire *list of Best Books of 2021.*

*In this interview, conducted after Shroff's virtual reading hosted by an independent bookstore in Portland, Oregon, Shroff speaks about* TER*'s interest in telling a story of contemporary India that departs from globalization, technology, and consumer culture. In this interview, Shroff discusses why and how he came to tell stories of the poetics of everyday life among the 'common' folk navigating longstanding ideologies of caste, religion, and gender, rural and urban living and exchange, and philosophical rather than capitalist orientations.*

*The overall theme of your latest work, the collection of short stories* Third Eye Rising, *might be summarized as the "invisible India."* TER *avowedly gets away from the consumer cultural excesses of globalization and focuses on the quotidian violence of caste, gender, and class in rural and urban India. But, the focus on the quotidian also evokes the creative and poignant ways people negotiate life amidst the vast social discrepancies of Indian life. Recently, some scholars have termed the return to realism in Indian fiction as responding to globalization – both evoking the ugliness of disparities and attempting to reflect as is the uncertainties associated with rapid and mass change. Do you see your writing as participating in social critique or literary realism? What motivated the thematic focus of* TER*?*

***Third Eye Rising*** **evolved out of a deep and intense personal experience that spanned almost seventeen years. Let me share how it began, so that the motivation behind this kind of work, the kind that seeks to unravel an invisible India, becomes clear. I began writing in the year 2001. After two years of writing plot-based stories, I felt a certain disenchantment with my work, a kind of unease that I wasn't quite there; I hadn't figured out what really drove me, my subjects of abiding interest, and why I needed to be read. I have always been a disciple of serious literature, and my disenchantment rose from a realistic and growing sense of awareness that I hadn't quite understood the conundrum that was India, that I didn't know how many of my fellow-Indians thought. To cure myself of this ignorance, I started journeying to the villages of central India, to the site of a large dam, where I learned—for the first time—of this phenomenon called displacement. Travelling from village to village, I learned that, as a result of this dam, 244 villages had been submerged and 60,000 families displaced. To make way for the dam, villagers were evicted by uprooting their water pumps, demolishing their schools, and cutting down their trees. To get compensation they had to go through brokers and middlemen, who would take their pound of flesh. The rehabilitation schemes would compensate landowners but not landless laborers, forest tribes, artisans, tradesmen, and fisherfolk. Often, farmers were compelled to give up prime, high-yield land in exchange for arid plots. Overnight, these farmers became paupers. Hearing these stories of loss and betrayal, I was deeply moved. I understood that this was nothing less than forced eviction, with little or no recourse to the law. This, despite there being clear-cut guidelines for rehabilitation as established by a water disputes tribunal. Over several such trips, I also understood why villagers poured into cities, took over pavements and public spaces, and constructed slums. Given a choice, they would rather not be here, in the city. I began to see the machinations of a development game which brazenly favored cities over villages, and which led to such terrible inequities. These inequities inevitably spilled over into the cities, making them unlivable and exploitable. I knew then that I had found my subject: the neurodiversity of India. Or, rather, the inequities of diversity. And with that realization, I shifted my writing from plot-based to thought-based, a kind of literary realism that would sensitize people to the other side of India. The India not of malls and multiplexes but one that struggles to survive, that has not a voice, loud enough, in the literary space. I began to feel a certain usefulness of purpose that began to manifest in and inform my work. This became the thematic core of *Third Eye Rising*.**

*It is significant that there is absolutely no mention of globalization in the stories set in villages, almost as if that aspect of national life has not even made a presence in rural India, and only one of the three set in the city even mentions it. To what extent is this decision framed by fact? And to what extent is it the result of a creative license that wants*

*to guide readers to view India away from the dominant lens of globalization?*

The villages I visited, first in Madhya Pradesh, then in the Satpura mountain ranges of Maharashtra, and eventually in Bihar, were small agrarian communities untouched by globalization. They were either struggling to keep their lands or their integrity against a vast and unseen force (the state), or dealing with issues such as caste and female exploitation. If, as a fiction writer, I had to make this world available to my readers, I needed to present a more intimate view of their life struggles rather than bring in a macro-movement such as globalization, the impact of which they might have felt inadvertently, but not directly and consciously. And I had to do this from their point of view, keeping my authorial presence to a minimum. Our cities and satellite towns were of course seeing the immediate effects of globalization (and I had already written about this in my debut collection, ***Breathless in Bombay***); but 70% of India lives in its villages, and many of these villages had been either overlooked or discriminated against by the state. There was a situation created of what I call "man-made poverty," that is, poverty due to displacement; and it was rampant; it was silent; it was insidious. It was driving people out of their homes and cheating them out of their livelihoods. It was forcing them from one state to another, a state with an altogether different language, culture, and traditions. Often, displacement sends its victims to an alien environment (the city), to an alien neighborhood (the slum), and to an alien livelihood (manual labor). This man-made poverty is very different from other forms of poverty, which is to say, caste-based poverty, or literacy-based poverty, or health- and unemployment-based poverty. It bothered me that we were doing this to our own people, and that our rural infrastructure lacked two of the most basic indices of human development: good education and timely healthcare. All that our villages are craving for really is self-sufficiency. It was important for me to understand these failures and their consequences rather than analyze and capture the effects of globalization, which, I felt, could be treated more equitably through the logic of non-fiction. If globalization was to be the big leveler it claimed to be, it had not even touched the surface of these two critical sectors.

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*Caste, religion, class, and gender are dominant social realities in India, and* TER *deals with all of those. What is interesting are the ways you elicit the horrors of caste and gender exploitation while also showing the ways people deal with and overcome these struggles in everyday life. For each instance of caste or gender violence (psychic and physical), you show the oppressed turn things around by active or silent resistance, subversion, and resourceful thinking. (In "Third Eye Rising," the young husband commits an act of patricide to protect his wife, whom he loves, from being tortured any further; in "Bhikoo Badshah's Poison," the peon working in a city office cleverly gets his boss to give him loans so he can return to his village as a success story and not bear the brunt of caste oppression; in "A Rather Strange Marriage," the village leader's*

*wife saves a young woman from rape and also claims equality in her own marriage.) Are these stories of resilience, resistance, and agency written with a certain audience in mind whom you want viewing the "India unseen" of* TER *differently from the stereotypical associations of unsurmountable oppression?*

**Stories, I believe, are never written for a certain audience, at least not the kind that seek to inform and illuminate, the ones that don't play to popular tastes. But stories do have a certain intention; there is something deeper, a subconscious bug than drives the writer, goading him, reassuring him, that he can reveal something to himself and his readers. The whole purpose of writing a story is that the writer, gripped by his own dilemmas, lives with them, journeys with them, and is transformed at the end of it; in the bargain, he can transform the reader. *What was that bug for me?* Perhaps the compelling need to see rural women break with their chains of oppression and stand empowered. Speaking to groups of village women in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, I realized that there is an inherent fatalism prevalent in them, a reluctance to change their situation, an almost abject acquiescence to their fate. Fortunately, the people who were committed to changing this mindset and who led me to this reality were both powerful women activists who had committed their lives and careers to improving the lot of these women. So I had my role models before me, and their work became mine, too. Therefore, the transference of power in "Third Eye Rising" (the title story), from the dowry-oppressed wife to the weak-willed husband, and from the headman's wife to the oppressed girl-bride in "A Rather Strange Marriage," where, also, the entire female population of the village takes up against their men for being complicit in a crime against the girl-bride, Mandira. There was most certainly a revolution brewing in my head when I wrote these, an overwhelming desire to see the historic ills of female exploitation corrected. Similarly, there is a deeper understanding of migrant aspirations in "Bhikoo Badshah's Poison." Bhikoo runs the charade of hiring a professional wife because he wants to see his son educated in a private school, so that the boy can shed the burden of caste. Something that Bhikoo himself was unable to do, despite his success. This story came directly out of my travels to Bihar, understanding the caste inequities and the state of schools there, and then, equally, understanding the condition of public schools in Mumbai, which are run so badly that 50% of students drop out before reaching grade nine. In Bhikoo's craftiness, in all his game-playing, there is conviction that he can beat the odds he was born with.**

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*To some extent, religion, the other big divide in India, is marginal in* TER. *But, what is interesting is how Hinduism and Islam seem*

*to coexist beautifully in several stories. (The opening story, "The Kitemaker's Dilemna," showcases this in the protagonist's awareness of compassion toward a child; in both "A Matter of Misfortune" and "The Floating Tomb," Islamic history offers rich possibilities for philosophical and personal awareness.) What is the reason for your choice to not delve deeper into religion as a point of contention, whereas you focus on caste and gender to such a great degree? Do you feel, as many say about the media today, that an inordinate focus on certain negative aspects of society in fact fuels that negativity all the more? Or, is there another reason?*

**But that is exactly my point about India: it is not an antagonistic civilization, but a pluralistic one. In the stories you quote, I wanted to show religion not as an overt hostile force of separation but as a subtle, almost instinctive, point of unification, a point where the differences between communities just dissolve. Pluralism is, perhaps, the greatest strength of India, a strength we need to tap into more often, and which we need to offer up to the West as our most significant contribution to world harmony and peace. This unification is endorsed amply in our religious texts. In the *Katha Upanishad*, for instance: "He who sees the variety and not the unity wanders from death to death." And in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where Lord Krishna advises Arjuna: "He who sees me (the Universal Self) present in all beings, and all beings existing within me, is never lost to me, nor am I ever lost to him." In "The Kitemaker's Dilemma," when all has been revealed and resolved, I raise the question: "*Open door, open heart*. Wasn't there something in Indian philosophy about this?" Here, the use of the word "philosophy" is intentional, so that the thought need not be proprietary to any one religion. It is man's action that is all-important and worthy of redemption. And so, having liberated the boy Akash from his bondage, his guilt, Baba Hanush, the kitemaker, is liberated from his own grief and he feels a strange, almost metaphysical, unity with the universe. ("And as he walked away from Akash, away from the squeaking bolt, the darkness, and the warmth that had eluded them for days . . . Baba Hanush began to feel light and happy. He hadn't felt this way since years now, ever since his wife had died.") Likewise, the protagonist in "The Floating Tomb," who is a devout Hindu, gets his life affirmation from simply looking at the beautiful glowing dome of the tomb where the Muslim saint Haji Ali is buried. He realizes that his parents had had a beautiful death, because, like the Muslim saint, they too had learned to let go attachment. I like the idea of religion being a subtle force at work, of touching unlikely lives, without difference or discrimination. The India of my dreams is a miracle of co-existence. It is a dream I share with our founding fathers, and, providentially, it finds its way into my work.**

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*Again, with respect to class, only a few stories deal with the middle classes, and these stories are distinguished by a more personal turn than the larger social issues mentioned previously. (For example, "A Diwali Star," "The Floating Tomb," "A Matter of Misfor-*

*If* Third Eye Rising *had to be an India collection, as I had decided it would, I needed to explore another compelling aspect of Indian society, which was the Family. Family at the heart of your existence, Family as influencer and motivator, the ground on which you shape your life, your actions, is something deeply, intrinsically Indian.*

*tune," "Oh Dad," and "An Invisible Truth" all have middle class protagonists turning philosophical in light of various relationship crises: parents and children, fathers and sons, friends, spouses.) What is at stake in mixing these stories of individualized crises with those of socially instituted ones? Fighting for one's life in the face of caste or gendered violence is significantly different from dealing with a marital or filial issue.*

**If I were to answer this at a simplistic level, I would say it is the fiction writer's methodology of developing both, the inner and outer plot; it is man raging against his environment, his circumstances, while battling his inner demons/limitations. But, no, this goes a lot deeper than that. If *Third Eye Rising* had to be an India collection, as I had decided it would, I needed to explore another compelling aspect of Indian society, which was the Family. Family at the heart of your existence, Family as influencer and motivator, the ground on which you shape your life, your actions, is something deeply, intrinsically Indian. In stories like "Diwali Star" and "Floating Tomb," I was able to introspect on the subject of attachment. But, in doing so, I could also nuance the joys of devotion—as embodied in the love of Amarveer Rathore and Uma Rathore for their children and grandchildren ("Diwali Star"). Or the love of the elderly parents of the protagonist in "The Floating Tomb." In order to save their son's marriage, they relinquish their luxurious "home-by-the-sea" and go live in a tawdry one-bedroom apartment in an old building where "the ceiling was held up by beams." By a single decisive act, the parents broke with their material attachment while proving their parental devotion. For all his charades and deceptions, even the roguish Bhikoo is a family man at heart. "He had built for his father a *pucca* house in the village, and he had got his sisters married, sparing nothing on the rites, nor on the jewelry." In "Oh Dad," the son sacrifices himself in order to preserve his father's integrity. And, in "An Invisible Truth," Amir Chauhan will overcome his fears and take up a job in the city only so that he can win his wife's admiration. At the heart of many of these stories is family love: thwarted, tested, or realized.**

TER *also foregrounds/suggests the lessons that may be learned from history vis-à-vis the tellers of stories – fathers and sons, tour guides and tourists, the all-seeing animals, a professor of history. It is obvious that you see writers, through their storytelling, as keepers of history. Do you see the post-1947 and pre-1990 generation of writers as keepers of a colonial/postcolonial history that the millennial and younger generations seem to be further and further away from? (There are glimpses of a long ago past in stories like "Diwali Star," "A Matter of Misfortune," and "The Floating Tomb.") What kind of stories do you find Indian writers in English telling, and which ones do you personally want to continue telling, and why?*

**You are correct in that the post-1947 and pre-1990 generation of writers don't have the kind of eminence or readership they once**

did. Writers like G.V. Desani, Nirad Chaudhuri, Kamala Das, Mahashweta Devi, RK Narayan, Khushwant Singh, Dom Moraes, and V.S. Naipaul *are* our literary heritage, in as much as a Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, or Mark Twain are part of the American tradition. These writers are indispensable to understanding the making of our nation and have been prescient in their readings of Indian society and culture. Sadly, some of them, like Chaudhuri, Desani, and Dom, are not even published any more, let alone taught. I think Indian writing today is headed in a vastly different direction from its post-colonial predecessors: it is leaning more on Indian tastes and Indian aspirations; and Indian publishing is developing its own market, so to say, rather than relying on Western imports. But not all of what is happening is good and edifying; a lot of mediocrity seems to seep through, because there is a tendency to view the market strictly through the lens of popular tastes. The gatekeepers themselves are dealing with a high level of commercial anxiety and, in the bargain, are trying to woo readers with Bollywood-like themes. What I would really like to see is some state-level involvement in promoting Indian literature at the school and college level, through festivals and grants. This needs to be taken up as an on-going collaborative effort among the state, the education department, institutions of learning, publishers, authors, poets, and academics. I can't speak for other Indian writers, but the stories I would like to continue telling are those that demystify India and the Indian psyche, that come from a space of time, place, and purpose. This is the land where the human spirit is doggedly tested. This is the country where we are constantly called upon to accept our fellow citizens who differ from us in language, culture, tastes, and traditions. This is where we need to tell stories that enhance our understanding of each other, that build up our reserves of empathy. And if nuggets of history and spirituality can be woven in purposefully, so much the better.

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*How much does your own work in advertising influence or show up in your work as a literary writer? Advertising and literature are sometimes polar opposites in that the former sells, while the latter gets you to see the selling. (The characters of Ehsaan Ali and the narrator of "A Matter of Misfortune," as well as the anthropomorphic cow in "Eyes of a Temple Cow," come to mind as examples of how literature can get you to see a different, more critical perspective.)*

Advertising is clearly and conclusively a past life. It brought me success at an early age and enabled me to meet some of my personal goals. You are right when you say they are polar opposites. With advertising you create illusions; with writing, you destroy them. I guess I am grateful to advertising because it showed me what those illusions were—the heady lure of consumerism, of hyperbolic growth. The funny thing is I never believed in those illusions myself. I was always a nomad at heart.

*How might teaching (in India and in the West) a collection like* TER *transform students' understanding of India and Indian English literature?*

I would like to believe that *Third Eye Rising* gives you slices of the real India, an India keenly felt and experienced, with all its trials, tribulations, triumphs, and wisdom. Sometimes, the spiritual faith of Indians seems to border on irrationality, on superstition, on blind faith. But it is this faith that strengthens and empowers at the worst of moments. As, for instance, in the title story, where the young wife, Minolini, called upon to prove her fidelity to her sadistic in-laws, draws on the love story of Lord Shiva and Sati, and the myth is powerful enough to see her through her ordeal. In the story "An Invisible Truth," the manservant Amir Chauhan is prepared to lose his job rather than defile the Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge. By understanding Amir and the sacrifices he has made for his family, the protagonist is able to resolve something in his own life. In a country like India, where the inequities are so great, the only equality we all have is the power of self-realization. And sometimes that is enough.

Sri Craven is an associate professor in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Portland State University. She received her Ph.D. in English and Women's studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is a literary/cultural studies critic in the postcolonial and transnational feminist traditions. Her scholarly and creative writings can be found in leading feminist studies journals.

# THE MOCHI'S WIFE

MURZBAN F. SHROFF


Sonika Agarwal

A strange transformation came over the mochi's wife a few months after the mochi was arrested. During his working life, the mochi had been some cobbler. He'd sit in a shed, on a jagged pavement, repairing shoes, slippers, handbags, briefcases, and umbrellas. This part of Mumbai was a madhouse. The traffic was endless: a cacophony of competing horns, a sheet of hot metal chaos. Old buildings stood in art deco modesty, while new buildings wore flashy facades and grand, sweeping entrances. And in the midst of this was a whirlpool of commerce. You could see the commerce everywhere: in the long, noisy bazaar, in the supermarkets, the sari shops, the stationery shops, the sweetmeat shops, the chemist shops, the jewelry shops, the plywood shops, and the home decor stores. Of course, none of this mattered to the mochi. He was an illiterate man, meant to serve at people's feet. He was meant to work in all kinds of weather. He had to live, eat, survive. He had to feed and educate his daughters, the twins, who were growing up fast. Too fast for his liking.

As a father he was strict; he kept the girls in check. At the most, he would let them watch a movie that would be screened during the festival months. This would be at night, when the bazaar would empty out, and there would be this giant screen put up, and on both sides of the screen people would sit, waiting for the film to start. The projector would roll, the picture-quality would be diffused, but the audience would be absorbed, for every line delivered emotion, every scene promised a climax. The girls, watching, would bite their lips and wonder whether such a life was, indeed, possible. A life of uncontainable excitement.

On the other side of the bazaar was the railway station, and outside the station was a ladies' bar, where women danced to Bollywood songs and men gaped at them longingly. The ladies' bar was called the Red Stallion, and next to it was an *adda*, where laborers and migrant workers drank. The mochi was a regular there. Every night he went to the *adda* and stayed there till he had exhausted his earnings.

He often ended up drinking on an empty stomach, wincing at the pain that stabbed at his sides. But it was the walk back from the *adda* that was difficult. The bazaar would swim before his eyes and the scurrying rats would startle him, challenge him with their greedy little eyes.

During the festival time, the walk got even more difficult, for the idol of Lord Ganesha would dominate the lane. For ten days the Lord would preside, fresh and milky-white, his trunk curled over his belly, his one hand raised in blessing. For ten days, the residents of the neighborhood would flock to pay homage. They would leave their wishes at his feet, their wishes and their prayers.

In the queue would be Shraddha, the mochi's wife. She was a short woman, so she had to stand on her toes to see the idol. But when she reached the head of the queue, she would place her head on the Lord's feet and whisper, "Please, my Lord, make him stop drinking before it is too late. Before something bad happens and our lives are ruined." And she was sure her Lord was listening; he had noted and filed her request.

Shraddha was a noticeable woman: fair, firm-bodied, and many years younger than her husband. She had come to the mochi as part of a debt settlement. Her father owed the mochi's father a sum of money which he could not repay, and so a bargain had been struck. And a fine bargain it was. For the mochi, given his drinking habit, could not have done better. His young wife was a hard worker, she ran his house in the meager amount he gave her, and she never nagged about his drinking. The mochi had enjoyed Shraddha's youth and freshness while maintaining a silence that kept her in awe of him. And she had given him two daughters and slipped into the routine of a housewife. She loved her daughters like crazy and could not bear it when the mochi spoke to them harshly. But she knew it was a man thing, so she did not say anything.

During the day, the bazaar crackled and roared with life. Under old beach umbrellas, the wares were laid out: flowery-white cauliflowers; rosy-cheeked tomatoes; dark velvety brinjals; crisp green cabbages; red, yellow, and green capsicum; sheaves of spring onions, coriander, and lettuce; and pyramids of fruit, all so ripe and inviting.

Seated at the entrance, Shraddha sold ginger, garlic, coriander, mint, basil, and parsley. She started late morning, after the girls left for school, and she worked till evening, till the sun had set and it was time to prepare dinner. Then she would bring out two vessels, partly-burnt and dented, and an old kerosene stove, which she would pump at till it was ready to flare and smolder.

Her first impression of the mochi was that he was a shy man. He would bring her the shoes he would make, gleaming like they were machine-made, or would hold out the shoes he had repaired, looking like new. She could tell that he wanted to impress her, and impress her he did. His customers, too, were admiring of the way he would restore torn articles. He would repair them so artistically that you couldn't tell they had been damaged.

But over time, he began spending more and more time at the *adda* and giving her less money to run the house. The money for the girls' school fees, their school uniforms, and study books came out of her earnings, and this she did not mind. And in him she saw the devil of greed rise. He began to use thinner threads for the footwear, and cheap-quality soles, and inferior polishes. All that was okay; she accepted it as part of his business wiles. But then he began to accept shoes and slippers stolen from outside temples, and these he would retouch to a point where they were beyond recognition and could be sold for a fat profit. And this she flinched at, thinking about the sin it would incur. How it would lower them in her Lord's eyes.

Then once a week, he would bring home a piece of luggage, a suitcase of expensive leather, and he would work on it at night, after taking his dinner. The strange thing was he would not work in his shed, his workplace outside the bazaar. He'd work, instead, in the enclosure where they stayed: the large, roomy shed in the quadrangle. He would ask her to light two candles and leave, ordering her and the girls to sleep outdoors. And she did not like that, because there were rats in the quadrangle, large gray rats with plump hairy bodies and long pointed mouths. But after a while, she remembered that the rat was Lord Ganesha's *vahana*, his vehicle, and that her Lord rode it as a way of controlling his ego. So she started placing carrots and cucumbers for the rats, and in the morning would be thrilled to find them gone.

A little before midnight, the mochi would start out, carrying the suitcase he had been working on. He would go down the road, past the traffic signals, past the eateries, past the chemist shop. Turning left at the crossroad, he would take the bridge to the east side, where there were brothels, guesthouses, and dealers of drugs and women.

On his return, he would wake up Shraddha and show her his earnings: a thick, crisp bundle of hundred-rupee notes. He would flap the notes in her face and expect her to express surprise, to show delight. Seeing none, he would rise and leave, set out in the direction of the *adda*. And he'd stay there drinking, till the last order was taken and the shutters were rolled down halfway.

Waking up next morning, he would order her to prepare a big breakfast, which he would gobble. Then he would whistle and sing an old Hindi song: *Saala main to sahib ban gaya*. Or he would start off in that lofty voice of his. "You don't know how lucky you are, woman, that you have married an artist, a man with a gift in his fingers. Just think! You could have been married to one of those donkeys from the bazaar. Those donkeys who are going to remain here all their lives, shouting to compete, shouting to make themselves heard. But you and I and our girls are going to see better days; we are going to be rich soon, I tell you. Just wait and see. You will thank your lucky stars you married me."

She hated it when he spoke like this, for the "donkeys" were her friends. They—the onion vendor, the tomato vendor, and the flower ven-

dor—worked beside her in the bazaar. They kept her amused with their jokes and their stories and, when the vans arrived, would rush to help her unload.

After some time, the mochi bought himself a cell phone. When it would ring, he would stare at it warily, then walk around the quadrangle, speaking loudly. He would pace the quadrangle, shouting that he was too busy, he couldn't come right away, where was the time, with all the work he had. What did they think? That they were his only customers, that he didn't have any other work? He would look like he was enjoying himself, refusing them. But invariably he would go, wearing a clean white shirt and trousers and, before leaving, he would instruct her to mind the shed, which she hated doing. She hated the fact that a customer would remove a piece of footwear and leave it under her nose, waiting for her to pick it up and repair it. She felt like throwing the footwear out onto the main road, where it would be crushed by the traffic. But it was not in her nature to do that. She would move to the shed, instead, requesting one of her vendor-friends to mind her baskets.

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With a screech of tire, they stopped their jeep outside his shed. He barely had any time to look up, to understand why they raised him by the collar, slammed him on the ear, on the cheekbones, on his temples, until his head reeled, his neck felt severed. *Wait*! *Wait*! he shouted. There was some mistake. But, no; they dragged him like a common criminal, a thief. His cell phone was left behind, his body was off the ground, his one chappal was missing, his heels were scraping the road. He felt humiliated, helpless. But did they listen? Did they stop? "Shraddha, Shraddha!" he screamed at the top of his voice, as they pushed him into the back of the jeep and snapped on the handcuffs.

At the station, they had so many questions. *Where was the hashish going? How was it going out*? *Who was the mastermind behind the false bottoms*? *Had he met him*? *What did he look like*? *How much was he paid for his labors*? And: *When was the next consignment*?

He said he knew nothing. His customers had told him nothing, and he did not think it proper to ask. How could he? He was just a poor mochi, and it was not within his right to ask.

The police did not believe him. They beat him so badly that his own daughters could not bear to look at him. He was missing four teeth in front; his fingers had been broken, had been twisted back to the point where he'd never hold a hammer again or thread a needle; and his right eye could not open: it was a dark puffy lump of purple. Their father must be a bad man, thought his daughters, for the police to have done this to him.

In spirit, too, the mochi was broken, and now he behaved like an old man. For every little thing he would call to his daughters. To give him his meals. To heat his bathwater. To pour the water on his back. To soap him,

dry him. To make him wear his clothes. To wash him after every toilet. Returning from school, the girls were expected to wait on him, and if they were busy with schoolwork, he would threaten to burn their schoolbooks. He would fight bitterly with Shraddha. Why did the girls need to study? What were they going to do with all this education? All it would do is fill their heads with foolish ideas. Instead, he was going to teach them his trade, make artists out of them. He had fed them for long, and now it was their turn to deliver. She understood what he was trying to do. Keep them illiterate, make slaves out of them, so that they could serve him life-long. Well, she was having none of that. Not if she could help it.

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She had always imagined Kalyan Babu as a demon who preyed on his customers' weaknesses. Why else would he own an *adda*, where men destroyed themselves on alcohol? Not just themselves, their families, too. And why would he run a ladies' bar, where pretty young women danced before rich, drunken men? But the man who emerged from the entrance of the *adda* was pleasant-faced. He had large sympathetic eyes and deep features, and was dressed in a spotless white kurta-pajama, and on his forehead was a red *tikka*. They couldn't talk at the *adda*, he said. It was not the right place for a woman. Tapping her gently on the shoulder, he pointed to the Red Stallion next door.

She was amazed how large the place was. It had thick silver-plated columns, a dancefloor with black and white squares, elegant tables and chairs, and long red sofas. There were those large, funny-looking balls hanging from the ceiling, balls that winked at her with a million eyes. The place was not yet open, said Kalyan Babu. So they could speak freely, without being disturbed.

He had led her to a corner and ordered a *nimbu-paani* for her. And then Shraddha had opened her heart out to him. She spoke to him like she had always known him. She told him her troubles and asked if he could help her. She had heard that he was a powerful man, that he had contacts and connections everywhere, and was like a brother to women like her. Women in need, in distress.

And Kalyan Babu heard her and said, "I understand, sister. I understand how much of a burden it must be for you . . . on your young shoulders . . . and with two young girls, in this day and age . . . not easy, not easy at all."

And she had looked at him and said, "Yes, I want my girls to continue their schooling. And I want them to stand on their own two feet. I want them to be beauticians, have their own beauty parlor one day." She hesitated. Then said shyly, "I know the name already. I have seen it in my dreams. Riddhi-Siddhi Beauty Parlor. I want that for them, and am prepared to do whatever it takes."

The names Shraddha mentioned were of Lord Ganesha's consorts. Did she know . . . could she have known . . . that he, Kalyan Babu, sponsored the Ganesha idol in the bazaar every year? The idol that cost two

lakh rupees to make and another thirty thousand to immerse. But, no; how could she have known that? It was perhaps a sign from his Lord, thought Kalyan Babu. A sign that he must take this woman under his wing, protect her and her dreams, which were not for herself but for her daughters. Looking at her, he said gravely, "Yes, it's important to earn, sister; important to be secure in life. Not just for yourself, but for others." And Shraddha had felt a load lift from her neck and shoulders. She felt a wave of calm wash over her heart.

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And now: a strange transformation came over the mochi's wife. She wore her hair loose and her sari below her waist, so that the folds of her navel showed. And she applied kohl around her eyes, so that they appeared deeper and darker than they actually were. And she fluttered her eyelashes and laughed aloud when speaking to her male friends at the bazaar. And when she walked through the bazaar, every night, after dinner, clutching her handbag, her shoulders erect, she looked like a woman who knew her value, her worth, a woman who knew where she was headed.

By the time she returned, the mochi would be asleep, snoring out his hangover in the quadrangle. Entering the enclosure, she would slip off her bangles and *payals*, trying not to make a sound, trying not to disturb her girls. But, invariably, they would wake up and come to her.

Half-asleep and yawning, they would sit beside her and, with their small little hands, would rub at her shins, her calves, her ankles, her feet, all so tired from dancing. And Shraddha would feel the fatigue leave her, and something in her heart would snap, and a warm delicious feeling of sleep, of contentment, would overcome her, making her smile, making her feel like she was the most loved woman in the world. Smiling to herself in the dark, she would listen to the sound of rats scraping, sniffing for breadcrumbs, for carrots and cucumbers, and she would think: how much better life was once you had overcome your ego. Once you had learnt to let go your pride.



Murzban F. Shroff is a Mumbai-based writer. He has published his fiction with over 70 literary journals in the U.S. and U.K. He is the recipient of the John Gilgun Fiction Award and has garnered six Pushcart Prize nominations. Shroff's short story collection, *Breathless in Bombay*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the best debut category from Europe and South Asia and rated by the *Guardian* as among the ten best Mumbai books. His novel, *Waiting for Jonathan Koshy*, was a finalist for the Horatio Nelson Fiction Prize. It was published in India and China and will be released in the U.S. in 2022. His recent book, *Third Eye Rising*, won high praise from numerous American writers and was featured on *Esquire*'s list of Best Books of 2021.

# IDENTITY (POLITICS): ANTHOLOGIZING INDIAN LITERATURE IN THE DIASPORA

Meena Alexander, editor. *Name Me a Word: Indian Writers Reflect on Writing*. Yale University Press, 2019, pp. 440.

SRI CRAVEN

## Introduction

*Name Me a Word: Indian Writers Reflect on Writing* (*NMAW*), edited by the late Indian American writer Meena Alexander, enters the copious terrain of anthologies of Indian literature published for a transnational readership. Scholars investigating anthologies' relationship to identity in the Anglophone West draw attention to the format's power in canon building, which reflects dominant culture (Benedict 2015; Lockard and Sandell 2008). Alexander remarks that within Indian literature, as represented heavily by the canon in *NMAW*, "readers face the knotty issues of embodiment and self-creation" (xiv), and that there are "recurring themes of identity and embodiment" (xv).

Notwithstanding Neelam Srivastava's (2010) contention that reading anthologies of Indian literature in terms of identity excludes considerations of literary form and history; identity is deeply important to *NMAW* due to Alexander's editorship. For, editors shape anthologies, as Joe Lockard and Jillian Sandell argue in their call to investigate the "politics of editorial choices" (249). Editors also define reading approaches, as Barbara Benedict observes in her study of the history of the anthology in shaping the idea of British literature (2003). When the editor is both a literary writer and a literary critic, and also one located in the diaspora, a reading of identity and identity politics can productively engage understandings of the relationship among the literary, the social, and the political. This essay is a meditation upon how Alexander's personal history as writer and scholar shapes the story that *NMAW* tells about identity, and through that prevents a simplistic narrative about anthologies as vehicles for multiple positions on identity. It argues instead that, as *NMAW* shows, identity (politics) is a highly selective process for meaning-making among individuals, one that can be highly circumscribed or fall

away despite broader political awareness. And, importantly, as Alexander notes about *NMAW*'s various writings, identity as personal meaning-making also represents "the rich humanism of a cosmopolitan existence deeply rooted in place but reaching out to the larger world" (xviii). What this humanism might reveal may be less apolitical or skewed than current critiques might concede. Rendering poignancy to a critical reading of Alexander's role as editor is that in *NMAW*, for one last time, she frames a perspective on identity that adds a valuable dimension within conversations about biopower and biopolitics. For, *NMAW*, alongside *Atmospheric Embroidery: Poems*, represents Alexander's swansong as she passed away months after having completed these literary endeavors.

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## Alexander's Editorship and Identity in *NMAW*

*NMAW* is about writers reflecting on writing. The anthology is marketed on Yale's website as "a thoughtful gift for poetry and fiction enthusiasts and fans of Indian literature, as well as an ideal volume for academics introducing writers from the subcontinent,"[1] making it both an artefact for the general public and for faculty (presumably globally) teaching courses on South Asian literature. The press release details that "Alexander brings together leading twentieth- and twenty-first-century voices from India and the diaspora," and that "[c]ontributors include English-language luminaries such as R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy, and powerful writers in Indian languages such as U.R. Ananthamurthy, Mahasweta Devi, and Lalithambika Antherjanam." The release signals the slant of the anthology as representing writers from English and *bhasha* (indigenous/regional languages) canons. Alexander's acknowledgements page clarifies that the entries are reprints of previously published works. Living writers either granted permission for previous works to be used, or selected and sent in works that respond to the theme. Alexander states that the writings bear both "overt and elliptical" (401) relationships to the theme. She accepts the selectivity of *NMAW*, saying that there are writers "whose works we could not use" (401), although she does not clarify why. We might reason (alongside anthology critics in general) that no editorial selection process can be fully inclusive, of course, especially in the contexts of 'national' literature, historical breadth, or linguistic diversity. What is significant is that over the years Alexander has invoked several of the writers selected

[1] http://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300222586/name-me-word

as literary influences in her own writing (Dalal 2015, 29; Basu and Leenerts 2009, 10; Maxey, "Interview" 2006, 29). This speaks to editors' personal interests as an important criterion in anthology selections, especially when that editor is embedded in the literary tradition the anthology is based on. The publisher's language indicates the market logic associated with ethnic and/or regional literatures crafted for a transnational and academic consumer base. But, as the above example shows, a consideration of editorial history produces a different interpretation of an anthology's focus on identity.

No scholarly account of Alexander misses mentioning writing as the space to process deeply personal experiences of embodiment and identity. On the one hand, Alexander affirms the centrality of the body, drawing on her own experiences of writing from the position of an ethnic minority woman in the United States (Han 2013) and as a postcolonial immigrant in the West (Dalal 2015; Basu and Leenerts 2009). In fact, Alexander repeatedly invokes the body as the site of historical and social violence in her memoir, novels, and poetry (Ali 2009; Basu 2009; Mehta 2009). In her essays, interviews, and public lectures, history moves through the body as Alexander experiences many migrations since childhood, and writing becomes the space to process the sometimes conflicting nature of those experiences for a sense of self (Rustomji, 2009; Gioseffi 2006; Maxey, "Interview" 2006; Shankar 2001; Alexander, 1996). On the other hand, Alexander's position on embodiment's relationship to identity reflects identity's limitations for a writer. When asked if she considers herself a "feminist writer," Alexander responds: "No, I don't want to think of myself as a feminist writer because I think that is very narrowing. I think I write what comes to me, but in my life I'm a feminist," asserting that the label "is very limiting because it is almost as if certain things have come to consciousness and you are required to conform to [them],

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which I think is not good" (Shankar 2008, 47).

The distinction between accepting, even foregrounding, embodiment versus working from an identity political position embedded in a troubling and potentially damaging notion of difference is one that women writers have grappled with in literary histories globally. *NMAW*'s approach to gender politics, which Alexander names as one of the key identity themes, certainly forestalls what Sidonie Smith terms, in discussing Virginia Woolf's autobiographical writing, "the slide from subjectivity to identity" (270). It is relevant to note here that Alexander considers Woolf a literary influence in writing about the experience of womanhood and femininity away from the constricting terms of identity (Basu 2008, 44-47). In *NMAW*, the Malayalam language writers Antherjenam, in "Childhood Memories" (74-81), and Kamala Das, in "From *My Story*" (210-215)—both recuperated as "feminist" voices by Indian feminist literary criticism—suggest in no uncertain terms the vagaries of family and class circumstances that facilitate their writing as women. Neither names feminism as the end-point of such reflection, or female identity as the *raison d'etre* of writing, at least not in these reprinted pieces, favoring instead a mindset that politicizes culture based on historical exigence. A key writer in Alexander's native language and home state of Kerala, Das has been a literary influence for Alexander (Rustomji 1998, 20; Shankar 2008, 45). Similar to these two canonical writers, the anticolonial-era Urdu writer Quarratulain Hyder articulates "Urdu" (not Islamic/Muslim) culture as gender egalitarian in the interview "Beyond the Stars" (153-162), arguing that womanhood has never been a deterrent to writing in Urdu literature (154). Collectively, these writers reflect closely Alexander's own position that writing about embodiment precludes feminist identification and is, in fact, most usefully thought about as a way of processing "the all too turbulent flow" of world history (Giossefi 47).

Yet, Alexander is not unequivocal about disavowing gender identity politics, which stems from her life situation as a racialized woman in the United States. This is a theme she revisits in various genres in *The Shock of Arrival* (1996) and in her memoir *Fault Lines* (1993). Scholars have read Alexander's processing of this racialized female body under the rubrics of woman of color (Han 2014) and diasporic and immigrant (Valladares 2019; Shankar 2001), foregrounding the identity political orientations in Alexander's writing. In *NMAW*, gender when sutured to caste undergoes such a process of identity politicization as exemplified by the inclusion of Tamil Dalit activist, poet, and filmmaker S. Sukirtharani (b. 1973). In Sukirtharani's "Untitled Poem—2," there is no dithering on the subject of identity politics as the poem ends with the unnamed narrator saying, "Yes, I am a pariah girl" (400). In two further poems, Sukirtharani centralizes the Dalit female body that is disavowed in a casteist culture framed by fear of female sexuality. "Night Beast" (397-398) evokes and celebrates the pleasures of female masturbation brought on by erotic literature, while "Gigantic Trees" (398-399) positions the Dalit woman's body as equally the source of desire and history. Alexander has herself used the concept of the "female pariah" in her famous poem, "The Art of Pariahs." In this poem, the South Asian and African historical figures of Draupadi, Rani of Jhansi, and the Queen of Nubia are imagined as

re-shaping Manhattan lovingly away from racist xenophobia by "conjur[ing] honey scraped from stones" (*The Shock* 8-9). Both Sukirtharani and Alexander, living in different places, thus politicize caste/racial disenfranchisement through female identity.

