

BETWEEN THE LINES

THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA | 2016

BETWEEN THE LINES
Peace and the Writing Experience

An anthology of poetry, prose and photography created by Between the Lines participants representing Pakistan, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the United States, facilitated by the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.



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FOREWORD

In 2015 Roxane Gay was given the PEN Freedom to Write award. Upon receipt she said, “I refuse to accept that inequality or violence and suffering are things we must accept as facts of life, as if we do not dare to want for better, for more. I see this world as it is but I refuse to accept this world as it is. In my writing, there is no room for complacency.”

In close collaboration with Between the Lines staff, I spent the summer preparing to challenge and inspire young people. But on Saturday, July 16, twenty students representing Pakistan, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and the United States arrived in Iowa City, Iowa, already armed. They were filled to the brim with intention, outrage, intellect, and phenomenal creative ambition.

After five rigorous days in the classroom, these students spent a Friday night deep in conversation about the world as it is. They talked about justice, perspective, the dark spaces within creative writing, as well as the rights of the disenfranchised, the privilege of language, and the obligations of a thoughtful, critical writer.

On the following Saturday morning, these same incredible young people piled in to cars and headed to Lake Macbride, where they swam, picnicked, and pedal-boated together. In these moments of play, young artists from across the world acted out the peace they’d so intently discussed the night before.

It took them one week to find commonality and love. By the end of the program, Between the Lines participants have shed entirely assumption and fear. In place of these things are kinship, and devotion to expression for purpose. These young artists dare to want for better, for more. In their writing, there is no room for complacency. I could not be more proud of this group, and their work herein.

CATE DICHARRY

Program Coordinator

CLAIRE ADLER

Salt Lake City, USA

GHOST TOWN

lets melt together, your curls scratching the valley
between

(i'd take you there, this place past slashed out
caverns, salt-edged red rock, swallowtails
flurried into a murmuration)

a protuberance of kneecaps, unfolding
in clusters of cranes. when I look,

you are all shimmered out, easter sunday snowflakes
spiraling exuberance and you.

twirled into me like a revelation.

(and i love this girl)
(and I'm scylla, when i watch her)

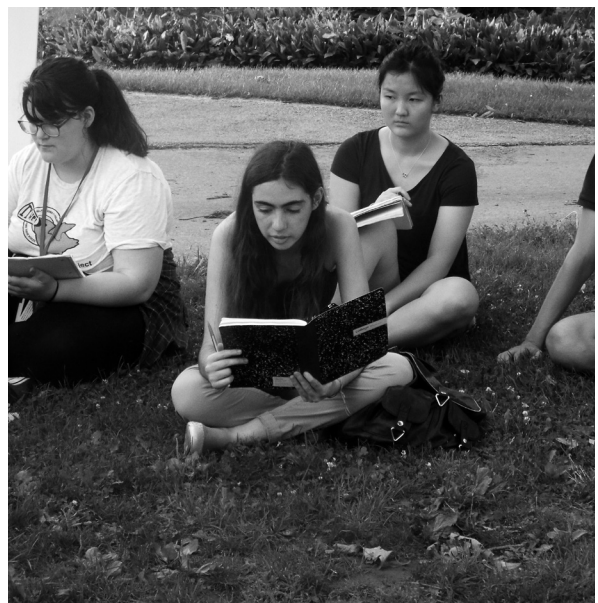
the lines of my hands split and grow dust.

*the engine hisses with the absence of birds, echoes
desiccate, shrink down and the door in the claw- rent crags
remains smug in this desert dedication, sand rough on
tongues, caught between teeth and lips folded back into
your mouth.*

presumably, these homes had burst into sandstorms.

But someone has left plastic roses,

(and its so dry here)



OLIVIA ALGER

Lake Bluff, USA

In the evenings Nina lights a sandalwood incense and talks to Francisco. She's peeling blood oranges while Reggie brings him over from the bodega before he retires and Jamaal comes in for the night. "These are not so much for me anymore," he says, sliding loose newspaper pages to her across the wooden countertop. The first night he'd said he couldn't write poetry about a Cuban character without a Cuban's consent. Nina looked up and said she wasn't a Cuban and Reggie tossed his big callused hands up and laughed, a dry weeping sound echoing all day through the thin wall between their bodega and her mother's incense shop. She could see pink gums swallowing his old teeth until he calmed himself and tucked his chin into his long neck, looked down at her like a paper crane in pity. "My small friend." He patted the damp newspaper where Francisco's stories were crammed between margins. "You are still very small sometimes."

