

# BETWEEN THE LINES

Peace and the Writing Experience 2023



**IOWA**

International Writing Program  
Between the Lines





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**5** Acknowledgements

**6** Foreward

**8** Lina

**10** Roshmi

**13** Tanatsiwa

**14** Elizabeth

**15** Sahil

**17** IV

**18** Ankita

**20** Miguel

**24** Shalom

**26** Uzayer

**29** Shamiso

**30** Brynne

**31** Nina

**32** Azima



**35** Narges

**52** Mia

**36** Sofia

**53** Ava

**37** Cyril

**54** Emma

**41** Alex

**55** Faculty & Staff

**42** Asma

**44** Inis

**46** Aleena

**48** Amari

**50** Farwa

# Acknowledgements

Each year, since its inception in 2008, Between the Lines (BTL) has pursued innovation and growth. This year's program is again made possible by the generous support from the Cultural Programs Division of the U.S. Department of State, and the dedication of individuals and organizations that support the program's mission: Christopher Merrill, International Writing Program (IWP) director; and all the staff of the IWP at the University of Iowa; Jill Staggs, Asha Beh and Nancy Szalwinski, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State; BTL instructors: Mary Hickman, Rumena Bužarovska, Rochelle Potkar, Tariro Nodoro, and Vladimir Poleganov; BTL teaching assistants: Sean Zhuraw, Delaney Nolan, Sibani Ram, Helene Sicard-Cowan, and Henneh Kwaku Kyereh; IWP editor Nataša Ďurovičová; BTL program assistant Razan Hamza; BTL program coordinator Romeo Oriogun.

We also give our thanks to BTL's Special Seminar Instructors; Hera Naguib, Camisha Jones, Henry Lien, Jerry Lee Davis, Arinze Ifeakandu, Esther Okonkwo, Saleem Hue Penny, and Moriana Hernandez. And finally, our thanks to all the participants of Between the Lines for making this program extraordinary.

# Foreword

*"The world is like a dancing masquerade. If you want to understand it, you can't remain standing in one place."*

*– Igbo proverb.*



In 2023, for the third year running the Between the Lines (BTL) Program was held virtually. We brought in twenty-eight young writers from twelve different countries around the world. We hoped that over the course of two weeks they will find friendship and understanding among each other while paying attention to the world around them through their writing.

We asked them to wander outside the familiar borders of their cultures, we asked them to travel virtually into the lives and literature of their cohorts. We asked to believe in their voices, to trust us, to question stereotypes. And then every day, all day, for two weeks, we asked them to explore, write, and read. We asked them to be vulnerable and brave, we asked them to take risks and throw themselves headlong into every challenge and every adventure that comes with the art of writing. Each of these writers met every moment with courage, ingenuity, and passion. We asked a great deal of them, we believed that they could find a pathway for themselves through their writing, and they did just that.

During their time with BTL, I got to know them as individuals, but, more spectacularly, I watched as they became sure of their voices. Their creative workshops, literature classes, and special seminars began as programmatic events, but by the end of two weeks, these shared experiences led to friendships, bonds, and, finally, rituals, ceremonies, languages and celebrations, specific to this group of young writers. They became a new tribe of their very own.

The work they have produced over these two weeks has been remarkable— but more than that, I am certain the work they will do in the future, as the newest generation of strong, vibrant, unapologetic creators, will be thrilling. I cannot wait to see what comes next, but whatever it is, I will always be proud of them and the visionary spirit that they shared during their time with the Between the Lines (BTL) Program.

Romeo Oriogun, IWP Youth Programs Coordinator

Razan Hamza, Between the Lines Program Assistant

# Lina



## My Home: The Apricot Tree

It was 12:17 p.m. We were having lunch at the dining room and we had Qabuli, a traditional

Afghan dish. It is made of rice, carrots, currants, and lamb. A slow wind was moving the pale pink blossoms of the big apricot tree in our yard. It had been there for years, even long before we moved to this house. I finished my lunch and got ready for school. I wore my shoes outside the house and started walking on its shadow. After a long day at school, I came back home. The orange rays of the setting sun were shining through the newly opened green leaves of the big tree. I sat on the swing that my father had made on one of its big branches. I sat there and watched the silent house, its walls concreted and its windows yellow colored. I watched the ready

to blossom flowers that were planted all in a row in front of the house, two red, and one pink roses, the well, the apple trees, and the big yellow door. I kept watching everything, while sitting on the swing and slowly going back and forth and went to sleep.