Of the forty-eight writers in *NMAW*, only three deal directly with the theme of caste politics, with Sukirtharani being one of them. The two male writers who do so speak more to the relationship between art and caste politics. Marathi Dalit writer Namdeo Dhansal (1949-2014) does this in two poems in which the argot and the female body become symbols to interrogate a social order based on active denigration. Alexander mentions that Dhansal's "surreal imagery" and "coruscating language" (314) is grounded in the communities of sex workers and the slum-dwellers among whom he lived in Bombay, thus exemplifying a deep political involvement that raises the issue of caste and poverty through his art. Malayalam Dalit poet and novelist Raghavan Atholi (b. 1957) notes in an interview that caste in his writings is the basis for identifying and correcting literary lapses, and for reframing literary tradition. Alexander says of Atholi's "aesthetics of blackness" that it "taps into the pain of being an Outcaste, as well as to its profoundly universalist appeal" (350). Atholi mirrors this in his own response that "[b]lackness is a representational term that unifies oppressed people the world over" (356). The limited inclusion of Dalit writers nevertheless foregrounds the breadth of literary representations that politicize caste in Indian literature by spanning different *bhasha*. The attention to caste identity in literature also offers possibilities for comparative readings with race and ethnicity, for all three are, in an important sense, categorizations of the body that have colonialism as a significant architect.

Not quite embodiment in the strictly corporal sense, but as an ideology attached to bodies and the body politic, language serves as the other identity issue in *NMAW*. Alexander's selections draw strongly on the debate about English as the language of Indian literature. In the introduction, Alexander notes that *bhasha* and English writers have experienced "in the past… a certain amount of tension" stemming from the perception that *bhasha* is grounded in a "superior connection to subcontinental soil and region," and the latter to "world audiences" (xviii). Alexander exhorts that instead of this fractiousness, it is better to consider that languages play an important role in capturing the "hybrid nature" and "syncretic culture" that is India, and that diaspora writers are "part of an ever evolving Indian literature" (xviii). The selections attend to this in several ways. Essays by prominent writers such as R.K. Narayan (1906-2001), R. Raja Rao (1908-2006), Keki N. Daruwalla (b. 1937), Adil Jussawala (b. 1940), and Salman Rushdie (b. 1947) argue that Indian English is grounded in, and, therefore, entirely capable of capturing Indian history and culture.

Illustrating the issue of Indian English satirically are two poems by two different women writers who use bilingualism as a creative and critical response to the simplistic mapping of language onto culture. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Malayalam/English writer Das's poem "An Introduction" announces that the language she speaks "is half English, half/Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest/It is as human as I am human, don't/You see? (214-215). She exhorts "critics, friends,

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visiting cousins" to "leave/Me alone," effectively arguing for Indian English as its own idiom. Meanwhile, at century's end, English writer Arundhati Subramaniam (b. 1967) uses Tamil words in her poem "To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find Me Identifiably Indian." She issues this knowledge of her mother tongue to denounce the Welsh critic of the title, whose rhetoric symbolizes colonialism's power to name and judge, which she mocks thus: "Arbiter of identity/remake me as you will/remake me as you will" and "Teach me how to belong/the way you do/on every page of world history" (394). Sarojini Naidu's (1879-1949) letters to her British contemporaries take this debate in a different direction by complicating the distinction between Indian and British English literature. Naidu's letters to fellow poets and critics mimic the familiar voices of Charlotte Brontë or Jane Austen's heroines who are self-deprecating even as they acknowledge their writing talents. Naidu's inclusion not only signals her status as a preeminent poet of India—whom India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru anointed "the nightingale of India"—but also shows that it can be tricky business to distinguish between colonized and colonial in the heydays of colonialism. In different genres, Indian writers across a century (like their postcolonial counterparts globally) remind us that language is a marker of the historical conditions of its placement, and always eventually changes in the culture it lands in.

Writers who grow up in India with *bhasha* as primary linguistic experiences process bi- or multi-lingualism differently, unlike those born and raised in diasporic communities in the Anglophone west. Kannada writers Ananthamurthy (1932-2014) and Girish Karnad (1938-2019) turn to *bhasha* as a means to capture the literary histories and traditions of the region and language community. Others, like Malayalam/English poet Das's previously mentioned poem, and the English/Marathi poet Arun Kolatkar's (1931-2004) "From Making Love to a Poem" (195-202), position multilingual identity as a kind of artistic schizophrenia that re-shapes existing poetic traditions in these languages. Some *bhasha* writ-

ings simply reflect the diversity of the Indian literary terrain, and by their very presence challenge Western academic readers of postcolonial and South Asian literatures to think beyond English. And, in some others, language becomes a means to capture loss and longing for home, as in the case of intra- and international migrants. Poems such as Agha Shahid Ali's (1949-2001) "In Search of Evanescence" (308-313), Alexander's (1951-2019) "Illiterate Heart" (320-324), and Jeet Thayil's (b. 1959) "Malayalam's Ghazal" (359-360) offer clear examples in this regard. Essays, too, are included as part of writings that engage bilingualism, thus offering a blend of praxis-based criticism and creative approaches to the theme. Poetry and essays are, of course, Alexander's chosen forms in her career. Thus, the absence of plays and novels that engage language and identity signals again the need to investigate rather than assume form's relationship to identity issues raised by/in literature.

A historical event like Partition might be seen as bringing into relief the inextricable bonds of gender, ethnicity, language, and religion. Yet, in the three major writers selected from this era—Sadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955), Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), and Amrita Pritam (1919-2005)—only Pritam's work addresses Partition directly. The violence of embodiment is not a direct object of any of the writings, even if Alexander names Partition as one of the major identity concerns of Indian writing (xxi-xxii). The excerpt from Pritam's memoir, *Revenue Stamp* (117-121), and her poem, "For Waris Shah" (115-116), both elicit the loss of literary community and the pain of calling friends "enemy" based on the arbitrariness of national borders. Chughtai's reflection essay, "We People," concludes with a commentary on the consequences of Partition for poets and novelists who found themselves straightjacketed into writing for a flourishing film industry as the publishing industry failed (111-112). Both writers undoubtedly situate literature as a space through which historical events are processed, an idea that Alexander is devoted to (Dalal 2015, 5; Han 2013, 292; Joseph 2010, 114; Maxey, "Interview" 2006, 33-5; Ali and Rasiah 2000, 76). That these writings do not provide any commentary on religion—perhaps Partition's central theme—might speak once again to editorial biography. Among scholars, only Lavina Dhingra Shankar notes—albeit in passing—that Alexander ignores her own status as a Syrian Christian religious minority in laying claim to "Indian" identity from the diaspora (2001, 289). Significantly, in an interview, Alexander is forthright about her lack of awareness of religion as a flashpoint in her novel *Nampally Road* (1991) in which the central event is a Muslim woman's sexual assault in prison (Rustomji-Kerns 1998, 25). The setting aside of identity issues that are all-consuming in the Indian context—including, in the current moment, that of queer and trans politics—underscores that the diasporic perspective differs significantly from a nation-based one in the production of anthologies of "national" literatures.

## Conclusion: Literary Cosmopolitanism and Identity

Not only do the writings in *NMAW* signal very different positions on embodiment and identity, they also indicate evacuations of both at times. For example, in Rabindranath Tagore, Narayan, and Rao's autobiographical reflections of their literary beginnings in the social and cultural milieu of Brahmin fami-

lies, there are no reflections of the role of caste, class, and gender privilege that made for literary success. Karnad and Ananthamurthy, who name poor women and peasants as the source of literary inspiration, do not acknowledge the cannibalizing power of writers feted for capturing oral traditions in writing, while the poor who foster and keep alive such traditions often do not have access to literacy and the written word. None of the diaspora writers reflect upon "language skills, occupation, education, and social status" that enable a transnational literary life, as Stephanie Han notes about Alexander (284-285).

How might we then read the anthology's premise without excoriating its unevenness in representing identity? An answer might emerge in Alexander's statement in the introduction that the "cosmopolitan existence" of Indian writers provides a "stay on the one hand against the violence of colonialism and on the other against a stringent nationalism with its vision of cultural purity" (xviii). How might cosmopolitanism help understand identity (politics)? In *NMAW*, there are writers who exemplify humanism's utopianism as Tagore does at incipit in the poem "Sickbed 21": "I am a poet—I will not take sides" (6). And, there are those who cannot but avow identity as Sukirtharani does at the end, "Yes, I am a pariah girl" (400). These two poets who bookend *NMAW* draw a picture of identity politics as located in the tight nexus of historical contingency and social location, each of which can preclude the other. Bridging the gap between humanists who disavow identity politics and identity political groups who disavow humanism is the cosmopolitanism that Alexander attributes to Indian writers, but, in effect, is framed by the anthology. For, after all, it is Alexander who has chosen the writers she names as enacting cosmopolitanism. In this sense, can literary cosmopolitanism serve as a "a tool for radical social imagination and radical projections of cosmopolitan democracy" as Zlatko Skrbis, Gavin Kendall, and Ian Woodward (2004, 115), theorizing cosmopolitanism, call for?

Collected within the pages and the space of an anthology, writers embody cosmopolitanism's meaning as a disposition that is about openness to others with whom we live in the world, while being grounded within specific materialities determined by/within contexts of nation, nationalism, and national culture that Skirbis, Kendall, and Woodward argue should lead understandings of cosmopolitanism. In the Indian national/cultural context, these materialities can include caste, gender, religion, and sexuality. Thus, Dalit and upper caste, women and men, *bhasha* and English writers all illustrate cosmopolitanism, even as their specific material conditions shape their views on identity. Viewed this way, identity and identity politics can be seen as but one means among many for subject consciousness and political strategy. Literature, of course, brings differing viewpoints and experiences together, constituting a cosmopolitan space of its own. And, a cosmopolitan space—which is by definition a space of difference—shows that identity concerns are never absent even when unacknowledged. This is likely *NMAW*'s major contribution to the ongoing critical conversations about Indian literature and identity (politics).

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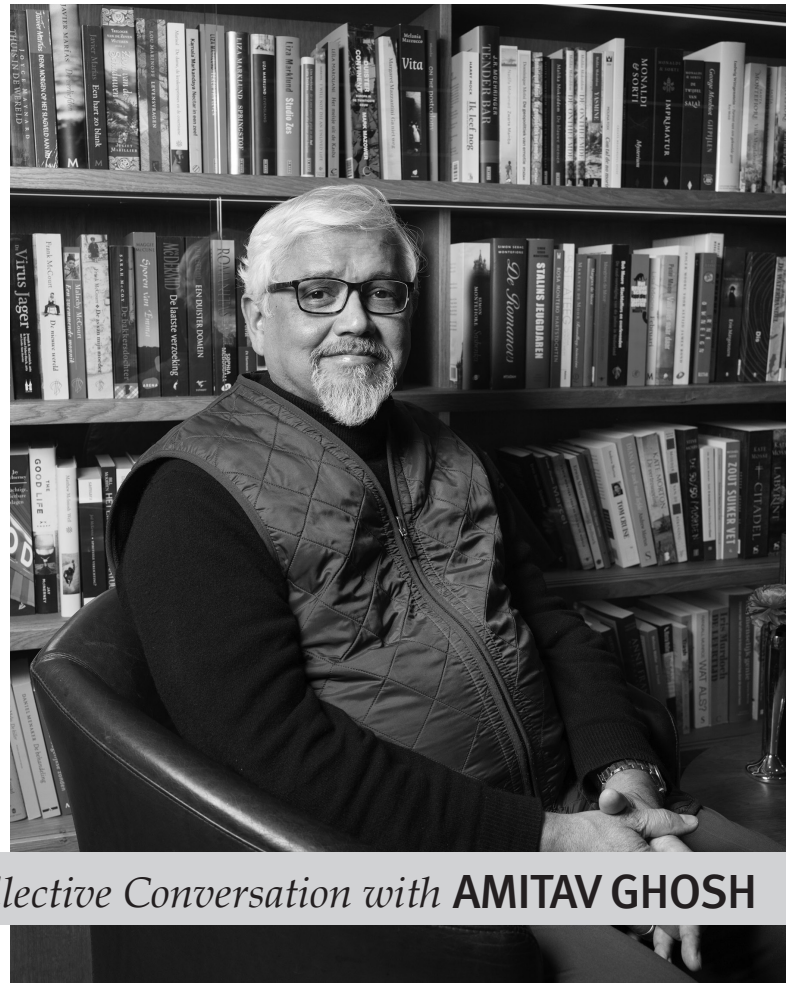
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# NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

MICHAEL WUTZ




*A Collective Conversation with* **AMITAV GHOSH**

*Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. He is the author of numerous books, including* The Circle of Reason, In An Antique Land, Dancing in Cambodia, The Calcutta Chromosome, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide, *and the Ibis Trilogy, consisting of* Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, *and* Flood of Fire.

The Circle of Reason *was awarded France's Prix Médicis, and* The Shadow Lines *was honored with two Indian prizes, the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Ananda Puraskar.* The Calcutta Chromosome *won the 1997 Arthur C. Clarke award, while* The Glass Palace *was recognized with the International e-Book Award at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2001. In January 2005,* The Hungry Tide *was awarded the Crossword Book Prize.* Sea of Poppies *was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008 and was awarded the Crossword Book Prize and the India Plaza Golden Quill Award.*

*In 2007, Mr. Ghosh was awarded the Padma Shri, one of India's highest honors, by the president of India. In 2010, he was a joint winner, along with Margaret Atwood, of a Dan David prize, and in 2011 he was awarded the Grand Prix of the Blue Metropolis festival in Montreal. In 2018, he was the first English-language writer to receive the Jnanpith Award, India's highest literary honor. In 2019,* Foreign Policy *magazine named him one of the most important global thinkers of the preceding decade.*

*Mr. Ghosh's recent work includes* The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable *(2016), which explores the challenge of literary narrative to come to terms with climate change. His latest novel,* Gun Island *(2019), combines the global migrant crisis with Indian myth and folklore, as does his first-ever book in verse,* Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban *(2021). His latest non-fiction book,* The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis *(2021), further interrogates these concerns by taking a long view at Euro-American imperialism and its repercussions into the present.*

*Mr. Ghosh was a Hurst Artist in Residence in Weber State's Telitha E. Lindquist College of Arts & Humanities in fall 2021, where he spoke with students, faculty, and staff, and read from his recent work. The following text is an edited compilation of these conversations. We want to thank the Hurst endowment for making Mr. Ghosh's residency possible, and thank Amitav for his generosity of time and spirit.*

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*For quite some time, the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has spoken of a "code red for humanity," and recently the International Energy Agency (IEA) released its "World Energy Outlook" report of 2021. The report states that, in the wake of the economic recovery during the pandemic, the world has seen "a large rebound in coal and oil use." And largely for the same reason, it is also seeing "the second-largest annual increase in CO2 emissions in history." This all with a view toward the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow, Scotland, which begins next week. Now, we, of course, know from leaked documents that some of the participating countries that are tied to the fossil fuel economy – such as Saudi Arabia or Norway – are already putting pressure on the writers of the draft report to alter it with a view toward diminishing the impact of fossil fuel on the globe. What are your hopes, what are your fears, for the upcoming climate summit?*

**Well, as you say, things are not looking good. Actually, if you look at the whole range of issues that are out there, I think that things are much, much worse than we are told often.**

Especially scientists, they've developed this ethic of trying not to panic people, and as a result what they constantly do is produce undervaluation of the risks. The IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] has notoriously done that. Now, all around us events are outstripping the predictions. One of the iconic headlines of this era is "Scientists Are Amazed. Scientists Are Surprised." They too are constantly surprised at the speed with which things are unraveling. So, in the face of that, yes, we could of course hope for substantive action, but right now it's difficult to think that any substantive action will come out of COP26. It's very, very unlikely because—apart from Saudi Arabia, and Japan for that matter, working together to water down the language of the draft-declaration—there are so many other factors that are holding back these negotiations. Just yesterday, the president of Brazil said that if the world wants him not to cut down the Amazon rainforest, the world will have to pay Brazil compensation. And the Amazon rainforest is a huge carbon sink, and it is one of the barriers that stands between us and utter catastrophe.

*Fareed Zakaria recently talked about how the only solution right now is to look at a transition, and that with the overabundance of fossil fuels, until we have green energy, that's what we have to rely on. Even here in Utah, it seems that until something is our problem, it's not our problem. What are your thoughts on that?*

You know, we had an opportunity to move very rapidly toward renewable energies starting in the mid-'90s. Imagine if you had renewables in place. Imagine if your whole house was solarized with big battery storage systems. You wouldn't be tied to the grid. You wouldn't need to have energy delivered to your home. You would be generating your own energy if you had a windmill on top of your house, and those windmills do exist. You could so cheaply generate your own energy.

We think of fossil fuels as producing a thing called energy, kilowatts, and we think that a similar quantity of kilowatts can be generated by a solar panel, so that the two are the same thing. But they are not the same thing, because fossil fuels interact with structures of human power in ways that are completely particular to them. For example, the standard narrative of the industrial revolution is that it was powered by fossil energy. But this is completely wrong. From the late 18th century until the mid-19th century, most industries in Britain and the United States were powered by wind energy and by water energy. If you go around the great textile production centers of Britain and in the United States, say, in Massachusetts, you'd see they are always built next to a river because they have water wheels, and the technology works just as well as steam technology. The energy historian Andreas Malm has actually shown that the reason fossil fuels won out over wind and water energy is not because they were more efficient; they were not. It was because the industrialists who were setting up these industries wanted to be able to control their workers more. That is something fossil fuels allow you to do because you can move fossil fuels. Like coal. It's not so easy to move wind or water energy to wherever you want. So, fossil fuels became dominant because they interact with structures of power in a certain way. They have an uncanny ability to reinforce the power of the elites, the power of the ruling classes, and the powers of the rulers that be, as it were. So, when we say that we had this opportunity in the '90s, why was that opportunity not taken? It's because these immensely powerful corporations and the people who profit from them intervened very directly to prevent such a turnover. The entire structure of power today has become so closely enmeshed with fossil fuels that it is very hard to see how you make that transition.

*As someone who doesn't know much about climate change, I wonder what you mean*

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*when you say, "the future is bleak"? And if we do start to change things, would the Earth get better, or would it stay the same?*

**The choice right now is between very bad and catastrophic. That's where we are. The trouble with greenhouse gases is that they can't be fixed immediately. Once they are in the atmosphere, they are there for a very long time. Thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of years. The impacts we are seeing today are being caused by gases that were put into the atmosphere decades ago. So, some impacts are locked in and there's almost nothing we can do. What we can do is switch to a path that is not catastrophic, but merely very bad. I am sure you can see how these impacts are unfolding around you. There is some sort of weird belief in America that rich countries will be fine, only the poor will be affected. It is true to some degree. Certainly in the U.S., the ones most affected will be poor people and people of color. That is already the case. But at the same time, look at what has happened in California with wildfires. California is one of the richest parts of the world, but the disasters there also affect ultra-wealthy people. The idea that there is a safe place is completely wrong.**

*When we talk about the consequences of climate change, what are these major consequences? Is it air quality? What should we be most worried about?*

**We like to speak of climate change as a sort of box, like a siloed thing. But the sorts of things that we are seeing now are not just the result of climate change. Climate change is one aspect of a much broader planetary crisis. This planetary crisis is the result of multiple sorts of crises. Ultimately, they are all just the result of the incredible acceleration that we have seen over the last 30 years—in production, consumption, modes of communication, in the movement of people. That is what is driving all these crises, including this pandemic. The human incursions into forests, increasing proximity to other species, increasing destruction of habitat, all of that is part of this picture.**

*I think we shouldn't live in denial and accept that the consequences of our actions is to prevent them from becoming a reality in our life out of fear. Would you say one of the intentions you had for* Gun Island *was to make leaders more aware of the increasing dangers and complexities of climate change, especially in regard to migration and climate justice?*

**I very much doubt that any leader reads novels, certainly not my novels (laughs). I'm sorry to say this, but if you look around the world, who are the leaders? The people who go into politics, anywhere now, are in many ways borderline sociopaths. I think we all know that. No ordinary, normal person would subject themselves to what politicians have to go through. Because of that, the leadership class is now completely self-interested. They are really looking to their own wallets most of the time. What interest do they have in trying to mitigate climate change? Some may make performative statements, but to my mind the only true leader in the world right now is Pope Francis. His Encyclical *Laudato si'***

is the best statement on climate change that anyone has written. In ***The Great Derangement***, I compare his Encyclical with the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement is a lot of technocrats addressing each other in really arcane language which no ordinary person can even begin to understand without a great effort, whereas the Pope is really trying to communicate the seriousness of the crisis through very simple, clear language which anyone can understand. He has a whole council of advisors, so the text is very well-informed in a scientific sense. And at the same time, it's a very clear statement of where we've gone wrong, what has gone wrong.

*You mentioned pedagogy a moment ago and I'm very curious to hear your thoughts. This is a specific version of the general culture question that you address in* The Great Derangement. *I wonder why we have such a hard time getting it – understanding the scale and the magnitude and the reality of our situation. How might universities be able to help?*

That's a very good question, but since I am not a teacher I don't really deal with that problem on a day to day basis. I should think that by now there is a lot of writing that can be taught to alert students to the nature of the challenge. I do think universities have a duty to play a part. One thing I've seen happening across the world now are these concentrations called Environmental Humanities. They are really quite remarkable because they are transdisciplinary; they bring together people from many different disciplines, the sciences, the humanities, and so on. The surprising thing is that they are the among the most in-demand courses, at least where people are paying attention.

*We've talked a lot about climate and the younger generation. Where do we separate the line from our personal carbon footprints and our community carbon footprints to the nationwide and global footprint? There's sort of this learned helplessness where big corporations output most of what is damaging our environment. How can we as individuals take steps to make changes?*

This whole idea of personal responsibility is completely created by big corporations. The whole idea of the carbon footprint actually comes from an advertising campaign that BP launched many years ago. It was a mega advertising campaign and persuaded people that the way to solve the climate crisis was through adjusting your personal lifestyle or adjusting your community's lifestyle. Those are not unimportant. If you make those adjustments, it means your mind is at least engaged with the problem. But make no mistake, these adjustments can only affect a very minor aspect of the problem. The main thing is to have widespread concerted action at a collective level. Unfortunately, that kind of collective action has really become harder and harder to achieve. So again, I would say, if you are making those lifestyle changes in an aware way, it means that at least you have taken the first step, which is to engage with this crisis. But will those steps within themselves make a dent in the problem? The answer to that is no.

*You mentioned that if we had started implementing green energy decades ago, we wouldn't be in the situation we are in today. I just want to bring up the point that these green energy technologies do have flaws, too. Wind turbines kill a lot of bird predators, batteries and solar panels use a lot of precious resources, and then you have the issue of disposal when they don't work anymore. If we started implementing these solutions decades ago, I wonder whether we might even be in a worse situation today than we are right now. How would you address these concerns?*

These are very valid concerns, and I agree with you. I don't think that renewable energy is the answer. I think, ultimately, that the problem that we are dealing with is funda-

mentally cultural. It depends upon the sort of cultural and esthetic choices that we make. You just look at this room, why are there so many lights in this room? I've been hearing about all the steps that WSU is taking to create renewable infrastructure, so the buildings will be lighter in energy use. But at the same time, every room I have been to here has been overlit in a bizarre way. It's not just true of here, it's true of every college I go to, every institutional building—they are overlit, overheated, overcooled. These are cultural choices that we make, so it is possible for you to sit here in a T-shirt. Why do we not have this room at a colder temperature? We could get dressed up in sweaters and jackets, like I used to do when I went to university in England, because they keep their rooms much colder. These are, ultimately, cultural choices, no matter how many renewables you have. So, yes, you are absolutely right.

There's a famous formula called the Jevons paradox. The Jevons paradox states that the more efficient energy becomes, the more energy use rises. The thinking behind this is, "Oh, I have a lightbulb that uses less energy. Well, then I'll just use 4 bulbs." It is absolutely wasteful energy use. If you take a plane over America, you'll see, if you look out the window at night, these vast parking lots where there's nobody, not even a car, but they are all blazing with light. Why? If you look around you and start asking those questions about how we live, about the patterns of our life, you'll see more and more instances of these things. I'm not a technocrat. I can't tell people how to change energy sources or whatever, but I do think that this is fundamentally a problem of culture, of lifestyle, and ultimately those are the issues that we will have to address. In that sense, your point is totally valid. When we talk about total energy substitution, what we are really doing is telling people that you can go on living like this as long as you have renewable energy. And that is not the case.

*How do you continue to spread your messages?*

I am not an activist. I don't have a message. Honestly, I'm just a writer who is writing books and reflecting on these issues. I'm trying to write realistically about the world we live in. Trying not to shut my eyes to the problems we see all around us.

*Let me shift gears to the beginning of your writing career. What drew you into being an author? And when did you go from saying you wanted to be a writer to knowing you were going to be one?*

Well, from my childhood onwards, I just loved to read, and I loved reading novels especially. I somehow always knew that I wanted to be a writer. I was in my late 20s when I started writing my first novel. At the time, in India, there was no such thing as a literary career, especially for a writer who is writing in English, as I was. It was a very difficult career path to pursue. There were no creative writing courses, that whole infrastructure didn't exist at all. So, my first attempt to make a life in writing was that I became a journalist.

As soon as I left college, I joined a newspaper, and it was an amazing experience. It has contributed so much to my life as a writer. But I realized, at a certain point, that if I kept on working at a newspaper, I would never be able to write a novel. There are deadlines. Especially if you're low in the hierarchy, you

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have to file a story every day, and you have, like, 45 minutes in which to type out your story. So, I realized that wasn't going to work for me and went back to university for a master's degree. Then I got a scholarship to Oxford, and my supervisor encouraged me to do a Ph.D. So, then I went back to India, in my late 20s, and I suddenly realized that here is the moment: I either now commit myself to an academic career or I start writing my novel. It's not an easy decision to make, because especially when you're at that age, all your contemporaries are getting into their careers; they have jobs, they have a family, they have a life. And there you are, struggling away with your novel. I literally did it the hard way, like starving in a hot garret. It was on top of a house. Especially in the summer, you just can't believe how hot it was. I wrote one draft and hated it, and I started again and wrote a couple of hundred pages. I sent it to a friend of mine, who had become a literary agent. He loved it and, it went on from there.

*What are your methods of building a character?*

I think the most important thing with writing a character is to give the character agency. When I read contemporary fiction, what I have noticed is a tendency to make characters into victims, people who are completely devoid of agency or who are just pushed around by fate in various ways. It's important to recognize that you can never entirely know your own characters. There's something that each character—if they're a real character in your head—holds back. Recognizing that element of indeterminacy is crucial.

One other vital element in relation to character is to describe their appearance. That's what invariably takes me the longest. I struggle with the sentences. You can't describe at great length, that doesn't help, but you've got to give your reader some clues as to how you're visualizing this character. If you're reading empathetically, you have to be able to see the person the writer is describing. At the same time, you have to give your reader the space to imagine that person in their own way. It takes a lot of sandpapering to get your sentences in place. Gabriel García Márquez once compared writing to furniture making. It's a very apt comparison because a lot of writing is really about sandpapering. It's about getting the whole contraption in place.

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*Listening to you can be disheartening, because you seem such a pro at writing. I struggle quite a bit with mine. Is there anything you struggle with most? How do you overcome it?*

Believe me, I struggle with my writing all the time (laughs). I don't think there's anyone who doesn't. I'm not a very fluent writer at all. It's always a process, dragging the stuff out of your head. But if you stick to it, and go at it diligently, you'll get somewhere. You may know that famous analogy by E. L.

Doctorow: that writing a novel is like driving a car in the dark. You can see only as far as the headlights, but you know that if you keep going you'll arrive somewhere in the end. I think a lot of it is like that. Simply because of its length, a novel requires perseverance. You have to really be reconciled to living with yourself for very long periods of time. But there's a profound and subtle pleasure in writing a beautiful passage, or a passage that satisfies you. It's a deep, deep pleasure; one literally lives for those moments.

*Would you describe yourself as a start-from-the-beginning and then right-till-the-end writer? Or do you, perhaps, like to jump around?*

The answer is the second (laughs). There's no single pattern, each book is different. I usually start somewhere in the middle and then work my way towards it. I find that the best way to start is to have a powerful scene that really engages you. And once you've written that scene, you can think of the antecedents of the scene, and then the consequences of the scene. What's even better is if you have two scenes; they could be completely different and completely arbitrary. But once you have those two scenes, the rest of the book is connecting those two scenes, and many other scenes will suggest themselves. In connecting two completely different scenes, that's where you have the plot for your novel.

*Have you ever considered or attempted experimenting with other genres? Some of your work I am familiar with seems to challenge traditional boundaries and fall into those spaces of in-between.*

I don't really believe in the validity of the notion of genres. I think it can be very misleading. But I actually won one of the world's top prizes in science fiction, the Arthur C. Clarke award, for a book called *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Not only did I win the Arthur C. Clarke award, I got to meet Sir Arthur C. Clarke and spend time with him. He was in a wheelchair at that point and living in Sri Lanka. It was such an extraordinary experience to visit him in his old bungalow. It was filled with all this futuristic gear, huge satellite dishes. He was wearing a sarong. The walls were plastered with celebrity pictures of every kind: film stars, heads of government. When I was sitting with him, he was getting calls from the Admiral of the U.S. Seventh Fleet. That was completely surreal. Arthur C. Clarke actually worked on the U.S. space program, so he played a vital role in space exploration. And then he switched to writing these amazing novels, which are still with us. While I was sitting with him, he said, suddenly, "Come, do you want to play table tennis with me?" So, I said, "Yes." Off we went in his car, including a huge entourage of people, to a club to play table tennis. He was such a crafty old man. He said to me—and I'm quite a good table tennis player—"you will play on the whole of your side of the table. I will play on half the table and that will even the odds."

*What's your revision process like? Do you revise as you go and find yourself pretty happy with what you got? Or do you perhaps just write through a draft and then go back over it?*

I don't think I've written a single sentence that hasn't gone through 30 or 40 drafts. I'm of the generation just before computers, so what I do is that my first drafts I write in pencil on blank paper, my second draft I do with a fountain pen, on ruled paper. Then finally, when I have, like, tens of thousands of words, only then do I move to a computer, and then I start editing. Just this process itself puts you through several drafts. If I try writing straight-away on a computer, I freeze up, it makes me incredibly anxious. If you're drafting on a blank piece of paper with a pencil, there is a kind of, what should I say, lightness to it. So, I would say that my process of revision is really one of moving slowly from something very indeterminate, very fluid, towards greater

and greater determinacy. When I finally move to the computer, I usually type around three pages and I'll print them out at the end of the day. And the next day, the first thing I'll do is read those pages, revise them, make edits and so on. And then I start on the new pages, so that's the slow process of revision. Then when the chapter is done, I give it two more readings. Then when I have the whole manuscript, I give it several more readings. Then, when the manuscript gets approved, yet more readings, so 30 to 40 revisions in all.

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*Repeatedly in* Gun Island*, you show in great detail some of the processes of immigration and human trafficking. Are these actual events that you've come across, or are they based off of things that you've heard?*

That's a great question. I'm an immigrant myself; my family have been immigrants for centuries. My family was originally from Bangladesh—what is now Bangladesh—but then there was a flooding catastrophe that drowned the village, so they had to migrate. In a sense, my family were sort of environmental refugees, in the mid-19th century, even before there was such a term. But I've always been interested in displacement and migration, such that every single book of mine is partly about that. So what happened is that around 2012-13, there was a huge migratory movement towards Europe, especially across the Mediterranean and across the Balkans. I think everyone who was looking at those pictures couldn't help being fascinated, because just seeing those boats going across the Mediterranean was just so horrifying, but also so compelling. I started reading about this mass migration, and I saw one thing which struck me as very strange. The media reports all said that these migrants were from Iraq, or Syria, or some other war-torn country. But when I looked at the pictures, I could see that a large number of these migrants were actually not from Iraq or Syria. They were from the Indian subcontinent, and many of them were from Bengal, which is where I'm from.

In 2016 and 2017 I went to Italy and actually visited many of the migrant camps. I interviewed hundreds of these migrants, and it was a very, very illuminating experience for me. Most of the people who write about these migrants, whether it be in the United States or in other places, especially in Europe, they don't know the languages of the migrants. When migrants talk about their experiences and about their motivations, and when they're talking in a sort of official language—whether it be English or Italian—they

have a tendency to tell a completely different story, because they are perfectly well aware of what sort of story the official system wants. The volunteers who work with them often will advise them to tell a certain kind of story, so they understand that very well. But the stories that I actually heard were very different.

Bangladesh actually has extremely good climate education, because of various NGOs and because of the government as well. The climate problem is very well understood in Bangladesh. So, when I talked to the migrants, I would often ask them, "Would you call yourself a climate refugee or an environmental refugee?" None of them would agree to that, even though, when they told me their story, I could see that they were actually climate migrants. They lost their land. They had to give up doing agriculture because harvests became increasingly erratic, because rainfall became increasingly erratic. By any standard metric, these migrants were climate-minded, but none of them would ever accept the label "climate migrant." They would also say there are many factors behind their movements, such as political conflicts, but most of all domestic conflicts. I was amazed by the number of young migrants who ran away after a family quarrel.

The migratory networks I describe in *The Gun Merchant* exist. Today they are the single largest clandestine operation in the world. They are now more lucrative than drugs. But I don't think one can actually call it "trafficking." In Bangladesh, for example, there'll be a local guy who's called the *dalal*, a go-between, and the *dalal* is almost always a highly respected figure. When kids decide to leave, the parents or the family will go to the *dalal* and talk about things and make the payment. They will sell their land or whatever to make their payments. Trafficking implies that they're sort of captured and sent off, but that's not it at all. These migrants have a lot of agency. They're going because they want to. It's important to remember that these kids are in the prime of their lives.

*The migratory networks I describe in* The Gun Merchant *exist. Today they are the single largest clandestine operation in the world. They are now more lucrative than drugs. But I don't think one can actually call it "trafficking."*

Their awareness of risk at that age is very limited. Coming across the Mediterranean in a rickety boat was not a concern they had.

But the second thing which struck me very powerfully is that they—to an even greater degree than kids here—live in a virtual world through their smartphones. The smartphone is absolutely the instrument that makes these movements possible. These migrants think that because they have their smartphone, nothing will happen to them. It's just like people taking selfies when something terrible is coming towards them, a storm or whatever, or people falling off cliffs while trying to take a selfie. The virtual technology must create some sort of blockage. These kids felt that while they're on the boat, they're insulated. They're in a virtual world. The technology has really reinforced the kind of belief that "this can't happen to me."

*Do these migrants ever go back after, say, learning their life lesson of leaving and going through these hardships? Do they stay gone?*

Most of them, when they get their papers, they go home. This is another complete misconception that Westerners have about migration, because the Western conception of migration, essentially, is formed around the settler colonies in the 19th century, when large numbers of people began to leave and move to the settler colonies—the Americas and Australia and New Zealand. And when they left, they left forever. They kept some

connections, but the whole idea was that they go to the new place and assimilate and be there forever. They merge into the communities. But this is not historically how migration has worked. If you think before the 19th century, English people were very reluctant to come to America. So, from the 17th century onwards, you have these propagandists who are publishing pamphlets to encourage English people to go to the English colonies, but they didn't have much success. It's only in the 19th century that large numbers began to leave. But our contemporary imagination of migration is formed by that 19th-century experience, whereas what most migrants today aim for is something that we might call circular migration. They want to go to a place, but don't want to leave their homes forever. Ideally, what migrants would like is to go to some country, spend three months there, earn a lot of money, then go back home and live peacefully for the next nine months with their family. And then go back again after that period is over. This is the model of migration that has emerged around the Gulf economies. In the Persian Gulf, the native-born people in the Emirates, or Qatar, are a tiny minority; the vast majority of people are from other countries. They're from India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and these people work there for a couple of years maybe and then go back home. This is one way in which wealth has been redistributed. For example, those parts of India which send large numbers of migrant workers to the Gulf are much wealthier than other parts of the country. So that has created a circular kind of migration within India. People from poorer parts of India now go to the western part, which is a huge demographic shift already.

So, this is actually the model migrants want to follow, but liberal structures of governance, modern state structures, make it impossible to move. Because the migrant, when he arrives in Italy, has to present himself as falling into certain categories of victimhood, because liberal conceptions of justice are very much tied to the idea of a victim. So, once he gets there, he has to present himself as a political refugee or something like that in order to get asylum. And once you have asylum, you can't go back to your home country. That is an absolute tragedy for them. So, the structures of governance that we now have are compounding the problem in many ways. The migrants become forced to remain in Italy, where they have terrible lives. Often there are 10 of them living in a room altogether, there's no employment even for native-born Italians. To earn a little money, they are cleaning car shields with their squeegees. Many of them are quite educated, but they're reduced to that sort of absurdity. I did not meet a single migrant who didn't express some regret for having undertaken this journey.

The reality is, when migrants take out certain kinds of jobs, the native-born population, including children of migrants, immediately move away from that sector. So, for example, no native-born American today will work in agricultural labor, picking strawberries or any of that sort of back-breaking work. It just doesn't happen. The same is true in Italy, where caregivers for the elderly are entirely migrants, migrants from Bangladesh and Africa. Native-born Italians just don't do that work. They don't do the work of agricultural labor. Today, Parmesan cheese is produced by Indian migrants. Anti-immigrant sentiments are built on the fantasy that native-born Italians will rush to do those jobs if they weren't taken by migrants. But they won't. It's an absurdity. Similarly, Brexit was fueled with this fantasy that if migrants were kept out, there would be more jobs for native-born people, but that's not the case.