Francisco was quiet at first, but so was Nina. It's January in the city and water pipes are clenching up in swollen buildings along the street, windowpanes fogged with heat against traffic spilling sleet and slush onto folded curbs. But in Reggie's newspaper poetry it is June, and Francisco says he is reading psalms beneath palms while his wife is washing her hair in the kitchen sink. Behind the singeing sandalwood Nina can almost smell her coconut shampoo, coming clean in a white bottle like Rumchata. In Januarys before Nina would paint her nails behind the counter while Reggie illustrated Jamaal's holiness -- he's a kind boy, you know, smart, nice, clean souled. These adjectives belonged to Nina once, too, but Reggie doesn't talk about his good son anymore because Nina's dropped out of university five months after she began. Jamaal comes back to the bodega from the community college each evening as Reggie's delivering a new Francisco poem. These are the times when Reggie doesn't speak for once and they listen to Jamaal's muffled entrance through the wall -- shaking his umbrella, dropping his keys, dialing the radio to Jamaican gospel music -- and Reggie's brown eyes glimmer blankly while looking at Nina like she's as simple as a glass of plain milk.

Upstairs in their apartment, Nina's mother has changed the radiators so the air is always thick and sweet with unfamiliar warmth and Nina doesn't need wool socks anymore. In Januarys before Nina would wake to the sound of the faucet running after her mother's night classes, finding her warming her hands red under steaming tap water. Now things are fixed but Nina wakes disoriented, finding her mother bathed in blue television static.



SAM ANTHONY

Iowa City, USA

EXCERPT FROM *LAWLESS & EMPTY*

I cannot tell you where the Mithril Trust Bank begins and Cindy ends. In the morning, my hands touch flesh in the mirror. But no person stands before me, because I believe that apartment 132 of the Lester Brooke Building in New York City is vacant. I'll explain: The New York Housing Authority defines occupation as the long term residency of any property by a person. And I, Cindy, am no person. Each morning I watch the building disappear in the rear view mirror. As it twists away into the concrete spires of this city, I think of my apartment, picturing the bare walls and the cold floor. It is vacant. It has been ever since I moved in during the fall of '89.

They say that a psychopath is born the way they are, while the sociopath is created by his or her environment. But I am no psychopath. Every month, I send money to the intangible, starving children in Africa that our marketing director bangs his bongos for when it will make our institution appear as if it has a conscience. But a company cannot have a conscience, and nor can a psychopath. A sociopath has a conscience, but I cannot be one of those either, for I am never stricken with rabid, barbarian emotion; I cannot feel. I am the greek-bodied statue that stands on the marble fountain in our lobby, skin stricken with muscle and unfeeling stone as he hurls an iron discus. I am the blank space on the wall above my desk.

I am Cindy Lockley, a talented investment analyst who most people would describe as down-to-earth. Daily, I move throughout this world of concrete and papers: paper that is white and wears a coat of black spreadsheets; paper that is rectangular and green, wearing the faces of revolutionary men who did things that actually mattered. Paper that, in my dreams, flies down the city like a storm of furious doves.





AMSEL B SALEEM

Karachi, Pakistan

HER SUN SETS IN THE EAST

When three; her best friend is the grass,
Silver stokes of pointy blades tug the cloth of her
dupatta.

She draws an open life, two irises in the mud,
“Eyes are God’s to make,” says *Baba jaan*,
“Not yours to re-invent.”

Four; the water glows orange.
Its noisy layers embrace the surface of her toes.
She digs her fingers into its blue
& fishes for rainbow stars.
Baba jaan, come look. Look what I found.
Too late. It’s time for prayer.
She throws the stars away.

Five; she knows *namaaz* by heart;
Baba jaan recites a strange string of Arabic in her
ear,
What does it mean?
She looks out the window thrice.

Six; wood is purple & trees are a crisp form of pink,
A melody of colours reside within her room’s walls,
Inside becomes her refuge; closed & open.
Baba jaan, I made this. Look, I made magic!
He tears the sheets she had whispered to,
“Don’t do this again *jaan*.”

Seven; she sees red polka dots in the sky,
But *Baba jaan* says that they are silver.
The wind allows a comfort warmer than the one at
home. She dreams.
Baba Jaan brings her back
With crushed pastel colours he found beneath her
bed.

Eight; she hides the paints behind curtains;
Secret canvases of her own refuge.
A green sunset glimmers in her palette,
Silenced with *Baba jaan*’s love,
“*Jaan*, wear your *dupatta*.”
“*Jaan*, stay in the house.”
“*Jaan*, the sky is blue.”

