



Elsewhere:
A Place for Writing about Place
Hanging In There

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Elsewhere: A Place For Writing About Place

Masthead

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Fiction

Gemma Cooper-Novack

Mars

My semester ended two weeks after Keira's. She already knew she was going to take the next year off, anyway, and so she met me at the gates of my dorm three hours after my last final. She'd told me on the phone that she had purchased her first car, but what she was driving was an ice cream truck, a chipped menu of soft-serve options still painted on one side. She scrambled to hurl the doors open and toss all three of my bags into the back before she threw her arms around me and we twirled on the narrow sidewalk.

"My Lady V!" she cried, an incongruous little tremor in her voice. "Oh, my god, I missed you."

"Missed you too." Her hair was shorter than it had been when we saw each other in December and she looked a little skinnier, even her breasts. But it might just have been the black tank top she was wearing.

"All right, babe. Let's get this show on the road." She tossed me the road atlas, and I snatched it in midair. "Pennsylvania or bust!" We would be on the road for three weeks before I had to get back and start my internship, and would be spending each night in a different state. In the passenger seat I flipped the atlas open to find its maps peppered with foil star stickers.

After we graduated from high school, Denise, Katie, and I had gone on a road trip, to Chicago and back. I remembered those ten days with great pleasure—the heady sense of freedom, the air in the backseat thick with marijuana smoke, the sparkling urban landscape coming into view. But it had nothing on this journey. The ice cream truck changed everything.

On the highway approving couples in convertibles honked at us. On rural routes farmers stopped dead in their tracks. We got a disappointed child or two at every rest stop, which pleased Keira more than it did me. We left the interstates whenever we could, which made the truck even more conspicuous. Keira had loaded the back of the truck with old couch cushions, and we left our sleeping bags unrolled on top of the stack and pulled into parking lots or campsites sometime after midnight, whenever we got tired of driving. Behind the cushions, pressed up against the

driver's seat, was a case of vodka, and we took a few swigs every evening chased with whatever bottled juice or soda we had picked up at a rest stop. Keira seemed to be drinking a little less than she had last summer, but that might have been wishful thinking on my part.

Outside a tiny, rusty railroad-car diner in Indiana, where we had consumed meat loaf sandwiches and watery green beans, a man—a very respectable-looking man, with a pressed and buttoned plaid shirt, khakis, and a neatly combed mustache—spotted the two of us opening the doors of the ice cream truck and asked, in a quiet voice that carried across the parking lot, “Can I have a lick?”

Keira gave him the finger and gunned the accelerator.

The western route took us through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, and up to the Montana-Wyoming border, because Keira wanted to see Yellowstone National Park, one of the few tourist attractions she had never visited as a child. It turned out that I was more impressed with Yellowstone than she was, fascinated by the mountains and the forests and the bear we spotted, lumbering by the side of the road at dusk. I could have watched that heavy, graceful animal for hours while it examined every tree with its stubby muzzle and vicious, blundering paws. Keira told me about her anthropology class on folk tales and oral narrative and a story she had read for it, “The Girl Who Married the Bear.” She suggested that she would leave me behind, head to California, and return in a few days for my wedding. A weird part of me could actually picture it, thought I might really belong in these woods, in a rough-hewn cabin with only bears for company. It felt like my home, certainly more than Boston or Syracuse, more than Haiti. Keira recognized this in my expression. “Come on, drive,” she said softly. “We have more beautiful places to go.” We spent one night at a campground in the Oregon woods, our narrow campsite set at some distance from the rest of the grounds, the pines surrounding us at least four times my height. When I got up to pee in the roots of the trees, the moon shone through them and cast harsh, astonishing spiky shadows on the sheer white sides of our ice cream van. For a few minutes I just looked at them, open-mouthed: I had been transported into a land of shadows; I, and everything around me, had been drawn in ink.

“Keira,” I whispered, reaching into the truck and shaking her foot through the sleeping bag. “You have to see this.”

She kicked out at me and rolled to the left. "Shut up."

"Seriously. Come and look."

The whites of her eyes flashed for a second in the dimness, and then she scrambled through the stacks of pillows and bags and over the lip of the doorframe.

"*What?* Are you okay?"

I had stepped back from the van, and I indicated its walls. Keira loped over to stand beside me and stared. We both craned our necks towards the broad precise circle of the moon, looked at each other, and then climbed silently back into our sleeping bags.

We drove down through California the next day, spent the subsequent night at the only roadside motel we could find in the dusty, barren desert of northeastern Nevada (where the road unfurled like a fingernail scratch through the endless plateaus of red sand and we could see the flat blue sky from the driver's side window and a cluster of thunderheads from the passenger side), and crossed the border into Utah on Thursday.

"It's like we're on Mars," I breathed, leaning out the window in Arches National Park, masses of red sandstone conveying greater stillness than I had known could be on Earth. Keira, behind the wheel, leaned out the window and whooped, but she looked immediately like she regretted it.

When we pulled into the camping area beside the second arch, it was fully dark and the sky was blurred with glowing swaths of stars. Keira clambered onto the roof of the truck, dragging her sleeping bag and pillow behind her, and I ascended the vehicle after her, the dented fender trembling beneath my foot. The air was brisk and tasted delicious. We could see only the wispiest clouds of our breath. Keira snuggled her sleeping bag up against mine. It always surprised and delighted me when she showed spontaneous physical affection: it was so like and unlike her, at the same time.

"I think I like the Southwest best," I said.

"Me too."

"I think I might like Utah best."

"Even with all the Mormons?"

"Yeah. I mean, they make pretty cities." We had spent a few hours that morning at a farmer's market with craft stalls in the center of Salt Lake City before driving to Arches at the encouragement of a suspiciously clean-cut fellow road tripper.

"I have an aunt who's a Mormon," Keira said after a moment.

"Really? Which aunt?"

"You don't know about her," Keira said. "My mom's other sister. Melene. She's not a regular Mormon, she's one of the weird ones. You know, polygamists."

"What does that—"

"Multiple wives. She has, like, five sister-wives. I don't think she's really allowed to travel."

"Allowed?"

"The husband is in charge. Like, of everything, and then they have a leader, sort of a guru. Or a cult, or, like... whatever. But one time she came to see my mom, for a week or something, when I was eight. That was the only time I met her."

"What was she like?"

"I don't know, I was eight. She seemed really scared. Or just anxious, maybe. But I think my mom and Halena—I think both of them liked her better than they like each other. Like when they were kids, I mean. It's weird."

I wasn't sure of the right response to this pronouncement. But somehow a response that was precisely wrong slid into my head. I let a decent interval of time elapse before I said, "Keira?"

And then I waited so long that she turned her head towards mine and said impatiently, "What?"

I swallowed, making myself turn and look into her tremendous eyes, colorless in the dark. "I need to tell you something about your mom. And—and about me."

Keira's face snapped back towards the stars. Cheek to my pillow, I forced myself to keep looking at her icy profile, her pale skin illuminated against the backdrop of shadowy, precarious rocks and endless sky. When she finally spoke it seemed to crack her flesh. "Did you think I didn't know?"

I had already said too much. So I didn't say anything.

"Both of you," she continued quietly, her voice thin and sharp as a sheet of paper. "I mean—do you think I'm an idiot?"

"You know I don't."