*Earlier, you mentioned how contemporary technology tends to take over life. Is that why you chose to talk about mythology so much in* Gun Island*, as a kind of counterweight? Or is it, perhaps, that you have always had an interest in mythology?*

I think we haven't adequately yet confronted the profound disruption that technology has caused to accustomed forms of behavior. I'd always thought about it in relation to middle class kids growing up in your kind of circumstance. But it was only in talking to these migrants that I came to realize that communications technology has become a part of our technological unconscious. When newspapers write about migrants, they never mention technology, even though these movements are largely driven by technology. Recently, thousands of Haitian migrants were collecting on the U.S. border. What allowed them to come together in such large numbers is communications technology. It's through their cell phones that they learn where they can come and where they might be able to make a crossing, yet no one talks about the technology. I remember a migrant saying to me that if they want to stop migration, there's a very simple way to do it. Just shut down the internet. If you think about it, you are forced to realize that the internet cannot be shut down. At this point, the internet will not allow itself to be shut down. It has more agency than we do. It has actually reached a point of escape velocity; it's no longer in our control. Let's also accept that for decades now, one of the main patterns of globalization has been up-to-the-minute manufacturing. Factories in the old-fashioned sense don't exist anymore. You have thousands of different parts made in hundreds of different countries. And through the internet, all this movement is coordinated, so that these parts end up somewhere where they are finally assembled. When you have a technology that makes it possible to move so much capital and so many things, how can you expect that it will not also impact the lives of people?

*Do the climate change and weather patterns dictate when stories recur? Typhoons, for example, are a big part of* Gun Island*, and how legends kind of ebb and flow with natural occurrences. If South Asia didn't face those kinds of climate change, would these stories still ebb and flow the way that they do, simmer and die away for a while, and then all of a sudden reappear?*

That's an interesting question. I think stories everywhere have always been related in some way to environmental factors. If you look at *The Odyssey*, environmental factors are so much a part of the story. As climate change intensifies, the old kinds of stories are really breaking down. That is to say, the stories of the 19th century where nature was just a spectator, and the humans were everything. Those stories are becoming harder and harder to tell. And we mustn't forget the huge treasure trove of stories that comes to us from Native Americans. Those stories were violently suppressed in the 19th century, but are now resurfacing in the profoundest and most important way. I've been reading an advance copy of David Graeber's *The Dawn of Everything*, which is going to completely overturn our understanding of so much of history and of civilization. Because it makes the argument that what we call The Enlightenment comes from the Native American critique of Western civilization, starting from the 17th and 18th centuries. Because ideas such as freedom and equality became important in Europe after Native American thinkers presented critiques of what they saw amongst the settlers around them.

*Moving back in time from* Gun Island *to its companion volume, of sorts, what were your major sources of inspiration for writing* The Hungry Tide*?*

Well, it's kind of a long story because *The Hungry Tide* is a novel set in the Sundarban. It's the world's largest mangrove forest stretching across two countries, India and Bangladesh. It's formed by the meeting of two very big rivers, the Ganges and Brahmaputra; it's a vast delta. And the southern, coastal

part of the delta is formed by a mangrove forest. This forest is unique in many ways, simply because it's just so vast. The other is that it has a huge population of Bengal tigers, and these tigers hunt humans. Usually tigers don't do that, but this is one part of the world where tigers have hunted humans for a long time. And the number of humans killed by tigers is not negligible. In the late 19th century, tens of thousands of people were killed by tigers. Now, because the tiger population is smaller and because of human encroachment on the forest, it's not at that scale, but still, hundreds of people are killed by tigers every year. I also happen to have a long connection with this landscape because one of my uncles worked as a school teacher in one of the small villages, and so we used to go and visit him. I guess I was always fascinated by this ecology, by this kind of strange, really mysterious landscape.

*Could you enlighten us on the story of Bon Bibi, who is so central to* The Hungry Tide *and some of your other work as well.*

Well, the really remarkable thing about the ritual complex of Bon Bibi is that many of the villagers in the Sundarban think of themselves as Hindus, yet they perform this ritual in honor of a woman who is Muslim, and they perform it with invocations in Arabic, essentially. So, despite all of the divisions and differences, the traditions of various groups actually merge in some ways in the folk traditions. I think that's a really wonderful thing. This syncretism goes very deep within Bengali culture. What's important about the legend is that it is about ecological balance. There are very few such stories, especially within the English tradition. My latest project, which came out in India a few months ago, is a collaborative adaptation of the Bon Bibi legend entitled ***Jungle Nama***.

*You have been known to reject the phrase "postcolonial," stating that you prefer to focus on the individual features of each location. My question: In terms of the Marichjhapi Massacre in* The Hungry Tide*, is it possible to discuss the displacement of the refugees without discussing postcolonial effects the displacement had on the community and environment?*

The reason why I feel somewhat uneasy with this term "postcolonial" is because I don't really know what it means. I think it means different things to different people. If you feel that one can't think of the massacre without postcoloniality, that's fine with me. If that's your understanding of postcolonial, that's fine. Who am I to contest it? In my mind, I'm not writing about something that is post-anything. I'm writing about contemporaneity.

*In the Author Statement of* The Hungry Tide *you state that there is only one scholarly source documenting the Marichjhapi Massacre. How did you yourself learn about the Marichjhapi Massacre and discover this source?*

I worked with a lot of the scholars who had been working in this region. I guess they led me to it. I also looked up archives in libraries and so on. There was very little published on it, but after my book came out, suddenly there was a burst of research (laughs). People suddenly remembered and woke up. So, in that way, writing a book reminds people of things, it serves the function of memorializing things.

*The Massacre was justified by the government at the time due to environmental reasoning – citing Marichjhapi as an unlawful intrusion on a state forest reserve and tiger preserve property. As an environmentalist, what are your feelings on the government prioritizing conservation over human habitation/human rights? Does the interdependence between humans and nonhuman nature in the novel offer some hope?*

*The reason why I feel somewhat uneasy with this term "post-colonial" is because I don't really know what it means. I think it means different things to different people. If you feel that one can't think of the massacre without postcoloniality, that's fine with me. If that's your understanding of postcolonial, that's fine. Who am I to contest it? In my mind, I'm not writing about something that is post-anything. I'm writing about contemporaneity.*

You know, there are many kinds of environmentalism. A certain kind of environmentalism has become dominant in the world simply because it is backed by very powerful nations—by the United States and by several countries in Europe. This model of environmentalism goes back to the mid-19th century, the setting up of national forests and so on. The idea behind that kind of environmentalism is that nature has to be preserved in pristine ways. What people tend to overlook is that there is no pristine forest anywhere in the world. Every forest emerges out of interactions with human beings. For example, it's now thought that up to 10 million people lived in the Amazon. The Amazon is not really a pristine wilderness. It's more like a garden because the indigenous peoples knew what to plant and what to exclude and how to interact with the forest. And the forest would never have taken that shape if it were not for these interactions. So, the response of the Indian government after the 1950s was to adopt the Western model of environmentalism, because it was pushed very hard by the small group of billionaires who funded the World Wildlife Fund. This model of environmentalism led to terrible kinds of events. Like literally ethnic cleansing.

In Tanzania, the Masai had been living in the Ngorongoro Crater forever in interaction with many different kinds of species there. But after the World Wildlife Fund intervened, the Masai were shoved out; they were shunted out of the Crater, and who came in? Basically, the tourism industry and middle-class urbanites. So, look at what it is, it's a giant land-grab. And to make excuses for this land-grab, they say, "Oh, you know, native peoples, they don't know about the environment and ecology." Actually, nobody knows more about the environment and ecology than the native people. It was in the same way that the government of West Bengal at the time created a background for this massacre.

*Were there any parts of* The Hungry Tide *that changed dramatically from the first draft to the final publication? Have you published a novel and wanted to go back and change things, or include new themes?*

Between the first draft and the last, I think almost everything changed (laughs). That's just how it is when you write a book, you revise, and revise, and revise. This one was also revised many times. Do I ever feel like going back and changing anything in my other books? No, I don't at all, not at all. I very rarely re-read my books. Because when you are writing a book you are kind of inside a bubble. In the bubble of that book, you have to find a particular voice and tone and pitch for that book. That pitch exists only within that bubble. Once you step outside of that bubble, you're inside some other bubble. So, if you go back to that previous bubble, you will want to re-write the whole book (laughs).

*The character Moyna says, "It doesn't matter how many languages you know, you're not a woman and you don't know him.*

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*You won't understand." Could you speak to the power of acknowledging your lack of positionality as a male author in this quote, while still writing from the perspective of female characters and highlighting their cultural struggles?*

**You know, the highest endeavor of fiction is to put yourself in other people's shoes. To try to empathetically understand their circumstances. Yet you know you will never entirely succeed, something will always elude you. Even with the characters who are exactly like yourself, who share all of the demographic characteristics that you might have, there's always something elusive. You must accept that you won't be able to completely render a woman's perspective, or in my case, that of a fisherman of Bengal. He may be male, my age, but I'm not a fisherman, I didn't grow up in those circumstances, so all one can do is to sort of try to empathetically understand what that character's predicament is. Because if one doesn't do that, what is one left with? In my case, I'd be left with writing about a middle-aged Bengali man (laughs).**

*What is your view of language? Piya in* The Hungry Tide *notes that "speech [is] only a bag of tricks that fool[s] you into believing that you [can] see through the eyes of another being." Do you share this sentiment? Is language a hindrance to our understanding of others?*

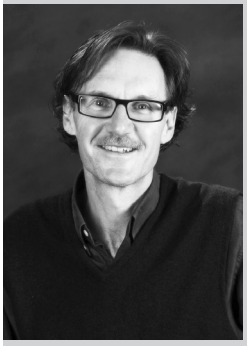
**Yes, to some degree I do believe that. I do believe that more and more, actually. We humans have complicated language to such a point that we have created a kind of curtain between us and the world. It's not just language, but also the forms of language. Certainly today, your primary interaction with the world is often through your cell phone, which creates another curtain that shuts you off from the world. I find it very interesting that shamans everywhere, whenever they talk about the ways in which they communicate with non-humans, it's never through language. You have to leave language behind to be able to empathetically interact with non-human beings and entities. So, yes, I do think that language does cut you off from the world. Language can also give you the false sense that you understand someone else or something else completely. Actually, so much of what is conveyed in language is opaque, it's not transparent.**

*We talked about language and storytelling in our class, and how some characters believe narratives are a primal human activity, whereas others dismiss storytelling, especially in its non-human form, as being non-existent. The Piya in* Gun Island*, 15 years after* The Hungry Tide*, is among those deniers. Could you comment on that element in your work?*

**Human life is built around stories. Talking to migrants made me realize that everything**

*We humans have complicated language to such a point that we have created a kind of curtain between us and the world. It's not just language, but also the forms of language. Certainly today, your primary interaction with the world is often through your cell phone, which creates another curtain that shuts you off from the world. I find it very interesting that shamans everywhere, whenever they talk about the ways in which they communicate with non-humans, it's never through language. You have to leave language behind to be able to empathetically interact with non-human beings and entities. So, yes, I do think that language does cut you off from the world.*

**they said to me was either a story, or it was about a story, or it was about their own stories. So, yes, these are very primal things. We like to say that stories can only be told by humans, but there's increasing evidence that this is not the case. Consider, for example, whales. Many human stories are actually connected to movement, movement through space. Now, many animals move much farther than human beings do, like whales or birds. These movements can't be represented as merely mechanical. We don't know what the whales are thinking when they're coming from their wintering ground to their summering ground. But how do we know that they're not telling themselves a story about getting there? Similarly, there's been an interesting study with a group of penguins who return annually to the suburbs of Sydney, making incredibly dangerous journeys. The author argues that, in fact, these movements are related to stories. So, there's a lot of evidence to suggest that animals have their own ways of telling stories as a way of communicating.**



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# GOVINDAMMA

HELEN MULDER



Govindamma with a few of our children's toys, 1965.

Hyderabad, India. Imagine a legendary city, high on the Deccan Plateau, its medieval fortress, Golconda, extolled by Marco Polo in his travel chronicles for its legendary riches. With diamonds, pearls, and "wealth beyond imagination," the very name "Golconda" became a synonym for treasure.

Then imagine Hyderabad in 1965, a short twenty years since the end of colonial rule when the old feudal system was dismantled. Hyderabad was now a city of three million, but still a "garden city" where former palaces and mansions were being transformed into schools and hotels. The ceremonial formality of previous centuries, the extreme courtesy and gracious living of the ruling Muslim class, was giving way to a new energy and focus. Turning away from the patterns of British rule, a new generation was eager to embrace American innovations in government and education.

Colleges and universities were adopting requirements in American literature, history, and politics. This new emphasis brought a need for resource materials and the founding of an American Studies Research Center and library. My husband, William Mulder, was named as founding director. His task was to build an extensive collection of books and publications, but also, along with his staff, to provide assistance to Indian scholars for their research and teaching.

My task, with our family of five children, was to maintain our domestic life while assisting as hostess and tour guide for our many visitors: scholars, officials, and dignitaries, both local and foreign. I preferred a historic house and large garden. We found Saadat Manzil, a one-hundred-year-old villa, and acquired a staff of eight to maintain it. I was free to write and to teach in a boys' prep school. The portrait that follows (part of a memoir in the making) is of our devoted *ayah*, our nanny and housekeeper, whose six years with us kept order and calm.

India, which my family called home for six years, is the locus of lush and lavish memories, many humorous, some insurmountably tragic. Unlike temporary visitors, we had a haven, a homelife, a sanctuary of domestic concerns where ordinary rounds of existence sheltered us from possible soul-shattering experiences beyond the boundaries of our compound walls. The scale of our house, with extensive grounds, century-old trees, open to birdlife or snakes, and inside, the familiar household staff, made life seem under control. Beyond our gates, never. One of our staff who never faltered was a very small, dark Tamilian woman who could read Tamil and write her own name in English: Govindamma.

Govindamma became as comfortable and necessary to our daily lives as the polished wardrobes, the carved sideboards, the cut-velvet sofa-sets, and the net-draped poster beds that furnished our Saadat Manzil in 1965, and later our Tarbund villa in 1979. This massive-scale, 19th-century furniture was acquired piece by piece from the old Hyderabad mansions of the former Nizam's rule. The crumbling palaces of Hyderabad's fading aristocracy also yielded chairs, desks, and marble-topped tables. And while the large scale of these furnishings was dwarfed by our twenty-five-foot ceilings and gallery-size rooms, Govindamma at four foot eight inches was intimidated by neither. The *slap-slap* of her sandals as she made her housekeeping rounds was as familiar as the rooster calls in the morning or, from our banyan trees, the calls of fever birds, koels, and crows.

*Unlike temporary visitors, we had a haven, a homelife, a sanctuary of domestic concerns where ordinary rounds of existence sheltered us from possible soul-shattering experiences beyond the boundaries of our compound walls.*

But Govindamma, too, was a relic, trained under the British Raj; her "Good morning, Madam," or "Very good, Madam," echoed days of colonial glory when households were staffed with many more than our eight necessary servants. Servants had been exchanged and transferred from one official family to another and came with a folder of *chits*, descriptions of the character and tenure of their former employment as well as an assessment of their talents and, sometimes, shortcomings. We acquired Govindamma as an *ayah* from a departing British family. She imposed a regal orderliness upon our nine-month-old son's day befitting a prince of the realm. He and she had a wing of our mansion with separate bath. Each day, his floors had to be washed by another maid-servant and his laundry done by hand so that "my poor baba" would always be clean. He was up early for juice and a circuit of the grounds in his stroller. Then breakfast, a bath, and fresh clothes. Each hour had its allotted ritual, including being brought to me for a kiss goodnight. We thought she could also help with the three older children, but her *chona poochee*, the golden one, needed her constant attendance. This tiny woman carried him about so much I feared he would never walk. "Put him down, Govindamma." He was balanced on her hip. "Oh no, Madam, poor baba," and she would crack her knuckles on her forehead to invoke the blows and



Saadat Manzil, 1965.

disasters of life on her head instead of on his, then pinch his fat cheek and kiss her fingers.

All daily activities were ritualized. If I wished a bath, I had to order it in advance so that water could be heated in the copper boiler in the kitchen-house. Govindamma would release the long bolts from the outside door of the cavernous bathroom and oversee repeated buckets carried in by the mali whose garden duties included anything physically strenuous. "Bath ready, Madam," Govindamma would announce. The first time through this procedure, she offered to bathe me. I declined, but wondered which previous madams had required such intimate service.

The massage was quite another matter. Often at my desk, writing much of the day or just observing the wind lift the long gauze curtains or sway the fern fronds, I knew a lotos-eater's indolence. Govindamma would appear, "Poor Madam, so tired. May I press it?" Once I was on the bed, her massage was not kneading or rubbing, but firmly and repeatedly pressing, squeezing my flesh, muscles, tendons, feet, legs, and back, until a tingling somnolence preceded a complete and levitating surrender to her brown hands.

When we returned to India eleven years after our first three-year stay, her "baba" was fourteen and his younger sister eleven. No need for a nanny anymore, but along with the familiar furniture surviving from our first three-year stay I did need the reassuring loyalty of Govindamma, now in her seventies. She was the same small woman with diamond nose-stud, her long ears bearing three studs each, her graying hair in a knotted bun. I knew her requirements: an egg a day, coffee, a measure of rice, white saris with black border, aspirin. "Please Madam, back paining, Madam," and this time her own locked room in the villa, the only servant so served. Two servant families lived in the long row of servant quarters on the west side of the grounds; the others came daily on bicycles from their adobe dwellings in suburban villages.

Govindamma liked her room and seemed very much at home. She had never been eager for her afternoon and evening off though she had her own family, a grown son and daughter. Long a widow, in never anything but a white sari, her real life seemed to be with us. As our housekeeper, she made beds in the morning (sometimes for as many as eight of us), secured mosquito nets at night, and set the table three times a day, arranging linen napkins in complicated fans and flourishes. She monitored the houseboys and maid-servant, argued with the cook, and checked nightly the tall bolts on nine outside doors. Her most crucial duty was to boil and filter all of our drinking water, funneling it into empty gin

*When our departure date was fixed, and we had endured the endless tributes and farewell parties, we prepared to disband our domestic staff, dismantle the household, and crate our homebound possessions. Govindamma, though we provided her an annuity, was facing a future more bleak than I let myself imagine. "You go, I die, Madam." With her hands constantly engaged, the crochet hook ever active, the thread she knotted seemed sufficient and continuous.*

bottles to be stored in our refrigerator, *prigiter*, used solely for that purpose. Because her eyes were growing dim, she always put everything away immediately. Once, a full gin bottle was mistakenly stored with the water, and a full glass of gin startled someone at dinner. Always alert, her lapses were few, though I'm sure she despaired that I carried no keys and did not ration out sugar, soap, and supplies like a more frugal or suspicious *memsahib*.

Govindamma often helped me to dress for an evening out, kneeling at my feet to adjust and even the pleats of my sari. She was always there to unbolt the door late at night when we returned from a party. Before I could undress, she would draw me aside and insist on a secret ritual to remove the evil eye, perhaps cast upon me by an envious glance during the evening. She would get a strip of clean, white cotton cloth and, beginning at the top of my head with a wiping gesture, complete the circuit of my body while whispering an incantation of magical power. Then, with a flourish, she took the evil out through the sole of my left foot and scurried away to burn it quickly. She could tell by the smell of the burning cloth whether or not I had been victim of the evil eye. She returned to reassure me in a conspiratorial whisper all was now well. I never told her I didn't believe, because I did believe in the urgency of her concern.

When we were preparing for one of our frequent parties with lights in the garden, she capably counted plates and silver for as many as a hundred guests and saw to smooth communication between the kitchen and the house. Beyond shopping for provisions necessary with the car and driver that the cook could not bring from the bazaar on his bicycle, I had little to do but dress myself in silks and jewelry sure to invite the evil eye. I was always mindful of our being subject to public scrutiny as official representatives of the United States.

In the interlude between all the preparation and cleaning up after, either for parties or the simple business of daily life, Govindamma was never idle. I kept her supplied with yarn and cotton thread. She made countless coasters and small fly-screens with colorful bead-weights to be draped over our glasses as we had evening drinks on the verandah before dinner, watching the white egrets return to our neem and tamarind trees from the rice-paddy fields beyond. Sometimes, a sky full of migrating birds would draw us

from our wicker chairs to witness their miraculous as-one, wave-like flight. This against the tall mounding clouds of a salmon sunset. These moments with Govindamma, in unobtrusive attendance, outweigh all the illnesses, the helplessness in the face of death, the rage at injustice, that are also attendant in a land so teeming and incomprehensible.

Govindamma, too, had moments of weariness. "Better I die, Madam." When our departure date was fixed, and we had endured the endless tributes and farewell parties, we prepared to disband our domestic staff, dismantle the household, and crate our homebound possessions. Govindamma, though we provided her an annuity, was facing a future more bleak than I let myself imagine. "You go, I die, Madam." With her hands constantly engaged, the crochet hook ever active, the thread she knotted seemed sufficient and continuous.

A short six months after we left Hyderabad and our life in India, we heard Govindamma was dead.



Helen Mulder ( Vassar College and B.A. English, University of Utah) is a retired A.P. literature, writing, and humanities teacher. Her career of thirty years spans a range of private and public schools including St. Francis Women's College and H.P.S. in Hyderabad, India. An NEH grant at SUNY, Brockport, for the study of "Gilgamesh" married her interest in art, history, and Eastern cultures. Since retirement she has been serving as resource, hostess, and advisor for the Fulbright exchange scholars at the University of Utah. This commitment to cultural exchange is a continuation of her late husband William Mulder's long service to the program (who was also a founding member of *Weber*'s editorial board).

# WORLDS THAT NEVER LEAVE YOU—

ASHLEY MARIE FARMER



*A Conversation with* **BRANDON HOBSON**

*I can't pin down the moment when I first encountered Brandon Hobson's writing. I know only that it blew me away and that I've been an avid fan ever since. This is true of the writers I admire most: it feels as though their work has lived inside my imagination for so long, woven into the way I think about stories and my own approach, that it's tough to recall when their work was new to me.*

*Brilliant and bold and wholly original, Hobson's approach to fiction compels readers for the balance it achieves and the tightrope it walks: formal experimentation elevates traditional aspects of storytelling, sentence-level dynamics propel satisfying story arcs, elements of surprise punctuate universal themes, the brutal is buttressed by beauty and heart. Whether it's a dark, compressed study of family (*Deep Ellum*), a complex and satirical mystery (*Desolation of Avenues Untold*), or the piercing coming-of-age tale about survival and home that is his most recent and highly acclaimed novel,* Where the Dead Sit Talking*, each of Hobson's books is a singular masterpiece. These are the words and worlds that you never really leave and that never leave you.*

*I have gotten to know Brandon over the years through the writing community and literary journals we've each edited, and I felt lucky to chat with him via email following his recent reading for the Weber State University Creative Writing Virtual Reading Series.*

*Dr. Brandon Hobson is the author of the forthcoming novel* The Removed *as well as* Where the Dead Sit Talking*, which was a finalist for the 2018 National Book Award and longlisted for the Dublin International Literary Award. He has won a Pushcart Prize, and his fiction has appeared in* McSweeney's, Conjunctions, American Short Fiction, NOON*, and elsewhere. Hobson is an assistant professor of English at New Mexico State University and also teaches at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. He is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation Tribe in Oklahoma.*

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*As someone who deeply admires both your short fiction and your novels, I wanted to ask you about your experience of working in these two different forms. How do you know when you have a longer project on your hands versus a shorter narrative? Is there anything you enjoy about working in one form versus the other?*

**I love both, really, I guess, but I mostly write in long form—in novel drafts. I mean what I love most about writing a novel is being able to stay in that world for a long period of time, months and years of being in it. I really don't write too many short stories—most of my shorter pieces I've published have been part of the novels. I have only a few stories I've written I actually like.**

*When you refer to novel drafts, it makes me curious about your process. Could you share a bit about where a story begins for you and how you approach revision? When does something feel like it's finished?*

**It usually starts with an image. I try to turn that image into a scene, add a character and maybe another and see what happens. I don't really outline or anything, especially in the first draft. Sometimes I think I know the ending by the image, though. In terms of revision, I try to do what Charles Johnson talks about in his craft book, *The Way of the Writer*, which is to go through three drafts and try to find a sense of pleasure in doing so. Johnson says art should always be a form of play. But I'm not sure I ever really**

**feel completely confident that it's as good as it can be. Do you feel that way as well?**

*Yes! I could revise the same project in perpetuity, always finding something else to change. But at some point, it's just a matter of letting a project be what it's going to be.*

*Your acclaimed novel,* Where the Dead Sit Talking, *is told from the perspective of Sequoyah, a 15 year-old Cherokee teenager in foster care alongside two other youths. He's such a complex, compelling character—one who, toward the end of the book, says "I don't know who I am." I know you've said that one focus of this book is identity. Could you please share a bit about which aspects of identity Sequoyah is uncovering or understanding? What inspired you to make these part of Sequoyah's story?*

**I worked with a lot of teenagers when I was younger, and it seems to me one of the things they were trying to figure out is who they were and whether or not they were accepted, etc. Sequoyah likes eyeliner and is very androgynous, which, in 1989, doesn't exactly fit into rural Oklahoma schools, which is why he has such strange interactions. He's also very guarded and quiet. He doesn't want attention—he's trying to be himself.**

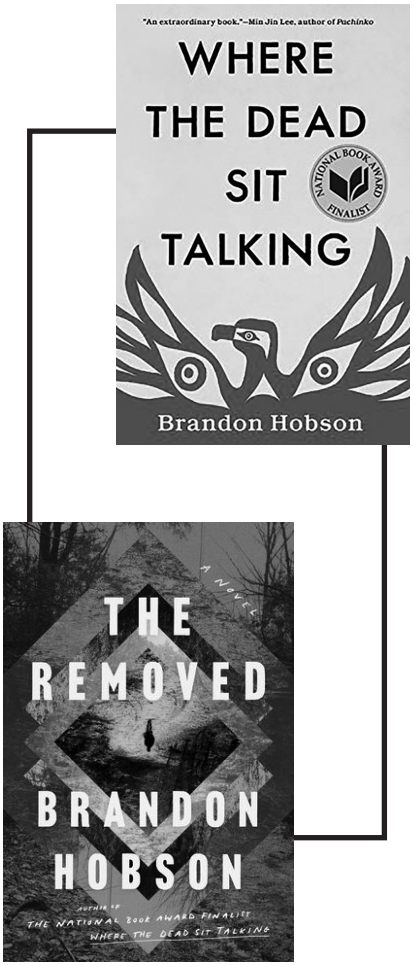
*You mention 1989 and I wanted to ask about this time period. Is there something about that era in particular that felt like the right fit for this book? I love the references to music and other details that bring it so vividly to life.*

**It's mostly just a time when I felt great change in my own life, and certain music of that period feels so nostalgic. I saw The Cure in fall '89. What a show!**

*After I finished reading* Where the Dead Sit Talking, *I couldn't help but wonder what life would look like for Sequoyah as an adult. If you could telegraph out into the future, what do you think awaits him? What would you want for him?*

**The book originally began with an image of Sequoyah as an adult standing at his mother's grave. I don't really like to think of him as an adult, to be honest, other than this image, so it's hard to say. . . .**

*I can't wait to read your forthcoming novel,* The Removed. *Could you please share a bit about the origins of this new work? Also, from your perspective, are there threads between* Where the Dead Sit Talking *and* The Removed*? Or did your focus radically shift from one project to the next?*



*I wanted to conceptualize the generational trauma and suffering of Cherokees and more specifically the Echota family. I've always been interested in the old traditional Cherokee stories, call it mythology if you want, as well as the spirit world. This book isn't really at all like* Where the Dead Sit Talking *except for the character of a foster boy named Wyatt, but he's way more outgoing than Sequoyah. Chekhov said fiction begins by asking big questions, and one of the questions I was thinking about in* The Removed *was* How do we handle trauma? *One of the narrators is an ancestor spirit who talks about the Trail and suffering. This book has several narrators, and stories within stories, so it's a different beast than the last one.*

**Thanks, Ashley. I wanted to conceptualize the generational trauma and suffering of Cherokees and more specifically the Echota family. I've always been interested in the old traditional Cherokee stories, call it mythology if you want, as well as the spirit world. This book isn't really at all like *Where the Dead Sit Talking* except for the character of a foster boy named Wyatt, but he's way more outgoing than Sequoyah. For example, he does impersonations and loves storytelling time at the shelter, whereas Sequoyah was dark and brooding. Chekhov said fiction begins by asking big questions, and one of the questions I was thinking about in *The Removed* was *How do we handle trauma*? One of the narrators is an ancestor spirit who talks about the Trail and suffering. This book has several narrators, and stories within stories, so it's a different beast than the last one.**

*Could you share a bit about the role that geography and place play in your writing? Do you revisit familiar settings or explore less-familiar locations in your work?*

**You're so great at writing about place in your own work, A.F. I think Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas are three places I've written about, mainly because I'm most familiar with those states. As a kid I never was able to travel anywhere very far, so as an adult it's been great to see places I'd only seen in movies or read about. *The Removed* has parts that take place in The Darkening Land, which is a mythological place I sort of made my own in this book.**

*I know that, for me, inspiration sometimes comes from non-literary sources like visual art, music, and whatever I'm streaming on Netflix. I wonder what other art forms or aspects of your life bring you inspiration and inform your work?*

**Music mostly. Sometimes visual art, but I listen to a lot of music and it almost always sparks the imagination in ways that only art can.**

*Are there certain bands or albums you return to? Are there also any authors or books you pick up knowing that they'll have a positive effect on your work?*

**Wow, I listen to so much. Hendrix inspires me. So does Bowie. I constantly return to the early Stones. Also Iggy and the Stooges, Sly and the Family Stone, and The Smiths are always on my playlists. Also Springsteen, Hank Williams, Prince, Jack White, Elliott Smith. Kind of a diverse mixture, I guess. I'm**

*I listen to so much. Hendrix inspires me. So does Bowie. I constantly return to the early Stones. Also Iggy and the Stooges, Sly and the Family Stone, and The Smiths are always on my playlists. Also Springsteen, Hank Williams, Prince, Jack White, Elliott Smith. Kind of a diverse mixture, I guess. I'm not sure if they have a positive effect on my work, but they all make me feel very good.*

**not sure if they have a positive effect on my work, but they all make me feel very good.**

*Right now, we find ourselves at the end of 2020, a year unlike any other we've experienced. I've been wondering what this might mean for books and how the events of the past several months might affect my own and other writers' literary interests, concerns, or creative processes. Do you feel like this year has or will change how you approach your own reading and writing?*

**I don't think it has affected the way I work or read. I'm still able to write. What else is there? We can all sit around and blow smoke rings and listen to Pink Floyd all day, I guess, but that gets old, so we must work, A.F. We must.**

*What are you working on right now that we can look forward to reading one day?*

**I have two projects I'm very excited about, but it's way too early to even talk about them yet.**



Ashley Marie Farmer is the author of the new essay collection *Mercy* (Sarabande Books, 2022) as well as three other books. Her work has been published in places like *Gay Magazine*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Progressive*, *Flaunt*, *Nerve*, and *Santa Monica Review*. She is the recipient of *Ninth Letter*'s 2018 Literary Award in Creative Nonfiction, the *Los Angeles Review*'s 2017 Short Fiction Award, and fellowships from Syracuse University and the Baltic Writing Residency. She lives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

# ALWAYS A BECOMING

LIBBY LEONARD



*A Conversation with* **JOY PRIEST**

*Born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, Joy Priest received a B.S. in print journalism from the University of Kentucky and an MFA in poetry with a Women and Gender Studies certificate from the University of South Carolina. Currently, she is a doctoral student in the Literature and Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston. In addition to working with incarcerated women through art and writing workshops, Priest has taught rhetoric and composition, poetry, comedy, African American arts and culture, and American identity courses at the university level.*

*Priest is the author of* Horsepower*, her stunning debut collection of poetry from the University of Pittsburgh Press (2020), exploring themes of gender, race, and class. The book reflects Priest's connection to her hometown, Louisville, focusing on the young girl-speaker who lives within Churchill Downs's shadow. Priest uses a unique blend of poetic journalism to report, through non-linear memory explorations, on the past, the present, and the somewhere-in-between of Louisville.*

*Priest is an expert at the somewhere-in-between: the liminal space of the impenetrable but looming Derby, the not-quite deployment of a Bildungsroman narrative, and the constant clash between memory and reality, Black and white, naivete and experience; all work to center* Horsepower *in a state of decentered-ness.*

Horsepower *is the winner of the 2019 Donald Hall Prize for Poetry from AWP and was nominated for the 2020 John Leonard Prize. Priest is the winner of the 2020 Stanley Kunitz Prize from* The American Poetry Review*, the 2019 Gearhart Poetry Prize from* The Southeast Review*, and the 2016 College Writers' Award from the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation. Her work can be found in* American Poetry Review, The Atlantic, Poets & Writers, ESPN, Virginia Quarterly Review, Mississippi Review, *and* The Rumpus*, among others.*

*I had the privilege of having a conversation with Joy Priest via email in late 2020 and early 2021. We talked poetry, identity, classic cars, and the striking setting in* Horsepower*, Priest's hometown.*

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Horsepower *is your debut collection and an absolutely stunning one at that. Can you talk about how poetry came into your life and about your journey to becoming a poet?*

**Poetry is a natural extension of my relationship with reading, and I believe it's simply a manifestation of the way a certain kind of mind works. I was always writing poems, even as a child, especially as a child, and probably better.**

**The thing about writing poems is, it's always a *becoming* because you never have it figured out. You don't wake up one day and go, "Oh, I know how to write poems, finally. Let me just sit down and knock this new one out, which I know exactly how to write." Each poem requires unique attention before it reveals itself to you, and it helps to be in the practice of study and reading. In that way, I sincerely feel like I'm still and always becoming a poet. If I had it figured out, I'd probably be doing something else.**

**I realized that I wanted to write poetry, as a vocation, in undergrad when trying to hold most other jobs was negatively affecting my mental health, and when I realized that being a poet was something that one could do through the examples of my early teachers Nikky Finney, Frank X Walker, Crystal Wilkinson, and the Affrilachian Poets.**

*Throughout the collection, your speaker recalls Louisville in a way that is difficult*

*The thing about writing poems is, it's always a* becoming *because you never have it figured out. You don't wake up one day and go, "Oh, I know how to write poems, finally. Let me just sit down and knock this new one out, which I know exactly how to write." Each poem requires unique attention before it reveals itself to you, and it helps to be in the practice of study and reading. In that way, I sincerely feel like I'm still and always becoming a poet. If I had it figured out, I'd probably be doing something else.*

*to categorize—it's nostalgic and steeped in sensory details that make it a rich and lovely setting, and it simultaneously reads like a love letter written to a long-lost lover whom it was extremely painful to be involved with, to be separated from, and to move on from. Would you elaborate on your choice of setting and your speaker's troubled relationship with the city?*

I love this reading.

I was just writing poems early on for my creative writing workshops and this is the only setting I knew. Therefore, it informed the image-reservoir of my poetry. I was writing what I knew. There wasn't an explicit moment where I made a "choice" on the setting.

*The speaker in* Horsepower *is a Black child with a white parent. She exists in this liminal space, this threshold of not-quite belonging, and is often on the run. Can you discuss the role of liminality in your work? How do you see identity, and perhaps the ability to self-identify, as spaces for both exploration and education in poetry?*

That description ("Black child with a white parent") is actually meant to enforce against the idea of liminality, as a reality in the U.S. Race in this country is historically constructed and specific to that societal history. It's not something that one can "self-identify." I can't walk outside tomorrow and decide I am white. I am Black in this country (glad to be so). Even though the speaker's grandfather has made the mother "promise not to speak of my Blackness, my father, to me" ("Abecedarian for Alzheimer's"), and in spite of the denial that the speaker's mother has developed over the years—"On the citation / there was a box labeled 'Black.' At home / there was my mother's question: *what did you do* / *to make him think you were*? . . . I was" ("Ode to My First Car. . . ")—America, and its authorities and arbiters of race, see the speaker as a Black girl. The post-racial, mixed-race sort of conversation that emerges with rhetorical force among liberals after Obama's election in 2008 is ahistorical and obscures a more complex discussion of race in which my book seeks to engage. It's not as it was in Apartheid South Africa, which produced the racial constructions "white," "black," and "colored" (to represent those with one Black parent and one white parent). In America, chattel slavery and the "one-drop rule" defined our very specific construction of Blackness, and, importantly, defined whiteness against it. It did not allow for liminality. As I read the narrative in the book, the speaker is running from a white supremacist household that raises children without a necessary engagement or discussion around race, and she is seeking the parent and family, who has these answers, whom she is being kept from: "& there I sit in my mother's white Plymouth / Stolen in the open, under advisement of / this country's laws & customs. . . ." If there is a liminality, it is an artificial and untenable one being imposed by the Black child speaker's white caretakers, who believe they can hold her in this un-reality. The speaker's burgeoning awareness

*The post-racial, mixed-race sort of conversation that emerges with rhetorical force among liberals after Obama's election in 2008 is ahistorical and obscures a more complex discussion of race in which my book seeks to engage. It's not as it was in Apartheid South Africa, which produced the racial constructions "white," "black," and "colored" (to represent those with one Black parent and one white parent). In America, chattel slavery and the "one-drop rule" defined our very specific construction of Blackness, and, importantly, defined whiteness against it.*

of this, and who she is, is the liberating factor of the book. I don't believe racial identity is something that one can self-designate.

In terms of "identity . . . as spaces for both exploration and education in poetry," I think poetry is a phenomenal educational tool for the individual and for the classroom, in that it can be used to enrich one's understanding of experiences outside their own. I have learned so much from my peers about their respective cultures, languages, religions, national history and events, and resulting experiences, particularly those whose subjectivities have been denied or erased by the dominant narrative, namely Native poets. It's kind of a feminist theory that personal narrative makes an intervention into empirical models of learning, such as math and science, that prioritize data and objectivity. The idea is that the expert on an experience is the one having that experience.