No--
The sky is not blue *Baba jaan*,
The sky is twilight’s shade of purple songs.
Why don’t you see that *Baba jaan*?
Why?

Nine; though she begs her eyes to stay awake,
By now the sky is blue & that is that.
The *dupatta* is straight & that is that.
Baba Jaan knows,
She is a girl, & that is that.

NAMAAZ: A muslim prayer routine

HARAAM: against God

*DUPATTA: (in context) a scarf to cover the head; serves the same
purpose as a hijab*

BABA: father

JAAN: a nickname given to a loved one

MAYA MEADOWS-CLAUSSEN

Iowa City, USA

You are standing in a platinum city.

Nearby, a little girl rings a bell.

The buildings are taller than you imagined possible. You think that they must reach the window of God.

Every surface is primed and polished to just beyond perfection.

Nearby, a little girl is ringing a bell.

And you are here.

And she is there.

And the ground reflects your sins.

The relentless shine surrounding you makes your skin gray out to a rusted gold color.

Nearby, a little girl rings a bell.

Her ruddy red face and frayed pigtails are striking. You see her and blink.

And you blink.

And her feet shine and you blink.

And then you realize.

The girl is not moving.

The bell is not ringing.

It is held above her head in eternal anticipation.

Her feet are cast in platinum.

Her ruddy cheeks are bright against the skyless cityscape.

The spilt ends of her braids are melded together.

The metal work is immaculate.

And you are here.

And she is there.

And you blink.



MELANIE HERRMANN

Mesa, USA

WONDA

You focus on the crushed velvet beneath your palms. The fringe lining the bottom of the booth bench tickles at the back of your bare feet. You keep your eyes on him, to watch for a sign of returning life. And rip at your lips with your teeth. As people, bubbling and wiry, drift past the silent world only you and he occupy. It's too many people. Their bodies rub each other raw. You feel guilty to have all this space to yourselves when everyone else struggles to find a pocket of unrecycled air to breathe. He stares into these people with gauzy eyes. You were never supposed to be a cause to these eyes.

Fear coats your lungs. Of him leaving, walking away, disappearing into the people, to never have to look at me again. You hardly speak the language. You've only been in the land for a month now. The only person you've been able to speak to has been him all this time. You were finally beginning to think the ground was becoming stable again. Like you could start moving forward with him again.

Just the two of you.

You can't navigate this city of color and stone alone. It makes you nauseous to just imagine it. And he led you here so quickly. So excited to show you. Have his friends finally see what he's been saying. In a language you don't speak.



ALLISON HUANG

Princeton, USA

FALLEN IN LOVE

West lake, as in the one
Figaro chose for his
union, is as alive
as it is dead. The flowers—a kind
of clay red—melt away
as if the many waters
chaste their throats. Fringed
by their reflection, how do the
lotus leaves appear so—
on the brink of sea?
Their movement is cut
by stillness.
Even alive,
these things are passing away.

FALLEN OUT OF LOVE

The fisherman's flute
is actually a loon.
Some find it pleasing, though
this is the call
of a young male
in search of love. Thus
it is tragic. For the
beginning had
already begun. In five
months this stone
behind my scalp will fade
like snow into
the ground. Fine flakes
of ash take on a silver
cast when dancing in the dying light.
Women never touched.
Hands never found.



AHMAD IBRAHIM

Lahore, Pakistan

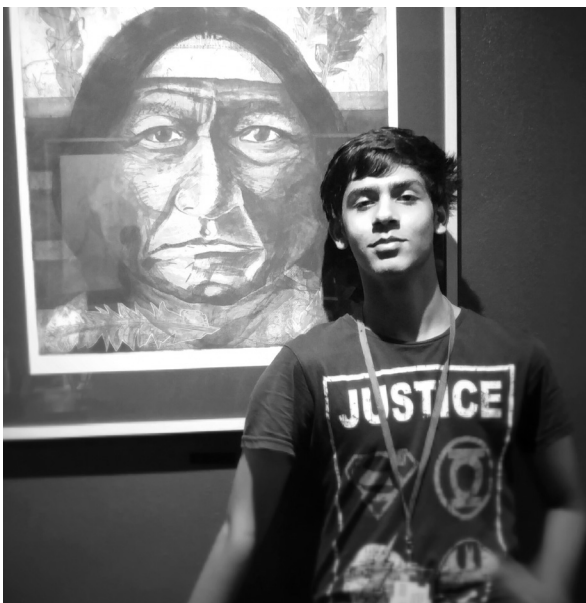


MY BLACK ROSE

I burst out laughing, it was so much fun
Then it turned to screams of lamentations at the realization of what I'd done
Mama, I did it because you told me to
You told me you wanted to die painlessly so I killed you
But now I'm okay
I know we're not born to stay
So when I go into the next mother's house
When I give her child a knife to kill his father or his father's spouse
The child will grow, like I grew
The child will know, like I knew
He shall be happy
Like I'm happy
Dear mama look at me