Keira drew a breath that seemed to take a lot of effort. I hated that I was already crying, a fine line of salt tracing the curve of my exposed cheek. Keira was still pressed weirdly close to me, and I thought I felt her sleeping bag shake. "Then what?"

she said.

“I don’t know.” The tremendous quiet of the desert invited me to go on. “It isn’t—I haven’t seen her since we graduated, it isn’t like—”

“I *know* that, Lauren! God!”

We were on Mars. I could hardly breathe, and the atmosphere around us maintained that crystalline stillness unchallenged by buildings or oceans or bridges. I was staring at unfamiliar stars among which I could hardly see my home planet, merely an indistinguishable speck of glowing dust. I closed my eyes and listened to Keira crying, and did my motionless best to ensure that my own tears were silent. My chest shook with the effort. Keira and I were clearly the only people on this isolated planet, the first of our kind to make the journey.

“Are you happy?” Keira choked out. I didn’t answer, my voice as lost behind my eyelids as my vision. I started to feel dizzy, thinking of what Keira’s face might look like beside me and what they sky must still look like above us. There were so many stars, so many parts of the world, the universe.

I wondered what it would be like to be able to identify the stars, to recognize all the constellations. It was the sort of thing Keira probably knew. When she was a little kid, she and Frank used to go on father-daughter camping trips, and he would bring a telescope. There was a time when she had been able to see the patterns, to recognize Sagittarius and Pisces and the Seven Sisters. Was there anything, anything in the world or on Mars, that Keira didn’t know?

“Okay?” Keira’s thickened voice spoke suddenly, and I opened my eyes. She had rolled onto her side and was facing me again, her eyes still big gray blurs in the darkness. What I could see of her expression was naked, her tone urgent. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” I tried to invite a bit of oxygen back into my ribcage. “Yes.”

The sky stretched over us, two very young women lying flat on the flat roof of a once-refrigerated truck too broad and clunky and unwieldy for the highways, waiting quietly for aliens to pick us up and take us home. The air stilled around us, the back of Keira’s hand brushing my pillow as we slept.

Non-Fiction

Kim Peter Kovac
Out Of Robben Island

Prologue: *Stages of the island*

Out of the mid-70s, forged in the crucible of apartheid in South Africa, came a play that at the time was called *The Hodoshe Span* (from the Xhosa word for green carrion fly). Naming it after the unnamed prison island where it was set was not allowed, implying criticism of the government, yet anyone sentient knew what it was about.

The play later called *The Island* was an important event in the theater in South Africa ; a piece that the two master actors who created it with playwright Athol Fugard continually improvised since a written text could have been used by police against them. The first ten minutes of this minimalistically staged play were two cellmates silently miming filling a wheelbarrow with sand, rolling it to the other side of the stage, dumping it, refilling it, rolling to the other side of the stage. Over and over and over. Ten minutes of this on stage is excruciatingly long, possibly the tiniest glimpse of what life was like on the (unnamed but clearly Robben) island. The last part of the play is a rehearsal of a performance of *Antigone*, with Antigone defying King Creon in order to give a proper burial to her brother who died in battle making war on the state. Sisyphus meets Sophocles meets South Africa as this version of Creon says "Take her from where she stands, straight to the Island! There wall her up in a cell for life, with enough food to acquit ourselves of the taint of her blood".

1. ***Welcome to the island***

Over the entrance to Robben Island Prison is a sign in English and Afrikaans: "We Serve with Pride," as well as the words "Welcome/Welkom." Irrespective, it's a new world now: visitors *are* welcomed by former political prisoners, once again living on the island, this time by choice.

2. *The (former) political prisoner*

The guide does his best to be warm
but if he ever was, he is no longer;
on Robben Island for eleven
and a half years.
What is white-hot, though, is his passion
for telling the story of the island:
his story, and everyone's story,
and private glances of what lies beneath.

3. *Haiku of the seals*

Afrikaans for seal
is the name of the island
and now there are none.

4. *The jailer, later*

Waiting for the ferry to Robben Island, the largely kitsch-free
gift-shop items are rung up by a chatty salesclerk.
He claims to have been one of Mandela's
jailers during his twenty-seven years locked up,
proudly brandishing a photo from a book,
an image bristling with clichés:
two men, one, 6'4, elegant, Black; one 5'7", white, balding
even then. The disconnect between the former
and present workplaces echoes the archbishop:
'God surely has a special sense of humor'.

And then there's the additional claim that our salesclerk
was a friend to Mandela, providing special
privileges. While entirely possible that he smuggled in letters
and extra food, as claimed, the accent is Afrikaans,
the language of power, and he was a jailer, not an accountant
in a notoriously harsh political prison at the height of Apartheid.
Is he speaking the truth, dissembling, or just plain lying?

He is quite anxious that his story be believed,
but the announcement of the ferry leaving
interrupts his monologue, with the truth -
whatever it may be - left hovering.

5. *Things on Robben Island not found on your standard-issue prison island*

1. World War II bunkers and artillery with fading camouflage paint.
2. A late 19th century primary school.
3. Colonies of African Penguins (AKA Jackass Penguins).
4. The rusting wreck of a Taiwanese tuna boat.
5. Fence posts made of WWII shell casings.
6. A leper cemetery, church, and the ruins of the leper residences and swimming pool.
7. The Moturu Kramat, a sacred site for Muslim pilgrimage.
8. Four quarries: slate, fieldstone, granite, limestone.
9. Former school busses that transported prisoners and now transport visitors.
10. A coat of arms for the island: a green shield with a lily.
11. An emblem for the maximum security B-section: crossed keys and the scales of justice. Balanced.
12. The 'Cape Doctor' wind from the southeast: hard but cleansing.

6. *E.E. Cummings' first day at the censor's office*

It's just winter

here on the island

and james and gregory and christo who are guards and
odd specimens of manunkind

are training me in counting: onesixfivehundred
(1 letter / 500 words / every 6 months)

and in scissors (to cut

out

the offending parts) as well as

cello

tape

to tape

the parts

that remain

back

together

with tape

so sometimes only

'dear' and 'love' remain

!!!

they also train me in newspaper and music and books:
news in English or any tribal language - no
African music - no
The song 'secret agent man' - no (don't want them getting ideas)
Carl Sandburg's Cowboy songs and spirituals - no (can't think of heaven)
The bible - yes, no, yes, no (maybe sometimes heaven)
Jazz music - yes

Only JUSTTWO
hours a
day

7. *Optics of the Landscape*

The island is flat, only a few meters above the sea near the turn of Africa, unremarkable topography for a place that looms as large as Alcatraz and Devil's Island. Despite a surprising amount of green, the landscape feels sterile, baked dead, as if its three hundred plus year span as prison (and leper colony and lunatic asylum) has leached most of Mother Nature out of the land. From Signal Hill in Cape Town, Robben Island appears close, within the embrace of the bay, and the high-speed ferry takes barely a half hour. On the island looking back, though, the optics are very different: Table Mountain looms fortress-like and foreboding over tiny buildings, and a frisson of dread switches on with a click.

8. *Kafka on the island*

Of all that was banned,
please take note:
white sugar.

The prisoners were Black,
(or coloured, as the mixed-race
were called), so obviously

their tea and coffee
could not be sweetened
with something white.

Instead: small rations
of brown sugar.