*Let's talk about the cars. You've got a host of secondary characters in the form of vehicles in the collection, ranging from pickup trucks to Plymouths to Oldsmobiles to the speaker's favorite, the 1988 Cutlass Supreme. Every time I encountered a car in the speaker's narrative, I thought of Beat Poetry – the idea of being "on the road," the idea of driving and being driven. I also recalled Dorothy Parker's thoughts on the car as being akin to Woolf's idea of a room of one's own, in which she could quietly observe the world around her. How do you see the vehicles operating in your work, and what inspired you to include them in such vivid detail?*

Man, I love cars. I grew up with several vintage muscle cars rotating out of the carport. To me, vintage muscle cars or "old skools" are symbols of the working-class South. In this way, they become one of the major conceits of the book as it imagines "horsepower." Horsepower doesn't just refer to the presence of horses or horseracing in the setting, it also refers to a measurement of power that came along as industry developed. Horsepower invokes cars, trains, factory machines, etc. The speaker's socioeconomic circumstances are another reality with which she contends across the narrative.

I really like your invocation of Dorothy Parker's thoughts here. I was unaware of them and would love to read this. I certainly think for the female characters in the book the car is a place of sanctuary that belongs to "her," whether that is the speaker's mother or the speaker herself, though for different or additional reasons. In "Ode to My First Car. . . ," the Cutlass becomes a place with which to apply an intersectional lens to their respective experiences.

*As a related aside, what is your favorite car? Is it the same as your speaker's? What is it about this particular car that you love?*

The 1988 Cutlass Supreme Classic is my favorite car. Growing up, my mother had a 1986

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**Cutlass Supreme Classic that I really loved. When I was in high school, my dad discovered that his coworker had a 1988 Cutlass he was willing to get rid of, and he sold it to me for my birthday. The 1988 model was released the year I was born, so I always thought it was cool being the same age as my car, though thankfully I have lived a longer life.**

*"Horsepower" has many different iterations throughout the work, and I heard you mention in a reading that it took you many years – ten, if my notes are correct – to title the collection. Can you speak a little more to this process of naming and working through the multiple meanings of both the individual word and your poetry as a whole?*

**Similar to the setting, I didn't go through this decade-long process of putting together a book with a title and order, etc. When I say I was working on it for ten years, I mean that the oldest poems in the book were started ten years ago. For the next ten years, I was just writing poems. Everything that transformed this manuscript of poems into a book came together very swiftly toward the end, when all of the content was already present, and I was in the revision stages. The last poem that I began that is included in the book is the title poem, "Horsepower." I titled the poem before the book had a title. Upon revising that poem, I realized that it contained all the major themes of the book—the horses, horseracing and its accompanying setting, muscle cars, and the mental fortitude or particular design of the speaker's mind. Only then, very late—I think I'd already sent the manuscript to one or two contests with a placeholder title—did I realize that that was the title of the book. I really enjoyed it because it was a single, strong word associated with masculinity and it was going to be the title of a woman's book.**

*I can guarantee you've been asked this before, but what is your writing process like, specifically when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic? Have you got any advice for writers who feel slumped during this time?*

**My book just came out. I just finished the first project, the most major undertaking, so far, of my writing career, in the middle of a pandemic, where living is, to an extent, stalled by quarantine. So, I don't really know what my writing process is right now. I'm sure it will be different now since I am no longer working on that project. But I get a lot of my momentum from the public, being out and about, and being within the same four walls for a year has not helped my writing. I've found that the few poems I have written are about breathing or my house plants. I suppose my advice right now would be to read. Take it easy and just read. When it's all over, you'll be full of language.**

*What kinds of opportunities would you recommend that other writers look for when beginning their careers? What kinds of opportunities did you have that you felt moved you forward in the literary field?*

Send out your work. All that matters is that you write good poems. And that you don't forget how to have fun, which leads to good poems.

Publication leads to more publications. My published poems are what moved me forward because people who could give me opportunities read them and thought they were good. My poems got me into retreats and conferences and writing programs. They got me out of Kentucky.

Attend workshops and writing retreats. Read craft essays and watch craft Q&As on YouTube.

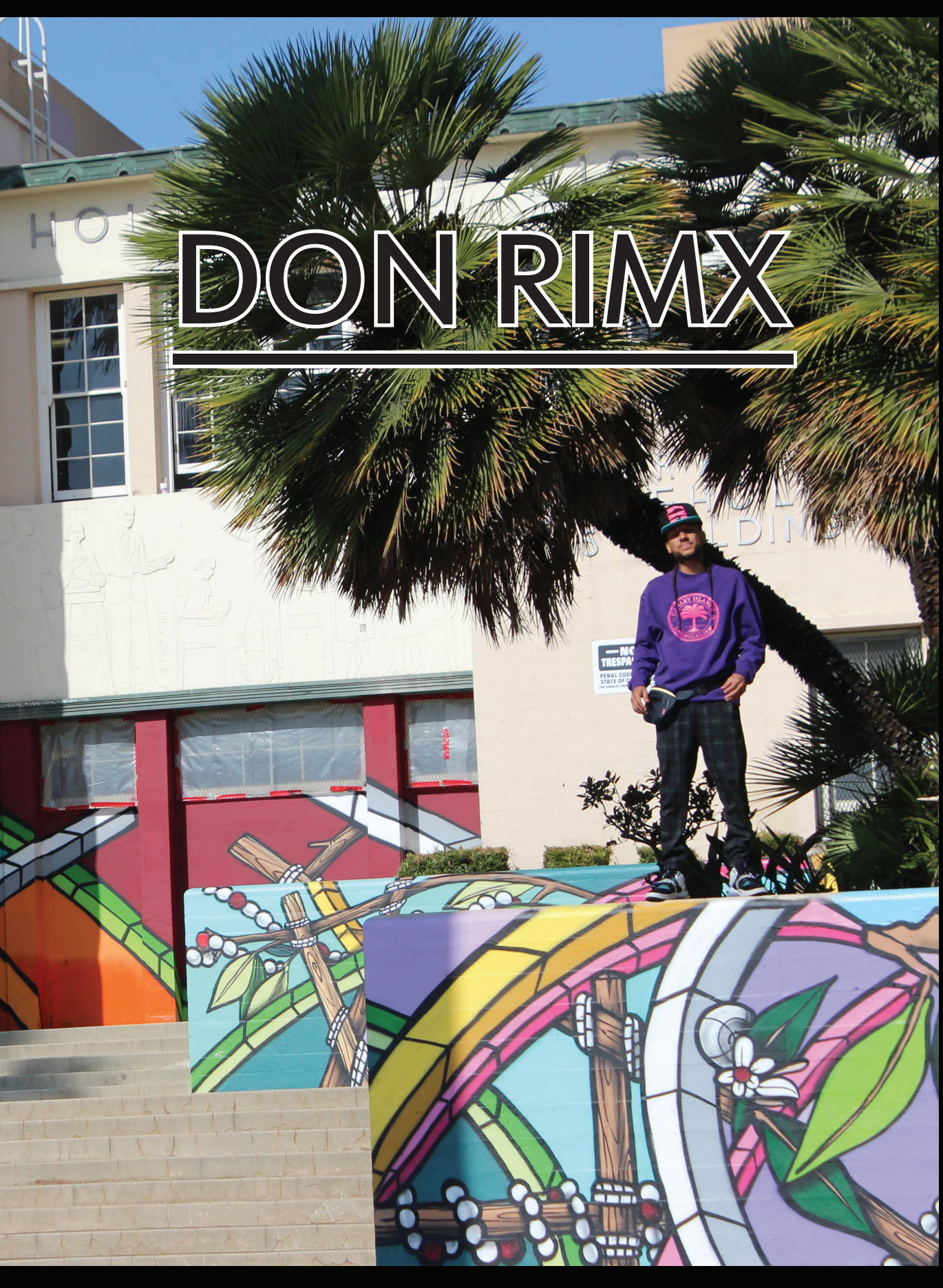
Look at the publishing credits of a collection you like to see where a poet published their poems.

But mostly, focus on developing your own craft, and don't keep your work to yourself. Unless, of course, you don't care about moving forward in the literary field.



Libby Leonard is currently studying for her Masters of Arts in English (creative writing) at Weber State University, where she serves as a teaching assistant. She has read her work at Weber State's National Undergraduate Literature Conference and published it in *Metaphor*, the university's undergraduate literary journal. Alongside her work as a writer and teacher, she edits the Utah-based literary magazine *Midnight Motel*. She resides in Layton, Utah, with her son and her cats.




DON RIMX



*Mrs. Rodeo*, 40’ x 60,’ acrylic on concrete, Ogden, UT, 2021



*Joe McQueen*, 40’ x 60,’ acrylic on concrete, Ogden, UT, 2021




*La Union*, 40’ x 50,’ acrylic on concrete, Ogden, UT, 2021



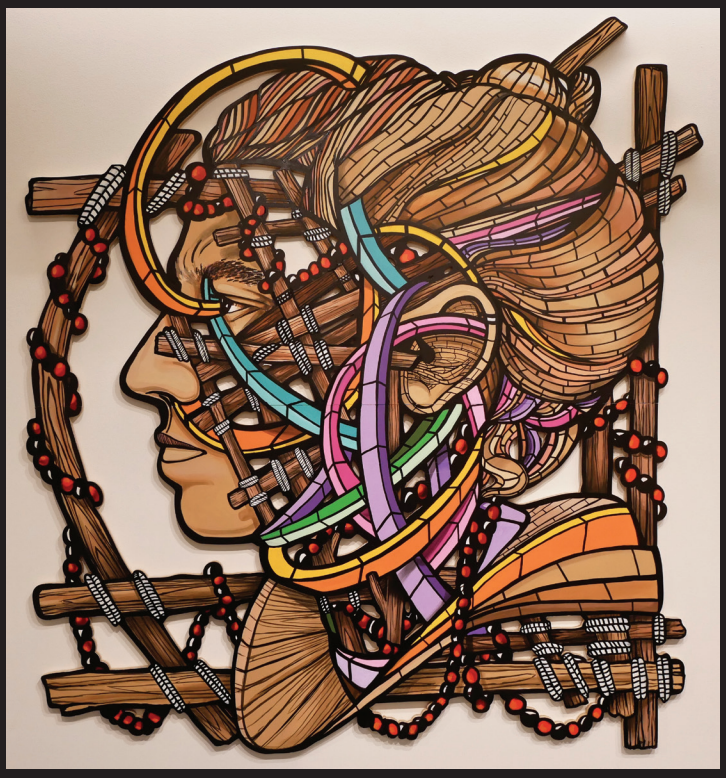


My body of work has been realized in public places, spaces of cultural value, schools, and private properties exposed to the eye of the general public. The inspiration behind my work are the different cultures of the world, the energy their traditions transmit, and the development of the urban landscape. My ideas aim to continue developing and constructing images that in some way carry a story, images that stimulate creativity to bring about a unique experience between the individual and each of the pieces, and building a bridge amongst cultures, people, and energies. My medium is a mixture of acrylic paint and spray paint.

# CREATING IN THE PUBLIC SPACE



*Aire*, 94" x 90," acrylic on laser cut wood, Orlando,FL, 2020



*Autoretrato*, 90" x 76," acrylic on laser cut wood, Orlando, FL, 2020

Creating in the public space is a progressive act. It's formulating the desire to do something and exposing it one hundred percent. It is the sharing of a transformative process from start to finish. It's a movement that stimulates sensitivity and touches everyone's curiosity. And it is one of the reasons I love living my passion.

Each project is unique. All are different in location, size, and points of view. There are great learning opportunities that, at times, offer challenging situations that one must manage along the way.

The relationship between the height of the viewer and scale of the mural is a design element I use to accentuate the power of the image, which in turn creates a greater public impact. On many occasions, the image and landscape sizes are combined to add more interest to the piece, thereby creating a unified relationship with the location.

I enjoy using spaces and incorporating murals within different landscapes. Walking and discovering new pieces makes me return to a specific place. These creations later become points of reference to inspire and stimulate continual experimentation of new things.

Murals, over time, become one with the surrounding landscape. They live amongst the community and collect the energy of those who pass by and contemplate them.



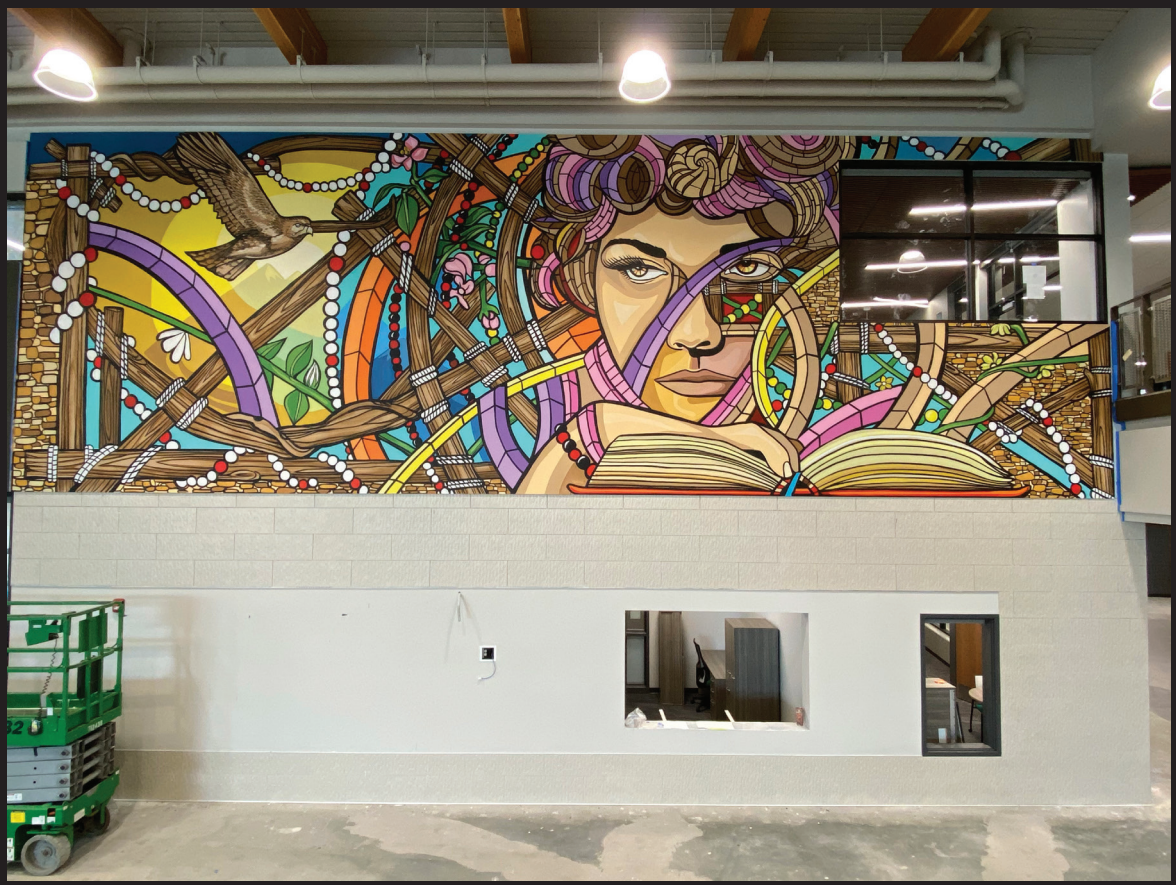
*Un Poco Mas Alla*, 24" x 20," acrylic on canvas, Orlando, FL, 2019



*La Luz por la Ventana*, 32" x 24," acrylic on canvas, Orlando, FL, 2019



*¾ of Life = Water*, 23' x 36,' spray paint on drywall, New York, NY, 2014



*La Vision Guiada*, 15' x 40,' acrylic on birchwood, Spokane, WA, 2021




*Aroma A Café*, 8' x 12,' spray paint on wood, Miami Beach, FL, 2018



*Nelson Mandela*, 30' x 80,' spray paint on brick, Grove Hall, Boston, 2017



*Olor a Azucenas, El Perfume Del Barrio*, 30' x 50,' spray paint on vinyl, Brooklyn, NY, 2019




*Sangre Indigena*, 40' x 30,' spray paint on concrete, Roxbury, MA, 2020

# THE HEART, THE BREATH, AND THE BODY

ABRAHAM SMITH, SEAN BISHOP, SARAH JEAN CARTER, QUINCY BRAVO, JORDAN WISE, AND HEIDI FERGUSON



*A Conversation with* **EDUARDO C. CORRAL**

*Eduardo C. Corral is the son of Mexican immigrants. He is the author of* Guillotine *(Graywolf Press) and* Slow Lightning*, which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition in 2011. He is the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University. He teaches in the MFA program at North Carolina State University.*

*In* Guillotine*, Corral maps the perils of the body moving through myriad floods of desire: the migrant's corrosive saga crossing the desert; the lover's epic struggles with feeling at home in the body; the searing desert, and those that roam the edges of the borders, threatening to consume the individual in search of selfhood; and unrequited love jeopardizing similar forms of erasure. All the while, Corral's poetry brings bold beauty to loud and quiet despair.*

*Corral is the rare artist whose beacon-like brilliance pairs with far-reaching, unassuming generosity. He doles out wisdoms with a nonchalance that belies the depths of their impacts. His WSU Visiting Writer reading moved the attendees out past the edges of their seats. The answers he provided to the questions that followed stirred the undercurrents of consciousness and provided walking sticks for the sometimes uncertain terrain of a life in the arts. Listeners became poets for life that night.*

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*(Heidi) I understand that parents shouldn't pick favorites among their children, but perhaps a poet is allowed to do just that. Do you have a favorite poem or section within* Guillotine*? If so, would you mind sharing which one and why?*

**It takes me a long time to complete a book. Over nine years for the first, and seven years for the second. So I spend a lot of time with my poems as I draft and revise them. I really get to know them. This might sound strange but some of my poems, in my mind, have personalities. This poem is a charmer. This poem is reclusive. This poem is a gossip. That said, my favorite poem in *Guillotine* is probably "Autobiography of My Hungers." Why? It reveals so much about the hurt that animates the book. The poem is a scab over a wound. I'm still amazed that I was able to distill into language such emotional turmoil. This poem signifies not an artistic triumph, but a personal triumph.**

*(Sean) What is your process for playing with form? Do you splice words out of physical paper and paste them into different configurations, or is it a digital method? Do you start with the form and fill it with words, or the opposite? Does it change from piece to piece?*

**For me, language arrives first. Language gives way to subject matter. Subject matter suggests a form. When I start drafting, I don't think about subject matter or form. It's my job to follow the language until it reveals subject matter. By following the language, I mean: dwelling with imagery, playing with phrasing, isolating the music, breaking open the words I know to discover the unexpected words inside them. I try to explore various possibilities for the language. It takes more than a few drafts for the subject matter to appear. I trust this process. I trust the language.**

**But before I start drafting, I practice radical attentiveness. I jot down any language or image that stills me. I carry language in my mind, let it resonate. I write down menu typos. I look up words that are new to me. I write down interesting verbs on tiny pieces of paper, place the pieces into a jar. Why? I know my verbs are weak, so I'm always gathering good verbs. I move through the world with my five senses alert.**

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*(Jordan) Is there a cultural significance to the scorpion, hummingbird, and wolves in* Guillotine*?*

**All poets are haunted by the things of the world. For me, the scorpion, the humming bird, and the wolf are rooted in the desert of southern Arizona, where I was born and raised. These animals were, for the most part, invisible parts of the landscape. We rarely saw them in the wild. But each of these animals is tied to a vivid memory. I once watched as my mother cupped a hummingbird with her hands. I watched my sister drag a black light through her child's nursery and jump back when a scorpion glowed in the light. I remember believing as a child that a coyote (a term for human smuggler) snuck my aunt across the desert. These animals live in the zoo of my mind. There's no way I could ignore them.**

*(Sarah) Your poetry uses both Spanish and English, as well as commercial and religious words and phrases. How does the language of your writing draw from the language you hear and read?*

**I grew up as the son of Mexican immigrants. Spanish is my first tongue, the first grammar I learned, the first music I heard. My parents raised us as Catholics, so I spent many Sundays listening to the language of faith.**

**All languages should be at play for a poet: high or low, secular or religious, commercial or domestic. I've trained myself to jot down any word that catches my ear, that confuses me, that surprises me, that stuns me with beauty. All kinds of languages have a home in me. So when I draft and revise, I'm able to call upon these various grammars and musics to enrich and complicate my work.**

*(Quincy) Throughout* Guillotine*, you have several repeating objects or parts such as thumbs, mirrors, and beards. Do you make a conscious effort to work these repeating things into your poems, or do you find that they seem to work themselves into the poems? Thumbs, in particular, seem to repeatedly show up in the second half of the book. What is the significance of thumbs in your book?*

**Motifs! Images or language that echoes throughout a book. The second book does indeed have its motifs: wolves, ovals, beards, and thumbs. I'm usually not aware of my motifs until I'm half way through writing a book. Then I work hard to make sure the motifs are being used in interesting ways. Being too aware too early isn't helpful for me. I need to discover my motifs. I don't want to force them.**

**What do thumbs signify in my second book? Honestly, I'm not sure. My best guess: the last man I loved had beautiful thumbs. So I was probably thinking of them, of him, when I wrote down the word "thumb."**

*(Abraham) As a poet who teaches, what's a sterling piece of advice that you were taught and seek to pass on in pretty much every class you helm? And what's a wisdom or rule that you tend to teach but break in your own writing process?*

**One of my teachers told me, "Good writing equals good thinking." I went to him because I was worried I was not smart enough to be a writer. His words instantly made**

sense to me. Writing isn't just about the intellect. Writing is about language—intelligence dwells inside language. But so does the heart, the breath, and the body. Which means any living person can be a poet.

I always tell my graduate students to write in other genres—essays, reviews, or fiction. Writing outside poetry will strengthen your poetry. But I myself have no interest in prose. Why? The sentence terrifies me.



Sean Bishop graduated from Weber State University with a BA in theatre in 2012 and is back completing a Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in creative writing . He lives in a 130-year-old Victorian house in Ogden with his husband, Taylor, dog Ted, and cat Tina.



Sarah Jean Carter is a graduate student in Weber State University's creative writing program. A former midwife and technical editor, Pleasant View is her home, where she enjoys dark chocolate, her Labrador retriever, three near-adult children, and her husband, John.



Heidi Ferguson graduated from Weber State University with a degree in English teaching and a minor in ESL. She is currently a student in the Master of Arts in English program at Weber State University.



Jordan Wise is a student in WSU's Master of Arts in English program focusing on creative writing. She is currently working on a children's book.



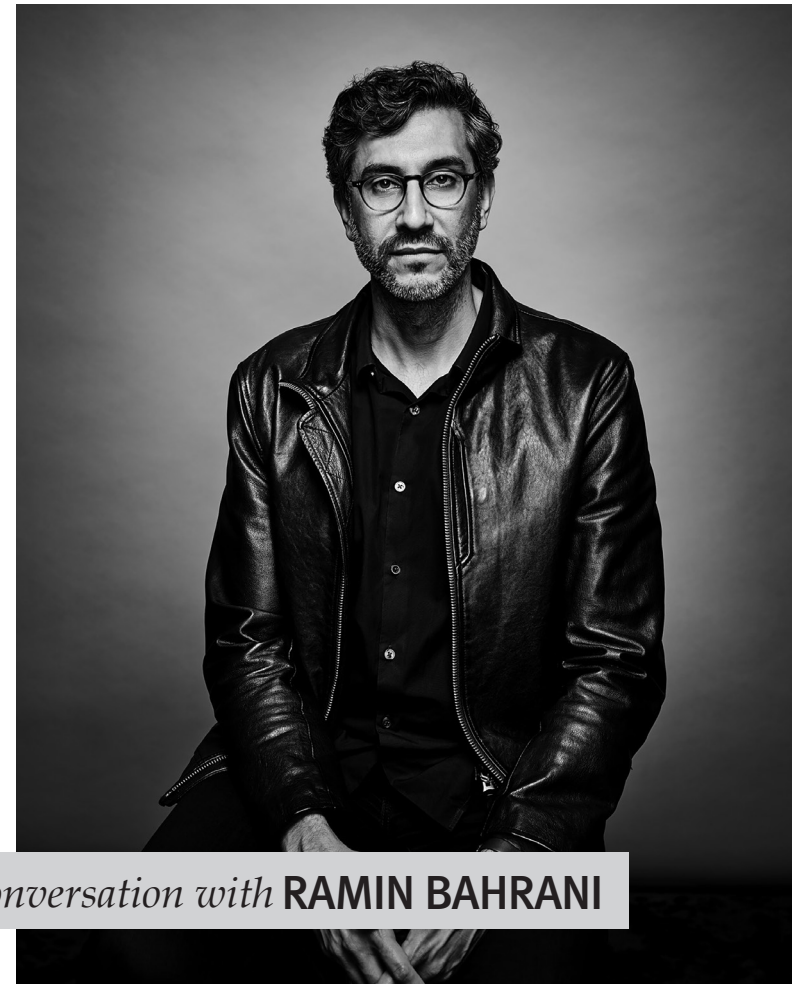
Quincy Bravo lives in Ogden, Utah, and is a prospective poet. He is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in creative writing at Weber State University.



Abraham Smith is associate professor of English and co-director of creative writing at Weber State University. Away from his desk, he improvises poems inside songs with the band The Snarlin' Yarns.

# “THE NEW DIRECTOR OF THE DECADE”

MICHAEL WUTZ



*A Conversation with* **RAMIN BAHRANI**

*Ramin Bahrani is an Iranian-American director and screenwriter who gained international prominence with two recent feature films: the re-adaptation of Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel* Fahrenheit 451 *(2018, HBO), and the adaptation of Aravind Adiga's Man Booker-prize winning novel* The White Tiger *(2021, Netflix). For the latter, he was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay.*

*Bahrani is also widely known as one of the most innovative practitioners of independent and non-commercial cinema with an impressive filmography. His first feature film,* Man Push Cart *(2005), premiered at the Venice Film Festival and screened at Sundance the following year.* Chop Shop *(2007) premiered at the Cannes International Film Festival, before being screened in Toronto and Berlin.* Goodbye Solo *(2008), his third feature, was honored as an official selection in Venice, where it won the international film critic's FIPRESCI award for best film.* At Any Price *(2013) was selected to compete for the Golden Lion in Venice, and his fifth feature film,* 99 Homes *(2014), too was shown in Venice and nominated for a Golden Globe Award. What unites his films are innovative camera work and sound design, and a sustained and empathetic attention to the plight of the underprivileged and the effects of the global market economy. For his work, Bahrani was recognized with the 2007 Independent Spirit "Someone to Watch Award"; he received a 2009 Guggenheim Fellowship and was nominated for the 2008 Independent Spirit Best Director Award; in 2009, the late film critic Roger Ebert hailed him "the new director of the decade."*

*Bahrani is currently finishing work on his first feature documentary. He is also producing the next generation of filmmakers, including the Independent Spirit Award Winning* Socrates *from Alexandre Moratto and the Sundance Award Winning* Luzzu *from Alex Camilleri. Bahrani is a professor of film directing at the graduate film program of his alma mater, the Columbia University School of the Arts.*

*I want to thank Ramin for his time and generosity in fielding my questions, and to Lindsey Mayer for facilitating this meeting of the minds, which happened via Zoom on Friday, May 14, 2021.*

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The White Tiger *was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay, which must have been gratifying to you. The award went to Florian Zeller's adaptation of his own play,* Le Père/The Father. *I know you've seen the film, and I happened to see it during its Sundance Premiere in 2019 while working as a volunteer. I want to ask about the film's cinematography, which is anchored in – if not altogether defined by – the subjective camera of the father, played by Anthony Hopkins; the film, about the gradual descent into dementia, would be unthinkable without it. And while a subjective camera point of view is rather unusual for your work, you too have made use of it in* The White Tiger, *especially in critical moments of the film. Can you say some more about this choice of camera work in this film, and maybe others?*

**My first films were pretty objective, the camera, that is. There were rare exceptions for subjective shots. The films were inspired by, and designed to be, in a world of naturalism, in some cases even in the hope that someone would think maybe it was a documentary or a pseudo-documentary. So for me, in that style, the subjective camera wasn't really something I wanted to utilize. I've used it here and there in all my films, but not often.** ***The White Tiger*** **was certainly the most, for me, the heaviest use of subjective camera**

because the story is so much inside Balram's head. It's such a subjective story—he's telling the story through first person narration, and I wanted the audience to experience that journey with him as opposed to just witnessing it. With an objective camera, you're still going to go on a journey with the character. One of the most popular movies of all time is ***The Godfather***. There are very few subjective shots, almost none, and still people feel like they know those characters. So, there is sometimes a confusion that if you're using an objective camera, you're not deeply involved in the characters. But with ***The White Tiger***, I really wanted it to be from Balram's eyes and what he sees, and he's spying a lot. A lot of what he is up to he's overhearing; he's eavesdropping; he even describes one of his skills as eavesdropping. So, for that I needed subjective camera.

*I want to come back to* White Tiger *later in our conversation. Right now, I am thinking about another film of yours,* 99 Homes*, the opening of which is a three-minute steadycam shot. That's when Michael Shannon enters the picture, much like a bulldog. That, too, is quite an unusual shot in your work. I was reminded of another film that's not immediately connected to yours, Robert Altman's* The Player*. That film's opening sequence—of a six or seven minute uncut shot—is also really amazing. I'm not sure how Altman set this up at the time, but it's an extraordinary shot much like this one in* 99 Homes*. Could you say something about that?*

Yeah, that's my first film with Steadicam, actually. The film is a mix of Steadicam, handheld, and studio-mode shooting. The opening, in a way, was inspired by an Ernst Lubitsch film called ***Trouble in Paradise***. The opening section of the movie takes place in Venice, Italy. Normally when someone is going to show Venice, you have beautiful shots of the gondolas, and the water, and the domes, and the sunset. Instead, Lubitsch starts here on a high-angle shot of an alley. You have no clue where you are—there are some garbage men taking out the garbage. As they take out the garbage, the camera tilts up, and we see they are taking it to a gondola. That's how he reveals we're in Venice. It's of course got the Lubitsch touch, meaning it has the dramatic irony of Lubitsch. Another thing that Lubitsch did, which Billy Wilder did a lot of, too, was to do the unexpected. So, I thought, if people hear Ramin Bahrani is making a movie about the housing crisis, they will assume it's going to be sad, slow, and depressing (laughs). I wanted to flip all that upside down and start the movie in a way that no one would expect. And for a moment, they might think, is this guy a detective? Is this a detective movie? Little by little, you realize, no, he's a real estate broker. No, there was no crime here. The crime here was actually the financial system, capitalism, and globalization. There was no other thief but the thieves on Wall Street, and it's resulted in this man's death. So, all of that was to upend expectations. It was done in one shot, a moving master, to enhance Michael Shannon's character, his power, and to let the audience know they are in good, capable hands. And to make the first edit point powerful. The first edit is to a body bag. Shannon sees a body bag, and the next edit is to Garfield's face. So, there is a direct connection through camera and editing; first, suicide, Michael Shannon, body bag, cut to Garfield. So, with the editing you tell the story.

*You've worked with Michael Shannon at least twice that I know of, in* Fahrenheit 451 *and* 99 Homes*. The same with Ahmad Razvi. What are the benefits of using an actor in more than one film? Are there challenges as well that come with it?*

You come to know them; you have a relationship beforehand. I would love to work with Michael Shannon again. If he was brown, I would have put him in ***The White Tiger***

(laughs). I always have him in mind as someone I would like to work with again and again. He's one of the greatest actors working, and he and I just get along. I know he's going to deliver on a high level. I know he's going to improvise with sarcasm and humor, so he's someone I like to be around, and trust. And actors are drawn to him, other actors like to work with him. Making movies is a hard process, and there are a lot of people involved. Sometimes you get a nasty actor who shouts at you all day—I have experienced that—and you want to try to avoid people like that.

*I just saw him in* Frank & Lola*, where he plays a chef in Las Vegas. That was an intense film, and he communicates his own intensity well, often appearing to be on edge.*

He's also very funny. I would like to do a comedy with Michael (laughs).

*Europe is of course not a monolithic entity, but in conventional terms is (or used to be) far less diverse and multicultural than the United States; and yet, European film festivals have a history of much greater inclusiveness than those in the U.S. Fortunately, that has changed, and your films have been celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic. Still I wonder, how would you account for that, at least historical, difference?*

The most immediate answer that comes to my mind is because Europe is a continent with many countries. They're small countries relative to America, so people are constantly crossing borders, hearing different languages, whereas in America that's not the case. So, if you are showing your movie at the Venice Film Festival, there are movies coming from all over the world. They're much closer to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, East Asia, so they were celebrating Satyajit Ray. Venice has a great history of showing Chinese, Taiwanese movies, and Japanese cinema. They've celebrated Iranian cinema in Cannes and Venice, and it takes a bit longer for those to cross the great ocean. I think it would be correct to ask, "How come, at the same time, there weren't more projects, more films, coming from South, Central, and Latin America into the States?" That would be a correct question. Maybe people are more interested in what's in their backyard and they didn't know about those subjects.

*You just mentioned Satyajit Ray, whom you have cited as being formative in your own career as an artist. Your Top 10 films list on Criterion includes several Bergmans and the Italian neo-realists; you have worked with Amir Naderi and drawn upon "post-revolutionary art-house" cinema in Iran; and then there is Kryzysztof Kieślowski, among others, and these are just a few. Could you, in broad stokes, trace some of these influences for our readers?*

Really, my encounter with cinema—other than haphazard ones, like watching *Taxi Driver* over my brother's shoulder when I was too young; I was very drawn into the movie and I was also horrified by it—really started in high school. I had a teacher in 11th grade, Van Brown, who suddenly decided to show us movies, instead of forcing us to do the classwork. The movies were American films from the '70s. So, I was watching Robert Altman, *The Conversation* (1974) by Francis Ford Coppola, *Mean Streets* (1973) by Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). Suddenly, these great American films from the '70s showed up, and to our surprise he expected us to talk about them—that movies were things to be discussed, rather than just for eating popcorn (laughs). And it never occurred to me until that moment that a movie was something that could be considered a work of art, or could be discussed the way you could discuss a book or play; I got hooked pretty quickly. Up until that point, I was more interested just in reading. I'd become interested in creative writing, but it never occurred to me that movies were something

that you would do. So from there, I was going to the local "Video Village," it was called, where you could rent VHS tapes or Beta; we had VHS. I quickly went through all the great independent American films; I then went through whatever they had in their "classic section," which was not much. Video stores, you may recall, were mainly for new movies, new releases in the last 5-6 years—action and whatnot. They had a small foreign section, and so I exhausted that and went to the public library and started to discover people who influenced me early on, like Werner Herzog. Seeing *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) as a teenager totally changed my way of thinking. By that time, in the early '90s, when I was finishing high school and, in the mid-'90s, going to college, Iranian cinema was coming to the global stage. And so Abbas Kiarostami became a huge influence. Seeing *Where is the Friend's Home* (1987), *Life, And Nothing More* (1992), and then *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) on the big screen at the New York Film Festival when I was at Columbia—all of these things completely changed my direction and my thinking. Of course, the Italian neorealists, *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Umberto D.* (1952), *Le Terra Trema* (1948), *Rome, Open City* (1945). From there it just went to the great works of cinema. You mentioned Kieślowski. Watching the *Dekalog* (1988) as a college student was a huge influence on me. I go back to those films pretty much all the time.

Goodbye Solo *is partly an homage to Kiarostami's* Taste of Cherry.

An homage, you're completely correct. But it is also flipped in whom it takes on as the lead protagonist. The movie in many ways originated from [Roberto] Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950). I loved the War Trilogy: *Rome Open City*, *Paisan* (1946), and *Germany Year Zero* (1948). *Germany Year Zero* may be the *only* war film that makes you want to never go to war. Many war films, even if they are good, there's some part of them that is still alluring, especially to young men with adrenalin who want to kill and shoot and go on an adventure and blow away people who don't look like them. After World War II, Europe and Italy were still in shambles, and he wanted to make a film that could give some hope or some inspiration. He wanted to get away from the Trilogy, those kinds of harsher films, and so he made *The Flowers of St. Francis*. It's a great film; [Frederico] Fellini was credited as one of the writers. You can see it on the Criterion channel. It's about St. Francis and his episodic story, and he thought that at that time the world needed somebody with that spirit. And so *Goodbye Solo*, the concept of it, started at the time of the Iraq war. There was so much killing every day of innocent people in the Middle East, and all these war movies were coming out in American cinema—killing movies, some critical of war, but still so full of killing and death. And so, I thought, maybe there is a way to reimagine *St. Francis* now. And I met this taxi driver that had this warm spirit, and then that connected to Kiarostami and it became this movie *Goodbye Solo*.

*You mentioned Coppola's* The Conversation*, which has brilliant sound design and was, I think, nominated for an Oscar in that category. That made me think of your short* Plastic Bag *(2009), which too explores innovative sound design. Toward the end, the sound design even features whale songs. It's moving away from music toward something very different. Humans, in fact, are evacuated from that world; you don't see a human face except for the sculpted face of the, rather ironic, victory statue. So I am interested in the sound design of your works, like* Plastic Bag.