RETICENCE

Drowning silently in the fire, in the regret
Where was the end, someone told me about it but I forget
Who told me about it?
Who warned me about it?
My ears are burning in the reticence
I need the voice again
It's light penetrates my heart, my mind
It's going to help me find
Find what? Find it?
The voice which came to me when I died
The voice which abhorred my lies
The silence taunts my mind



MOSTAFA IRFAN “BHALLUK”

Dhaka, Bangladesh

THE CHERRY DROP

(I)

The red luscious apple was well beyond her reach. As her limbs stretch, adrenaline courses back and forth inside and just like that, out of nowhere, her thigh muscles stiffened and she slipped and started to fall from a nine feet ladder.

As her stomach feels the strong pull of gravity, her seven year old heart feels a vigorous push of negative energy.

Her cherry coloured hair flew everywhere blinding her sight; in the same manner, doubts clouded her judgment and self esteem.

The gravity did its work and she did her: thinking if she was truly as pathetic as others describe, if she was indeed a failure and if ‘disgrace’ was the only word to describe.

She felt herself being dragged down from the seven heavens of hope and success and then being thrown into the dwelling arena of failure.

As she crashed into the reality of life and misery of shame, her knees were badly bruised, her soul shattered as her faith, inch by inch, was torn apart.

(II)

The abused freedom seemed to be well within reach, the only thing she needed was acceptance.

As she starts to believe that there is hope in the peaceful arranged marriage ahead, she found her twenty-seven years old heart was reeking the smell of wrath and her soul combating against this unholy matrimony: a war against fate but a war for love. And just like that, she finds herself drowning.

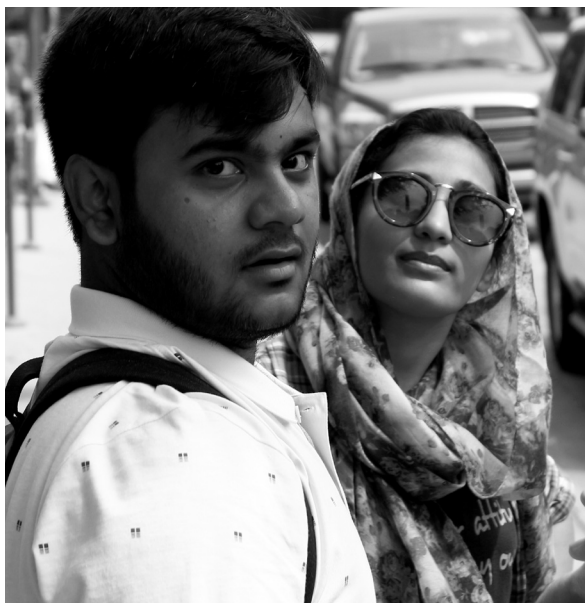
Her body sinks in a stiff fashion; it sinks in the ocean of stinking reality and newly found freedom.

As her now grown cherry stained hair, drenched with courage, blinds her drowning body... she finds a newly lit path.

A path that allows her to break away from the shackles of truth and the doomed matrimony; but, is it selfish to choose herself over her wretched foster family? Maybe yes... so?

Why should her story be based on the past? Why can't it be in the process of being written... because she is also in the process of being?

She feels her body touching the sea bed of metamorphosis; she felt her body relaxed, her soul relaxed and whole again as she had her faith restored.



NGAWANG LACHUNGPA

East Sikkim, India



RANG SEM TANGO TAWA

When your view is so fulfilling,
the shoulder blades of khangchendzonga
swimming between your prayers
and the depth of my palms hugging Teesta
will not stop for conceitedness.

Rang sem tango tawa

Black ribbons twisted into fine braids and,
from the rubber bands,
the sprouting water fall falling just above the waist
will not pause for words like these.

On Sunday,
When I went to the grave,
I picked up a black shovel
to dig out all of the vision you were starving for,
but I still had a handful yet.