9. *The Lime Quarry*

Blazing white limestone, where the prisoners moved stones
from right to left and back again for no reason
other than to fill their lungs with rock-dust
and blind their eyes with glare. Near the center is a cave,
used as a latrine, a lunchroom, and, away from the eyes
and ears of the jailers, the location of the University
of Robben Island (as it was called) , where the men taught each other –
history, economics, sociology, and, for some, reading and writing.
This also may be where Mandela remade himself,
through the acts of teaching and hauling limestone,
from an angry fire-breathing radical into a calm,
Sphinx-like Zen-master of change.

10. *Walt Whitman and the Penguins*

This day before dawn on the south of the island I ascended a small hill not much
taller than a man standing on another man's shoulders
Sat to wait for the sun to rise over the sea, with a small repast of biscuits to eat
and milk to drink
The rich dawn light bathed a high wall of rock, a white wall, perhaps Lime-Stone,
changed its color to the warmest red
From behind me appeared a long line of men, men who walk with Burdens, Black
Men in beige garments with their arms and lower legs revealed to all
They are led by White Men whose words sound like the clearing of throats, men
who sit in their long trousers with canteens of water watching the Black
Men move the stones from the right to the left to the right to the left as if they
are the puppet-masters of Sisyphus
I watch them until the sun is high, and see them move to a cave for their midday
break, and notice when they emerge, they walk as if taller, as if their
spirits have somehow been freshened by something other than from Bread
and Water
They now seem like echoes to me, in life's rich circle, to the group of black and
white birds that walk along the sea, upright on very short legs.
They have no burdens, these birds, they are free in the fullness of nature, and I
want to remove the Burdens of the Black Men, somehow finding the
better angels, so these men will walk as free as these birds, and even more proudly.

11. *At Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens*

The birding guide is rangy and rumped,
and geeks out on history as well as birds;

the British accent with a whisper of Afrikaans
signals long-time family roots in Durban.

He has sensitive antennae for nuanced
rhythms of movement, sound, and colors

of the birds that both live here and fly by
as well the nuances of the shifting colors

of the Rainbow Nation, as the Archbishop
christened the country after the election

that made Mandela President. "Look",
he says, "most of you think apartheid;

you forget the centuries of racism before".
He stops abruptly and cocks his ear

after hearing a chirp. Nothing.
"Real change will only occur when

the children of all cultures and languages
study in classrooms together", he offers,

sips Rooibos tea from his thermos and spots
a Cape Sugarbird barely visible off to the right.

12. *For Athol Fugard and Antjie Krog*

Gratitude is too small a word
for the momentary glimpses
into the heart of your wondrous

and wounded country. Words
take life when illuminating
for those outside and afar,

allowing a slant of perception
and complex understanding
into our gaze. More moving

than the words alone

are the acts of writing them
and speaking them aloud

and insisting they be heard.
Surely, neither of you cared
you were from the tribe

of the oppressor; you wrote
hard truths and pushed them
into the limestone quarry

of the world and forced us
to look in spite of the glare.
Darkness hides behind darkness

and does not love the bright
stiletto of truth that pierces
the grief between us all.

Epilogue: Stages of South Africa

As the origin story tells it, South Africa's new constitution was forged in the limestone quarry cave and recorded on scraps of paper with pencil nubs.

Moving into leadership, the graduates of Robben Island U codify eleven official languages and non-retaliation, and the former terrorist-in-chief (now the wise and graceful President) reaches out to former jailers, bureaucratic oppressors, and Afrikaner rugby fanatics. Poet/Journalist Antjie Krog translates Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* into Afrikaans and details painful personal, public and tribal stumbling forward during the Truth and Reconciliation process.

Playwright Athol Fugard is honored by the government for excellence in theatre, though most of his plays were banned during apartheid, and a theatre is named after him in Cape Town's District 6, infamous for the sixty thousand residents forcibly removed to townships. A play for young audiences called *The Oglering*, about a young man-eating ogre who re-envision his life, is produced in South Africa fifteen years after it was written, (in French), by Quebecois playwright Suzanne Lebeau, who did not know that a man-eating ogre called Izim is a central figure in Xhosa mythology. With only minor changes, this play has special resonance in rural Xhosa villages: it seems to spring right from the core of the culture. The play was also performed in a Xhosa-English version to multi-

cultural audiences in schools and theaters in Cape Town and at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. Perhaps 'rainbow nation' is becoming a reality, not just a catchphrase. Surely, because of efforts large and small from many, notably her poets, playwrights, and political prisoners, South Africa is no longer an island.

Mihir Vatsa
English
(A Personal Essay)

1.

I had just returned to the guest house from a short walk around the University of Hyderabad campus when my phone started ringing. It was another journalist asking for a short interview. He had a bunch of generic questions ready for me: *where do you draw your inspiration from, how do you write, at what age did you start writing, how do you find Hyderabad*, among others. I began involuntarily. I had answered these questions so many times in the last few days that even before I realized I was repeating the same thing all over again, changing certain words and phrases occasionally to sound less repetitive. However, there was one question I couldn't answer the straightforward way: *why did I write in English, and felt so comfortable with it, if my first language was Hindi?*

2.

My parents married in 1984, without having seen each other before the wedding. My mother was then working as a Sanskrit teacher at a residential school in a small town called Lakhisarai in Bihar. My father was just starting his academic career in Sanskrit as an ad-hoc lecturer in another small town, Khagadia. My mother grew up in a family of eight. She had four siblings, and her grandmother lived with them in Patna, the capital of Bihar. Though both her parents were doctors, her father secured a permanent job much later than her mother, after fifteen years. The family, though living in the city, was quite poor and lived on whatever money my grandmother made from her job at Patna Ayurvedic College. Lecturers and teachers, in those days, earned very little, and supporting eight people on that money resulted in various conscious, and sometimes unconscious, sacrifices on every one's part.

My mother could never go to a proper school. She studied at home, appearing as a private candidate¹ for the state board exams. Then she again studied privately for an undergraduate degree in Sanskrit. Her eldest brother's books would do just fine for her, she was told. She continued this way, studying and passing exams, year after year, until she received her MA. Did she study any English? I can't tell. She doesn't remember it either.

Perhaps, as she moved from one degree to the next, she put her English textbooks, if there were any, into the many carton boxes which would be sold off to a rag collector eventually. However, to be an MA was a feat nonetheless. Soon, she took up her first job at Lakhisarai, and moved out of her childhood home.

My father, on the other hand, was the eldest in a family of five living in a rural North Bihar region. His father worked at a small press in Madhubani, earning few rupees at irregular intervals. His mother's side of the family was much better off financially. So, from a very early age my father was raised in the house of his maternal grandfather, his *nana*, where he read whatever he could find on his *nana*'s shelves, also helping at the same time with the household affairs. The shelves contained huge stacks of books on Sanskrit literature, language, grammar, and criticism. His *nana* was an important figure in Sanskrit scholarship. But fame and money do not always go together, especially academic fame in the 70s Bihar. Therefore, my father, though he did go to a proper college in Patna, could study only Sanskrit. The family would not have to spend money on his education. The books he needed were in the house already.

Both of my parents, whatever little contact they had with English, lost it after they finished high school. English was not mandatory for them, but an option which they did not choose.

3.