*The Conversation* was very helpful to me on *99 Homes* because *The Conversation* is so single-mindedly focused on surveillance—every scene, every prop, every set design, every costume, every story point, every theme, every relationship. And I was studying it when

Goodbye Solo, *the concept of it, started at the time of the Iraq war. There was so much killing every day of innocent people in the Middle East, and all these war movies were coming out in American cinema – killing movies, some critical of war, but still so full of killing and death. And so, I thought, maybe there is a way to reimagine* St. Francis *now.*

**I was writing *99 Homes* and I eliminated every scene that had nothing to do with foreclosures, or didn't have something to do with housing. Sound design is something that I love, especially off-camera set. I mean, if you see a movie like *Chop Shop* or *Goodbye Solo*, there's no soundtrack; there's no score in the movie. *Chop Shop* is endless sound design. Noise in that location that's been carefully designed; Abigail Savage at that time did the sound design. *White Tiger* also uses sound as a way to make scenes more emotional or internal. You're always thinking about, How can sound put the viewer more inside the head of the main character? How can sound make the viewer experience the scene more emotionally the way the character is going through it? Off-camera sound I like a lot as well, coming from [Robert] Bresson, which then Kiarostami used a lot as well. *Plastic Bag* has its own freedom to it because it's a short film. It's 18 minutes; nobody wants to make their money back, so somehow I found myself free to do anything. It was my most risk-taking film up until *The White Tiger* in terms of jumps in time, voiceover, and humor. And of course, I'm taking the risk that you're going to care about a piece of plastic with a voice by Werner Herzog (laughs). And then I'm very much inspired by Persian poetry, especially [Omar] Khayyam's poetry, which was a big influence on that movie.**

*Sound design begins, in this case, with Herzog. There's this very particular voiceover, a German accent, almost a little strange and alienating, as if his voice were giving voice to a disembodied, inanimate object – and of course that is what the film is about. Why did you pick Herzog?*

**Well, there were a couple of reasons. One was because the plastic bag has been living for hundreds and hundreds of years, and there's something about Werner's voice that feels like it could belong in the classical era. He could have come out of prehistoric times, even—he has that quality. I also knew he would be good for humor. He has a good, comic, deadpan delivery. And most of all, I just wanted to meet him. So, these were all good reasons.**

*That leads me to a question about intention, and design, and serendipity. There is a scene in* Plastic Bag *where you see the plastic bag drifting down, and only toward the end of that scene do we realize the camera is capturing the plastic bag through a puddle and then the camera tilts upward. That's beautifully done and suggests the topsy-turvy world that this film is addressing. But shortly before that, as this plastic bag is coming down, I think past a parking structure, the bag is chasing up these pigeons and they fly away. (Pigeons are a big motif in your films, which I'd like to reserve for a later question.) That is a shot you couldn't possibly have controlled. You can control the puddle shot slowly tilting upward, but you can't control the pigeons being randomly chased from their perch (unless you are a Hitchcock in* The Birds*). You research all your shots very carefully, but there are moments of serendipity in films that are beyond anybody's control. Even the most careful director is, maybe, grateful for moments like this that are sort of like, "Oh, my gosh. This is a gift that has dropped into my lap."*

You're searching for that, you're hoping for that. There is a scene in *Plastic Bag* where the bag is dancing with a red bag, and suddenly it lands on the red bag and they are in an embrace. This is just by chance, but they made love in a way (laughs). So you're hoping for that in any film. You're also trying to prepare for it, especially when you shoot in live environments. You see that a lot in *Man Push Cart*, where you're shooting in live environments with people who do not know they are even being filmed and they are interacting with the main character. In *Chop Shop*, the kids are selling candy in the subway to real people whom I don't know. I've never talked to them; they've not been staged. They're really buying candy. Part of how that works is, I had the kids really selling candy on a train in the preproduction period, so they would feel comfortable and know how to do it since they had done it before. And I don't say, "action," I don't say "cut." You're just kind of shooting, and the actors are prepared for things to happen. In *The White Tiger*, there's a scene where the main character is shouting at a beggar woman in Old Delhi in a crowd of hundreds and hundreds of people. These are not extras, none of this has been staged; I've gotten rid of the crew. I don't say "action" and "cut," so he's interacting with real people in real time. So, in some way, you're hoping for it, you're praying for it, to get lucky with some strange accident—a bird gets lost in your frame, someone walks into your shot and starts talking to the actor. You're hoping for it, and you're also planning for it, in a way: that if you arrange the set, you'll get lucky.

*Speaking of* Chop Shop *and* Man Push Cart*, I've noticed some continuities in those early films, but only now that I've been watching them again in sequence. There's the pirated DVD motif—everybody's selling them because they are trying to make a buck; the candy, of course; and then there's the pigeon motif, which makes me think of the trapped roosters in* White Tiger*. I realize that's quite a leap, but we are dealing with birds, and then there is also this desire for both physical and social mobility. In* Man Push Cart*, it's the push cart. By the time we get to* Chop Shop*, we are graduating to a food truck. You've got the mobility of the taxi in* Goodbye Solo*, and then in* The White Tiger*, Balram sees the driver's license as a license toward upward mobility, which it is, and which he passes on to his own fleet of drivers. So, there seems to be this sustained attention that links physical mobility with social mobility in your work.*

Yeah, I think so. I like these things because—well, in the first two films, they're physical things, and I like that because you can film them. Plus, all the things you're describing, they're work related. There's tension in all the films, the power of money and the power of globalization, and what are the impacts on working class people. When I made *Man Push Cart* in 2005, when it came out, Ahmad's daily struggles seemed distant to a lot of the audience, who were more of a bourgeois audience in arthouse cinemas. You know, earning one dollar a day. I think in the 17 years that have passed, it seems now that those struggles are hitting people in the face in a larger percentage of the population. If you look at the gig economy, it comprises almost 30-40 % of the U.S. economy. So, I think increasingly, people are going to start to feel the pressures and traps of capitalism, as we understand it now.

*I would describe you in more senses than one as a "literary" filmmaker, in that you have been an avid reader for much of your life: from the poetic works of Hafez or Farid ud-Din Attar in your parents' native Iran to many of the carefully curated book titles in the opening shots of* Fahrenheit 451*. And then there is your enduring friendship with Aravind Adiga, which produced* The White Tiger*, and now* Amnesty*, which is in preproduction, I understand. Written texts and their "translation" into visual form is part of*

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*who you are as a filmmaker. How would you describe the relationship or tension – if it is a tension – between the language of cinema and the language of words in your work?*

**Yeah, they're different. A book can deal with ideas much more than a movie can. It's harder to express some of those structural "ideas" in movies, but then of course movies can do things books cannot do, like film an actor in close-up. But I've always been more of a reader than a watcher. My adolescence was more about reading than it was about movies, movies came later. Even now, to this day, I'm more involved in reading than I am in looking at movies. Speaking of influences you had asked about, *Man Push Cart* is coming out of a lot of things, but more than anything it's coming out of Camus and his essay on the myth of Sisyphus, his reinterpretation of that myth, as a way to understand his concepts of absurdity. I think Dostoevsky, probably more than any other writer, has been around all of the film's moral tensions—tensions of society, how can there be morality when we don't have bread?**

*That's the epigraph to the script of* 99 Homes*, isn't it?*

**Yes. In *99 Homes*, the written script began with a Dostoevsky quote; I just didn't put it in the movie. I think in terms of American novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* is probably the one that impacted me the most in terms of its focus on the working class, its focus on social issues, its focus on labor movements, on money and power. Of course, *Grapes of Wrath* is also dealing with environmental issues that in some way trickle into *Plastic Bag*. So, in between projects, I am usually reading and re-reading things to draw themes, and ideas, and characters to put in my scripts. Of course, *The White Tiger*, it's a direct adaptation, as will be Aravind's *Amnesty*. Otherwise, you're just pulling from things.**

*I've not read* Amnesty*, but I've read* The White Tiger *and I've read* Last Man in the Tower*, which, broadly speaking, deals with the real estate market. That's not a real issue in* Chop Shop*, but it's sort of on the periphery.*

**And in *99 Homes*, of course.**

*Yes, and both novels chronicle elements of the transition from the old India to the new India in different ways – but they are murderous as well. I am wondering, have you and Aravind talked about other adaptations beyond those novels or other collaborations?*

**No, right now, it's just these two. I mean, when we were much younger, before either of us had ever made anything, we tried to write a script together and we just didn't know how to do it. I didn't know how to write a script, he didn't know how to write a script, and**

**then he got busy writing books. So, mainly now we just talk and read each other's work.**

*I know you've also shared some scripts with Amir Naderi. I understand he hasn't actually written any part of them, but you share ideas with him, so there's this sense of collaboration between the older and the younger filmmaker, and you seem genuinely to create a climate of collaboration among the film crew.*

**Yes, I like that very much. I don't like to tell the crew exactly what I want to do; I like them to bring their ideas to the table. So you're not telling the cinematographer initially, I want it to look just like this. You're asking that person, what do you think it might look like? You're fielding their ideas. Then if it's not in the zone of what you want, you can say so. You want to see if your collaborators can make your vision better, stronger, more interesting, more surprising. If you tell them everything, you're never going to get that. So, I prefer the other way, especially with the actors. You're hoping that they're going to surprise you. There's nothing better than that when you're on set and an actor surprises you.**

*In terms of other literary connections, as I was preparing for our conversation today, I was watching* Chop Shop *again, and I noticed that in the Criterion edition there's an essay by Viet Thanh Nguyen. I've taught his work repeatedly, especially* The Sympathizer *and* The Refugees. *It seems to me that* The Refugees *would be a tailor-made book for your own interests. Have you talked to him about adapting or doing some work with him?*

**We have. We talked about *The Sympathizer* for a while, but the timing just didn't work out. They are now putting it together as a series. He is just a brilliant writer of fiction and of non-fiction, and a great thinker. I just got *The Committed*, the sequel, I haven't read it yet but can't wait to. I love *The Refugees* also.**

*I do too, and I have to say that as I was rethinking my questions this morning, I thought, you know, in* The Sympathizer, *he's also delivering this stunning critique of* Apocalypse Now. *Looking at it from the perspective of the colonized vs. the colonizers, and who gets to write what kind of narrative, so he is a sort of film critic and theorist as well. Readers get a kind of cultural/cinematic jewel midway through this novel. Do you feel like that as well?*

**Oh, sure. In fact, I just watched a movie called *Even the Rain* (2010), a Spanish film by director Icíar Bollaín and her husband, Paul Laverty, who wrote the script. (Paul Laverty writes also for Ken Loach, another director I like a lot.) And there's some of that same feeling about that. I texted Viet to make sure he sees that movie. There's a great play of making a movie with indigenous people in Bolivia and how they're treated. It's based on a historical subject, but it's also deal-**

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ing with a water strike that was happening in real time. It's an interesting movie.

*In terms of other writers that I thought of in that context, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel* The Namesake *was adapted by Mira Nair. Some of her other books,* Unaccustomed Earth *or* The Lowland*, would, I think, speak to you as well, if you have not already read them. And then of course there is Amitav Ghosh's new novel,* Gun Island*, which speaks to the issues of climate change and migration, in the way* Plastic Bag*, by virtue of its scope, as a playful, abstract film, can't address. Your sensibilities as a director tend to couple climate change with mass migration.*

That's what ***Grapes of Wrath*** is.

*It is, it really is. You have toggled among feature films, documentaries, TV spots, etc. I know that your films are carefully rehearsed and shot, and you often have multiple takes and trial runs before the actual shoot. And yet, these films also evoke this quality of documentary precision. That's the case with* Chop Shop *and* 99 Homes*, and your other early feature films. They tell compelling stories and offer social commentary at the same time. Can you give us some insight into how you negotiate the dividing line, if there is a dividing line, among these various genres?*

It's just always been in my work. I don't know how to describe it. I don't do as many rehearsals anymore. I like blocking a lot, but I also don't like things to be too perfect. If they become too mechanical, it won't match me. I like things a little looser, a little bit rough around the edges. Even if in ***Chop Shop*** we did many takes of the same scene, the goal was to think it was accidental, even though it had been planned. I like that more, somehow, things that are a little bit rough.

*Perfection might draw more attention to itself. The roughness seems more natural somehow.*

It works for some filmmakers that I admire, Kubrick being one. Or David Fincher in contemporary cinema. But it doesn't match me personally, my style. I admire it, I like to watch it. I can't imagine a Coen brothers' film not being that way, where the camera position is so perfect and the editing and the design. If it were rough, it wouldn't work for some reason. I admire the Coen brothers greatly. They are so unique, and original, and funny, going against what you would always expect. It's really incredible.

*The underground heroes of* Fahrenheit 451 *are people of color, or people endowed with unusual cognitive gifts or challenge, like the young Iranian-American boy. He's a genius who has memorized all of Proust's* Remembrances of Things Past*, down to the page. It's a great scene in the barn. By most traditional accounts, he might be on the "spectrum," as we codify it today, and be deemed a social outcast or misfit. Yet this young actor as well as some others seem to ensure our survival as a species, possibly. I wonder whether this is a film that rewrites the traditional hegemony of white power along lines of gender and skin color. Am I reading too much into this?*

No, not really. I can't disagree with any of that. At the same time, it's just how I felt the characters. I acknowledge that all of that is there, but I can't say that it was my first intention. When I met that young Iranian-American kid, he was a great actor, and when I heard he was Iranian I liked him more. What can I say (laughs). Or Sofia Boutella, of course. I connected with her, because she was really great, great for the part, great personality. As someone coming from another part of the world, naturally I'm drawn to people like that. Even wanting to talk about Michael Shannon, part of what draws me to him, other than that he's incredibly talented, is that he feels a little bit outside the zone. He doesn't seem to fit in. I like that about him.

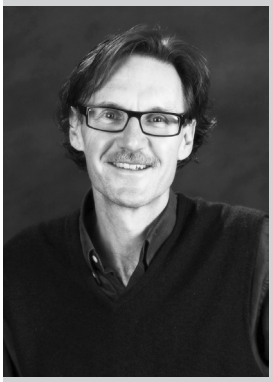
*Could you give us a preview to coming attractions? I understand you're shooting a new documentary on the man who invented the bullet proof vest.*

**It's a man named Richard Davis. He invented modern-day concealable body armor. To prove it worked, he shot himself over and over again and filmed it. It's my first feature documentary. I've done two short documentaries. I had a third short documentary that we started, but Covid stopped it, but now we'll be back in August to finish it; it's about healthcare in the rural communities of the South. It's a very interesting project. I have a short documentary on Criterion called *Bloodkin* about a young boy who murdered his father in Texas. And another called *Lift You Up* about an egg inspector that I made with the Mandela Foundation.**

*One last question. The influence, not just of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, but also of your literary tradition coming out of Persia and Iran, did that come from your parents' side? Were you yourself interested in that?*

**Yeah, it started at home with my parents. Hafez, Rumi, Khayyam, Ferdowsi, the *Shahnameh*. These were all things in the house. Going to college, being fortunate enough to work with people like Hamid Dabashi, who was a mentor for me at Columbia, and reading Sohrab Sepehri and Forough Farrokhzad, and others. And of course he started teaching me about Iranian cinema and Middle Eastern cinema. The great film *Yol* (1982), and so many others. And then I lived in Iran for three years after college. That was one of those pivotal experiences that helped form me as an artist.**

*Thank you so much for your time, Ramin. It was a pleasure.*



Michael Wutz (Ph.D., Emory University) is Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at Weber State University and the editor of *Weber*. He has published in the fields of American literature, media studies, science, and the humanities. Recent publications include a volume of original essays, *E. L. Doctorow: A Reconsideration* (co-edited with Julian Murphet, Edinburgh UP, 2019), and an edition of original essays by media theorist Friedrich Kittler, *Operation Valhalla* (co-edited with Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Ilinca Iurascu, Duke UP, 2021).

# HISTORY, GROWTH RINGS, AND MUSIC

LAURA STOTT AND MORAN HARRIS

*Kiki Petrosino is the author of* White Blood: A Lyric of Virginia *(2020) and three other poetry books. She holds graduate degrees from the University of Chicago and the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. Her poems and essays have appeared in* Prairie Schooner, Best American Poetry, The Nation, The New York Times, FENCE, Gulf Coast, jubilat, Tin House, *and online at* Ploughshares. *She teaches at the University of Virginia as a professor of poetry. Petrosino is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, a Fellowship in Creative Writing from the National Endowment for the Arts, an Al Smith Fellowship Award from the Kentucky Arts Council, and the UNT Rilke Prize.*
*We had the privilege of having a conversation with Kiki Petrosino via email in early 2021. We talked poetry, the connections of past and present, and the intertwining of humanity and nature.*



## *A Conversation with* KIKI PETROSINO

*Laura: I knew I was going to love* White Blood *as soon as I read the Lucille Clifton quote that opens it and your prelude poem. It's definitely one of the most powerful openings I've read in a poetry collection. It made me excited and a little nervous – like I was on the precipice of something. And I was! I liked what the prelude was asking me as a reader to examine closely and was preparing me to enter. And your choice of including an interlude at the end of the book asserted to me that we weren't at the end of anything. I wondered if you would talk about your process of organizing this collection and at what point your decision of how to begin and end the book happened?*

**I think of this book as a series of musical movements, and I wanted to honor that concept in titling each section. While each part of *White Blood* relates, in some way, to the history of Virginia, I had quite a bit of material to explore. It felt right to create a structure that would contain and facilitate different types of language within the larger work. I kept thinking about opera and symphonic music, "large" musical genres that create similar structural space for theme, variation, transition, and transformation.**

*Laura: Your poems also have such a beautiful lyrical quality. Were there individual poems in* White Blood *that were also influenced by music specifically, not just the movement of the book as a whole?*

**In general, I think of poems in musical terms. I enjoy working with repetition and incantation; this has been true for me in all of my books. Poetry and song are trees that draw nourishment from the same ancient taproot.**

*Moran: In* White Blood*, I loved how you divided your poems and the titles for each section. I felt like these groupings shifted from the speaker trying to confront their cultural history to then trying to understand their current lived experience. Why did you group the poems into the sections that you did? And how did you choose the names of the sections that are not titled "What Your Results Mean"?*

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**I try to be rather straightforward in how I arrive at titles, even in a book like this, which features many individually named sections. In the case of *White Blood*, the poems are grouped according to the circumstances of my research process. The "What Your Results Mean" poems are erasures taken from a DNA test I took at the start of this project, so the title actually comes from the testing company's own language. "Prelude" and "Interlude" are musical terms that suggest something about the structure of the whole book. Other titles simply describe the places I'm writing about: "Albemarle," "Louisa," etc. While unfolding the mysteries of history and genealogy, I wanted my titles and subtitles to be clear, almost like labels for the reader to use as reference.**

*Laura: As a teacher, I'd love for my students to hear what you have to say about revision. I found a version of the prelude poem under the title "Black Genealogy" published previously in* Miracle Monocle*. It's quite different from how it appears in the book, and I wondered if you would mind talking about your process of revision, even with this poem in particular?*

I published "Black Genealogy" early in my process. Many poets do this—put together a brief collection of poems while they're between book-length projects. Revision is a process I enjoy, so I don't forbid myself from continuing to revise after something is initially published, though I often stop revising once the poem appears in a book. "Black Genealogy" is a snapshot in time, reflecting where I was, in my thinking and in my practice, as the larger work took shape.

*Laura: Do you find the kind of record your own poems create helpful as a writer?*

It's funny, I haven't thought about previous versions of my poems in that way, but I like the idea. I do tend to move on from the poems once they appear in a book. If the previous versions create a record, maybe they are like growth rings in the trunks of trees. They trace how something came to be.

*Moran: In the section "Happiness" within* White Blood*, I found a theme running through the poems that dealt with the human body in an interconnected way with plants. Some of my favorite quotes dealing with this interconnectedness were "didn't yet sense myself turning into sedge grass," "what happens when the beloved body hangs up its flowers,"and poem 11 where the forest becomes like a human throat. I especially loved when you used words such as "larynx," "jet," and "lozenge," which give this piece a jarring feel even though a forest does not usually fit with that harsh description. Why exactly did you choose to weave plants and nature with the human form in this section?*

It seems to me that the bodies of plants and the bodies of humans have always been together. I was raised with the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, the first humans, who were charged with stewarding the earth. In researching Thomas Jefferson's *Farm Book* and his *Garden Book* (compilations of his plantation journals), I noticed how much attention Jefferson always paid to the time of year, to the weather, and to the precise life cycles of his gardens. At the same time, hundreds of enslaved people labored in the shadows of his observations, doing the strenuous and uncompensated work of bringing forth the abundance that Jefferson celebrated. *White Blood* seemed to offer an opportunity to explore bodies, human and botanical, seen and unseen.

*Moran: I found an interesting connection between past and present within the discussion of Thomas Jefferson in your various poems in* White Blood*. I felt like the section "Albermarle" was discussing one's own history by discussing the history of our country. Why specifically did you choose to focus on Thomas Jefferson?*

I feel the ripple effects of Jefferson's legacy acutely. Having attended the University of Virginia as an undergraduate, having these ancestral connections to central and north-

*I noticed how much attention Jefferson always paid to the time of year, to the weather, and to the precise life cycles of his gardens. At the same time, hundreds of enslaved people labored in the shadows of his observations, doing the strenuous and uncompensated work of bringing forth the abundance that Jefferson celebrated.* White Blood *seemed to offer an opportunity to explore bodies, human and botanical, seen and unseen.*

ern Virginia, and having lived in Kentucky (Jefferson County, in fact!) for the first part of my academic career, adds up to a glimmering net of associations with Jefferson's vision. In the United States, we are still very much alive inside the experiment in representative democracy that Jefferson and his cohorts designed. In this sense, you and I are always in Virginia, no matter where we roam.

*Moran: This is something I was intensely curious about when reading your poetry. I love how you feel the presence of history in your life and your heritage, and how you then express that to the reader. I especially loved how you said "association with Jefferson's vision." It is complex to think about living in the vision of someone from the past.*

It's very complex and we live that complexity every day as Americans! Working on ***White Blood*** helped illuminate the depth of connection I feel to our shared history. It's easy, in our popular discourse, to partition off the past, as if it has nothing to do with us; we even talk about "getting over" it. But history is with us all the time. For better and worse, our ancestors set us on our individual and collective paths. They were, and so we are.

*Moran: In section one of* Witch Wife, *I noticed a dark, fairytale element to the poems. In fairytales there seems to be a promise of change, either for the body or the mind. The body seems to be a point of focus in this particular section of your book. I am wondering if a fairytale essence was in your mind when writing these poems, or if it was just me finding this string for myself?*

Yes, I believe that's right. I think of fairytales as occasions for thinking about all sorts of transformation. In fairytales, and in my own work, the body is often the focus of this preoccupation. The poem itself is a body. It has multiple essences: physical, emotional,

*I think of fairytales as occasions for thinking about all sorts of transformation. In fairytales, and in my own work, the body is often the focus of this preoccupation. The poem itself is a body. It has multiple essences: physical, emotional, spiritual. The poem is mortal, just like the body. You can invite the poem to transform itself, through revision, and sometimes it will do this. But, like the body, the poem has limits, secrets, and desires of its own.*

spiritual. The poem is mortal, just like the body. You can invite the poem to transform itself, through revision, and sometimes it will do this. But, like the body, the poem has limits, secrets, and desires of its own.

*Laura: Speaking of* Witch Wife, *I'm also really impressed by your use of repetition. The first book of yours I read was* Hymn for the Black Terrific *a few years ago, and I noticed it then and of course I'm still noticing it now. I wondered if you could talk about your use of repetition as a force in your poetry and this amazing hold you have on fixed verse forms.*

Repetition is very important to my poetics. It allows you to have another chance at exploring an idea. That's why I love villanelles, the form which formed the spine of ***Witch Wife***. The patterns of incantation and repetition in a villanelle create a wonderful knot of thought that, as a reader, you can experience in an active way. Repeti-

**tion creates a propulsive energy within a poem that I find fascinating to work with.**

*Laura: I noticed that about your villanelles! And I think they are fascinating to read. I was also impressed with the sheer volume of them and the energy they carried inside that book, even with the repetition of the form itself. I've always been intimidated by the villanelle as a poet, so I have to ask, do you have a villanelle secret?*

**The secret is to remember the villanelle began as a song form! So, in writing a villanelle, be cognizant of the fact that you are composing as much in the musical realm as in the syntactical one. A strong villanelle resonates in the ear, first and foremost.**



Laura Stott (MFA, Eastern Washington University) is the author of two collections of poetry, *Blue Nude Migration* (Lynx House Press, 2020) and *In the Museum of Coming and Going* (New Issues Poetry and Prose, 2014). Her poems can be found or are forthcoming in various publications, including *Barrow Street*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Sugar House Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Copper Nickel,* and *Mid-American Review*. In 2020, she received an Ogden City Mayor's Award in the Arts for making a difference in the community through the literary arts in Ogden, Utah. She teaches poetry and creative writing at Weber State University.



Moran Harris is a senior at Weber State University. She is majoring in English and minoring in linguistics and plans to obtain a Master's of Arts in communicative disorders and deaf education with a specialization in speech-language pathology. Moran is an aspiring poet and has published her work in Weber State's undergraduate literary journal, *Metaphor*.

# PASSING THE TORCH

## *Reflecting on a Conversation with* RUBY BRIDGES

NICOLA A. CORBIN



After a federal court ordered the desegregation of schools in the South, U.S. Marshals escorted a young Black girl, Ruby Bridges, to William Frantz Elementary School, New Orleans, 1960.

### The Invitation

I was in the middle of prepping for the eighteen one-on-one feedback meetings I had arranged with my writing students when the email came in. Anxious for a distraction and an opportunity to procrastinate in the ways we academics know well, I rushed to open it.

"Are you at all interested in interviewing Ruby Bridges in February? I'll need to know ASAP."

Had I owned an Apple watch at that point, it would have most certainly recorded a jump of 20 points in my heart rate. The blood pressure almost certainly went up as well. I broke a slight sweat as my brain registered the anxiety. Me interview Ms. Ruby Bridges? THE



Ruby Bridges/ Tom Dumont Photo

CIVIL RIGHTS ICON Ruby Bridges? The Black 6-year-old first grader who integrated William Frantz Elementary School in Louisiana in 1960 and who became a civil rights activist spreading the message of Dr. Martin Luther King. And I need to make a decision now.

I tried to return to meeting prep, but couldn't concentrate until my brain landed on a decision. The email asked for an "ASAP" response. I was definitely in the group of folks who developed ongoing anxiety issues through the inexplicable stressors of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. I couldn't fathom how I would handle a high-pressure, public interview with an icon of the U.S. civil rights movement. It's one of those things that you couldn't mess up. I mean, I was sweating with just the invitation. My decision was made.

"As wonderful as this opportunity sounds, can I take a pass this time?" My blood pressure returned to normal, and I felt at peace.

Six minutes later. "Are you sure?"

I responded a minute later. "I'm excited to hear what she has to say. I don't think that I can do a good job interviewing in a public way. Makes me nervous : )" My imposter syndrome was in overdrive.

Later that evening during dinner, I related the email exchange to my spouse and daughter. After patiently sitting through my long-winded rationalizations about why I said no, my spouse said simply: "If you're declining because you're afraid, that's not a good enough reason. You would be amazing." He left it at that.

I was quiet for a long time after the conversation—a rarity in our home. My brain was racing. I kept coming back to how I would respond to my daughter or one of my students in the same situation. I knew all of the words I would say. I could even picture how the conversation would go—and it would all come down to "Of course you can do this. It's an incredible opportunity. Let's talk through how to prepare."

Again, disquiet and unease until I decided to send an email the following day to gingerly inquire if the opportunity had passed. I fell asleep hoping that it had. The response came back quickly the next day. The opportunity to interview Ms. Ruby was still available. I ignored the sweat and heart rate this time and accepted.

## The Preparation

A couple weeks later, I bought Ms. Ruby's books and began listening to interviews she had conducted over the years. Most of them eloquently conveyed her calls for grace, bravery, and truth-telling. In 1960, as a first-grader, she was escorted by U.S. Marshals to school for a full year when she was selected to integrate William Frantz Elementary in Louisiana. The white parents kept their children out of the school for the year, and many of the town's white citizens violently protested outside the school and even threatened to poison Ruby every day. Riots against school integration broke out from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, with people throwing rocks and flaming bottles at cars, and burning crosses in Black neighborhoods. Ruby was taught alone by Mrs. Barbara Henry, a white teacher from Boston, for that first year because all of the other teachers refused to teach a Black child. She emphasized how her white teacher's dedication to her education forced her to realize Dr. King's dream of judging people not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. For while both the crowds and her teacher

were white, they were hateful, but her teacher was not.

Yet, I fixated on her parents' decision to send their 6-year-old child back to a school day after day for an entire year through the ugliest representations of humanity to sit in a classroom with only her teacher. The documented images of primly dressed, respectable-looking white women and children, and white, adolescent boys—with faces twisted in hate, and even mocking glee and entitlement—cut to my core. The Black baby doll in the miniature coffin they brought to their "protests" was the stuff of nightmares. In fact, Ms. Ruby described having nightmares during that first year. Her mother urged her to say her prayers for comfort, according to her 1999 memoir *Through My Eyes*.

What was that continual decision like? Not only for Ruby, but for her parents, siblings, and other family and community members? In her memoir, she writes that her father was less optimistic about the prospect of his daughter integrating William Frantz School because of his own experience with attempts to desegregate during the Korean War.

Her mother thought differently. Not having the chance to attend school herself, Ms. Ruby's mother, Lucille, "thought that the opportunity for me to get the best education possible was worth the risk, and she finally convinced my father." History documents the ugliness that ensued in that Louisiana town—the rioting, the harassment, the burning crosses, and lynching threats. For Ms. Ruby's family, their livelihood was threatened. She writes that her father lost his job and they weren't allowed to shop at the closest grocery store. The decision added another (pretty overwhelming) stressor to the family, and her parents eventually separated.

When we consider the well-told stories of the civil rights movement, we seldom examine the families and supportive systems that pushed our heroes to be brave, even at great personal cost. As a parent, I doubt my own fortitude and courage to be able to make the decision Ms. Lucille made. Why should a child have to carry the burdens of other people's irrational and illogical hatred for her humanity and rights to be acknowledged? Yet, as I read the dedication in Ms. Ruby's memoir, I was and continue to be consumed with gratitude for her mother's courage. It reads:

> "To my mama,
> Truly an unsung hero, for having the courage and faith to take a

*From her books to radio and television interviews to podcasts and TED talks, I did what I would have advised my student in this situation. I prepared. And the more I read and listened, I realized that this conversation was not about me nor my nerves. I had one job—to help the listeners to truly hear Ms. Ruby Bridges with all the nuances of her humanity when she told her story. She was not just a paragraph in a history book (if she appeared at all) or a school lesson. She is real, her story is real, and this history is present.*

stand—not just for her own children but for all children."

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So, my spirit was calm. I had done the research. I wrote the general topic questions and enlisted members of my village to help me refine them. I practiced the questions—in the mirror, when I walked the dog, just before falling asleep—I practiced and anticipated her responses. My colleague who knows all things film helped me set the lighting of my office space for the most significant Zoom call I had been a part of to date.

That afternoon, I laid out the pearls I received as a gift from my siblings when I graduated with my doctorate, lined up the all-black jumpsuit that made me feel confident and sophisticated, and took extra care ironing the university purple scarf that I would wear as a shawl.

Then I set to work on my hair. For Black women, their hair is strongly connected to their sense of self and identity. It is a physical characteristic that is braided tightly into a tremendously complex and painful marker forged in pride, respectability politics, and historical—and ongoing—oppressive attitudes. Understanding Black women's relationships to their hair escapes many. For me, I knew that this natural hair on my head needed to be just so. There was no way I could, or would, show up looking any other way for Ms. Ruby Bridges, civil rights icon. I must show myself well.

Before my family and I departed for campus, I took a quiet moment to stand before my grandparents' sepia-toned wedding photo in the dining room to reflect on my journey from a little Black girl in Guyana who got into trouble for reading too much to this forty-something credentialed woman, now a

*I took a quiet moment to stand before my grandparents' sepia-toned wedding photo in the dining room to reflect on my journey from a little Black girl in Guyana who got into trouble for reading too much to this forty-something credentialed woman, now a professor at a university tucked in the foothills of Utah's Wasatch mountains. I was humbled by the opportunity I had been granted as I gazed at my grandmother in the picture. She never made it through secondary education, but all of her children had attained degrees. She performed the critical other-mothering role while my parents hustled in the ways many parents in the Caribbean do. To her, I whispered my eternal gratitude and promise to do her and my family proud.*



Nicola Corbin's grandparents' wedding photograph.

professor at a university tucked in the foothills of Utah's Wasatch mountains. I was humbled by the opportunity I had been granted as I gazed at my grandmother in the picture. She never made it through secondary education, but all of her children had attained degrees. She performed the critical other-mothering role while my parents hustled in the ways many parents in the Caribbean do. To her, I whispered my eternal gratitude and promise to do her and my family proud. I prayed for inner calm and to be used as the vessel through which the audience would hear the humanity of that 6-year-old girl and her message for us now.

My phone buzzed with a text message from my aunt, who had become the emotional center of our family. "Relax!! My dear niece. Take a few deep breaths or as many as you need. ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE!!," she wrote in her random caps, emoji-laden message. I smiled and walked out the door wearing my daughter's Chuck Taylor sneakers.

## The Conversation

I was so eager to plunge into conversation because we were slated to speak for only a little over an hour that I rushed through the opening right into the first question.

"Well, first of all, I just want to say thank you so much for this opportunity to come and share my story with you and your listeners," Ms. Bridges began. "I am deeply humbled. So I just want to start off by saying this is quite an opportunity for me. So to just take you back. . . " My brain paused, and I relaxed. She had disarmed me with her humility. I suspect she did the same for the more than 1100 people logged into the Zoom session.

As Ms. Ruby Bridges began to speak, I was transfixed. It must have been the quiet authority with which she owned her story and experiences, or the palpable innocence we all felt as we remembered our 6-year-old selves.

"She made me feel like I was there, walking with her, surrounded by federal marshals," wrote a listener in an email to me the following morning. "She touched my heart." This listener was not alone. The picture Ms. Ruby painted for us was vivid and nuanced. We saw the little girl whose parents never did really explain what she would encounter that first day at William Frantz School. My mother's brain screamed: *Prepare your child. As Black parents, we have to prepare our children.* But Ms. Ruby countered my thoughts before I had an opportunity to ask the question. How can any parent explain or prepare a 6-year-old child for that type of hatred? Yes, how can anyone? It was a dilemma that her story forced

the audience to grapple with. As a parent to a Black young woman—and as an educator—I have always struggled with how much is too much reality for my daughter's identity formation. On the one hand, I want her equipped appropriately for the spaces through which she will have to make her way; on the other, is it harmful to her own development? How do we prepare our children?

And so the conversation continued, gentle and authentic punctuated by laughter and piercing insights. From revisiting the loneliness and isolation of her first grade year to reiterating the critical importance of establishing more complete and accurate curricula to championing the hope and optimism that today's youth showed in recent years, Ms. Ruby's voice and story touched our collective hearts.

For me, it was when the conversation turned to the contemplation of her legacy in U.S. history that brought me up short. All my work reading, listening, getting ready did not prepare me for the power of this part of the conversation. I thought I was prepared not only because of my immediate research, but because of some of my life experiences.

I was born in Georgetown, Guyana, and was instilled with a strong sense of pride of family, race, gender, and nation. I was taught to be proud of who I am. Race was the least salient of these identities in my own life, in spite of Guyana's history of racial strife post-independence. However, when I immigrated to the U.S. at age 16, I encountered race in a way I was never forced to before. It was evident in the schools I attended, the neighborhoods in which I lived, the general comings and goings of daily life—a pervasiveness that simmered just beneath the surface. Even for someone who was taught a strong sense of self, I could always feel in visceral ways the low expectations that some high school teachers had of me. For the one year I enrolled in high school before college, my white teachers continually registered surprise at my strong academic performance; my Black teachers did not. All of the teachers seemed weary. My two Black teachers taught history and invested time in trying to contextualize the material for the mostly Black and Brown student population.

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By the time I went to college as a beneficiary of a program designed to improve educational access and opportunity for academically and economically disadvantaged groups, the mental stress of navigating consistently low expectations and expected underperformance by students in such programs began to do its work on my intellectual esteem. At first, I was indignant by the thought that I would ever be perceived as unequal to the work of my peers. But over time, it wore on me and the creeping imposter syndrome became hyper-pronounced. I began to question my own abilities. And so, I too began to cling to the positive histories of Blackness, especially those of Black womanhood, in the U.S. context to harness and navigate my own capabilities.

You see, it is an imperative for many Black folks in the U.S. to use the stories of history to help us push through or upend the continuing narratives and undertones of deficiency that we are told about ourselves in different ways, over time. In fact, it was reportedly why Carter G. Woodson created Negro History Week in 1926, which later became Black History Month.

Every now and then, I have been overwhelmed in my journey as a Black, female immigrant in America. Like the time when I took a group of students, most of whom were white, to a college conference in Atlanta. The late Rep. John Lewis, who had been a much younger counterpart to Dr. Martin Luther King during the 1960s, was the keynote speaker. I was overcome then sitting in the room, and recognizing the ways that this Black immigrant benefited immeasurably from the fruits of the civil rights movement, as other groups had. "Excited to listen to Congressman John Lewis—this man who marched and was jailed and beaten for the right for me to be here with my students today. I stand on the shoulders of giants like Congressman Lewis. Thank you," I typed on my Facebook page.

But, no experience to date had prepared me for the impact of my one-on-one, personal conversation with Ms. Ruby. Her description of what it was like when she met President Barack Obama at the White House to hang the Norman Rockwell painting that depicted her being escorted by the federal marshals to school transported me. She talked about their embrace and the realization by those in the room that the moment was larger than Ruby Bridges and Barack Obama. Those in the room teared up, she said. The moment, as she put it, was about the sacrifices, all the lives lost, all the




**Ruby Bridges speaks with President Barack Obama. The painting behind them, "The Problem We All Live With," depicts Ruby as she is escorted to school on the court-ordered first day of integrated schools in New Orleans in 1960. When the Norman Rockwell Museum loaned the painting to the White House for a short period of time, the President invited Ruby to view the painting while it was on display outside the Oval Office. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)**

marches, the beatings, the lynchings. They embodied the march of progress through struggle and victories. I think many of us on the Zoom call teared up as well as we felt the raw truth and consequences of all the sacrifices.

"It's like I had something to do with this and I'm so proud of her and the same thing with him," she said of President Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris, who is the daughter of Jamaican and Indian immigrants.

I couldn't imagine a more significant legacy than the one she described.

As we closed the conversation, I thanked her, wanting to be sure that she knew that I was supremely grateful for her mother's determination and her own bravery, for I too am a beneficiary of her legacy. "I'm proud of you too," she answered. I inhaled sharply. My hand fluttered to my throat.

You see, what I felt in my core just then wasn't only that I was a beneficiary and recipient of the fruits of progress in the ways in which we inherit history. Nor that we had just ended a wonderful conversation, two Black women of different generations talking together. What hit me at this moment was what it meant to be a beneficiary of that legacy. By saying, SHE was proud of me—a Black, immigrant woman who had found success in America, knowing that it was in part because of her struggles—she connected me in a personal way to that much larger family of people who dreamed for full inclusion in the promise of America. And, being a part of her legacy means that I must "carry the torch as far as you can carry it and then you pass it on."

Many of us learned on that Zoom call with Ms. Bridges that history is happening now, and we are all implicated. Indeed, "You helped us observers remember that history is happening as we speak and act," another listener wrote the following day. "We must be cognizant of our impact on vulnerable human beings and how we personally work through and against civic systems to either damage or uplift others as well as our own souls."