In March,
Sikkim was so glorious
that its footsteps already knew to sashay with the
flags.

So I apologize,
I cannot watch my own mind.
I cannot do something I do all the time.

My mind is so foreign.
I'm afraid.
I do not have my gears for exploring
space.

Rang sem tango tawa

I will watch the world,
and the world will watch me watching.



ANNA LANCE

Eagle River, USA

DATING HISTORY

A boy asks me out and I kiss him grass-battered
under the trampoline. It is a story
my parents bring with them — anthemic —
into the wilderness, not a memory.
A boy asks me out and I flush his pink poodle keychain
down the toilet. A boy asks me out
and I tell my classmates stories
about his bones bending around rocks
in the rootmat of a Sitka spruce,
the fall cataclysmic. A boy asks me out
but doesn't really ask me,
just tells my friend who tells my small self
who in turn gets up and runs away from bonfire
and bodies and into the blue night
like a messenger from the crater
of a city smoldered, a kitten from a hot thing
it didn't think would hurt. A boy asks me out
by quoting a movie over text
and references Dora the Explorer
("snaps fingers" "Aw, man!") to my rejection.
A boy asks me out when clouds smear an oil spill
and summer spirits loll from lake to beach,
sandy and haloed. My wet T-shirt does
what wet T-shirts do and he begins
to force a hug. I scream at him. I dent him
with my hands. I knee him so hard he detonates
and tell him to fuck off and God in His heaven,
or in that Bible camp at least, holds His breath.

A boy asks me out and I do none of those things.
I say no, no. I shake my head. I hug
my wet T-shirt to my chest
from cold and not defiance.
He listens in the glaze of sweat.
He says he understands, but I shiver
all through midnight, within the fire
and without.

I harden around the bitter seed,
learning why the needle swings,
undecided, in a stranger's hometown.
Wondering if I live there.

A girl asks me out
and I say yes.



IMMI MOHAMED

Colombo, Sri Lanka



She was banged up knees and pretty face that's creased from the way that she sleeps,

She was cigarette smoke and mixed up words

In a word full of temporariness she inks her truthful words onto her skin,

The closest she could get to her bone.

When the human ways are nagging at you,

What's a girl supposed to do?

And so without a clue she would choose to accompany herself through the less traveled road,

Still learning the ways of the human mind and soul,

Some she should have not know

Both indifferently made of glass

Through flowing river she would pass

Wondering alone in mind maps of the living and every so often dead.

She had a mind that ran solely on unlawful prescriptions and experiments yet not known to mankind,

Like a car she ran out of gas,

so she had to walk highways of ghost cars and dead plants to get her engine running.

At times at night her heart would beat wilder than usual, as if the heart, this muscular organ that pumps blood through her circulatory system was attached to a set of TNT, each that would detonate one after the other if lit, and at night, at night this explosive heart of hers is well lit,

And so this lead to chest pains and nosebleeds and every once in a while, broken teeth.

Her Finger tips reeked of nicotine and fitting in.

Her only true friend was the loyal cough syrup that sat next to her bed patiently waiting for her mascara eyes to shut.

At times at night the walls start closing in and she chocks by the hands of anxiety

Her life was built on skipping pills rather than skipping school,

Each capsule contained a piece of her artificial personality,

Each capsule told her how to be, what to say and to play along with the waves of society,

While inside she's torn by the cuts of vulnerability,

What hurt her most was never knowing her true identity.

They called it depression,

She called it her two friends, internal bleeding and heart breaking

Like a vase that fell from the top shelf,

she was broken,

Waiting to be thrown out.



GRACE MORSE

New Orleans, USA



JACK AND JOSIE GO TO BOJANGLE'S

The negroes that resided in Nelson County, Virginia, were never quite a satisfied bunch. This is not to say that Jackson Columbus and Josephine Tolmon were miserable creatures, half-black and wonder struck beings, no sir. On the Sunday morning before Jack died, they had followed their normal routine. They woke up, did their daily devotions with the best of their kind, and then decided they needed to feed, which is what placed them in the parking lot of Bojangle's, the local eatery in which Josephine had learned she was pregnant twice-over. Though her children had come and gone several years ago, she could remember the look Jack gave her when she whispered the news to him; his mahogany face had been struck with a grimace so strong that his veins tightened near his forehead. For the rest of that day Jack remained silent, his twenty-one year old hands captured in two fists. Josie shook her head as she got out of Jack's car, a Toyota truck that he stole from his father when he graduated high school. She felt her throat tighten, an uncomfortable feeling seeking in her upper body as she walked with Jack inside.