I was born in Hazaribagh, a small plateau-town two hundred and fifty kilometers from Patna, in 1991, seven years after my parents married. Also in 1992, the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh would usher in a new set of economic reforms which would open up India as a market for the world. Before 1992, English had enjoyed an elite status in Bihar. It was the language of the well-learned, upper class, upper caste people. People who would enjoy wine and cigarettes at the suave Bankipur Club in Patna. Neither of my parents was suave enough to be a part of this crowd.

By the time I turned four, there was already a nascent awareness about the changing status of English in my immediate environment. A couple of English-medium schools had cropped up in Hazaribagh. These schools were new and half-realised in their visions. They used books written in English, but Hindi was still the predominant language of instruction.

Like all kids from my colony, I attended one such school. In English periods, the teachers taught us some essential phrases like *good morning, good evening, how are you, how do you do*, in their endeavours to turn us into “gentler” kids with good manners. We were told that if we had to use the washroom, we should raise our hands first, and ask, ‘May I go to Toilet, miss?’. From the very beginning, it was made clear through different visible and invisible implications that we kids, studying in a private English-medium school, were different than those enrolled in a government school— we were better.

Every evening, my mother would ask me what I learned in school. I recited rhymes, *humpty dumpty sat on a wall*, told her how it was bad manners to interrupt the class in the middle by making noise, and that we had to ask ‘May I go to toilet, miss?’ if we needed to use the washroom. Through my rhymes, my stories about the many Johns, and with every new word that I learned to spell, my mother resurrected her memories of English from the once abandoned carton boxes. My rhymes and words became the concrete she used to fill that void. She laughed at the gestures I made with my hands while reciting, and with my grandmother sitting next to her, probably felt good for what I was being taught.

It wasn’t like as if post 1992, every four-year-old child started conversing in English. My education in English and Hindi started simultaneously. English existed only in English periods, or during inter-school competitions, when we were specifically asked to speak in English to intimidate kids from other schools. But the truth was that Hazaribagh had no sizeable English-speaking population, or a culture of using English as a conversational language. Even English teachers had to resort to Hindi to make us understand a short poem, or a story.

When I was ten, Bihar was divided to give birth to a new state, Jharkhand. I went to sleep as a Bihari on the Children’s Day, November 14th, 2000, and woke up as a Jharkhandi the next morning. My father was a lecturer then at a college in Saharsa, Bihar, some five hundred kilometers away from Hazaribagh. Before the division, there was a chance that either my father, or my mother, would get transferred to a place which might be relatively nearer to the other, but the new identity came with a price. The division grounded my parents to their own towns, now in different states. My father underwent a spinal cord surgery that very year and was advised not to travel for long hours. Neither Saharsa, nor Hazaribagh had airports. They still don’t. My father soon became an occasional visitor.

4.

Academics occupy a strange place in industrial Jharkhand. It's bad if you study too little. It's worse if you study too much. Studying something holds value only if it promises a job. The Hazaribagh middle class consists mainly of government employees active in various sectors, including my mother. Little surprise then that the approach towards formal education is driven largely by the demands of the market. Paying jobs are valued, IAS² officers are praised, engineers, doctors, and MBA holders are projected as glorious bodies of art which every young student must emulate. Reading novels and storybooks is a good *hobby* as long as it disappears when a student reaches ninth standard. It's alright to study physics to become an engineer, not so much to become a scientist. Poetry is assumed to be for the idle.

I'm an only child, and though I had lots of board games at home, I had no one to play with. But I always had a craving for stories. I used to read a lot of Hindi periodicals. In fact, some of the most wonderful stories I have read so far appeared in these Hindi periodicals. Even my first encounter with Harry Potter was a short story in Hindi translation. Then there were others—the two mythical forests of my pre-adolescent imagination, Nandan *Van* and Champak *Van*, the speaking snakes and hyenas, the many stories of hope about people going about their usual business, the stories of young adults in Suman Saurabh. There was no age-appropriate English-language journal in Hazaribagh then, and, the ones that were available elsewhere did not reach us. Without an English-speaking environment, my English was as half-cooked as any other person's in my town. The language scared me. There were too many words whose meanings I did not know and the only Oxford English Dictionary in my home was too thick and heavy to be used on a regular basis.

During this period, my mother, my *masi*- her sister - and I went to Chennai where my mother had a paper to present at a seminar. We were three Hindi-speaking people in a Tamil-speaking state. The only language which could have worked in Chennai was English. Upon reaching the guest-house room provided for my mother, we found it totally unfurnished. There were no pillows or mattresses. A switch was dangerously broken; we could see the blue current in the wires inside.

I was thirteen then, with acne on my face. My mother asked me to report the matter at the reception, since I studied English at school. I went to the reception, very nervous, and mumbled, "No pillows, no mattress, switch broken." The lady didn't understand. I repeated,

“No pillows, no mattress, switch broken.” She called an elderly man, who then asked me what the matter was in Hindi. I was relieved. I told him about our situation and we were immediately shifted to a new room. Everything was sorted and we were happy travellers again.

I was also aware, however, that this happiness did not come from the flair my mother and my *masi* had wrongly assumed I’d have. A few months later I scored a low 56 in my English paper while maintaining great scores in other subjects. As far as I can remember, English became important for me after I saw my marks. This was 2002. Four years later, in class ninth, I got the option to choose either Hindi or Sanskrit as the second language for two years (English was made compulsory). I took Sanskrit. I knew the language already. My mother and I had developed a habit of joking in Sanskrit in front of an unwanted guest, something we do even now. Sanskrit also meant good scores. In class ninth, I wrote my first poem in English, “Ode to a Dustbin”, and competed with a classmate in an open challenge for higher English scores. Both of us would learn a handful of lofty words and write unnecessary sentences in our answers just so we could use them. We made our English teachers run for their dictionaries. Some got annoyed. However, not once did I beat him, not until our class tenth results were released on the internet. I scored one mark more than him, a 92.

How and when I decided to pursue English as an academic subject is something I can’t pinpoint at. It happened. Perhaps a fancy of the 17-year old in me to become a writer pushed me towards it. Midway through my senior school, I made my intention clear to my parents—the intention of discarding the engineering aspirations my father so wanted to develop in me. He was staying with us in Hazaribagh then. The declaration resulted in an argument in our living room. The TV was kept on, and my mother chose silence in the fight between her husband and her son. My father’s major concern was if there’d be any economic outcome from studying English. As a lecturer himself, before the sixth pay commission was implemented, he had lived and fared through the hardships that come with an empty pocket. I was asking of him the choice to do the same. We settled on a challenge: if I scored 85% or above in my 12th board exams, I could do whatever I wished. Failing to get an 85 would mean becoming an engineer. Eight months later, I would score a near 90%, with a 91 in English. Soon I would come to Delhi.

5.

One of the initial assumptions I had about studying English was that it would teach me ways to write better. It did, and it did not. Academically, the program I was enrolled in taught me to write decent papers, form a thesis statement, and gave me a set of jargon I had never come across before. It taught me ways to analyse language and literature, the society, to do a feminist reading of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, to deconstruct an argument. But, it didn't teach me the craft of producing a poem of my own. I wanted to be a writer, write my own stories, compose my own poems. I realised this finally in 2010. It was then that I took up writing seriously.