## The Gift

The messages began to pour in before I signed off from the session. I heard from folks—some of whom I knew, others whom I didn't—that the conversation had touched their hearts, and reinvigorated their resolve to keep fighting and pushing forward for full inclusion for all. Most were thankful

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for the opportunity to hear Ms. Ruby's story and her thoughts that we must insist on truthful storytelling.

I stood again before my grandparents' weathered picture in its fraying frame later that evening. "I did you proud tonight, granny," I whispered. "Me, a Black woman immigrant teacher, who didn't think she could do a public interview, made you proud tonight." Ms. Ruby had said that we must be a credit to our race. I hoped I was a credit to all of it.

As if in confirmation, a text message sent in all caps with gentle effect came through from my aunt, my grandmother's only daughter. "DR. NICOLA CORBIN!!! YOU LOOKED ABSOLUTELY BEAUTIFUL! I ENJOYED THE FANTASTIC & HISTORIC PRESENTATION! DYNAMIC! SO VERY PROUD OF YOU!! GIVING THANKS TO BE IN THIS SPACE AT THIS TIME!!"

My aunt, our family's matriarch, died of complications due to COVID-19 less than two weeks later.

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# WEATHERING THE FICTIONS OF OUR CLIMATE

JOHN SITTER

The career of the word "climate" as an intellectual metaphor lasted for more than 300 years but ended with the beginning of this century. When Wallace Stevens published "The Poems of Our Climate" in 1942 or when in 1980 Harold Bloom used the phrase for the subtitle of his book on Stevens, no one expected to read about temperatures and atmospheric conditions. Up through the 1990s, the Climate of X or Y were phrases literary scholars and historians might use to refer to a range of things such as common themes, perspectives, and technical practices. No longer. If the phrases "climate of opinion"—first recorded as early as the 1660s—and "economic climate" still linger metaphorically in popular journalism, for scholars "climate" is now, insistently, climate. Anyone picking up Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021) will already have guessed that it discusses temperatures and atmospheric conditions. The literalization of "climate" is a small sign pointing to a vast problem.

The rise of climate fiction nests within the larger story of the rise of environmental fiction occurring over several decades, which can be suggested in shorthand by two events. The first is the initial rejection in the early 1970s of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* (1976) because "some of these stories have trees in them."[1] The second is the great critical and popular success since 2018 of Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, a novel largely about trees.



Ronan Furuta

Dozens of climate novels and novellas substantial enough to repay critical reflection have appeared in this century. My own reflections derive from over 40 "cli-fi" works published since 2000 and, disproportionally, from about 25 published since 2015 (see sidebar). This personal "archive" grew unsystematically. Most of the works were written in English (excepting Maja Lunde's *The History of Bees* and *The End of the Ocean*, first published in Norwegian, and Ilija Trojanow's *The Lamentations of Zeno*, originally in German.) More than half are North American. Two authors are English, four are Australian, one is from New Zealand. Tellingly, nationality makes less and less difference. Writers

from some regions are likelier to write about flooding, others about drought. But the sense of climate is fast growing more global, more informed by earth system science.

What do climate novels do? It depends, of course. An obvious and important function of many of the works is expositional, journalistic. For many readers they popularize scientific findings and projections. This work was especially important early in the century and loomed large in works by established novelists such as T.C. Boyle, Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Barbara Kingsolver. Many of these novels functioned as correctives and critiques of apathetic ignorance and active denialism. They were relatively small counterweights to the damage done to the world's understanding of climate urgency by Michael Crichton's 2004 best-selling *State of Fear*, in which small bands of "ecoterrorists" pose a greater danger to world safety than rising carbon dioxide levels.

This journalistic side of climate fiction remains vital and is in fact a major function that joins cli-fi to the traditional novel, which since its rise in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe has claimed the reporting of modern reality as its province. Our words "novel" and "news" are intertwined etymologically. Daniel Defoe and others purported to be publishing found diaries and letters rather than making things up, and other eighteenth-century novelists insisted their "histories," eschewing the extravagances of earlier "romances," adhered to probabilities. By the nineteenth century, novels begin to appear with emblematic titles like *The Way Things Are* (William Godwin) and *The Way We Live Now* (Anthony Trollope).

The words "are" and "now" might not seem the most apt for a genre often thought of as futuristic, but there are a few reasons why they may fit today's climate novels well. First, novels set in the future tend really to be about the present, a point I'll return to. But more immediately, many climate novels actually take place in the present or very recent past. Some are even explicitly historical novels. T.C. Boyle's *When the Killing's Done* (2011) is based on ecological restoration projects the National Park Service conducted on two of California's Channel Islands from 2001 to 2006, and crucial parts of his *Friend of the Earth* (2000) center around the anti-logging protests in northern California during the "Redwood Summer" of 1990, as does much of *The Overstory*.

Ashley Shelby's *South Pole Station* (2017) is a deeply human comedy, but it is also historically particular to the presi-

**Some Notable Recent Climate Novels**

**2015:** Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*; Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*; N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*

**2016:** Ilija Trojanow, *The Lamentations of Zeno*

**2017:** Omar El Akkad, *American War*; James Bradley, *Clade*; Louise Erdrich, *The Future Home of the Living God*; Megan Hunter, *The End We Start From*; Maja Lunde, *The History of Bees;* Kim Stanley Robinson, *New York 2140*; Ashley Shelby, *South Pole Station*

**2018:** Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

**2019:** Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island*; John Lanchester, *The Wall*; Elvia Wilk, *Oval*

**2020:** James Bradley, *Ghost Species*; Diane Cook, *The New Wilderness*; Maxim Loskutoff, *Ruthie Fear*; Maja Lunde, *The End of the Ocean*; Charlotte McConaghy, *Migrations*; Lydia Millet, *A Children's Bible*; Jenny Offill, *Weather*; Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*; Madeleine Watts, *The Inland Sea*

**2021:** Octavia Cade, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief;* Richard Powers, *Bewilderment*

dency of George W. Bush. The locale of Madeline Watts's *The Inland Sea* (2020) is the Australia of 2013, with its floods and intense fires. Watts's novel is a particularly apt example of what Shelby in a prescient 2017 essay described as "first impact fiction."[2] Shelby has in mind novels that describe "what the transitional existence might look like once the climate impacts that are imminent hit us," creating worlds "where readers see both the familiar and the slightly strange." Presenting The Way We Live Now of course entails more than incorporating careful research and up-to-date information. As novels generally do, successful climate novels render what it *feels like* to be living now, especially for someone acutely aware of environmental risk. The accuracy, in short, of realistic climate novels is affective as well as factual.

This affective function is in part therapeutic, particularly through the depiction of grief. A key figure in many recent climate novels is the Grieving Scientist. What are these scientists grieving for? More than climate per se in almost every instance. This fact reminds us that the career of the word "climate" does not simply end with literalization. A more complete story of the word goes further: as the metaphoric uses of "climate" grow less common, it functions literally for a while but then soon becomes a synecdoche. "Climate" today thus stands not only for climate but for accompanying parts of our environmental emergency, especially habitat loss, ocean disturbances, and extinctions.

One of the most engaging portrayals of a scientist as grieving witness is Barbara Kingsolver's Ovid Byron in *Flight Behavior*. The protagonist Dellarobia is surprised to realize how personally affected Ovid is by the "bizarre alteration of a previously stable pattern" that brought monarch butterflies to her family's mountainside:

> The one thing most beloved to him was dying. Not a death in the family, then, but maybe as serious as that. He'd chased this life for all his years; it had brought him this distance, his complicated system. She had only begun to know it. Now began the steps of grief.[3]

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Other grieving scientists include Amitav Ghosh's Piya, a marine biologist studying a dwindling population of river dolphins in India's Sunderbans region, who first appears in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and reappears fifteen years later, still distressed, in *Gun Island*; Alma Boyd Takesue, the biologist in *When the Killing's Done* (2011), and two exasperated researchers in *South Pole Station*, one of whom says, "I hate humanity. And yet I'm down here because I want to save humanity from certain suffering and death before this fucking planet bursts

into flames." Not a scientist but a science communicator, Sylvia, in Jenny Offill's *Weather* (2020), stops lecturing and writing on climate when she finds it too hard to end her presentations with "the obligatory note of hope." Patricia in *The Overstory* is a dendrologist who nearly commits suicide while at the podium. The grief of the scientist-narrator of Powers's latest novel, *Bewilderment* (2021), is overdetermined, but a significant factor is the predominance of "what we used to call freak weather."

These are characters in novels set in the recent past and present. Things worsen in the near future. The Zeno of Ilija Trojanow's *The Lamentations of Zeno* (2016), not an ancient philosopher but a slightly post-contemporary glaciologist, goes into deeper and deeper mourning as he loses his subject to global warming. His plight mirrors that of a real-life glaciologist, Garry Clarke, who told Canadian Broadcast News in 2015 that he would not be continuing his studies of Canadian glaciers: "It's a bit depressing to actually be calculating losses the whole time," he said. "I didn't get into science to be that kind of person."[4] Another actual scientist, Joseph Mendelson, a researcher at Zoo Atlanta, speaks in a similar voice in Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* (2014): "I sought a career in herpetology because I enjoy working with animals. I did not anticipate that it would come to resemble paleontology." In Trojanow's novel, Zeno comes to feel "like a doctor in a hospice."

If Zeno's grief leads to a nervous breakdown, the ecogrief of other fictional scientists plays out in family stress. Another student of frozen landscapes, Adam in Australian author James Bradley's *Clade* (2017) exhausts his wife's patience and their marriage because he can't resist announcing that the birds she so admires are a "ghost species," no longer reproducing sufficiently to avoid imminent extinction. In a more recent Australian novel, Charlotte McConaghy's *Migrations* (2020), both the professional scientist, Niall, and the self-taught ornithologist and narrator, Franny, grieve for the ghost species all around them. The novel does not offer a resounding note of hope (it was published in England and Australia as *The Last Migration*) but a barely possible "hint of how we don't always have to be a poison, a plague on the world, of how we can nurture it, too."[5]

New Zealander Octavia Cade creates the ultimate expression of ecological grieving through the researchers Ruby and Marjorie in her 2021 novella, *The Impossible Resurrection of Grief*. Ruby's specialty, jellyfish, are still doing relatively well in a hotter, more acidified world. But her friend Marjorie, undone by the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef, succumbs to "The Grief," a progressive depression that always ends in suicide. The Grief resembles the feeling that Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht has called "solastalgia," a sadness deriving from the awareness that one's environment is deteriorating, a homesickness without having left home. For Cade, "the undermining upwelling of loss in response to ecosystem devastation" that is The Grief is loss laced with guilt, a sense of responsibility for the human actions and inactions driving the pace of extinctions.

Scientific knowledge becomes a lonely burden. Aldo Leopold famously observed that "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen."[6] Leopold died just at the start of the post-war "Great Acceleration," during which global population has tripled and impacts of the human enterprise have multiplied even more. What was true for Leopold must be all the truer

for today's climate and earth scientists. The damage is everywhere but (nearly) invisible to all, even the specialists, due to its spatial and temporal scales. Leopold went on to say that the ecologist of his time would either retreat into academic quietism or become "the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise." The more extreme grieving scientist of contemporary climate fiction is Trojanow's "doctor in a hospice."

But climate grief and anxiety are felt nearly as keenly by alert non-scientists in climate fiction. Lydia Millet has written two climate novels, *The Children's Bible* (2020) for adults and *Pills and Starships* (2014) for young adults. But even in her comic *Mermaids in Paradise* (2015), a honeymoon novel that pays little attention to climate, the witty heroine arrives at a tragic realization:

> Global warming. . . it had taken our ancestors four million years to figure out fire. It took them five million years to develop writing. And then, in a great acceleration—just a brief screaming handful of seasons—we got electricity, nukes, commercial air travel, trips to the moon. Overnight the white sands of the parrotfish were running out. Here went the poles, melting, and here, at last went paradise. The writing gave us everything all of a sudden, then nothing forever.[7]

In Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife*, Lucy, a grieving journalist doggedly committed to covering a late twenty-first-century Phoenix collapsing without water, is at best non-committal when asked if she has faith in human survival: "I think the world is big, and we broke it."

*What is the attraction of reading about the grief of others in climate fiction? I believe it is at least in part the satisfaction of experiencing vicariously something most of us have felt unless somehow we have managed to be wholly oblivious to reports of environmental peril. The scientists and other acute observers in climate novels are in a sense "designated mourners," to borrow Wallace Shawn's phrase, who help name and define our inchoate feelings.*

What is the attraction of reading about the grief of others in climate fiction? I believe it is at least in part the satisfaction of experiencing vicariously something most of us have felt unless somehow we have managed to be wholly oblivious to reports of environmental peril. The scientists and other acute observers in climate novels are in a sense "designated mourners," to borrow Wallace Shawn's phrase, who help name and define our inchoate feelings.

There is a remarkable moment in English psychoanalyst Sally Weintrobe's magisterial *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis* (2021). As her subtitle (*Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare*) indicates, Weintrobe's project is a psychoanalytically informed political critique. While most of her book analyzes the psychological causes of the current emergency, later chapters delve into the psychological *effects* of the climate crisis on individuals: emotions such as "eco-grief," "eco-futility," "solastalgia," "eco-shame," "eco-rage,"

"climate trauma," and "eco-anxiety." Discussing this last feeling, Weintrobe abruptly confesses that "These days I read as much environmental news as possible but not before writing or sleeping as it is too disturbing and anxious making," adding, "I am not alone."[8]

If Weintrobe, who has been writing about the psychology of climate for over a decade and is thus probably as inured an observer as they come, finds the climate news difficult to process, then it seems likely that the rest of us might find relief in experiencing many of our climate-induced feelings in a fictional, potentially therapeutic setting. The reader's relation to the grieving experts in climate fiction is especially intimate because these characters are closely identified with the novelist. This alignment is clear partly because the scientist or other expert conveys information and a perspective that the author presumably is at pains to communicate. The scientist and the novelist may do our grieving for us, but only so far. A good climate novel cannot obviate but can clarify our need to grieve. And clarification has its real satisfactions.

But there may be a subtler and deeper connection between author and audience. As the passage from Millet nicely reveals, thoughtful climate novelists and their readers will eventually recognize that even the novel itself is a product of the knowledge-informed, advanced industrial civilization implicated in the whole of The Way Things Are, the whole of The Way We Live Now that has brought us to a warm and warming world. Walter Benjamin's famous dictum that *There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism*, a recognition of the dependence of cultural artifacts on exploitation and violence, requires an Anthropocene supplement: *There is no cultural document of modernity which is not also a document of environmental exploitation*.

Understanding this principle comes to more than acknowledging the shallow paradox that publishing a book about, say, saving trees involves consuming paper that comes from trees. Not that contemporary writers don't wrestle with such facts: thus the position arrived at by one of the characters in Powers's *The Overstory* that "What you make from a tree should be at least as miraculous as what you cut down."[9] More fully understood, however, the principle today means that our environmentally conscious cultural products, including urgently needed climate novels, are inescapably part of the post-World War II Great Acceleration whose success now imperils the very future they address.

For such an awareness to be something other than paralyzing in climate

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novels, and to warrant the description of them as "urgently needed," they need to cultivate plausible futures. Some do so explicitly. Of those, many are dystopian, and a smaller number are utopian, or in the terms Margaret Atwood, Kim Stanley Robinson, and others have preferred, "heterotopian" or "optopian," works in which survivors begin to work out a new order. Even most of the dystopias embody a longing for human continuity. Their apocalyptic endings only make sense as apotropaic apocalypses, that is, images meant to ward off evil: not self-fulfilling but self-preventing prophecies.

I argued earlier that books set in the future are really about the present, but in the realm of climate fiction the converse is also true. A rigorous depiction of the present moment in climate awareness will now invariably be suffused with anxiety about the future. It is becoming common for studies of the psychology of climate collapse to speak of proleptic mourning, anticipatory grieving, and *pre*traumatic stress syndrome. Thus, even the climate novelist choosing present-moment realism over speculative fiction will be part futurist. The rendering of our usually inchoate feelings about the future is part of what allows cli-fi to function therapeutically.

The need for such a therapy in our moment has been described most eloquently by Spanish political philosopher Daniel Innerarity in *The Future and Its Enemies: In Defense of Political Hope*. "We would not be human," he argues, without our capacity for 'futurizing,' projecting ourselves toward the future and anticipating it in terms of imagination, expectations, planning, and determination. The uneasiness that makes us hope, desire, and fear is what allows us to relate to the future in all its diverse forms." But, crucially, such futurizing "must be cultivated, just as we cultivate other human capabilities." Innerarity's account was written before the 2016 U.S. election but has grown all the easier to credit in its wake. He argues that unless futurizing imagination is cultivated—an obligation of schools, universities, and other civic institutions—then "anticipation works destructively: it atrophies, turns us into fanatics, into people who are unnecessarily fearful or excessively credulous."[10]

Perhaps these two disabilities are commonly part of a single dynamic. Fearfulness begets avoidance which begets credulity. E.O. Wilson recounts a conversation with a Texas hydrologist about the Ogallala aquifer, upon which much of the region's agriculture depends and which could run dry in 20 years. "I said, 'What will you do then?' He replied, with a shrug, 'Oh, we'll think of something.'"[11] Even at their most elegiac, current climate novels tutor our "futurizing" by trying to "think of something" now, rather than a generation from now. They generally do not map solutions. (With the notable exception of Kim Stanley Robinson, most authors would probably agree with Chinua Achebe's character who tells an impatient politician that "Writers don't give prescriptions. . . . They give headaches!"[12]). More instructive than a good climate novel's particular vision is the sheer effort of its envisioning, its simple display of cognitive courage in staying with a subject even the psychoanalysts find "too disturbing and anxious making." Such a novel calls us out of our temporal claustrophobia and de facto denialism, inviting us instead to look hard at The Way We Live Now and begin to imagine The Way Things Might Be.

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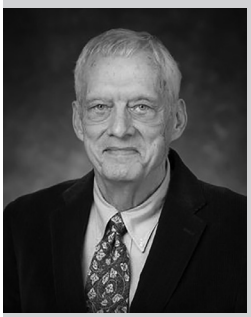
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9. Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*, Norton, 2018, p. 464.

10. Innerarity, Daniel. *The Future and Its Enemies: In Defense of Political Hope.* Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 123.

11. Wilson, E.O. *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life.* Norton, 2016, p. 171.

12. Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah.* Heinemann, 1987, p. 148.



For most of his career a specialist in 18th-century English literature, John Sitter (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is the author of four books and numerous articles on poetry and satire, and the editor of three others. He is now Mary Lee Duda Professor Emeritus at the University of Notre Dame and Charles Howard Candler Professor Emeritus at Emory University, where he teaches courses in environmental literature and in sustainability studies. He is also one of the former professors of editor Michael Wutz, who now has the privilege of sharing's John's magisterial learning with the readers of *Weber*.



# FLEDGLING

LARRY MENLOVE

I spend a portion of my days here in early June taking potshots at the collared doves with my bb gun. It's a fool's chore. They land on the power poles and recite their *hoooo-da-hoot-hoooo* that I have onomatopoeia-ed into "Shut the front door." Or worse than that. You can imagine. Drive me nuts, these collard doves. I've hit them with the Red Ryder. Does nothing. Just a *flut-tt-tt* sound against their feathers and off they fly. I suppose a lucky shot to the head would bring one down for good. But I ain't that lucky.

I've been thinning the apples on my three trees this year. Woke up to a morning in late April where the blossoms should have been an inspiration, a true Johnny Appleseed orgasmic splendor of pink petals to stir the soul moment, but all I could see was worthless apples on the ground come October, and the buckets filled and dumped in the garbage, not even noble enough for some apple-cider heap.

Sometimes wish I had a pig. Something to feed the apples to.

I've got these Rhode Island Red hens up on the hill overlooking my plot of land. A real nice coop run. A first-rate, cage-free, pasture-fed operation going on up there on the hill. I'll throw them some of the old apples, they'll peck at 'em. One of those hens—one of four—has been acting a little less henish lately. She walks around the run much slower, with mindful care to where she places her feet. And when she errs with a misstep on a rock or desiccated corncob she recoils and loses her balance. It would be nice if I could believe it was some royal affectation, some snobbery on her part to say, "Why must I put my talons here, here on this common earth surrounded by wire? Do you not know who I am? You there, you man, who throws kitchen scraps and the occasional old apple in here to us each day, who do you think we are? We should not be subjected to the base tossing of these scraps of radish, lettuce, and green onion tops. Bring us some proper biscuits, man."

I do really imagine these conversations, and, yeah, maybe I do really need to reassess the way I'm living my life.

So this one hen, though she seems more regal, is likely sick. I will probably find her one morning dead-squat beak-first in the corner of the coop stiff as any old dead cock.

I've buried a few roosters in the dirt around here. Live anywhere for a while with chickens, and you're going to bury a rooster or two. I've buried

plenty of hens, but it's the roosters that make me pause, leaning long against the shovel in an evening with the sun going down. A good rooster's death is a solemn occasion. There should be no less than a chorus of robins, starlings, and magpies singing thee to thy rest. A true noble heart lies there beneath the breast of a cock that cares for his hens. I've seen it. Truly. I've stood in wonder at the devotion.

Last evening, I lifted a fledgling robin out of harm's way. Picked it right up out of the lawn, its bellows of a mouth flopping back in my hands thinking I might tongue a little fresh worm or a fly in there. I had nothing to offer in avian nourishment, but I did place the little guy in a thicket of grow-low sumac under the pine trees, chased the cat back into the house, and my wife and I watched. Soon enough a mother robin was there chirping and fussing, and so we went to bed.

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My grandson is a sweet little three-year old with an unruffled streak that can calm a broody hen. Or me. Which he has done many times with his good nature. He's on the autism spectrum somewhere. Knew and could articulate his colors and letters and numbers before he was eighteen months old, but now he struggles to communicate much past two words. To hear him say, "I love you, Gampa," is a day of gold. Five syllables that could launch a ship. A flotilla.

He sees things. He hears things. Fire trucks. The moon in the afternoon. Helicopters. Planes. Birds. All the birds. He doesn't discriminate. Like Gampa does.

I've studied up on the Eurasian collard dove since I saw the first one here in 2010 or 2011, with its *hoooo-da-hoot-hoooo*. And then overnight it seems there were a dozen of them around here. Non-indigenous, so open season on them says the Fish and Wildlife. With the proximity of my wonderful neighbors, who are close but not that close but close enough that I don't dare use any more fire power than the Red Ryder, I call it open cursing season. I've not felled a single one.

One of the best mornings ever: the grandson was 18 months old, had slept over, I was up early with him and I carried him out to the apple trees in the morning dew-light. He's pointing at the "buu" of the sky, the "gree" "leese" on the trees, and I pull off a little "gree" apple from its stem on the branch and show it to him. He looks at the apple, and then I take a bite out of it. He looks at me, a wonder of wonders that I have not seen since. I offer him the apple. And he takes his bite.

So last night the fledgling rescue, this morning the sick regal hen prostrate in the corner of the run, beak

propped on an old corncob. Still alive. For shit's sake.

And this: a different fledgling robin on the other side of my land from last night dead in the lawn by the coop. Damn, but life is a brute.

I busy myself with other chores, drag a hose, pull a weed or two, feed the remaining viable hens. Dig a hole. One of those collard doves above me on the power pole. *Hoooo-da-hoot-hoooo*. Have I grown accustomed to digging holes? I suppose so. But there is a hinge there when the animal is still alive. It's a damning choice, holding the shovel in the run, the corner of the run, over the head of the hen, gauging the force of the blow to end the suffering, where I could just turn and walk away to come back in the afternoon and do the easy part: just bury the animal after it has died on its own.

But no. The grandson is coming out for a few hours this afternoon.

Here he comes, that boy. We play in the yard. So hot. Summer coming on. Apples thinned on the trees. Three hens scratching in the run. Does the boy notice? Only three now? He's a counter. I don't know.

He sees the sky. The planes. Motorcycles. "Apple." Hears the *hoooo-da-hoot-hoooo* that has been ever-present in his young life. He points. "Bird." He goes back home, tired from his visit, where he'll sleep. And dreams. I hope he dreams good dreams filled with apples and moons and helicopters and Gama and Gampa there reassuring.

He's gone back home, and here I am. Home. Up there on the hill under the dirt and dead regal hen is the fledgling in the earth around here. Well below that is bedrock. Above, the blue turning to red turning to gloam, and I take one last potshot at the power pole sitter.

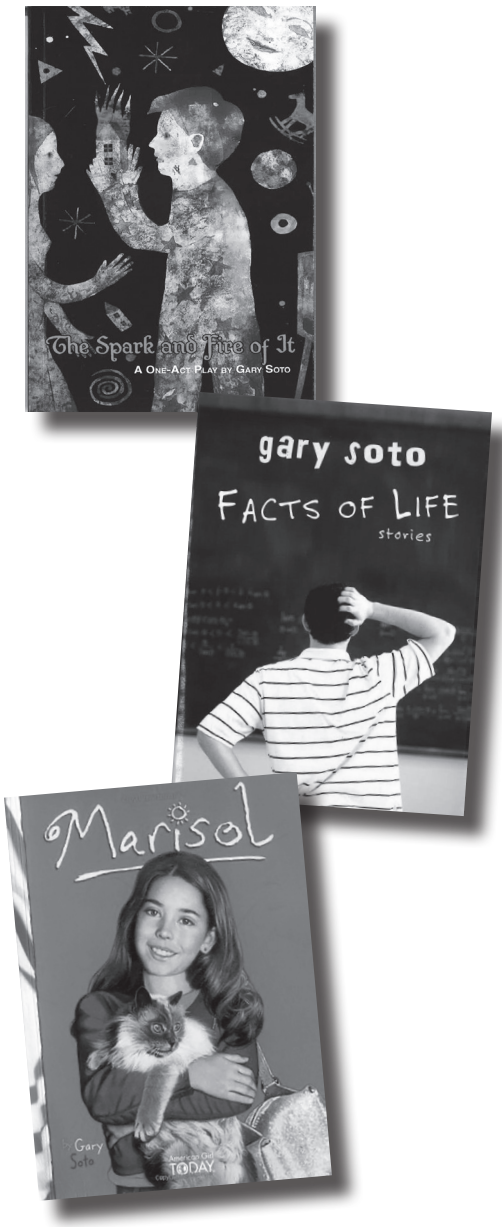
*Flut-tt-tt*.



Larry Menlove writes from Utah. His work has been published in many venues including *Weber*, *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, *Drunken Boat*, and *saltfront*. He has won first place in the Utah Original Writing Competition in both the short story and non-fiction categories, as well as honorable mentions in novel and short story collection.

# GARY SOTO—BACK IN THE GAME

RON MCFARLAND




In 1977 then 25-year-old Gary Soto of Fresno, California, entered what some regard as the "second wave" of Chicanx poetry with his first book, *The Elements of San Joaquin*. Some may argue his reputation as a poet—and poetry remains his preferred genre—may have peaked when his *New and Selected Poems* was named a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award (Stanley Kunitz won that year). Since that year, however, he has produced eight more books of poetry intended for adult readers, the most recent being the 2018 revision and expansion of his 1977 collection. Between 1985 and 1990 he produced four books of personal essays, mostly reflections on growing up in a Fresno barrio. Soto's decision in 1990 to turn his attention as well to fiction and nonfiction intended primarily for young Chicanx readers has proven "momentous," to apply a qualifier I regard as arguably ambiguous.

Certainly, his success as a writer for young, particularly Chicanx, readers has been momentous for him financially, but it has come at some cost. In his email response to my query of June 28, 2019, whether his writing for younger audiences has lost him some status in "the adult literary world," Soto responded, "Yes, without question. But it was something I had to do." The source of his compulsion to write for young readers is not hard to seek: He grew up in a home without books. If Gary Soto wished to claim a one-word mantra, it would be "Read!" The opening image of his webpage, garysoto.com, shows an open book and the following observation: "You can always spot bright people. They are reading a book."

In his essay "Who is Your Reader?" (initially published in the Summer 1999 issue of *American Literary History*

and subsequently in *The Effects of Knut Hamsun on a Fresno Boy*) Soto declares, "My business is to make readers from non-readers . . . my task is to start Chicanos reading" (204). In the same essay he submits, "between spring 1990 and spring 1998 my work for children, young adults, and adults has sold over a million copies" (199). He got to writing for younger readers by a somewhat circuitous route that began with his autobiographical essays intended for adult readers, *Living Up the Street*, in 1985 and still in print as something of an underground classic. Although the last four of the 21 essays that comprise the book, which reads like something of a nonfiction Bildungsroman, deal with Soto as a young married man, the other essays have proven appropriate for YA audiences. It is currently marketed as a Laurel-Leaf book, an imprint of Random House Children's Books.

Soto followed *Living Up the Street* with the essays of *Small Faces* (1986), *Lesser Evils* (1988), and his own favorite among these, *A Summer Life* (1990), initially published by the University Press of New England and now also marketed as a Laurel-Leaf book. Between 1985 and 1990 Soto also composed the poems that make up two of his most important books of poetry, *Black Hair* (1985) and *Who Will Know Us?* (1990). The poems of *Home Course in Religion* followed in 1991. Throughout his career, poetry has remained his first love. But not his only love. Readers have observed some of his briefer essays read almost like prose poems. Most of Soto's personal essays run three to five pages, similar in length to the essays of Sir Francis Bacon, but by no means similar in mode, and he has adhered to that format while expanding the range of subjects to his adult life in such recent collections as *What Poets Are Like: Up and Down with the Writing Life* (2013), *Why I Don't Write Children's Literature* (2015), *Sit Still!* (2020), and *Behavioral Medicine* (2021).

In "Why I Stopped Writing Children's Literature," the key essay from *Why I Don't Write Children's Literature*, Soto comments on his ability to "compartmentalize" with respect to his essentially synchronous work on poems that would make up his eleventh full-length collection for adult readers, *A Simple Plan* (2007), while writing five books for children or young adult readers that appeared between 2005 and 2006: "Each project is mutually exclusive, the frivolous and the serious, the small press and the commercial press, the poetry that requires close reading and the prose that can make sense while I am eating an ice cream cone" (61). The "frivolous" book that is the partial focus of this essay (both his and mine) is *Marisol*, but first some comments on Soto's writing for young readers are in order.

In his first four books of personal essays, intended for adult readers, Soto reflected on his boyhood and adolescent years. When he revised one of those "narrative recollections" by shifting point of view from first person to third with "Baseball in April," he generated the title story for his first important book written for YA readers, an "award-winning collection of eleven short stories" that "depicts the everyday experiences of young Latino/a people growing up in Fresno, California" (Day, 273-301). *Baseball in April and Other Stories*, like *Living Up the Street*, remains in print, and for Soto it remains remunerative. It garnered an American Library Association award for Best Book for Young Adults. (Technically, Soto's first book for young readers was *The Cat's Meow*, published by a small

press in 1987 and later revised and published by Scholastic Press in 1995.)

Over the past thirty years, Gary Soto has written more than forty books for young readers, ranging from picture books for pre-readers like *Too Many Tamales* (1992), a Christmas story, to serious novels like *Jesse* (1994) and *The Afterlife* (1999) for teenaged readers, published as a playscript in 2021 under his own imprint, Las Lomas Editions. He has turned out five plays for YA performance. But although his success as a writer for young readers enabled him to leave his teaching post at the University of California, Berkeley, his decision to direct much of his energy to that market has proven momentous in less positive ways. Some fellow writers, readers, and critics, choosing to ignore his achievements as a writer for younger readers, including half a dozen books of poetry, have come to regard him less seriously as a poet and author. Soto's comedic vision, his playfulness and ready humor—though usually serious, ironic, satiric in nature—surely factors in as well.

Although he takes some pride in his capacity to "compartmentalize" when it comes to his writing in all genres (his oeuvre includes three books of adult fiction), Soto's willingness to disperse his talents does leave the door ajar for critics who would prefer he had kept his focus on poetry, or at least on poetry and prose intended solely for adult readers. Some critics have also lamented his apparent departure from writing poems focused on political and socio-economic issues germane to the Chicanx or Latinx communities, most apparent in his first four books, through *Black Hair* (1985). To those readers and critics Soto responded frankly (perhaps too bluntly) in an interview with Lisa Broadwater published in the June 9, 1996, issue of the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*: "In the Chicano writing community, about 75% like what I'm doing. The other 25% feel like I'm a sellout. . . . I'm not following the party line, I'm not writing about The Cause. To that I say, 'S _ _ _ _, man, I don't care.' As a poet, you don't care anyhow because you're so full of yourself that you just want to do what you want to do." Gary Soto, Broadwater observed, "understands why this rankles some of his peers," and he professed his respect for those writers whose talents and interests pull them in that direction, but "it doesn't change the direction of what I'm doing. It can't. Otherwise, it would not come out as something that was sincere and genuine and authentic."

What many of his critics, peers, and fellow poets seem not to have appreciated is how important Soto's impact along the lines of socio-economic and political commitment to the Chicanx community has been—and remains—through his writing for young readers, most notably in such novels as *Buried Onions* (1997) and its sequel *The Afterlife* (1999), in short story collections like *Help Wanted* (2005) and *Facts of Life* (2008), and in his forays into writing for theater, most notably in the playscript version of *The Afterlife* and a musical on the Dreamers, *In and Out of Shadows*, that premiered with the San Francisco Youth Theatre in 2013. Two of his books of nonfiction for young readers merit at least passing attention here: *Jessie De La Cruz: A Profile of a United Farm Worker* (2000) and *Cesar Chavez: A Hero for Everyone* (2003). While he does not consider either of those books to have been a "success," Soto does consider them worthwhile contributions alongside his work with California Legal Assistance.

In 1999 he received the Hispanic Heritage Award for literature presented at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., where he stood on stage with four other winners: Tina Ramirez, artistic director for New York City's Ballet Hispanico; NFL Hall of Fame offensive lineman Anthony Muñoz; Antonio Hernandez, general counsel for the Mexican Legal Defense and Education Fund; and operatic tenor Plácido Domingo. Asked to provide a quotation for the program, he offered, "My hope is a literate world in which books have a place inside every Latino home."

All went swimmingly enough, it seems, until the 2005 publication of his 140-page novel *Marisol* for preteen readers released in consort with American Girl, which accompanied the novel with a Chicana doll produced by Mattel. On the positive side of the ledger, *Marisol*, which features a Chicanx family moving from a barrio in Chicago to suburban Des Plaines, proved a best-seller at some 250,000 copies, "and I, turncoat poet," Soto playfully acknowledges in his essay "Public Display of Affection" from *What Poets Are Like* (2013), "received a sack of money" (19). On the other hand, the market value of poetry, pace Billy Collins and a handful of other exceptions, remains slight.

Two years later, in "Why I Stopped Writing Children's Literature," Soto proves not so playful as he recounts the pushback he suffered as a result of what he calls "a light sugary narrative" (64) about a happy ten-year-old who loves her dance lessons (both classical ballet and *ballet folklórico*) and her cat, Rascal. Her mother's concerns over what she regards as a "dangerous" neighborhood prompt the family's move, which the girl at first resists but which turns out well for all. Shortly after the book debuted, Soto found himself besieged with complaints from "Chicago activists" including aldermen, the mayor of Des Plaines, and Congressman Luis Gutierrez, who "wrote a furious letter to the president of American Girl" (63). His essay concludes, "I have stopped writing children's literature. At my age, it's too dangerous" (68).

Although his recent dramatic writings feature adolescent characters and have been performed in public schools, colleges, or by the San Francisco Youth Theatre, the two plays mentioned above are aimed at broader audiences, and he considers them to lie outside the purview of "children's literature."

In an email to me dated November 21, 2019, Soto explained that he gave up writing for children and young adults "for good" around that time (2008) partly because "no Hispanic scholars/pundits/other writers" came to his defense. Moreover, he added that in writing children's literature, "I knew I had destroyed my credibility in the adult poetry world. True I was making an income, but at what cost?" In his essay he notes he was then at work on the collection that would become *A Simple Plan* (2007), which features the poem "Bean Plants," a "favorite of mine" and "possibly the best thing I've written" (*Why I Don't Write,* 60).

To some of his admirers Soto's abrupt decision to back away from writing for young readers may seem to have derived from little more than a kerfluffle. Injured pride or vanity may have been involved. In "Why I Stopped," however, Soto indicates having fielded calls from the likes of *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, NBC's *Today Show*, and ABC's *World*

*News Tonight*. He stopped picking up the phone. He decided to complete several projects for young readers that were already in the works, including *Partly Cloudy: Poems of Love and Longing* (2009), the stories of *Hey 13!* and an eBook version of the novel *When Dad Came Back*, both of which appeared in 2011. Basically, however, he was finished with writing for young readers.

Until he wasn't. Gary Soto's return to what I've called "the game" has been reluctant, perhaps, but some would predict inevitable. He's very good at it, after all. Moreover, Soto and *Marisol* had their defenders. Writing for UPI in "Analysis: Doll's Story Offends Hispanics," Al Swanson observed, "It would seem [critics] have not read the book. If they had, they would discover a charming girl in love with her community." In a 2014 blog, teacher Cindy L. Rodriguez wrote, "Soto's retirement from the kid lit world saddens me, as a reader, writer, and supporter of Latinx in kid lit. We have lost a giant in the business, and I worry that what happened to Soto could discourage writers from including Latinx characters in their manuscripts. . . .Think about it, Soto, a member of the Latinx community, was at odds with members of the Latinx community, over a Latina doll and her story."