And so began their final supper, and neither Jackson nor Josephine surprised at the poor state the restaurant was in. Cracked were the walls and damp were the floors, which glistened as the pair took their seat. The booth, which had yellow cushion coming out of the pockets, had tears and strips across the side. Jack told Josie to sit down while he went to the counter and ordered for the both of them, getting a sharp glare from the restaurant's manager, a round man with red cheeks and streaks of gray hair. When the manager called their number, he found a way to drop the tray on the ground, missing Jack's hands entirely. The orange plastic slammed into the floor, and the manager chuckled softly. Jack growled, a sound that resembled a car engine that had a severe malfunction.

"Jack, don't you go making noises at this nice man. You be civil and say your apology." Josie gripped his arm, having gotten up from her seat at the booth. Jack looked at the woman he had been sleeping with for the last three months and sighed, detaching his arm from her hand.

"I apologize, sir."

The manager looked at Josie and his mouth expanded to reveal a set of rotten teeth.

"Good thing you have a woman who can keep you in line, boy. It's 1971; ain't nobody need to remind you how to behave," he said. He reached over and placed his hand on Josie's shoulder, clenching his hand tightly on her flesh. Her freckled face quivered as the man moved closer.

SATYENDRA NAIR

Mumbai, India

I am the creature that country clichés often mention—
the city animal.
This restless wonderment
at my inability to harness nature in my poetry
is a distant thought now,
overwritten by the black airbrush exhausts—
probably precipitates on a friendly hawkers white smiley mask.

Case scenarios of what could be
are just voices in the wind now—
or the silent rustle of grass—
the rare child caressed by the final gush.
Instead, I wonder what happens if the hawker,
say for example, wipes his mask,
and his finger like a philosopher's stone,
reduced to the exotic mediocrity of an ivory touch
leaves an ivory trail—the tiny island of truth
staining his persona.

The dull splashes of paint in the galleries are my sky—
their depth momentarily mine,
and the sky falling is the stray strand of green
in my concrete jungle.
And you, dear crowd—
the empty bubbles winking at me
from the brim of my glass.



Z N PASHA

Sialkot, Pakistan

HARJAI

This veil of silence is suffocating me. At 88 my shackled limbs are forced to speak. These flowery scarves are making them weep. This fragrance of *Abu Jaan* is sweet. They burn down Karachi and I need to say sorry? Muhammad taught me to be. My *jamun*'s bruised up in Kashmir. It's my *parchai* and I want her to breathe. I collect *Bulbul* feathers to bury. There are knife holes in my sheets. Their knuckles bruise walls that are sunny. My parched lips sip on frozen dreams. I rode up to the sky to debate on *taqdir*. I am them and they are me. So *Kun* and there is God in me.



AZAMAT OMURALIEV

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan



'You could write a story about this,' she said.

A long hallway stretched for dozens of meters. Darkness didn't let the signs on numerous doors be read, didn't let the dust on the bookshelves be distinctly seen. Lonely footsteps echoed in the labyrinth of abandoned knowledge, as he and she were the first to enter it in many days, months and years. The cruel heat of summer noon couldn't touch them through countless intersections of walls and stacks of novels written on brown paper.

Their breath slowed down, tracks of sweat dried on their foreheads.

As he and she kept stepping down this endless corridor, glancing on spines of books, they missed out puddles of empty bullet shells and piles of arm bones, hidden in the gloom. They also didn't notice a little spark that sat on the pages of one of the books, with its light too weak to shine bright enough. The fire ate one word after another, and it did not stop as the steps vanished in the depths of the ancient building. It took its time. It killed the glories of knights when he and she left through a wide wooden door, it drained the rivers of blood when they sat in an old yellow car, it cracked the bones in the corners when she washed her long black hairs and melted the lead of bullets when he wrote a short story. It took its time, and no one ever again made a slightest attempt to stop it; it took its time until it burned everything down to ashes.

CHIRAN RAJ PANDEY

Kathmandu, Nepal

BHUPI'S DREAM

In 2006 a poet wrote his first poem into a notebook that could not be written in with a pen, but only with the blood of a once-King. The poet's name was Bhupi Sherchan, and when he wrote, he wrote with a vigor, he wrote with a calm, and he wrote with the blood of the King Gyanendra, the remnants of which he had gathered from the edge of a staircase onto which the King had once fallen and cut part of his head—an event which, indirectly, led him to abdicate his throne, for what King who had no rule over his body could rule a country?