There are challenges for a writer in India writing in English. Translation fails when faced with cultural connotations. Turmeric and *haldi* are not the same, though their literal meanings may suggest so. *Putush*, a wild flowering bush which grows in abundance in Hazaribagh, doesn't find its exact counterpart in the language of the delightful daffodils. The translated Harry Potter story which I'd read earlier had renamed Hermione Haarmon. She was described as talkative- *baatooni*- without any emphasis on her intelligence. Culture, obviously, changes from place to place. And language, even when it's technically the same, changes with place too. As an Indian poet writing in English, I cannot help but feel with every word I use that language in itself is a cultural product. Why is it that Globalisation is spelled with a z in the United States?

Delhi was an eye-opener, a change I both wanted and feared. It was a city of rapid transitions, unlike Hazaribagh, and reminded me (it still does) of what I had and what I didn't have back home. Even English was complicated by its contradictions. The college wanted us to write our papers in British English. But, amongst us students, American English was cooler. It helped us a great deal with slangs which we picked up from various American sitcoms.

Then, of course, there was the Indian accent which added another layer of ambivalence over how I defined *my* English. My English was neither British, nor American, but a language born out of a strong colonial past, my unique sensibilities as an Indian, and the on-going westernisation influenced heavily by the American ethos. This English became my language, and I could associate it with the McDonald's culture in which I suddenly found myself growing up in. Today, I use too many English words while speaking in Hindi, and too many Hindi words while speaking in English. I still make grammatical mistakes.

6.

But Hindi is not the only Indian language I know. Maithili happens to be my actual mother tongue, which I keep reserved for conversations among family members. I speak it in bits, often mixing it with Hindi phrases, ending what initially started as a Maithili sentence in Hindi, and vice versa. *It's a sweet language*, people remark when I tell them about Maithili. However, after living in Delhi for over four years, when I speak to my grandmother on the phone and say something in Maithili, it sounds strange and plastic even to me. On the other hand, she finds it amusing. Not very long ago, I was speaking to my cousin in Maithili, trying to be an ideal Maithil. Suddenly, she started laughing and said,

“You better speak in Hindi only. Your Maithili makes me forget mine.”

7.

Interestingly, despite all the poetry submissions I had made, my first publication was a short story published in 2011. By then, I had already collected my share of a hundred rejections. I was traveling with my mother when it went live on the website of the magazine. In fact, we were returning from my village, and I remember showing off my renewed Maithili skills. I saw the notifying mail on my phone and quickly opened the site to see my name on the screen. It didn't matter to me if the story itself was good or not. What mattered then was seeing my name in “print”, and it was there. I read my own story with a feeling similar to a dozen things pounding against the walls of my stomach. My name in the by-line affirmed me as a writer to my mother. She asked a couple of questions regarding the name of the magazine, from where it was published, and if I could get some contributors' copies. I told her it was an online magazine. She paused, smiled, then said how happy she was for me. The hard part was the knowledge that she could neither read nor understand my work. I tried to narrate to her the story I had written by paraphrasing it in Hindi, but failed miserably. I realized, the transition between the written English and the spoken Hindi was a rough one, and I wasn't particularly good at it. In doing so I had created my own Haarmon. And I didn't like her.

In the contemporary India, English is not only a language, but also a technology. It's something people sometimes display, and sometimes fear. It's a status. One can get his/her work done by speaking just two lines in English, leaving others to wait for hours. English is that assumed reputation of being published in a magazine with an international readership. It is

that higher prize money for a book written in English which an equally brilliant writer writing in say, Maithili, cannot even dream of receiving.

I still call my mother every time I get an acceptance. A lot of it gets published at online venues, and even though my mother owns a laptop, the commands and instructions in English intimidate her. Her responses are generally the same, and, at times, I feel the need to emphasize on the importance of certain publications. “No, you don’t understand, this magazine is more reputed than the previous one. *Samjhi?*” Then she would exclaim, ‘Oh! *Ye toh badi achchi baat hai!* This is so wonderful!’ And I, on the other side of the phone, would never know what to make of it. We understand this gap, live it every day, but sometimes joke that even if I win some fancy award in the future, she wouldn’t have the least idea what it is actually for.

8.

Eventually, I did win an award, recited poems in front of an audience that knew exactly when to laugh, gave interviews like the one with which I began this essay. I met people of literary significance in India and, together, we expressed dissatisfaction at the commercial publishers’ attitude towards poetry. I talked at length about my writing process with people who showed interest in my work, but also carried within myself the same desperation I’d felt after my short story was first published. This desperation was to make my parents understand what I wrote, what it meant to me, what it meant to the world, and why the award was important, knowing that I can probably never succeed. This helplessness made me hide the news from my father for a month. He had no idea I was in Hyderabad when he called me. I lied. I said I was in Delhi, looking for a place to have lunch. When I did tell him, his response felt as plastic as my own Maithili. It angered me to explain to him what this prize was. Step by step. *I sent a batch of poems. Nahi papa, they have it every year. Yes, it was a two- day stay in Hyderabad. People were very nice. OF COURSE I HAD TO RECITE MY POEMS THERE!* Every word I uttered took from me that overwhelming happiness I was carrying on my face. English had become the gap between us — a father and a son — growing all too apparent.

1. *Private Candidate*: An earlier education system where one could study at home and appear in exams by filling out a special kind of form issued by either state boards or universities.
2. *IAS*: Indian Administrative Service. Officers are recruited through an all-India test conducted by the Union Public Service Commission.

Poetry

Catherine Martin
September 21, 2011

Lawrence Russell Brewer and Troy Davis executed by lethal injection

the shivering glutton takes 21 minutes
to lament the dinner he didn't eat
before he dies with no other regrets

Troy Davis waits 15 minutes to let hell
settle in his veins before he decides he's done

a tall black girl, a tall black boy
wake up early on September 22

to spray-paint on a wall visible from I-95
going into the Bronx: I AM TROY DAVIS
in yellow letters bigger than the highway

chain their hearts to a pick-up truck
driving all the way to Jasper
they sweep the sand out of Texas
cover their arms and faces with it

they shoot out the truck's windows
before heading to Savannah
to knock down the walls of the old, pretty houses

a tall black boy, a tall black girl
carry the kudzu out of Georgia
lay the vines across the highways
in the shape of last words

Britt Melewski
Resort Living

He stayed in number fifty-two,
up two flights of armadillo
stairs. The boy was a ghost,
but somehow browned around
the blue strap connecting
a body board to his wrist.
Under the pool water
he showed me his prick,
moved his wet tongue
in my mouth fast
after night dropped in between
our voices. His slippery
arms around my neck. His
bearded father calling him away
from the sensuous waves.
His name was something like Evan
but more *ee*, more like leaving.

Then she came to me
through a sliding glass door,
from the immense cove
along the Puerto Rican coast.
Her swimsuit wedging
inward, her blonde arm hair,
breasts coming into the world—
for me? I will call her blonde
in a one-piece. I never
get her name, nor keep his;
everyone left
the very next day,
before memory's stone.

Instead, I chased the lizard,
but never got close enough,
never caught the one named
root with his clear skin
and naked slime trail. I lay instead
upon great heaps of dirt, leaned
into their to-be-constructed
sets within the pink auditorium,
listening for a whisper, an army
of fire ants, their sorry echoes.