As it happens, apparently the only prior children's title by Gary Soto to have proven controversial was the illustrated book *Chato's Kitchen* (1995), which was placed on a restricted list by the Clovis, California, school district because a parent complained some of the characters were togged out in gang-related clothing: they were "too *cholo*, too gangster in appearance" (*What Poets are Like* 157). According to Robert Rodriguez, writing for *The Fresno Bee*, one member of the committee "objected to a small cross worn by Novio Boy" (one of the cats). Soto's scrapbook includes half a dozen letters to the editor in defense of the book, a few of which he mentions in the essay "Troublemaker" from *What Poets Are Like*, which opens, "I haven't been too loud or controversial, though I'll smart off against the Republican Party at the drop of a sombrero." There he lashes out at "the racist picture Clovis Unified is creating by restricting this book" about "a suave, streetwise kitty" (156-7). That district had formerly restricted access to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

What I would call Soto's "official" return to writing for the youth market began in 2017 with the publication of his one-act play, *The Spark and Fire of It*, on themes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Robin and Jane in this version) played for laughs. The play is intended for classroom production and includes twenty poems from his 2016 collection, *You Kiss by th' Book: New Poems from Shakespeare's Lines,* along with an appendix of sixteen poems not included in that book. The characters speak in a goofy mishmash of Elizabethan and contemporary English, as when the mother speaks admiringly of the teenage boy, "To his credit, this lad toils!," shortly after having described the potato she was eating as "yummy and gluten free" (13). It gets downright silly at times, but it would probably prove fun in middle school performance. Stephen F. Austin Press published both these titles, Soto's 2013 book of poems intended for adult audiences, *A Sudden Loss of Dignity*, and in 2019 a revised version of the eBook, *When Dad Came Back*, now titled *Gabe*. The latter novella returns to the barrio of Fresno

and concerns the thirteen-year-old protagonist's struggle to accept his recovering alcoholic father, who is attempting to reshape his life after having abandoned his family five years earlier.

With more than seventy published books to his credit, Gary Soto qualifies as perhaps egregiously prolific, and given his extensive range in literary genre as well as intended audience, he qualifies as a moving target. Under his own imprint, Las Lomas Editions, he has recently turned out two limited edition books, the 118 "vignettes" (his term) for adult readers of *Sit Still!* (2020) and *Behavioral Medicine* (2021), a collection of fifteen essays, mostly drawn from earlier books; the novella "The Untimely Passing of the Clock Radio" from *Nickel and Dime* (2000); and most important, 36 new poems. In addition to the recent publication of his playscript of *The Afterlife*, also from Las Lomas Editions, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt will publish Soto's next novel for young readers (middle school, ages 11-14), *Puppy Love*, sometime in 2022. As is almost invariably the case with his writing for young readers, the characters are Chicanx, the protagonist of *Puppy Love* being thirteen-year-old Jordan Mendoza, and working-class (his father is a plumber). Unlike the somewhat edgy one-act play, *The Afterlife*, which concerns violence and suicide in the barrio, the forthcoming novel is upbeat and easygoing.

In his introductory comments for *The Afterlife: A Play in One Act*, Soto notes, "It had been staged by the San Francisco Youth Theatre at nine high schools and cultural centers and was beginning a run at a theater in Oakland, California, when the virus shut down all such productions." He also reflects on its regional identity: "I could speak of the Spanglish in the play or the regional feel to the narrative set in my hometown of Fresno." Although he and his wife, Carolyn, have lived in Berkeley for many years, the barrio world of Fresno remains the site of nearly all his poems and prose, the controversial *Marisol* constituting a rare departure from that familiar locale. Is Gary Soto then a "regional writer"? Conventionally, Western regionalists speak to mountains and sagebrush, farms and ranches—from Wallace Stegner to Mary Clearman Blew—and small towns (thinking here of Richard Hugo's poems from Montana). But the urban West, including the suburbs and the barrios, must be reckoned with, as Krista Comer observes in *Landscapes of the New West*: "a reckoning with the urban, not simply a repudiation of it, is surely inevitable" (63).

Over the years Gary Soto has expressed ongoing interest not only in live performance, dating back to the 1999 production of *Nerdlandia*, for which he wrote a libretto for the Los Angeles Opera, but also for film, dating to 1993 with *The Pool Party*, a 28-minute movie which was awarded a Carnegie Medal by the American Library Association. Among his current projects is a short film based on his much-anthologized poem "Oranges" and a feature-length film based on his YA novel *Buried Onions* (1997). In the street idiom of the moment, he's got game.

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Ron McFarland (professor emeritus, University of Idaho) retired after 50+ years of teaching literature and creative writing, mostly at the University of Idaho. His twenty-odd books include a study of regional memoir, *The Rockies in First Person* (2008); *Appropriating Hemingway: Using Him as a Fictional Character* (2015); a biography, *Edward J. Steptoe and the Indian Wars: Life on the Frontier* (1815-1865); and his prose and poems on angling, *Professor McFarland in Reel Time* (2020). His book on Gary Soto is slated for publication next year as *Gary Soto: A Career in Poetry and Prose*. His current projects include a book of short stories tentatively titled *The World According to Wibbles*.

Kenneth Chamlee

# Walking Through an Exhibition on an Early Sunday Morning

*"Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West"*
Buffalo Bill Center for the West, June 2018

I. *Entrée*
Among the carpeted arroyos I find
frames like lucent windows trimmed
in intricate carvings and gilt
bracing vistas and brute portraits.
No one else is here.

A tree in autumn bronze
arches above a skid of rocks
pitching into a lake where three elk
splash through backwater shallows.

Sidelight graves Yellowstone Canyon
into seeming bas-relief
as cloudshreds mirror
mist off the river with its
palpable roar.

A nod to each crown
in the Royal Gallery: antelope,
bighorn, mountain goat, moose.

And now a bison lumbers so close
his coarse hair scrapes the sill
as he halts and trains
a side-eyed stare.

Shoshone women boil roots
as dogs yip at approaching riders; other camps
are breaking down tepees, tying parfleches
as ponies wait for the next long plod.

Without realizing, I have walked up on the artist
working *en plein air*. In a pane of rough poses
buffalo appear at the end of his brush;
he turns them, stands them, settles them
down, old bulls and cinnamon calves. Then he
draws a green shade, upper left,
and quickstrokes a Native profile,
windworn and cragged.

Some scenes spread like two porch posts
at an overlook hotel—bison fording
beneath a hawkbill moon, bison shouldering
a prairie gale, bison stopped at a riverbank
fired by a benedictory sky.

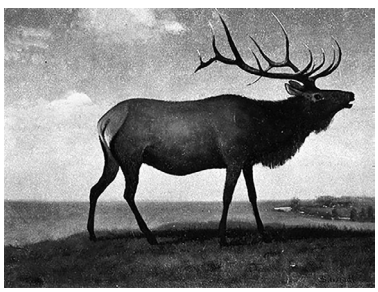
Strange to remember the blurred vision
of some who look at *The Last of The Buffalo*
and fumble its title, who cannot see
dual fates in the central pillar, see only
a weapon in the hunter's hand
and not the angle of that lance:
same slant as riders pounding in,
same slope as six dead and dying buffalo,
same tilt of six skulls counted from the corner,

or of some who cannot step back and see
the closer triad of fallen horse,
killed warrior and beast, who cannot see
the squared hump of a solitary bison
patterned in a mountain behind
or the back of another bull level
as the mesa above him, who miss every
*prima facie* parallel of land and living,
and who miss the black hollows of the closest
skull, turned toward the casual viewer.

II. *Reprise*

*Elk*

Afternoon candles his rack
and lights his rump. He bugles
to his harem, strange squeaking
like a rip of rusted hinge,
hears no answer from the cows.
Near the river, a young bull
snorts, shakes his mane and paws earth.



Albert Bierstadt, ***Elk***, oil on paper, 1879



Albert Bierstadt, ***Prong-Horned Antelope,*** **oil on canvas, 1865**

*Prong-Horned Antelope*

Four earth-defying legs,
cirrus belly and argent scarf,
a pair of sable heart-curved horns
all heating in afternoon's parch.
Heads lifted by sharp sound or scent,
flight or frolic is all the same—
the love they know is speed.

*A Bull Buffalo*

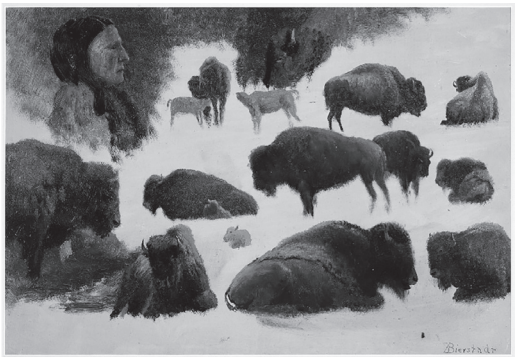
As dark a mountain as ever shadowed plain,
the great brown hump and shoulder, wild forelock
fill a broadside view, so close you see

the black marble and blood-moon
crescent of his eye, turned
warily, gauging

the artist,
his death-
smell.



Albert Bierstadt, ***A Bull Buffalo,*** **oil on paper, 1879**



Albert Bierstadt, ***Studies of Bison,*** **oil on paper, 1859**

*Studies of Bison*

No ground beneath them.
Once prairie mud and thunder, now
yellow dust floats them—
ten bulls, two cows, four calves—
hoofless, no place or way to run.
One calf nurses while another bawls.
A resting bull's shagged flank
is torn like the edge of a territory.

Above the token herd a warrior's
disembodied face, fixed gaze
level as the plains, his red shirt
a shouldered grassfire,
swept hair black and starless.

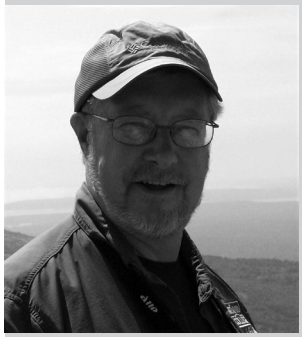


Albert Bierstadt, *Indians Traveling Near Fort Laramie*, oil on canvas, 1861

*Indians Traveling Near Fort Laramie*

Mounted and impatient, the men are pointing
toward the next remove, north, the broken herds.
Dogs snuff among camp bones while women slowly
fold the tepee covers. They will be walking,
babies on packboards, leading tired ponies
humped with bundles that lift the travois' sweep,
twin rakes effacing each mile and stolen home.

An old woman rides a jouncing seat,
telling her granddaughter about distant camps,
cold, swift rivers and deer bedding in the willows.
On the low horizon, a beacon rockspire,
hearth memory for the westward, but one rider
turns and remembers his dream—a lost warrior's
coup stick, stripped of feathers, its notches
scoured away by wind and whipping sand.



Kenneth Chamlee is Professor of English Emeritus at Brevard College in North Carolina. His poems have appeared in *The North Carolina Literary Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *The Greensboro Review*, and many others. He won the *GSU Review* (Georgia State University) National Writing Award in Poetry and has two award-winning chapbooks—*Absolute Faith* (ByLine Press) and *Logic of the Lost* (Longleaf Press). His poems have appeared in six editions of *Kakalak: An Anthology of Carolina Poets*. Learn more at www.kennethchamlee.com.

Dana Sonnenschein

# How to Paint a Gray Wolf

Sketch in the diamond of skull, add
ears, ridge of back, brush of tail.

Legs longer than a dog's, front paws
and foreleg articulated like your wrist.

Lay out your palette. Umbers, ochre,
siennas, zinc white, lampblack.

Mix grays of granite, schist, slate
as water flows over ledges, darkening,

grays of cottonwood bark, oak bark,
shadows on aspen, thunderstorm.

Mix brown of pine cone and branch,
leaves bronzed in autumn.

Tan of riverbank, sandstone cliff,
dry wash.

Amber. Apache tears.
Weathered femur. Tooth glint.

Pick up the wolf-tail brush
you bought in Seattle's Chinatown.

Handmade by a friend, the artist
and shopkeeper said. *For strong line*.

Point the tip with your tongue.
Mouth a prayer that wolf is with you,

laying a paw on your forearm.
Waste not a hair of his death.



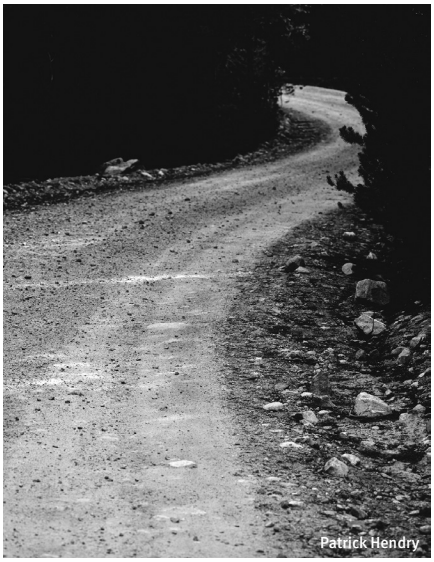
Dana Sonnenschein



Dana Sonnenschein is a professor of English at Southern Connecticut State University, where she teaches literature and creative writing. Her publications include creative nonfiction and books of poetry and prose poems (*Corvus*, *No Angels but These*, *Natural Forms*, and *Bear Country*). Individual pieces have appeared in journals such as *Into the Void* (Ireland), *The Matador Review*, *The Prachya Review*, and Terrain.org's *Dear America* anthology.

Kathy B. Austin

# Back Road




Here on this gravel road,
past the gates that mark pastureland,
shoulders narrowing to nothing,
we are far from all the signs
of civilization that we wrap
around ourselves like armor:
steel girders, cement walls,
stop lights, anything electric,
the gleaming eyeless panes,
neat rows of ceremonial trees,
or suburban bushes trimmed so low
nothing could hide . . .

Here in this deep darkness
eased only by stars and the feeble
darting lights of this one last
remnant of civilization, this rolling
outer skeleton we carry with us
for transportation,
surrounded by towering cliff rocks
and a tangle of vegetation,
we come across a sudden shining . . .

twin eyes that turn,
a rounded shadow, large,
black on black,
the outline of a tail,
and a sudden movement,
bounding across the road.

It could be bobcat . . .
the same one that trails her young
across the rocks, even in daylight,
right there, close to the cabins,
seen, but never hunted.
Or it could be another tall tale
told in a dark bar
between old ranchers
sharing more than one drink,
as most of these stories are.
Our heads turn instinctively,
though we know
there is nothing left to see.



Kathy B. Austin has published in the *Writing Path 1* anthology (University of Iowa Press), *Buddhist Poetry Journal*, *Flights* (Sinclair Community College), *Poppy Road Review*, *Glide* (Wright Memorial Public Library), and *Mock Turtle Zine*. She has received awards from the Iowa Poetry Day Association, the Paul Laurence Dunbar Memorial Competition, and the Dayton Metro Library poetry contest. Over the years, many of her poems have have been aired on *Conrad's Corner*, WYSO. Kathy spends as much time as possible in the western states studying wildlife at the Yellowstone Institute and visiting family.

Henry Hughes

# Who Will Drink Us?



Camille Brodard

Crush grapes and the yeast feast,
sweet-swirling and dividing delight
until their own tanked wastes
kill them. Press, barrel, time and luck,
and you've got love's fuel.

The other's drilled from the earth,
pumped and refined
for our long drives
past the factories and power plant,
pretty pastures grazing cattle,
to the rolling vineyards,
the air-conditioned tasting room
and handsome labels
pasted on heavy green glass.

We sip, smile and select,
carry a bottle into the garden
and pour. Red spirits
swirl blithely around the clear crystal
under the planet's steamier dome.

What heady wastes we leave
the world.  Who will drink us?

# Spear Side of the Family

I

What if we hiked all day
with stuffed packs of tribute—
whisky, smoked salmon, tobacco—
trekking my forebear's foreclosed estate,
gone wild with rabbits and graffiti.
Would he reappear with flowers
for Lady Margaret?—taken
in his greasy rough lust, softened
by her cross and tender touch
on the rug of the last Scottish bear
tracked and lanced in early snow.

II

Blasting dams, waking Columbia's
roaring falls might bring
your old man's old man out of the foam
with his long spear and short temper.
Would he shake off river, dogs, and flies,
and be kind to his smoky woman
tired from splitting and racking fish
in the wild wind all day? Her berry jokes
on the reed matt turning his coughs
into laughter.  Man, you'd hope so.

# Kandinsky

You quit law, Moscow and your wife, mazing Munich
for the pencil and brush before the guns of August,
racing home to vex Reds, then bumping Bauhaus
into trouble. But enough narrative, no more "Blue Rider"
over sweet clover. No more boats and trains. You wake

an emotional sofa, spilling coffee between piano keys
braising ballet. Spirit free of object, politics free of lines.
Nazis sneered "Degenerate," so you moved to Paris

for a *now* that's *here*—

Portland, Oregon. Galleries and vegan strip clubs,
murals and moss mosaics. We bike naked, vape sativa,
tattoo faces, recycle lint, brew 527 hoppy beers,
and reject sales tax.  Our favorite abstractions are green.

Who? Oh, yeah, Kandinsky. Your red jags,
yellow wheels, and gypsy gold ribbons. Primal genius
in pince-nez and a charcoal suit smoldering
for the new twenties. We'll catch the exhibit,
or the post, and say, *Kandinsky – Oh, yeah. He's cool.*

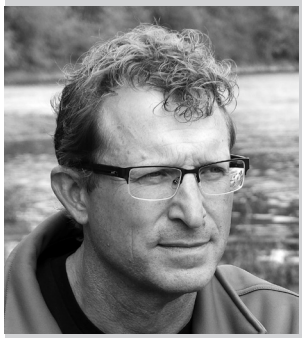
# A Fish Away from Losing It

*We need to "right size,"* the CEO says.
The Board adds metaphor: *Parts have become gangrenous,*
*and must be amputated.*

Bones sawed for marrow know something of soup lines
and lost health insurance, brows knitted over
millions locked in empty buildings.

Furloughed from the front without home cooking or hugs,
just booze, fishing gear, and keys to Uncle's cabin,
we drive our last full tank

into the High Uintas, greet mice, twist valves, prime the pump,
then cast and strip, cast and strip
slow across that thawing lake.  A fish away from losing it.



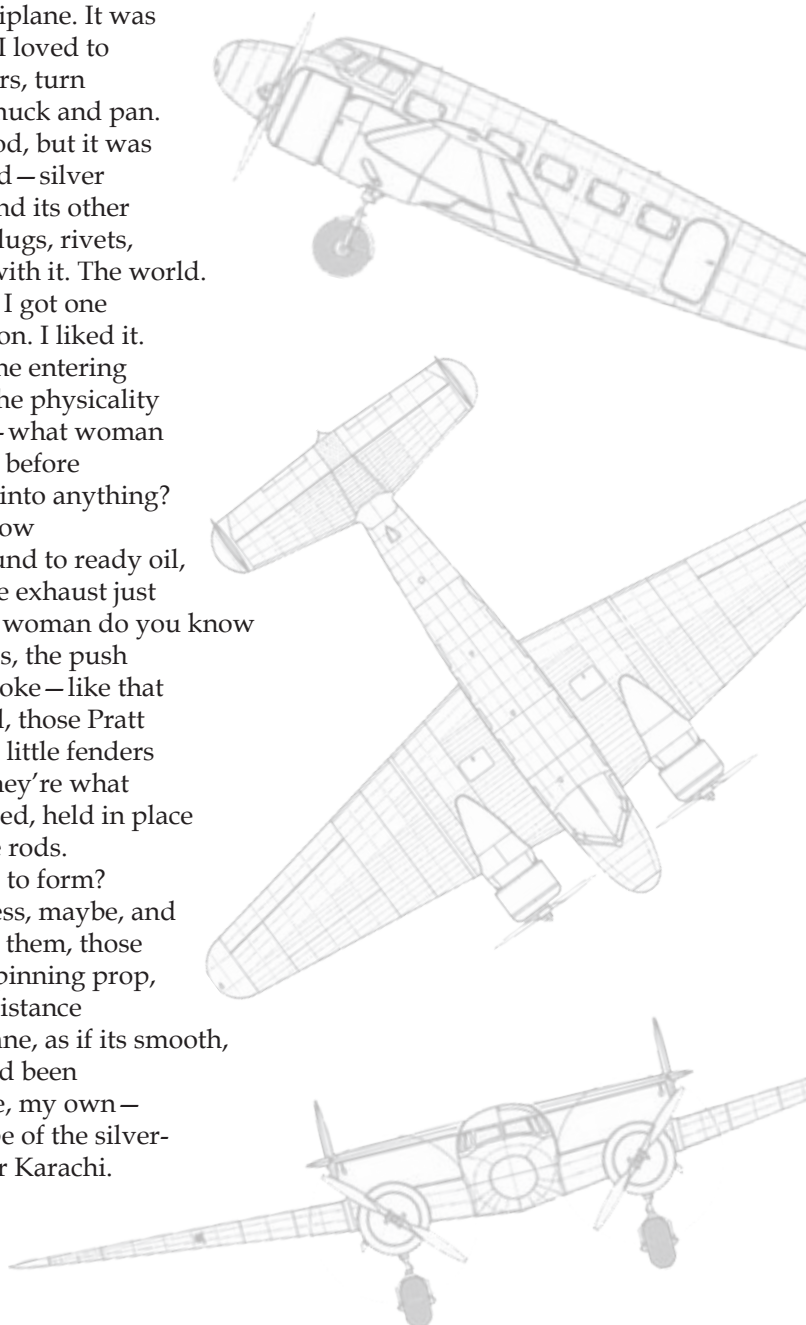
A past contributor to *Weber*, Henry Hughes grew up on Long Island, New York, and has lived in Oregon since 2002. He is the author of four collections of poetry, including the Oregon Book Award-winning *Men Holding Eggs*. His memoir, *Back Seat with Fish: a Man's Adventures in Angling and Romance*, was published in 2016 by Skyhorse. An active angler, naturalist, and literary critic, he edited the Everyman's Library anthologies *Art of Angling: Poems about Fishing* and *Fishing Stories*. His essays and reviews appear regularly in the *Anglers Journal*, *Flyfishing and Tying Journal*, and *Harvard Review*. He teaches at Western Oregon University.

William Snyder

# The Hard Stuff of Steel and Heart

*Amelia Earhart, 1897-1937*

When I drove the Bagget dumper, it was
*speed it up*, they'd say, *load it down, dump*
*it clean. You're too light, too neat.* I drove it
to buy the Kinner, that first biplane. It was
not easy, the Bagget, though I loved to
mash the clutch, shift the gears, turn
the big steel wheel through muck and pan.
The Kenner yes, well and good, but it was
an Electra I wanted, Lockheed—silver
fuselage, nacelles, rudders, and its other
metaled beauties—pistons, plugs, rivets,
cables. I could fly the ocean with it. The world.
The universe if need be. And I got one
in '36. Sure, it was the attention. I liked it.
The waving from the wing, the entering
through the cockpit hatch—the physicality
of it, the roughness, the grit—what woman
do you know would lift a leg before
the flash and crowd to climb into anything?
And what woman do you know
would shove a propeller around to ready oil,
would stand beside an engine exhaust just
for the smell and heat? What woman do you know
loved throttles, mixture levers, the push
and pull of a hard-wheeled yoke—like that
dump truck wheel—and God, those Pratt
and Whitneys. But those thin little fenders
above the main gear tires—they're what
got me most—how they curved, held in place
by the thinnest, most delicate rods.
Lockheed's bow to style, nod to form?
I don't know. Bows, and excess, maybe, and
nods, but look—the round of them, those
fenders, like the round of a spinning prop,
a compass horizon plotting distance
on a thin, cloth map. That plane, as if its smooth,
clean metal—the all of it—had been
fashioned from breath—mine, my own—
or from the glimmer and hope of the silver-
shaped sky over Tucson, over Karachi.



# Pietà (After Delacroix)

*Vincent Van Gogh, September, 1889*

No, I didn't like it at first—the red hair, like
a gargoyle, a wraith—and the odd,
struggled contortion of the trunk, the arms,
the neck. He'd got the butcher's son
to sit for him, paid him with a bottle of wine—
and, *this tree is itchy*, the young man said,
*and this stupid drape, and I hate to sit
on a cheek, my ass split apart like a peeled
green orange. But oh*, he said, *I'll have that wine*.
And the woman. She wanted to rub him,
the butcher's son. *Them muscles,* she said, *oh
lordy. But all these robes they weigh me down
and things'll be blue beneath and my puss
and what'll Jules say to that? You gotta' lose
them drawers, he'll say, and he'll ask if
Mister Van-dee-go'll pay for another pretty pair?*
No, I didn't like it at first, what with those
clowns he'd enlisted and how they complained.
But it's grown on me. He'd seen a lithograph,
blacks and grays, so he made the colors,
imagining Delacroix's in '50. Now blues,
greens, yellows—all there is but for
the blackened lines—and if you follow them,
and the green, the blue, the yellow, you're
pulled inside the Christ—as much as I hate
to admit, as much as it pains me that I do not
want to be. He'd been on a cross for hours,
they say, so what wouldn't a body do
when it came back down—alive, or dead,
or resurrected. And the hands, the frantic clutch
of fingers around the nail head iron. So I see it—
the blues and swirls and sorrows. The frailty,
even with the muscles. And the Virgin's arms—
no matter what the woman wanted, you have to
keep them up, you have to keep them straight—
you just can't touch God. She must've
known it, Mary, that fraught young
woman down from Galilee. Eugène knew it too.

# Electric

Through the window this morning, clouds
slewing east, adrift, swept along like
shadows over flint, over snow—the sun
setting later now, later still tomorrow.
Eight. Eight thirty. It is April. Finally.

And the last, black, rotten snowdrifts melt—
just shale-black lines in narrow ridges remaining—
our histories of November, December, on
and on, as we knew they'd tell us, but had
forgotten. I wondered then, would we fly

or drown? Or freeze? The sun down the street
is capacious now, consequential, in-bloom—
the two, tall, old elms sawed down two
summers ago. The thick man in his sleeveless
shirt, and with his chainsaw, and from his

mechanical bucket, lopping off limb after limb.
The limbs, and the segments of trunks
like rough, thick bones, fell to the sidewalk,
to the yard, the knocks and thunks and shivers
through the earth like warnings, like

arousal in a hungry body. I felt them as I sat
and watched on the curb, the man's arms,
it seemed, familiar with his blades and gas
and metal cowl and burnished handle,
and within his hands I imagined the rote, solid

memories of dust and violence. The uproar
that must be his waking. I wondered
at his day, his nights, the days after when
he returned. I watch the clouds now, the slowly
melting snow, the sun flinging wide

its own tiny ripples through the universe,
and I wonder for June—the memories then,
memories to come. To fly, I think—drowning
and freezing too cruel. And for hunger
and light and a daylily's slender petals.

# Lovely Cold

A cold night, cloudless, after blizzards up
and down, and colder with the wind—
a palimpsest of snow and ice on everything.
And our room, cold too—door closed

all day, furnace down to low. Our little bed,
a bed for one, a single bed, but for two of us,
so we tuck the blankets and sheets, blankets
and sheets for larger beds, tuck them in

around us, corners, long-side seams, hemmed
ends, and now, the light turned off, we lie
together, side by side—arms crossed, legs
straight, toes curled beneath the blanketweight.

And that first, long moment of silence
and still, our bodies easing into contour,
scoops of shoal and glen, alert to exhale,
inhale, to the long, sure hours, and we think—

oh, we are here, it is night, it is sleep, it is
body, it is shudder and weight and flutter—
it is dream, like deep bright moons
beneath the sea. In this bed we are careful

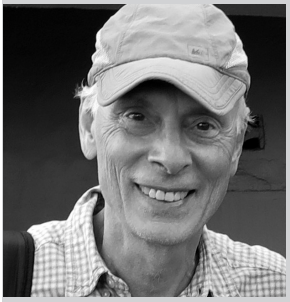
of each other, even as we sleep, side by side—
knee here, ankle there, elbow, wrist,
finger—bodies close beneath these blankets,
heat like magma we can't escape. Nor do we

want to. Once, at a time like this, your elbow
jammed against my waist, my heart
against your ribs, I said we'd get a bigger one.
A double. A Queen. One day soon. No, you said.

Discipline, you said. I want us always
to be like this, warriors of sleep, of sleepiness,
of share, never knowing, you said, where
we'll be beside each other, but knowing we

would be. Firm. Tight. Leavened. And later,
the house cold, your breath close, warm
on my cheek, on my neck, on my forehead
if I lie just right. Wildflower, cinnamon,

melon. The breath of your hair. The musk
of you. I'll not give it up, I promise.
I'll not give in to indulgence. That bigger bed.
Luxury. When I wake at night, I want to know.



William Snyder has published poems in *Atlanta Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, among others. He was the co-winner of the 2001 Grolier Poetry Prize; winner of the 2002 Kinloch Rivers Chapbook competition; the CONSEQUENCE Prize in Poetry, 2013; the 2015 Claire Keyes Poetry Prize; Tulip Tree Publishing Stories That Need To Be Told, 2019 Merit Prize for Humor; and Encircle Publications 2019 Chapbook Contest. He teaches writing and literature at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN.

# SAND AND ASH

JONATHAN FERRINI


Fallon Michael

The desert wind blows through my tiny home. The wind speaks to me of the many souls it's transporting, reminding me my time will come soon when I join the windy cavalcade.

My granddaughter Anna retreats to where her grandmother is buried, laying on her back and staring at the stars. I was told by my Native American neighbors the stars show Anna her destiny, and the wind will lift her away from the unhappiness she has endured in her short life. Anna will be reunited with a boy who couldn't return the love she had for him. The hearse delivering Stoney for cremation will arrive in the morning.

Anna idolized Stoney from the day they met briefly as children when the hearse delivered Stoney's beloved grandfather, a Vietnam veteran, for cremation. Anna followed Stoney's athletic career from Pop Warner football to high school quarterback, keeping scrapbooks filled with press clippings of Stoney's gridiron heroics. Stoney led his high school to a state championship. He received football scholarships from every top college but chose West Point.

We live on an Arizona ranch bordering a Native American reservation. Once a prospering cattle ranch, it's become a desert, including a tiny wood frame home and a metal warehouse with three smokestacks. Our ranch has been in the Montez family for generations.

I own and operate a crematorium incinerating medical waste delivered from Arizona, California, Utah, and New Mexico. When the unrefrigerated trucks arrive, I quickly unload the orange bags marked "Biohazard," placing them into my refrigerated crypt inside the crematorium. The smell is horrific, and when the wind whips up, the putrid odor is carried for miles, making the Montez family unpopular with our neighbors. The three cremation chambers run from morning until late at night, seven days a week. The unincinerated remains, often hip replacements made of stainless steel with titanium alloys, are given to my Native American neighbors, who sell the metal for scrap. In exchange, they ceremoniously remove the incinerated ashes, providing a dignified, Native American ceremony and scattering them into the wind.

I keep Anna away from the crematorium. I don't want her around the sights and smells of death. She was born to my daughter, a heroin addict who succumbed to a lethal fix. My departed wife, and myself, relished the opportunity to raise Anna. My daughter's drug and alcohol abuse created birth defects. Anna was born with a club foot and partial paralysis on one side of her face creating slurred speech. She also has learning difficulties. Anna is sweet and kind, and staring into her big brown eyes reveals only love, creativity, and eagerness to explore life. I've reconciled myself to the reality her birth defects will deprive her of finding romance.

Anna learned to cook and clean from her grandmother and keeps the house spotless. She has a "green thumb," makes roses bloom in the desert, and maintains a garden growing fresh vegetables. Anna loves her Native American neighbors. They named her "Soaring Heart."

I taught Anna to handle the office duties. A funeral home conglomerate has been after me to sell to them for years. When I die, Anna might sell. I'm confident she'd make a fine bookkeeper for somebody.

Anna was deprived of a loving female mentor to guide her into womanhood. She has no interests in buying clothes, makeup, or fragrances. She lives in a secret world she crafted for herself, including scrapbooks. Her secret world doesn't protect her from the cruel taunts and humiliation from her classmates.

One day, I sat with the school bus driver, Pam, at the town coffee shop. She is a no-nonsense, retired prison matron who revealed the cruelties Anna never mentioned to me.

"Mr. Montez, I couldn't prevent the cruelty your granddaughter endured. Little Anna was the last to board the bus and struggled to make it up the stairs into the bus with her club foot. Anna always resisted my offer to assist her, knowing it would slow down our departure and create more taunting. She sat in the front seat, reserved for handicapped students, which felt like a 'Scarlet A.' The children were cruel, shouting out, 'Scuzz Montez, what's in your lunch box? Human organ sandwiches? We can smell you coming a mile away.' Anna always held her head high, Mr. Montez."

My ranch is many miles from school, and I regret I couldn't drive Anna to and from school. I remember receiving an emergency call to

pick up Anna early from school. On the last day of junior high, Anna's classmates celebrated by running amok. Anna became their target. They dragged her into the bathroom, placed her head into a toilet, doused her hair with powdered hand soap, and repeatedly flushed the toilet chanting, "This 'shampoo' is called a 'whirling' and will get the smell of death out of your stinky hair!"

On another occasion, I received a call from a young man introducing himself as "Stoney."

"Sir, I'm with Anna. She needs to get home right away. Can you pick her up? We'll be waiting for you at the flag pole out front of campus."

When I arrived to pick up Anna, her head was dripping wet, wrapped with a football jersey emblazoned with "State Champions." Stoney approached me, "In observance of Veterans Day, the high school played the movie *The Green Berets*. The school punks began pulling pranks when the lights dimmed and the movie began. A glass soda bottle was rolled down the concrete floor, and the clanging noise caused laughter. One of the punks brought in a fast-food chicken lunch box, and chicken bones were thrown in the direction of Anna. One of the punks loaded a spoon with mashed potatoes and gravy, creating a catapult of warm, disgusting, creamy goo, which landed in Anna's hair. Anna screamed. The auditorium lights were raised, and the students laughed as Anna left the auditorium crying. Nobody went to Anna's aid, so I chased after her and found Anna crying outside. I took her to the water fountain and wiped the potatoes and gravy from her hair. I used my football jersey to clean and dry her hair the best I could, sir. Anna calmed down, and I told her, 'Don't mind those jerks. They disrespected you, the Green Berets, and John Wayne. You're in good company.' Anna managed a smile."

I thanked Stoney for his kindness. It was ironic the only kid to show Anna kindness was the most popular kid in high school.

When the shiny black hearse entered the dusty road leading into my ranch, it was occupied by an Army major, in full dress uniform, and the funeral home director. I worried Anna would be traumatized. To my surprise, Anna had rustled up a pretty dress, her hair was neatly combed, and she wore a beautiful yellow ribbon. She held my arm as the major handed me the cremation orders, revealing the remains were those of "LT. STONEY ADAMS. KIA. AFGHANISTAN."

I retrieved a gurney and joined the major and funeral director in removing the cardboard box from the hearse, placing it onto the gurney and pushing it towards the crematorium. Anna followed, but when we reached the crematorium I motioned for her not to follow, and she complied.

We entered the refrigerated crypt. The major took a knee alongside the gurney, silently said a prayer, and stood facing me: "The United States Army has entrusted you with the remains of Lieutenant Stoney Adams. His body was dismembered by an 'IED.' The Army has confidence you'll treat his remains, and service to his nation, with reverence and honor. Goodbye, and thank you, Mr. Montez."

Stoney's cremation was set for morning. Fearing Ana might enter, I closed and locked the door to the crematorium before opening Stoney's cardboard casket and inspected the remains. I cut the three metal bands securing the carboard lid to the box. Plastic lined the interior containing a rubber body bag surrounded with dry ice. I unzipped the body bag revealing vacuum-sealed, plastic orange bags marked "Partial Face," "Forearm," "Leg," and "Partial Upper Torso," all arranged as if still attached to a fully intact human body. The bags were covered by Stoney's full-dress uniform, polished dress shoes, a hat, and a folded, triangular American flag was placed at the head of the box along with Stoney's West Point ring buttoned to the ring finger of the white glove he'd wear on his right hand. A card was enclosed that read, "Goodbye fallen brother, with love."

It was written by the Dover morticians preparing his body for shipment home. I zipped up the body bag and replaced the cardboard lid, securing it with gold-braided ceremonial rope I keep for special occasions.

I was concerned about Anna's emotions. It would be a sleepless night for both of us. The wind picked up in the evening and the sand pelting our home made it difficult to fall asleep, but I managed to nod off.

I awoke early the following morning, calling for Anna, who didn't answer. I went to her room and found her scrapbooks containing clippings about Stoney piled upon her bed, which hadn't been slept in. She must have sat late into the night remembering Stoney. One scrapbook was open, revealing a photo of Stoney, the "Prom King" with his "Prom Queen." I feared the worst. I entered the crematorium and found a note hung to the handle of the cremation chamber door, "When wind blow through hous, me and GranMa are visitin. I luv u gran pa. Gud by."

I opened the door to the chamber, still warm from the cremation.

Gruff old Sheriff Jack and mild-mannered Doc Kippers, our county coroner, completed their suicide reports. They were visibly shaken, concluding from the skeletal remains and stains, Anna placed the plastic bags inside the chamber as they were placed in the cardboard coffin. She set the cremation timer to commence in five minutes as recorded by my computer. Anna crawled inside and closed the chamber door with the ceremonial gold-braided rope still hanging from the chamber door. Judging from the bone fragments, Anna laid close to Stoney. The singed remains of the American flag covered them like a blanket. Doc Kippers concluded: "The 1800-degree flames quickly consumed the oxygen inside the small chamber, and Anna fell unconscious, never experiencing any pain."

Pam arrived after the sheriff and coroner left. She handed me a box of handmade birthday, Christmas, and Valentine's day cards Anna created for Pam. I broke into tears. Pam held me tight, whispering, "Anna was a gift to all of us who loved her, Mr. Montez. Losing Anna is a knife in my heart. Goodbye."

My grief was lessened knowing Anna was reunited forever with a love she sorely deserved. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I gently swept their combined remains from the chamber, carefully placed the bone fragments into the "cremulator," grinding down the bones to sand which I sealed into a plastic bag, and placed it into a gold satin purse belonging to Anna's grandmother.

My neighbor and tribal chief arrived, wearing ceremonial headdress and clothing, followed by his procession. I handed the chief the purse as he sat atop his horse. He silently prayed in his native language, held the purse to the sky, then to his heart, and motioned for the procession to proceed back to the reservation. I knew Anna and Stoney would be released into the wind, carried across the desert, and into the afterlife.

When the wind blows through my curtains, I know Anna and Stoney have returned to say "Hello."



Jonathan Ferrini is a writer who resides in San Diego, CA. He received his MFA from UCLA in motion picture and television production.

# RIVER OF NO RETURN

## G.D. MCFETRIDGE


Laura Lefurgey-Smith

Early July and it was hot and sticky, thunderheads mushrooming above the distant horizon. A Burlington Northern freight train pulled by four locomotives was rumbling through the broad canyon, and as we made our way from the river to the railroad tracks, we could see the grass-yellowed hills stretching beyond the canyon's rim. Upriver about a quarter mile, Bob had bottomed out on a jagged rock and torn a gash in his kayak. We had a repair kit with fiberglass cloth and resin, but the tube of catalyst was missing and if we couldn't find a hardware store somewhere nearby, the day's kayaking adventure was over.