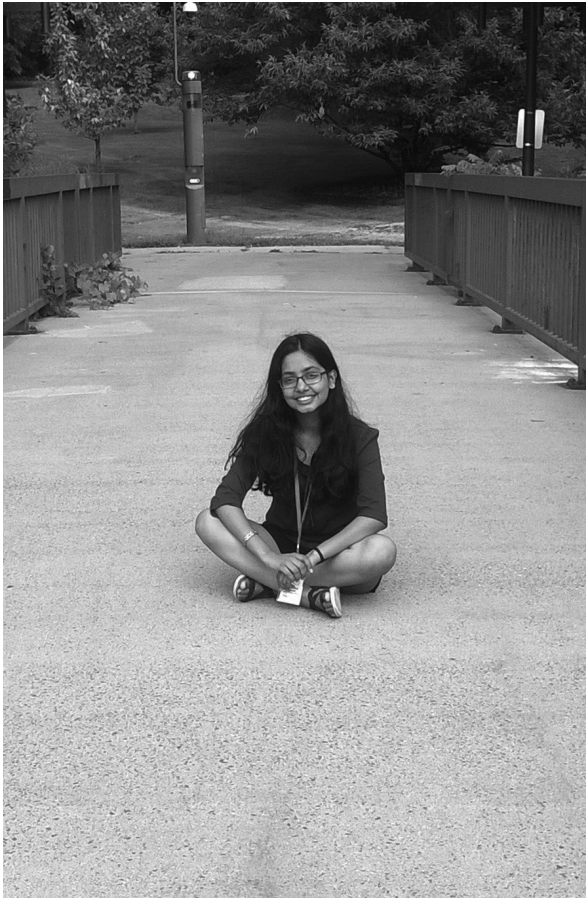
The ink with which Bhupi Sherchan wrote took two years to prepare. After he had collected the blood of the King, he oxidized it in two-parts alcohol and one-part coca cola for more than a year so that the red in the ink reddened and the stench hardened. When the oxidation had completed, Bhupi Sherchan had to sacrifice much of the ink in payments to his forefathers. Before, he had never known how many forefathers he had. There was his own father, Bhuwan Sherchan, and the father of his father, the brother of his father's father, the father of his brother's father's father, the father of his father's brother's father, and as the red from the ink stained the legacy of his fathers, it lost meaning. By the time Bhupi Sherchan was ready enough to finally write the poem of his lifetime, he had spent all but a pinch of the ink, only enough for perhaps two lines. When he wrote, he wrote in Nepali; he wrote *Nepal/ a bird rogi/ timi legacy of kasko/ mind ko marma/ ma tears jhaarchhu eklasma/ kathmandu in knots naya sadak ma/ justice dinma pretatma/ rakshi in a glass/ the director ko ho/ andho manchhe in a chair.*

On a swiveling chair a blind man learns to take in the world in its entirety and Bhupi Sherchan drinks the ink with which he writes to sprout leaves from his hands and his legs become stems and his head ripens to a fruit and he—for what remains of his life, turns into a flower.



JIGYASA SUBEDI

Kathmandu, Nepal



EXCERPT FROM "THE RED STAIN"

She swirled the glass. The wine tossed and churned, the crimson waves at fight with each other until a drop bounced, hit the edge, teetering dangerously before plopping down on the white couch.

She just studied the red stain that was expanding with every passing second, not in a hurry to get it cleaned up until she heard footsteps approach the door.

Her eyes flew to the door, watching as it swung open, before they settled on the stain again.

She heard him come in, his scuffles echoing on the hardwood floor.

There was a minute's pause.

"You're not supposed to be drinking."

Her eyes skittered across the room, meeting his warm ones. They held each other's gaze. Her stomach knotted at the thought of talking to him, him out of all the people. "I'm not." She glanced away. "It's calming, just holding it."

He dropped the keys on the counter, shrugging off his blazer before making his way towards her.

The couch dipped as he sat down, his shoulder brushing against hers. She stiffened.

He pulled her hand into his, squeezing it tightly. "Look at me." His lukewarm breath prickled her neck.

She shook her head vehemently, tears now welling up in her eyes. She couldn't. Not after what she had done.

Her lower lip quivered, a tear drop now trickling down her face. In the moment's weakness, the glass slipped from her hands, plunging and shattering into a million fragments; the wine toppled and seeped into the carpet.

She broke down then; deep, aching sobs emanating from her body.