Crocodile Tears

I sleep despite the jack hammers,
tearing away—sweet sucked CO2 they do.
I'm a marginalized person: I've found
my name in the margins of throwaways:
skunk-mouth and boxboy— little garbage water
penis. Ah, yes . . . there it is: That sound,
from concentrate. Similarly to the fact
there used to be a break room here. It wasn't destroyed,
or hidden— closed off with cheap sheetrock—
no. It has been filled with cots, a morbid tease.
No time to sleep, no time to take any time.
What you do is you make something inconvenient
irrelevant. Then blame it for the world's malaise.
I'm a part of your ilk because I'm your arm,
your skinny, over-worked legs, your fallen arches.
Not given. Try to turn off all your senses.
Walk into the wold and avoid getting shot
like you're on a train on a rain slick day.
Everyone is over-heated and insane,
their clothes don't fit on another Monday
morning, everything tight. The fact
of the matter is I *could* care less,
like my eight white frowning pills.
But I don't. Man of the middle, the road
somewhere else. I stay quiet
and say that I'm tired is all.

Bibhu Padhi
Turning Forty

I imagine a blue deeper than the sky,
despairing the Bay of Bengal's
depth and nightly activity.

A child's slim voice rises through
the sea's midnight slush, echoing from
the distance of the years, and then is lost.

What distance of time comes in between
the hour of the first cry and this
early morning speechlessness?

I hear a door turning for the final time
in a room of its own, and then another,
the darkness deepening into a blind mass of loss.

My three-year old son wakes up with a dim cry
for what he knows not yet, while his mother
is inventing a new language of consolation.

The kiss I received from my elder child
a while ago is keenly felt on my cheek
creasing, a remembrance of lips still moist

with a love that seems to spread, minute by
minute, over the days and nights waiting to come.
I wonder if there is time yet to retrieve the loss

of a lifetime's, an infant's quick eyes
that once absorbed all time, a child's
suddenly remote, all-forgetful smiles.

Today, it is only a matter of waiting
through time, a routine habit of watching
the house sparrows above my head

build their own homes, ignoring my
presence, in spite of the window's
grilled supremacy, the night's blind pride.

They wouldn't know that there is
somebody here who doesn't know
how to take care of himself this day.

April Morning, Calcutta

The hoots of the early morning sirens
still call the famished workers
to their place, wake me up
to the first, diffused light
of an eastern day.

The buildings lie in contrast to
one another: one tall and straight,
in long need of a coat of paint,
others, unplastered, waiting for
their end, and then so many
that are to be watched as if
forever, tempting me to
live inside them, comfortably.

The swing bed I lie on, takes
care of my thoughts, puts them
to something like a sleep that
otherwise wouldn't come so easily.

Pigeons carry away my day's
appointments and responsibilities
to a corner that seems to store
ancient things. Time falls
on my eyes and turns into sleep.

The workers must have started their
routine habits, the inmates
of the buildings dreaming of their
requirements of the day, while
my son sleeps his long and tired,
late-night sleep.

In another room, my friend
is perhaps meditating on that region
beyond the gods and goddesses
where there is no clock nor time,
no flowers nor worshipping.

I think, in a house on the next road,
another, who stopped counting
his money long ago, is readying himself
for a whole day of songs, even as
someone else is learning to know
what each new day means, how important
each small word we speak or hear, is.

And, with help from some strange quarters,
I suddenly let myself go free
of all those things attached to this
limp body, this ancestrally given name.

Tina Posner
Agoraphobia

**My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
-John Clare, "I am!"**

Being scared of cereal is no way to go through life, with the aspirational toilets, the zombie cucumbers providing comedic relief along the way, the serious German plumbing supplying the drama. Ennui may drive one to plan a Russian high tea for preschoolers. But that's not how I ended up with boot black dripping down my face an hour before the party, my psychological twin, simultaneously shaving his head across town. It's our inner Will Shatner, swaddled in a man-girdle, teetering on the tightrope of self-pity/parody, that longs to be loved. The word itched like a dry scab scratched off and inspected. Other vague sensations fit neatly in our carry-on baggage. And we will spend a lifetime folding these worn little feelings into piles we call "serious" and "not serious." A tedious exercise that takes place on an enormous expanse of dry ranch land edged in razor wire and managed for a group of investors by a local mute. Rumor has it that the investors got rich allowing radioactive waste to be buried here. But the electronic spying, we are assured, is real. And that pretty much explains why.

Brendan Sullivan
Seventh Summer

The boy remembered his seventh summer --
how pelicans haunted the bay,
swooping down
to snatch tiny minnows
and ghost crabs
hidden in the waves.
His grandmother died in June --
old lady smell and tuberose
filling the parlor
where guests offered prayers
crushed tight like robins.
It rained all day
God's judgment
his mother said,
her tearless face terrifying
beneath the long black veil
as her hands pushed away the coffin.

In July he went fishing,
the reek of blood worms
churning his stomach
while the boat rocked
and the sun ate up the sky;
the thick black of beetles
chewing through his jeans
as he pretended to fly
in a plane with no wings.
His father came home late August --
shiny new medals
bursting holes in his chest,
the shrapnel in his head
lending him a stranger's voice,
and promised this time would be different .

But his mother stopped dancing in the garden
and took to her bed again
claiming God was now the enemy
and his father talked
only to the whiskey bottles
hidden in the basement
where the maw of early autumn
settled in like men of straw.

Funeral

She wanted to be buried
under the yellow Cajun moon
when it was full
and curious with longing,
in a white coffin
draped in cat tails
and Spanish Moss
down by the river
running wild and cool.

She wanted mourners,
four and twenty widows -
round and jolly
with bright plumed hats
and fine lace handkerchiefs
singing out of tune,
their full proud bosoms
to blow the graveyard dust away.

She wanted feasts of jambalaya
redolent of Christmas -
groaning tables
pitched across the lawn
like a crazy quilt
and mama's old silver,
polished to blind,
strewn in the new green trees,
calling forth
the family ghosts to dance
and the guests to fill their bellies
and tell stories
of summer.

She wanted the water to rise
and the swamp to hunker
and open up
alive and wondrous
and the wind chimes on the porch
to rattle
all night

and a beautiful,
honeyskinned man
with a bright boutonniere
to lay his hands
and pray

upon the morning,
glorious and clean
with music
because he promised
she was coming home at last

and the world was starting over....

Lora Tomas

Smoking a Cigarette at the Window of Our House in Carmen

This afternoon I wrote down:
"I want to observe the gradual
Decrease of the angle at which light
Grabs hold of the wild vine on the façade
Of our house in Carmen."

The Old City slips into dusk.
Lit squares appear on the houses opposite
The ruins where one-eyed cats
Sleep among nocturnal flowers
That open up purple in the dark
Or the tumbled-over stone blocks
Resembling children's graves.

Korean tourists mill along the City walls
In identical raincoats.

(It was raining half an hour ago.)

On the other side, invisible from here,
I evoke the Sponza Palace
Built following the Fibonacci pattern
And divided into golden sections
As, again, is my body
And the direction into which sunflowers grow
As well as the spiral geometry
According to whose laws
This cigarette smoke
Coils and mathematically
Ascends into the sky.

I listen to the breathing of the hypnotic *giardini*.
Anticipate the imminent going from here.

The journey that doesn't even ask for evidence
'Cause it has already incised itself into the feet
As fatigue it will eventually cause
And I feel it as the need
To leave the window
And turn on the gas cooker
To make tea.
Then I remember your words:
"I don't need storms or big amplitudes –
Just a simple rippling of life."