A deerfly buzzed around Bob's head. "You little bastard," he yelled and swiped at it with a free hand.

"Why don't they stick with deer?"

"They never do," he grumbled.

The last boxcar rolled out of sight as the screeching sounds of wheels on the iron rails and the rumbling vibrations of the long train faded in the distance. Bob, his kayak balanced on his shoulder, grunted his way up a steep section of dusty trail ascending the railroad bed. The breeze had died and deerflies were tracking our scent and darting around us like miniature fighter planes. A large fly lit on the back of Bob's calf, and when he turned and swatted it he lost his grip on the kayak and it slid off his shoulder and down the bank, coming to rest against the trunk of a dead pine tree.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he hollered.

"Crush him between your fingers, you'll feel better," I offered.

"He's no longer among the living," Bob said, his eyes looking a little too intense.

He wiped sweaty dust from his forehead and made his way down to the kayak, his arms and shoulders dark from the sun, his balding head sunburnt.

The first day on the river was the most exciting, the snowmelt running hard and fast, and we'd enjoyed several sets of exhilarating rapids. I turned over once and banged my head on a submerged rock, although the helmet had reduced the impact to little more than a jarring blow. Bob was more skillful in whitewater and rarely tipped over. I was a little stronger in the upper body and could out-paddle him when the river was flat—but not by much.

The second day was also good, but as we lost elevation the river widened and the current slowed, creating long stretches of glassy sun-polished water. That night we lost much of our food after raccoons pilfered a rucksack Bob had forgotten to tie above ground. In the morning he cussed the raccoons.

When we reached the gravel bed of the railroad tracks, a tenacious deerfly managed to bite the back of my left biceps. Sunlight was glaring off the steel tracks and the trail dust made a gritty feeling on my neck and underarms. I wanted to go back to the river and jump in and cool off, but we had a mission to accomplish.

Bob set his damaged kayak on the railroad ties and unfolded a map. "I'd say Gloversville is about three miles."

"How much farther to the truck?"

"Another four or five miles. I think I recall seeing a hardware store in Henley."

"We'll keep a good thought."

A deerfly flew at Bob's head and he almost slapped his own cheek trying to knock the attacker out of the air. The parasite landed on my shoulder and I watched its body tilt forward as it extended its proboscis and began probing my skin. I slowly brought my hand up and smacked the fly, and then watched the little bloodsucker fall to the dirt, buzzing around in tight circles. I picked it up between a thumb and forefinger and extended my hand so Bob could see.

"What say ye fellow Roman?"

Bob's brow was shiny with sweat. "Crush the life out of him," he said.

"As you wish." I pressed my fingers together and felt the fly's iridescent green body give way until I had reduced it to a mash of insect flesh. I flicked the remains into the underbrush.

We walked for about an hour. The kayaks and gear were heavy and there was almost no breeze and the deerflies were relentless. Bob suffered more bites and cussed every one.

"Vicious little bastards!" He dropped his kayak and swatted at the flies.

When we cleared a long bend in the railroad tracks, we spotted Gloversville about a half-mile across a wide meadow. As we got closer we intersected the old highway and passed a boarded-up redbrick building. Judging by the faded sign and elongated concrete slab, it had been a general store and gas station, probably from the 1960s when loggers worked the area. Cattycorner across the street was another store with signs advertising ammunition, fishing equipment, and bait, wedged between a small post office and a café with an American flag attached to a wooden pole beside the front door.

We crossed the street and an old man wearing a white apron sat beside the doorway, his chair tipped back against the wall. Another man sat on the other side of the door. They seemed half-asleep from the heat.

"Just come in from the river?" the old man asked.

"Not exactly," Bob grumbled.

"We came in a few miles upriver," I offered.

"Bet them deerflies about ate you alive," the other man said, rubbing the knuckles of his hand over the gray stubble on his jaw.

Bob's lips tightened and I figured he would start cussing the deerflies. But instead he yawned and set his kayak beside mine. I was about to ask how far it was to Henley but the old man spoke first.

"You boys look like you could use cold drinks and a meal. Go on inside and have a seat, the wife will cook up something for you."

"You sell beer?" Bob wanted to know.

"At the other end of town, Fred's Place. He has beer and wine but he ain't got no real food, only bar snacks and pickled eggs."

I scratched one of my bites. "What about insect repellant?"

"Doubt it. Them deer flies never bother us locals, only you city folk and flatlanders."

The other old man laughed and reached into his pocket for a tin of chewing tobacco. Bob shook his head but didn't say anything.

"Let's eat, I'm starving," I said.

"What about beer?" Bob asked.

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Thirty minutes later we hitched a ride to Bob's pickup truck, after which we returned to Gloversville and loaded the kayaks. Next, we drove to the hardware store in Henley and got lucky—they had one last pint can of resin with a tube of catalyst.

We were in the parking lot making repairs when two young guys drove by in a white van with slalom-style kayaks strapped to racks on the roof. They parked and got out. One was tall, narrow in the hips with broad shoulders and muscular arms. He walked toward us like a straw boss inspecting a jobsite.

"You just come in from the river?" he asked.

Bob was spreading a coat of resin over the fiberglass patch. He glanced up and paused for a moment before wiping the back of his hand across his brow.

"Nope," he said, and kept smoothing the resin with long floating brushstrokes.

"We landed upriver from Gloversville, after he bottomed out on a rock," I said.

"Bad luck, huh?"

"Yup, bad luck," Bob said.

"Are you like touring kayakers or what?" There was an edge to the young guy's question, as if to distinguish him from us—the unspoken pecking order under whose auspices whitewater enthusiasts looked down on touring kayakers. His friend seemed amused. The fact was our kayaks were crossovers, shorter than full-blown touring models but longer and narrower than slaloms.

"We're just having a good time," I said.

He considered me for a moment. A small predatory grin appeared on his lips. "You tried the Salmon River yet?"

Bob set the paintbrush on the rim of the resin can, pulled his bandana from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

"Nope, we haven't," I said, thinking that'd be the end of it.

Bob eyed the kid. "Didn't they used to call it the River of No Return?"

"You'd have to ask my grandpa," he said, smirking.

"How far is it?"

The kid glanced at his friend. He was rolling a Tootsie Pop around in his mouth. "It's a couple hours' drive on some winding roads."

"Are you referring to a particular run?"

"Yeah, it's called the Triple Falls," he said. "Below the falls is epic, totally outrageous, drops hundreds of feet in less than a mile. But you guys should probably put in after the bridge. You'll get a nice run of rapids and another four miles of easy water, about right for what you got."

Bob pulled himself erect and the two locked eyes. "What's your point, slick?" Bob asked

"No point, man, it's just that you might want to put in after the bridge, that's all. Those fiberglass antiques you're paddling don't look like they maneuver so well."

The other kid suppressed a laugh. Bob's eyes were simmering like little blue flames. He'd almost made the 2000 Olympics, and even though he'd stopped competitive training a few years later, he was still world-class.

"So I take it *you boys* are headed to those falls," Bob said.

"Matter fact we are. We go to the University of Idaho, down in Boise. I'm on the whitewater team."

"That's swell. What time you hitting the river . . . just after sunrise?"

"No way, dude, more like nine or ten. We're on vacation." He laughed, as if Bob's question was ridiculous. The other kid laughed too.

"Maybe we'll see you there, if you don't sleep in too late," Bob said.

"Cool, maybe we will."

"We'll definitely check it out."

"We'll see you on the river," he said over his shoulder as the two headed across the parking lot to their van.

"Young punks," Bob said under his breath.

That night we split a bottle of Wild Turkey washed down with a six-pack and sat around the campfire reminiscing our younger years. We had met at Cal Berkeley back in 1996 and started working out together on San Francisco Bay. One time we paddled from Point Richmond all the way to Angel Island, dodging a big tanker chugging towards one of the oil refineries near the Carquinez Straits.

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Just before twilight, mist still hovering above the river, I woke with a bad taste in my mouth, a trace of a headache and a stiff back. Bob looked stiff too as he crawled out from under the mosquito netting stretched across the opening of his tent. The earth was damp on his hands and knees and he yawned, rubbed his eyes, and then grabbed the plastic laundry bag where he had stuffed his shorts and jogging shoes.

When the sun finally rose above the ridge and lit the tops of the tallest pines, the meadow was still shadowy and cold, with spider webs hung heavy with dew. In the distance the river made rushing sounds as it flowed between concrete bridge pilings. A cluster of embers still glowed at the bottom of the fire pit, so I added twigs and blew on them until they sprouted smoky little flames; then I got the coffee pot ready and added larger sticks to the fire. By the time the water was boiling, Bob had grabbed his fishing rod and was headed to a small tributary creek that ran just beyond our campsite.

I made two cups of instant coffee with sugar and followed him. He stepped gingerly into the stream, his trousers clinging to his legs, the rushing water pushing against his calves as he waded across. With the rod in his right hand, he allowed the line to drift with the current near the bank, stripping off from the reel with his other hand and letting the line run for several yards. A sudden tug bent the end of the pole and Bob leaned back and pulled against the taut line. He lifted the rod; it bowed, changed angles with the movement of the fish, the water breaking with a quick splash.

"Don't lose him," I shouted.

"Not this time," Bob said and grinned.

He jerked the rod. It bowed again and then lost tension as the line went limp, dangling from the stainless steel eyelet and making a wiggly cut mark across the surface of a back-eddy near the cut bank.

"Shit," he hollered. "I can't believe I lost him. No trout for breakfast."

"The raccoons left us some bran flakes and dried banana chips," I said.

"To hell with that—let's have a look upriver."

Bob made for a patch of sandy shore and reeled in his line. The sun was warming up in a hurry, although gnats and deerflies hadn't taken to the air. But they would soon enough, so I squirted a large dollop of insect repellant I'd bought at the hardware store and smeared it on my exposed skin. Bob did the same.

"Smells like my father's arthritis ointment," he mumbled.

We walked to the far edge of the campground and noticed the young guys' white van with the kayaks on the roof.

"He's on the big college team," Bob said and rolled his eyes.

The Salmon River plummeted out of a steep gorge, with a roaring set of stair-stepping cascades—each a little higher than the one before—which no kayaker in his right mind would try to negotiate. The run began at a wide slow-moving area where the river gathered itself before heading down the long chute, which angled left and right and then left again. Amidst the roughest part of the chute the troughs were four or maybe even five feet deep and swept past a series of boulders. After that the river slanted behind a thick stand of pine trees.

Bob shifted his weight from foot to foot, rubbing his hand back and forth over his thinning hair. "That smart-ass kid was right. It's a pretty mean run. You up for it?"

I put on my Polaroid sunglasses and took a second look. The level of difficulty concerned me but I wasn't going to let Bob know.

"If it doesn't get any worse than this, how bad can it be? Let's see if we can get us a better view from up on that hill," I said, pointing.

"Why bother," he said. "It's nothing we can't handle."

On the way back we passed the young guys' camp. The tall one was wearing undershorts and a University of Idaho T-shirt. When he saw us he stretched his arms above his head and made a tremendous yawn, then glanced at his wristwatch.

"How about eight o'clock, at the base of the falls?" he called, stifling another yawn. Bob gave him thumbs up. I felt the first hint of a knot in the pit of my stomach. My forte was power paddling, not mega-rough rapids, and though I had handled plenty of whitewater, what I had seen of the run looked fierce. Plus we didn't have floatation vests, only sleeveless urethane tops.

Bob elbowed me and winked. "*Put in at the bridge*," he parroted in a singsong voice. "I'm going to catch that punk on the wrong side of a trough and tip him over."

"Don't drown him for chrissake," I said.

From the base of the thundering falls, looking downstream to where the river slowed, the water reflected blue sky along with the distorted images of pine trees growing alongside the riverbank. Then, as if slipping off the edge of the world, the placid waters disappeared over the rim of the chute, roaring as they picked up speed.

The young guy and his sidekick came up the path, kayaks balanced on their shoulders. They gave Bob a look. I was already on the river, circling in the slack waters downstream from the last cascade, nervously eyeing the drop-off. I watched Bob and the young guys look each other over, like boxers in the middle of the ring. The tall kid dropped his kayak in the water by the sandy beach and strapped on a red helmet, then he slipped into his kayak and paddled toward me. A couple minutes later all four of us had grouped together about a fifty

feet upstream from the chute, back paddling to neutralize the current.

Bob shouted over the roar of the rapids. "Who's got the balls to go first?"

"I want to watch you get past those boulders," I said.

The other young guy pulled right, circling behind. He looked jittery.

Bob raised his paddle. "Want me to lead the way?"

"Yeah, right," the tall kid shouted and took off.

I wasn't sure who was goading whom. Bill paddled hard and I watched them drop over the rim into the fast whitewater. I let myself drift forward but wasn't ready to commit. The other young guy drifted too and I had the impression he was more nervous than I was. The width of the chute was about twenty-five yards and except for the middle section was fairly shallow. I stabbed my paddle into the sandy riverbed like an anchor, took rapid breaths to get myself psyched up, and then paddled hard, shooting down into the first deep trough.

Somehow I had failed to get my nylon waist skirt fastened correctly to the cockpit's lip. I felt it pull loose. The kayak slammed to the bottom of the trough and stabbed into the next wave, and water swept over the bow and poured through the loose skirt. I leaned and pulled hard with my paddle. Just as I regained my balance the nose of the kayak plunged into the next deep trough and more water flooded into the cockpit. The kayak rolled to one side as I backslapped my paddle against the water, but the current was fierce and my waterlogged kayak rolled sideways, caught by the suction around the boulders. I extended the paddle in a downward thrust to gain leverage—and that was the last I saw of the blue sky. I kicked free from the floundering kayak as it crunched into the sides of the boulders, and then the river spun me around, forcing me deeper until there was almost no light. I twisted and fought against the chilly water. I felt my feet hit the riverbed and kicked off and clawed my way toward what I hoped would be the sky.

Then there was light and a wash of blue, and my head broke the surface. Water spewed from my nose and the current swept me into another trough and over the next wave. I crested, looked downriver and caught sight of a bobbing head near the far shore. It was Bob, his metallic blue helmet corking over a wave sixty yards ahead of me. Swimming out of the rapids and breaking free from the powerful current, I managed to make it to shallow water and then waded to the left side of the sandy riverbank. I noticed the smart-ass kid walking upriver with his kayak balanced on his shoulder. He had made the run without mishap.

I looked for Bob and spotted him on the other side of the river, standing on the shoreline with his hands on his hips, his elbows jutting out. He waved at me and started for the bridge, but he didn't have his kayak and I figured he had lost it. When I got closer to the bridge, the kid met me. His face was aglow, his eyes alive with the vigor and

conceit of youth, his wet hair bunched up to one side and his teeth exposed in a broad self-confident smile. He set his kayak down on the riverbank.

"What happened to your kayak?" he asked, grinning.

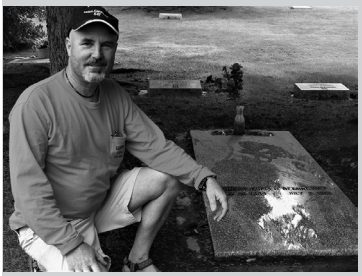
"I don't know where it is. My skirt came loose and I floundered."

"Bad break, but you know I warned you old guys you should put in after the bridge. You can't handle whitewater like this in those antique touring kayaks."

I didn't respond. He glanced down the river towards the bridge and his eyes twinkled with delight. "Me and your buddy had a collision in the roughest part of the chute, and I think he was trying to tip me over. But he went under instead."

I looked downriver and noticed Bob standing a little past the halfway point on the long bridge, caged by the silver-painted I-beams and the framework made bright in the sunlight. He shrugged and pointed down. The river had bent his kayak around a concrete pillar, the hull broken, the fiberglass splintered.

"Better luck next time," the young guy said. He ran his fingers through his thick hair and picked up his kayak and lifted it onto his shoulder, unassailable, basking in the youthful splendor he was certain would never end. Bob was walking, headed towards the end of the bridge, his blue helmet dangling from his hand. And I heard the river flowing past the pilings, relentless and indifferent, toward its rendezvous with the sea.



Having survived Covid-19, G. D. McFetridge continues to write from the wilderness of Montana's Sapphire Mountains. His fiction and essays are published in literary journals and magazines across the United States, in Canada, the U.K., New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, and India. Publications include work in *Tampa Review*, *El Portal*, *Lampeter Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and others.

# SAND

TERRY SANVILLE




The mummified body lay in the hollow between tall dunes, its mouth opened wide in death's grin. Black eyeholes stared upward at an acetylene-blue winter's sky. Jessie knelt beside it, breathing hard. She leaned back on her haunches, hands buried in the dune. *Why does sorrow always come to me in sand*?

An hour before she had topped the dune and almost fell down its steep face, exhausted, freezing cold, craving water with the taunting Pacific just over the ridgeline. In the hollow the wind had slowed. Her prune-ish feet and hands warmed gradually, tingling like limbs that had fallen asleep. She beat her fists against her jeans. The pain reassured her that blood still flowed where it should.

Strands of hair or animal fur protruded from the base of the shifting dune. As Jessie struggled to pull sand away from it, her jaw tightened. She'd seen this before, in Afghanistan while riding in a caravan of Humvees with other combat medics. They had screeched to a halt on the grit-scoured desert plains at a village just torched by the Taliban. The leathery face of this mummy told her little; but its short dark ponytail suggested female, Latina.

Jessie continued to uncover the desiccated body, exposing a petite figure clothed in Army fatigues and identified as Staff Sergeant Ortiz. She removed and pocketed the soldier's dog tag necklace, something she had done too often during her time in the military. Sgt. Renata Ortiz had type B+ blood and was Catholic.

Jessie rooted around in the sand looking for personal articles that might help explain why the sergeant lay before her. Her hand hit something hard-edged—a service pistol with a loaded magazine. She shuddered and stared again at the grotesque skull. A dime-sized hole pierced its right parietal bone with a big chunk of the left missing. *No, no, no, not another. Jesus, I should talk!*

Jessie stuffed the pistol into her belt, stretched her legs and leaned back against the dune, its heat warming her still-trembling body. She could almost see steam rising from her sopping clothes, adding moisture to the wisps of fog that floated overhead. She shuddered, gave in to the sand's heat, and dozed.

***

"Momma, can I go in water?" Jessie asked.

"No, honey. It's too cold . . . and there're no lifeguards."

"What's that?"

"Lifeguards are people that save other people from drowning."

"What's drowning?"

"Ah, Jess, you don't need to think about that."

"Okay, Momma. I won't."

Four-year-old Jessica and her mother, Olivia, sat cross-legged in the sand on Huntington Beach, near Tower #14, their favorite spot. On that early February morning the birds kept them company, that and the low rumble of traffic on Pacific Coast Highway. Jessie arranged a collection of dried sand dollars into the shape of a heart. Her mother kissed her on the top of her head.

"Thank you, Jess. I love you too."

The two watched the sky lighten over the dark water. Far off down the white-sand beach near the pier, the first surfers danced across winter waves on their pointed boards. Shorebirds stuck their curved bills into the wet sand and cried in triumph after they found something.

Jessie and her mother had moved in with her grandparents, into a tiny two-bedroom off Geneva Avenue, one of the last homes not replaced with condos or McMansions. Jessie's father had been called to active duty and had deployed to Iraq two months before, something about a *Desert Storm* that meant nothing to Jess. But his absence hurt.

Early most mornings, mother and daughter walked Main Street to the beach, then north to their favorite spot, away from crowds and the waking town center. Jess collected shells and other gifts from the Pacific; Olivia tried reading a book but mostly stared out to sea and watched her daughter play.

That day, a light brown sedan pulled into the beach parking lot. Three men in dark green uniforms and military hats got out. One carried a set of binoculars and scanned the beach, then pointed. Jessie stared at the men as they staggered across the sand toward them. Olivia caught her daughter staring and turned to watch. Her face paled.

"Honey, I want you to go play by that pile of seaweed," she said.

Jessie felt confused. "Why, Momma? I do something bad?"

"No, just go on now."

Jessie hurried off, taking her plastic pail and shovel with her. She liked to dig holes in the wet sand and watch the incoming surge fill them. Jess plopped down near the seaweed and turned to face her mother. The three men approached. Olivia rose to meet them. The wind whipped her shoulder-length auburn hair. The four of them stood frozen for a few moments, then her mother collapsed onto the sand and covered her face with her hands. One of the men knelt beside her and touched her shoulder. The sound of screeching birds and pounding surf filled the beach's silence.

After a while her mother sat up, one of the men handed her a little card, and the trio turned and trudged back to their car. Olivia remained seated, her face covered. Jessie crept toward her, being careful not to make a sound nor let her shadow fall across her sobbing mother. She sat quietly, stuffed her hands into the warm dry sand and grabbed fistfuls, then opened her fingers and watched the grains pour onto the beach to rejoin the countless others.

Time passed and her mother quieted, wiped her nose on her sleeve and stared at Jessie, as if surprised to find her there.

"Are you sad, Momma?"

"Yes, I'm . . ."

"Why are you sad, Momma?"

"Your . . . your Daddy won't be coming home."

"Why?"

"He's . . . he's with the angels, honey."

"Where's that?"

"I don't know, I don't . . ." Her mother bowed her head.

Two mini vans pulled into the parking lot. A gaggle of kids erupted from their sliding doors and charged toward the surf, laughing and screaming. Jessie leaned forward and put her hand on her mother's arm.

"Momma, let's go home."

***

Jessie sat in the sandbox, at the base of the jungle gym, and stared up at Lanita. Her fourth-grade friend clung to the top rung, her Catholic School skirt whipping in the spring wind.

"Look at this," Lanita called down.

"Whatcha gonna do? Sister Margaret is watching us."

Jessie fingered a handful of sand, the grains coarse. The boys used it to polish the metal slide so that kids would rocket down its steep slope. The nuns didn't like that either.

"Watch this," Lanita called again.

"Be careful."

Lanita had been Jessie's best friend since first grade. *Nita* and her parents lived in a garage apartment, across the back alley from Jess and her mom, in downtown Santa Barbara, about a block from the school. They'd

become like adopted sisters and played almost exclusively with each other, shunning the attempts by other girls to butt in. Jess had always wanted a real sister. But that seemed impossible with her father in heaven and her mom working full time at Thrifty Drug on State Street.

A great blast of wind blew across the schoolyard, kicking up dust and debris. Jess closed her eyes. When she opened them, Nita, with much jostling, looped her legs over the top bar and dangled upside-down, her brown thighs and white panties exposed. Nearby boys pointed and giggled. Across the schoolyard, Sister Margaret blew her whistle and hustled toward them.

"Better get down," Jess muttered, "the witch is coming."

"She don' scare me," Nita boasted.

Jessie stared up into her friend's grinning face. Then a yelp and Lanita's legs slipped off the polished metal bar. She fell. Her head hit the last crossbar before the ground with an almost metallic ring, like a clapper striking a bell. Nita lay face down on the sand.

Jessie screamed. Lanita didn't move. Jess gently rolled her onto her back. Sand clung to her friend's nose and mouth, her eyes showing only their whites. Jess reached forward to brush the coarse grains away. But hands picked her up and set her down away from Nita.

Sister Margaret bent over the unmoving girl, laid two fingers on her neck then leaned down with her ear next to Nita's mouth. Sister Frances joined her.

"Go to the office and call an ambulance," Sister Margaret ordered and Sister Frances took off running.

"Is she . . .?" Jessie managed to ask.

Sister Margaret sat back on her haunches and stared at her. "She has a pulse and is breathing. What were you girls trying to do anyway?"

"Nothing. Nita was just . . ." Tears rolled down Jessie's cheeks and she sobbed.

Sister Margaret moved forward and clasped her in a hug. "It's all right, Jessica. Help's on the way."

In a few minutes, a boxy ambulance with lights flashing rolled into the schoolyard. The nuns hustled the rest of the children back inside to finish their lunch hour at their desks. They let Jess stay with her friend until the ambulance took Lanita away.

The damaged girl never returned to Catholic School, was taught at a special place for children with brain injuries or developmental disabilities. Jess mourned the loss of her adopted sister, wondered what it would be like to wake up different, with strangers all around, unable to think clearly or to think at all.

***

The wind blew sand across Jessie's face and she sat up, sputtering. She stared at the dried body of Sgt. Ortiz and shook herself. *Jesus, it's all real, not some dream, not some syndrome.*

When Jess had left Afghanistan, there'd been talk about a problem with *toxic sand*, microscopic particles inhaled during wind storms that contained poisons that settled in the brain and lungs, killing cells, damaging memory and a soldier's ability to think clearly. Jess had been too scared to have herself checked out since there seemed to be no treatment or cure, and the military was slow to admit a problem.

Jess pushed herself to her feet. The wind had already partially covered the mummified remains. Out of habit, she reached for her cell phone to take photos but found only an empty pocket. She had held the phone during those last moments in the kayak before she hit the water and her own ordeal began. *Funny how clear that moment seems while my brain has been on-again off-again mush for months.*

With a rush, the feeling of despair returned. She wrapped her arms around herself and swayed back and forth as her mind gave an instant replay of the past few hours.

***

Jessie drove away from her apartment with the old kayak tied to the Subaru's roof rack, and parked in the sand-covered lot at Spooner's Cove. She slid her ancient craft into the Pacific and paddled north toward Morro Rock and the shuttered electric power plant. To Jess, the plant's towering smokestacks looked like the massive deck guns of old-time battleships, pointed toward heaven, ready to give their last memorial salute. Jessica felt ready.

She paddled against wind and coastal current, parallel to the shoreline where families rested under sun tarps and horsewomen rode their mounts in the surf. Ever so gradually she left the populated areas behind, their foot-printed beaches giving way to windswept dunes along a spit of land that protected Morro Bay and its estuary. At a non-descript spot in the ocean she turned the kayak seaward and paddled toward the horizon, out past the kelp beds, out past where migrating humpback and gray whales swam, until she reached truly open ocean.

She stopped and turned the kayak toward shore and went through her mental list: *1) Leave a long note for my mother in the kitchen – check; 2) Slide a note under the neighbor's door asking her to take care of my cat – check; 3) Stuff all the refrigerator spoilables in the outside garbage can – check; 4) Finish off the bottle of Bacardi – check; 5) Leave a note on the Subaru's front seat explaining . . . and the keys in the ignition, doors unlocked – check; 6) Stuff my Army field jacket pockets with stones – check.*

She rested for a long time and stared at the far-off dunes. In some strange way Jessie thought that dry sand defined her life—*walk across it and it grabs hold, saps a person's strength. You slide back half a step for every step forward and never seem to get anywhere. I'm ready to quit that bullshit, can't think of why not, can't . . . can't think . . . .*

She thought about phoning her almost-boyfriend but tossed her cell phone into the ocean instead. With a quick roll sideways, Jess swamped the old-style kayak. She grabbed its tail and let it drag her under, descending through green water with the light fading fast.

Unconsciously she'd taken a deep breath before sinking. Her lungs burned, panic and doubt set in and she let go of the kayak. But her weighted jacket dragged her down. She struggled out of it and pulled for the surface. *Don't do it . . . just suck in the sea . . . it'll be over . . . no more loss, no more living in a fog . . . God understands.*

When she broke the surface, the seagulls on shore likely heard her inhale. Like the sand, the ocean tugged at her. But she continued to fight and in what seemed like forever she crawled ashore and stumbled into the dunes, seeking a warm place out of the wind, seeking someplace away from everything where she could think. But Sergeant Renata Ortiz had changed all of that. Sgt. Ortiz had not been on Jessie's checklist. She'd become an unsolved problem.

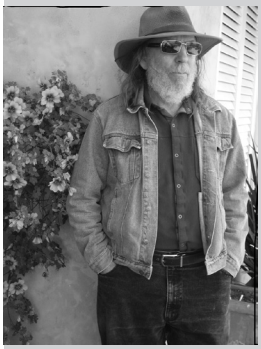
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Jessie looked around but failed to find something that could mark the location of the mummy. She struggled to the top of the dune and scanned her surroundings, her dune not unlike countless others that covered hundreds of acres. Jess doubted if she could ever find that place again. *The sergeant probably didn't wanna be found. Maybe I should let her go . . . finish what I came for.*

She removed Sgt. Ortiz's handgun from her belt. Its weight felt comfortable in her hand. But sand still dribbled from its barrel and gummed up the trigger mechanism. She smiled and shook her head, then returned to the mummy's side and buried the pistol.

In Jessie's mind a new list formed: *1) Go home and tear up my note to Momma; 2) Buy a new bottle of Bacardi; 3) Say hi to the neighbor and make up a story about the cat; 4) Search for Sgt. Ortiz's kin to let them, and if they wanted, the authorities know; 5) Get . . . get help.*

Jessica pulled sand gently over Sgt. Ortiz, struggled up the dune face and reached the beach. The roar of the surf filled her head. She headed south across the hard wet sand, staring into the hazy distance. With the wind at her back she gained strength. The press of the coarse grains against the bare soles of her feet felt good. She picked up speed, looking forward to a warm car and home.



Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California, with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. He has published more than 430 short stories in magazines and anthologies such as *The Potomac Review*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated twice for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in *Best of the Net* anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

# READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

## INDIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S.

*The Migration Policy Institute reported that, as of 2019, about 2.7 million Indian immigrants reside in the U.S.. Indian immigrants account for approximately 6% of the U.S. foreign-born population, making them the second largest immigrant group in the country.*

Educational exchange programs, new temporary visas, and expanded employment-based immigration channels opened pathways for highly skilled and educated Indian immigrants, many of whom brought family. From 1980 to 2019, the Indian immigrant population in the United States increased 13-fold . . . .

The United States is the second most popular destination for Indians living abroad, after the United Arab Emirates (3.4 million). Other top destinations include Saudi Arabia (2.4 million), Pakistan (1.6 million), Oman (1.3 million), and Kuwait (1.1 million), according to mid-2019 United Nations Population Division estimates . . . .

In the 2014-18 period, immigrants from India were highly concentrated in California (20 percent), followed by Texas and New Jersey (each with 10 percent) . . . .

As of 2014-18, the U.S. cities with the largest number of Indians were the greater New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and San Jose metropolitan areas. These four metro areas accounted for about 30 percent of Indians in the United States.

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Hanna, Mary and Jeanne Batalova. "Indian Immigrants in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*, 16 Oct. 2020, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/indian-immigrants-united-states-2019. Accessed 12 Nov. 2021.

## SOCIAL REALITIES OF INDIAN AMERICANS

*In 2021, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published a paper on "The Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results from the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey."*

Indian Americans are the second-largest immigrant group in the United States. As the number of Indian-origin residents in the United States has swelled north of 4 million, the community's diversity too has grown.

Today, Indian Americans are a mosaic of recent arrivals and long-term residents. While the majority are immigrants, a rising share is born and raised in the United States. Many Indian immigrants might have brought with them identities rooted in their ancestral homeland, while others have eschewed them in favor of a nonhyphenated "American" identity. And despite the overall professional, educational, and financial success many Indian Americans enjoy, this has not inoculated them from the forces of discrimination, polarization, and contestation over questions of belonging and identity. . . .

For Indian Americans, the past is not just a distant country. On the contrary, India continues to exist in the present as it influences the lives of the diaspora—even as its members chart a new path in their adopted home.

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Source: Badrinathan, Sumitra, Devesh Kapur, Jonathan Kay, and Milan Vaishnav. "Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 Jun. 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/09/social-realities-of-indian-americans-results-from-2020-indian-american-attitudes-survey-pub-84667. Accessed 12 Nov. 2021.

## HINDUS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

*The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an educational and advocacy organization established in Washington, D.C., in 2003. It focuses on educating the public about Hindus and Hinduism. HAF reports that New Jersey is the state with the largest Hindu population by percentage (3%). However, in Delaware and Arizona, Hindu Americans constitute the largest non-Christian faith. A Global Kerala Hindu Convention was held in December, 2021, in Phoenix, AZ.*

Kerala Hindus of North America (KHNA) was formed in 2001 from the far-sighted vision and motivation of Late Swamiji Sathyananda Saraswathi to unite all Hindus with the goal of preserving Sanatana Dharma . . . .

Their global conventions, held once every two years, are expected to have over 2,000 attendees and cater to a variety of audiences including, but not limited to: families of all ages, students, budding entrepreneurs, businesses, professionals, dignitaries, celebrities, and visitors from India, USA, Canada, Mexico, and Europe.

Source: Kerala Hindus of North America. https://namaha.org/. Accessed 12 Nov. 2021.

## DIWALI IN CALIFORNIA

*In September, 2021, California Assemblyman Ash Kalra introduced a resolution to commemorate the significance of the Hindu Holiday Diwali, the five-day Festival of Lights:*

WHEREAS, Diwali, a festival of great significance to Indian Americans and South Asian Americans, is celebrated annually by Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains throughout the United States, and across the globe; and . . .

WHEREAS, There are approximately 3,230,000 Hindus in the United States, nearly 2,000,000 of which are of Indian and South Asian origin; and . . .

WHEREAS, Diwali, one of the world's oldest religious holidays, brings together families, friends, and communities here in California, the United States, and around the globe in goodwill, peace, and a shared sense of renewal; and . . .

WHEREAS, Hindu celebrants of Diwali believe that the rows of lamps symbolize the light of knowledge and truth within the individual that signifies the destruction of all negative qualities—violence, anger, jealousy, ignorance, greed, fear, or suffering; in other words, Diwali celebrates the victory of good over evil; and . . .

WHEREAS, For Sikhs, Diwali is feted as the day that the sixth founding Sikh Guru, or revered teacher, Guru Hargobind, was released from captivity by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir; and . . .

WHEREAS, For Jains, Diwali marks the anniversary of the attainment of moksha, or liberation, by Mahavira, the last of the Tirthankaras (the great teachers of Jain dharma), at the end of his life in 527 B.C.; and . . .

WHEREAS, For Buddhists, especially Newar Buddhists, Diwali is commemorated as Ashok Vijayadashami, the day the great Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism as his faith; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Assembly of the State of California, That the Assembly recognizes this year's Diwali festival on Thursday, November 4, 2021, and encourages Californians to take part in this joyous day of celebration; and be it further

Resolved, That the Assembly recognizes the religious and historical significance of the festival of Diwali and in observance of Diwali, the festival of lights, expresses its deepest respect for Indian Americans and the Indian diaspora throughout the world on this significant occasion. . . .

Source: United States Congress, California Legislature, assembly. *Relative to Dewali.* https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220HR67, Introduced 08 Aug. 2021.

## HINDU TEMPLES IN THE WEST

*The website* Vedicfeed *recently published an article titled "10 Popular Hindu Temples in America You Should Visit." Two of those are in the West:*

The Malibu Hindu Temple is located in the city of Calabasas, California. It is dedicated to Lord Venkateswara. Built in 1981, it is owned and operated by the Hindu Temple Society of Southern California. The traditional South Indian style inspired the construction of the shrine.

The Shiva Vishnu Temple is located in Livermore, California. People from all across the country travel to be mesmerized by the big size and captivating beauty of the huge red and white temple. All the known and celebrated deities are housed in the temple for the worship of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. Hindu Community and Cultural Centre organize classes for conveying religious and cultural education to the future generation at the venue.

Source: AAyush, "10 Popular Hindu Temples in America You Should Visit." *Vedicfeed*, 14 Oct. 2021, https://vedicfeed.com/most-popular-hindu-temples-in-usa/. Accessed 12 Nov. 2021.

*The website* Wirally *recently published an article titled "8 Hindu Temples In The US & Their Stunning Architectures That Will Amaze You." Two of those are in Texas, and one is in Utah.*

The Sree Meenakshi Temple in Pearland, Texas, was developed in 5 acres. The east Rajagopuram, three gopurams, and four prakara temples were constructed in July 1995.

The Radha Madhav Dham in Austin, Texas, is one of the largest Hindu Temple and Ashram in the U.S. and is widely known for welcoming hundreds of visitors every day, regardless of their backgrounds, to its religious services, family festivals, and devotional retreats.

The Radha Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork , Utah, was constructed and is managed by ISKCON Trust. It is a religious place which brings awareness of Lord Krishna and Indian culture to the wider world. They conduct religious preachings, meetings, and photography, color festivals, and others at this place.

Source: Bharath, Kalyan. "8 Hindu Temples In The US & Their Stunning Architectures That Will Amaze You." *Wirally*, 21 May 2021, https://wirally.com/temples-in-the-us-and-stunning-architectures/. 12 Nov. 2021.

**EDITORIAL MATTER**

*ISSN 0891-8899* – Weber *is published biannually by The College of Arts & Humanities at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah 84408-1405. Full text of this issue and historical archives are available in electronic edition at https://www.weber.edu/weberjournal*

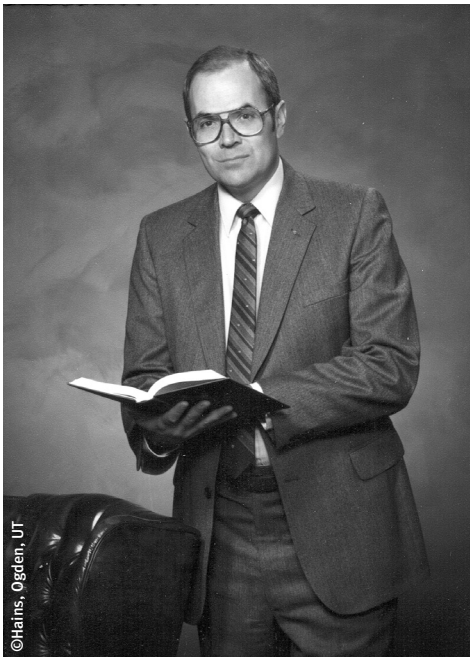
*Indexed in: Abstracts of English Studies, Humanities International Complete, Index of American Periodical Verse, MLA International Bibliography, and Sociological Abstracts. Member, Council of Learned Journals.*

*Subscription Costs: Individuals $20 (outside U.S., $30), institutions $30 (outside U.S., $40). Back issues $10 subject to availability. Multi-year and group subscriptions also available.*

*Submissions and Correspondence: Editor,* WEBER THE CONTEMPORARY WEST | *Weber State University*
*1395 Edvalson Street Dept. 1405, Ogden, UT 84408-1405.*
*801-626-6473 | weberjournal@weber.edu*

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