She buried her face in her hands. Her heart thumped against her chest, adrenaline coursing through her veins.

A hammering silence drummed in her ears.

She couldn't keep it to herself, not anymore. The guilt was gnawing away at her, pulling down her walls, brick by brick.

"I killed him." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

The words hung in the air, pregnant.

She breathed in and then out, opening her eyes. Her gaze shifted to him, eyes swimming with tears. "I killed our son."



SABINA UMURZAKOVA

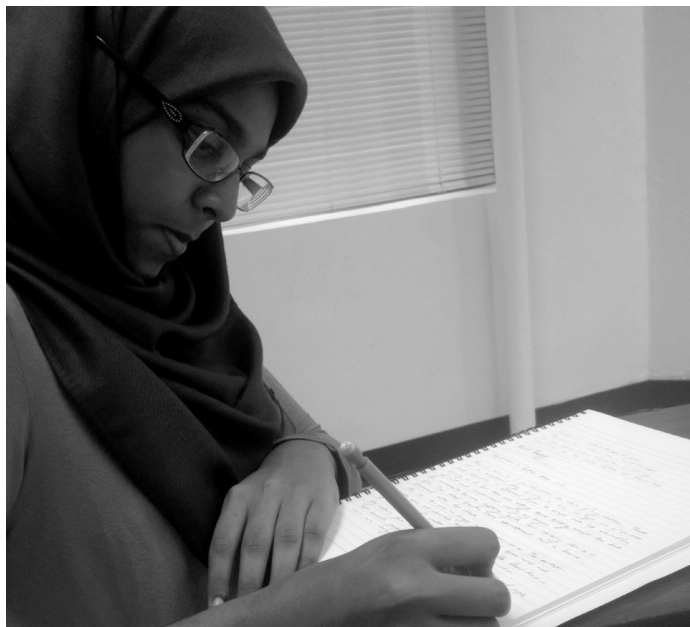
Karakol, Kyrgyzstan



Iowa !
I am beside you
On the rim of your heart.
Hear the cry of my soul.
I only ask you
Do not hurt me
Let me be the guest of your heart.
I am not born in your prairies
I do not whisper that I am your child
 Heartbeat...
 Trembling voice...
Let me enjoy your sky .
Let me be part of your beauty.
Merge with the singing of your birds.
I do not whisper that I am your child.
Let me be the guest of your heart.

ZIQRA ZAROOK

Colombo, Sri Lanka



When I was 7, I saw hell
possess the skin of my father.
There was a madman's fury
Simmering in him, his eyes orbs of darkness
and dementia.
I expected flames to erupt into
life around him,
burning us all but there was only stillness.
Nothing except the salt
trailing down my cheeks and disappointment
coating my tongue.

His movements became lightning quick,
skin striking skin in a blur.
Time stilled. Breaths were abandoned. And a bruise
flowered across her cheek.

At 10, this was no longer a
rare occurrence.
The Easter bunny was still
Real.
but silence after 6:00 was not.
Anger took refuge under the devil's skin.
The devil took us to church.
Holy water never stung him but my mother
flinched every time and that's when I knew
God abandoned us.
Abandoned me.

My mother's face was a
patchwork quilt of blues and purple skin
beneath paper skin. She
never spoke much but her smile was this
permanent fixture.



My poor mother, always smiling even when he
would use her body as the canvas for
his manic art.

My poor mother, painted in
black and blue,
purple and yellow.
So colourful.
So painful.

My mother sat me down at 15,
still smiling so
brilliantly.
Warned me about men with
easy smiles and
silver tongues.
She told me of the
devil laying dormant under the skin
of men.
Her eyes spoke volumes of
torment even as the smile grew
wider,
wider,
wider.

I vowed then to not end up like her
and after all,

Prevention is b e t t e r than the cure.
— on why I stole the lives of boys

KANDALA SINGH

New Delhi, India

MONSOON

The wind brought down this yellow:
petals littering the garden, the Maruti's windshield.
The rain shreds petals, leaves sticky splotches.
Armed with a rag, Ram Niwas (a hardworkin' old fellow)
declares war on the yellow, enters the battlefield.
He works stubbornly in the rain, wrestling stains.
The glass listens to the patter of rain; yellowness watches
the old man. It peels off quietly in petals, remains.

RANGOLI

My *diwali thali* has pink
bougainvillea petals, fallen
banyan leaves, tiny broken twigs,

gathered from this bend in
your road, once
an entire country to me.

(for JNU)



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