I, on the other hand,
Would love to observe a city
Through the shift of seasons,
As I will be saying
Only a few months from now
While we rush down a highway
Somewhere in South Delhi
Evading the blinding headlights
From the opposite direction.
We, who will have known each other
Only for three weeks by then
And are already buying a suit
For his best friend.

At the moment, still,
It's hard for me to leave the walled City,
So safely enveloped in its stone embrace,
And reflected in its precise beauty.

If you cut the skin at the right angle
You can significantly lessen the bleeding.

Laura Madeline Wiseman
The Wrong Tree

illicium floridanum

The wrong tree has no handhold low enough
for you to reach. Limbs are sawed off
into black wounds or left as amputated stumps.
The canopy won't shade you, no matter where you stand.

Even the roots trip you, despite how you watch
your step. You bonk your head on a branch
that appears from nowhere and are slapped across the face
by another. Once you thought it will grow, grow on you,

imagining bird feeders swaying in the breeze.
Now the roots worm into the foundation,
buckle the drive and kick up slabs of sidewalk.
Evenings on the lawn chair, you slouch, open beer

after cheap beer, your vision softening to another
tree in a yard festooned with dahlias and raspberry canes
offering white fists of ripening fruit and you think,
This tree stinks, and, I should walk away from this.

The Falling
quercus alba

It was only *a* forest then,
but *the* forest later,
huddling in isolation

and tucked in mountain shadows
when, suddenly, you began to fall,
how your balance faltered

how you sought to grab anything,
like a woman flailing at the edge
of a well, but slipping and plunging

and the small splash too distant
below to make a sound.
For years you grew taller, reaching

to the gaps in the canopy
and the bird songs above.
And you knew the feel of falling,

the tumbling of red and yellow
when the cool sets in and snow.
You weren't part of the forest then; those days:

the years changing, the approach
of trucks, the awful whine of saws,
and all those months as the light grew

brighter and you thought, yes now, now grow.
You were one standing among many.
It was as the flatbeds of chains rumbled

and shook the ground and we couldn't see
where they took their common haul.
Finally, did anyone hear the unheard falling

and see the men who didn't see? The scratching
as branches toppled, the deep gash
to the heartwood, and the roots left to rot?

Now having fallen, could you go back
to the forest, to the garden with its light?
Were you lost? Unheard.

Scarlet, but We Pronounce it Red

quercus coccinea

We were bitter nuts, then deeply divided,
transplants in sand, shiny lobes

losing years trying to mature
the team, our crowns.

We were never a pure forest
regardless of the referees' calls.

Not farmers, not detassellers,
never the common crowd but

stadium trees, eighty-feet tall, dwarfed
by concrete, the large, illuminated N.

We were called handsome and popular
between campus, parking, and the ticket gate.

Listening to each score and touchdown,
we were rooted outside, loving the applause.

Interview With Sahar Muradi And Zohra Saed

Introduction

Afghanistan inhabits a unique space in the U.S. imagination. On the one hand, it serves as a conspicuous reminder of the nation's recent histories of war and (imperial) aggression. On the other hand, like most places where imperial wars are waged, Afghanistan, tends to become a blank slate, a "culture-less" place, so to say. But then, it is precisely during this time that the Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini's novels have topped the bestseller lists in this country. How do we account for such apparently contradictory realities? How do we deal with the ongoing legacies of war and military aggression as writers and editors concerned with space and place? War, after all, is profoundly about space and its political ramifications.

We thought we would begin by interviewing two young writers, Sahar Muradi and Zohra Saed, who have recently compiled an anthology of Afghan American writing. Anthologies are versatile texts. They are almost like lists, giving the readers a taste of the variety one encounters when venturing into unfamiliar territory. On the other hand, anthologies also play an important role in literary canon-formation. They bring new writers into public view, redefine more established writers, and in the case of different "ethnic" literatures in America, anthologies have always played important aesthetic, cultural and political roles.

Like diaspora itself, an anthology represents a place where a multitude of voices come into dialogue with one another and in so doing provide readers with a kaleidoscope of experiences that illuminates the liminal spaces that members of a diaspora occupy. The multiplicity inherent to an anthology complicates the relationship between literature and place. This results in a breadth of view that cannot be rendered through a single perspective, alone, but that also relies on each individual writer's unique point of view. For this reason, anthologies may be the perfect medium for examining the complex, variegated, ever-changing space that is diaspora.

We gave the two editors of this anthology a common, shared set of questions. We also asked them more personalized, individualized questions. We did not want their role as editors to cloud their identities as writers. In our personalized questions to Sahar and Zohra, therefore, we have taken special care to ask them to comment on their individual pieces in the anthology. Their responses, we hope, will provide the readers with a glimpse into the complex aesthetic and literary worlds that Afghanistan and the Afghan American community embody.

Questions for Sahar:

Elsewhere: Your poem "Of My Mother" is an extremely complicated (and moving) account of intertwined loss, memory, family history and imperial violence. Why did you choose to write such themes, and especially the memories of a place left behind, through the mother figure?

Sahar Muradi: There was little choice in the matter at that time. I was haunted and could not get out from under it—the things my parents carried. Both this piece and

“Exile, or My Father’s Elbow” were attempts at entering or imagining the losses they bore as a result of war and migration and the different ways they continued to carry their losses.

In the case of my mother, she made the journey out of Afghanistan alone with just her three children, a Koran around her neck, and the address of a hotel in Pakistan where someone was supposed to meet us. I was so struck by that: Leaving one’s home for good and without a trace of one’s life. What is it like to leave behind your own parents in order to create a better life for your children? What is it like to see the landscape of your known days shrink away and for the last time? I mean *really*, what is it like to see your homeland for the last time??

Similarly, I was haunted by the few photographs we had of our life in Afghanistan. And there was something especially moving about my mother’s face in them. A kind of prescience of what was to come. The mother carries, is first, is what makes possible. And “mother,” especially in migration, takes the shape of language, of country, of sacrifice. She implies, at once, origins and births. So, yes, the mother figure here does represent memory, but also, a new direction—just as in memory may be nested what is to come.

Elsewhere: And, along the same lines, the father figure in your poem is immersed in memories. But, he himself is always located in the present. Why?

Sahar Muradi: It’s a funny thing about my father, on whom this is based. I was always struck by how he kept one foot here in the United States and one foot in Afghanistan. He couldn’t keep straight. He was wobbling on both sides. It became a running joke that he was in on. He knew his body and mind were separated. In fact, it wasn’t until 2003 when he returned to Afghanistan after 25 years and came to terms with what was actual compared with his longings, that he finally began planting flowers at his home in Florida. Memory is a palace and a hell.

Elsewhere: Food plays a really important role in your pieces. The grandparents’ relationship to chai (in “Things They Wait For”), the parents in the cafe/restaurant. So, we are wondering, what role does food play in your writing, especially vis-a-vis constructing an Afghan American historical memory? Also, do you think food often comes to take the place of family heirlooms in Afghan-American literature?

Sahar Muradi: Well, food plays an important role in my life! I grew up in the family restaurant business. My mother is an extraordinary cook. The house always smelled of Afghan cuisine peppered with days of American fast food. All my life, my father has been quite vocal that none of the fruits or vegetables of supermarket America come close to the flavors of Afghanistan. Food, for my dad—for many people in the diaspora, I think—is an expression of their identity. My dad prides himself on eating lamb for breakfast—a true Afghan, he’ll joke. But food, too, is in conversation with the American culture. It is a bridge between fellow exiles and transplants (I still delight whenever I see an Afghan restaurant or grocery anywhere in the States) and between Afghans and Americans. And I am interested in this aspect of food in the diaspora: as a site of memory and identity, as a source of nostalgia and a sort of stake in the new

country. And for those that did not leave the homeland with much, they still carried the tastes of home. And when we find or recreate or even approximate those tastes, it is an act of preservation, but also of creation, a construction of historical memory, but also an expression of a uniquely Afghan American (or Afghan in diaspora) identity.

But these days, with the way diaspora literature is overwhelmed by certain stereotypical and exoticized figurations of food or at least marketed so, I am weary of writing about food and avoid mention of pomegranates at all costs. But that's just the problem isn't it? I think it is time for some healthy subverting and reclaiming!

Questions for Zohra:

Elsewhere: In your poem "Neptune Avenue" you choose to write about a diasporic childhood, spent amongst multi-racial spaces and friends. Why did you make that particular choice rather than situating your poem in past, within a mythical memory-space, as a lot of the other writers in this collection have done?

Zohra Saed: My childhood in Sheepshead Bay and Brighton Beach is mythic. It was a space of belonging to a gang of kids who looked like me and spoke like me. Childhood is always beautiful even if it took place in alleyways with broken glass, stray cats and neighbors who hated "foreigners." The gift of growing up in Brooklyn is growing up among so many different kinds of people. My elementary school friends were of African American, Caribbean, Turkish, Chilean, Columbian, Spaniard, French, Italian, Irish and Russian backgrounds. It was a rich mix that perhaps is uncommon even nowadays in Sheepshead Bay. There were small pockets of Turkish, Mexican and Pakistani shops. The curious world of cured meats, something I had never even ate until I was in college. So this patchwork childhood has always been most comfortable for me because it is my past, the romanticized past for me. Perhaps because my family had left so early and missed the war, their families and their properties suffered, but we were the few who had gone out together as a family. Perhaps this is why my memories begin in diaspora and exile whereas many others in this anthology grew up in Afghanistan. I have no memories of Afghanistan. I was born in Afghanistan. I learned to walk in Tehran. I got lost in Amman for the first time after an escape from my mother at a bazaar. I learned how to go to the store on my own in Riyadh. I saw green grass in it's most lush form in Parsippany NJ, where I also got the warmest hug from a clown dressed in an American flag (both happened on the same day, so it was quite magical).

Elsewhere: Why is the present so insistently present in almost all of your pieces in the book?

Zohra Saed: Well, I think because I am Afghan American a lot of New York City is in my poetry and my work. It is hard to separate myself from it. But perhaps the present, my life as a grad student, the present that I am currently living is not so apparent in my work. So some present is present but not all of the present.

Elsewhere: We would love to hear a little bit about your writing process of the poem "Family Album." There seems to be a tension in the formal choices you have made for

this piece. On the one hand, this is a long poem. And that's an interesting formal choice. But, on the other hand, this long poem is made up of several shorter, almost stand-alone segments. So, it's not really a long, seamless narrative. Why did you make these particular formal choices?

Zohra Saed: "Family Album" is a series of shorter breathless poems for lost photos. And they were lost due to war, migration, and other kinds of family ruptures. I don't think so much when I write. They are poems that are first sound and then find words and then find lines. I have no other way to speak about my writing process as a poet. I feel like my body hears it first and the lines find their way to awkward lines before being polished a few times.

Elsewhere: What role do photography and photographs/snapshots play in your writing?

I have always wanted to be a photographer. My father always trusted me with a camera. So I grew up snapping photos. Also, I grew up alone in an apartment with a small family. I envied friends who had aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents. I did not have that luxury. Photographs were the only proof I had that I was not born right out of my father's mouth (something I used to imagine as a little girl).

Questions for Zohra and Sahar:

Elsewhere: As editors and writers, how do you two relate to each others' writings?

Sahar Muradi: When Zohra and I met nearly fifteen years ago now, I had an out-of-body experience. I felt like I met my *doppelgänger*. We were both goofy, obsessed with literature, equally haunted and mesmerized by our parents' stories of Afghanistan, and both hungering for community around those things. It's been incredible to read, write, and relate with each other. Zohra is a gifted poet and storyteller. I learn so much from her. I am especially struck by her extraordinary knowledge of Afghan history and her unique ability to so effortlessly and beautifully weave that history into stunning writing.

Zohra Saed: I'm a fan of Sahar's writing. This is why I had wanted to work with her on this project. She is a beautiful writer. Her images and soundscape have always appealed to me.

Elsewhere: Do you have any particular favorites amongst all these pieces you included in this anthology?

Sahar Muradi: My favorite is the collection as a whole. It is as patchwork as any diaspora—rich in its diversity of genres, voices, and themes. And I think the chronology of Afghan American history is pretty rad too!

Zohra Saed: All of the pieces work beautifully together. We worked very hard to capture all of the layers and moments of Afghan migration to the U.S. So I have

always loved that we begin with stories of immigrants who came at the turn of the century, after World War II and after the Soviet-Afghan war. I feel this is what makes it comprehensive.

Elsewhere: Anything else that you would like us and our readers to know about this anthology, your editing process, and Afghan American literature?

Sahar Muradi: I will never forget working on this manuscript in the waiting room of Zohra's dad's dentistry office late at night. Or the powerful conversations we had about the poetics of modesty and fragmentation. Or finally getting our first copy of the book the night before our launch at the Sharjah International Book Fair and tearing into the box in our hotel room and jumping on the beds with the book in one hand and sweet, celebratory dates in the other.

Zohra Saed: We edited this in a dentists' office. We edited this on subway rides. We edited this manuscript till 4am and worked 9-5 jobs the next day. This was a labor of love. It was labor that was migratory just as the stories were and edited in stolen spaces and in stolen time. It took a long time to come together but when it did, it was a gathering of some beautiful stories and lives.

Contributors :

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Sahar Muradi is an Afghan-born, Florida-grown, and NY-based writer and performer. She is co-editor, with Zohra Saed, of *One Story, Thirty Stories: An Anthology of Contemporary Afghan American Literature* (University of Arkansas Press, 2010). Her writing has also appeared in *Drunken Boat*, *dOCUMENTA*, *phati'tude*, and *Green Mountains Review*. Sahar has an MPA in international development from New York University, a BA in creative writing from Hampshire College, and is currently enrolled in the Brooklyn College MFA poetry program.

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His seventh book of poetry, *Migratory Days: A Travel Diary in Verse*, was published last year. His eighth book, to be called *Magic Ritual* is due out in 2014. Also, he has published a critical book on D. H. Lawrence and written (with his wife, Minakshi Padhi) a reference book on Indian Philosophy and Religion.

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Lora Tomas is an indologist, writer, translator and editor from Croatia, currently living and working in Bangalore. In the past, she has worked as English and Hindi teacher, and Hindi advisor and translator for Croatian Television. She co-edited and translated into Croatian a selection of contemporary *Indian women writing Popodnevi pljuskovi (Afternoon Showers)*, published by the VBZ Publishing House, Zagreb, 2011, and have contributed travelogues, interviews, and other articles for Croatian, Indian and Asian publications, and web portals such as *Himal, Fountain Ink, Goa Herald, Jet Wings*, and *H-Alter*.

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