After a long day at school, I came back home. The orange rays of the setting sun were shining through the newly opened green leaves of the big tree. I sat on the swing that my father had made on one of its big branches. I sat there and watched the silent house, its walls concreted and its windows yellow colored. I watched the ready to blossom flowers that were planted all in a row in front of the house, two red, and one pink roses, the well, the apple trees, and the big yellow door. I kept watching everything, while sitting on the swing and slowly going back and forth and went to sleep.

I woke up and my mother had washed the apricots that she had picked. I ate some but decided to pick some more myself. My sister and I went all the way up to its highest brunch and picked some of the finest apricots that were sweet like heaven. We picked some more because my school classmates were coming to our house this afternoon. I made some juice, I washed the apricots and put them on the Chinese dishes of my mother. My friends arrived and we chatted, said jokes, laughed and talked about all the good memories of school, while we enjoyed drinking the juice and eating the apricots.

My parents and some of my siblings left the house for going to our village, my grand father had passed away. My sister, my brother and I were alone at home. The pain that my grand father's sudden death had caused, had sent all the house into a deadly silence. My sister and brother would not talk much. My brother brought some things for dinner and we ate them in the blinking light that was hung from the brunch of the tree.



My father and mother went to a vacation, as I graduated high school. We moved to the new house my parents bought. It was right next to our old house, just one wall in between them. Two months later, under the falling leaves of the big, apricot tree, I said goodbye to my dear siblings and went to the airport with my parents. On the airport my mother's tears and their prayers for me sent away me and the two leaves that had fallen on my carry on.

The four college years were great. I learned a lot of new things, I made a lot of new friends, I went to a lot of new places, and I became a whole new person, but I also missed home. I missed my family, my friends, our home and our apricot tree. Despite my family's will, instead of going back home, I found a job and stayed there. I spent a lot of time working and learning new skills. I improved a lot and got a great job.

After some years, I had enough money to buy a house. I bought a beautiful house, painted it, bought furniture, and planted some flowers and an apricot. I started a great life, supported my family and my siblings. Three of my siblings came there for college and after some years, they had their own good lives.

The longer I stayed the better my life got. But there was a feeling that kept reminding me of home. I missed my parents so much. I was homesick. This nostalgia kept hurting my heart.

I was old when I decided to go back, to go to my parents, to go back home.

I counted seconds  
as I sat on the silver, old car  
on the way back home  
the old driver, with the grey beard  
asked where I was going  
with my breaking sound I said, home  
as he was driving the car  
I watched every tree, standing in long lines  
welcoming me home  
I counted seconds  
as I passed through all the old  
streets of home  
tears of happiness falling down  
my old wrinkled face, I laughed loud  
on the way home  
I counted seconds  
I waited 7200 seconds for the driver  
to take me home  
I wanted seconds  
while sitting next to my mother and father  
under the apricot tree, at home!



## Sonder

Sirens wailed. In their hideouts, the crickets stopped their orchestra. The corroded iron gate screeched open and torchlights crisscrossed through the bushes, which in their civilized days embodied a garden. They trampled over the undergrowth and advanced up the stairs. Under their soles, the stair-edges scraped. Three to the right, three to the left, four upstairs— the commander gestured.

A young officer searched across the terrace. The light hovered from one end of the terrace to the other, and then behind the colossal tank. The officer put his torch down. Did its light just quiver on something? On the floor, right before the tank. He knelt; the light focused on a knife piercing through her chest. Boundless crimson.

He summoned the others to the terrace. Amidst a disoriented approach of boots, his fingertips clutched around her wrist. Death is but a forever-slumber, impervious to the shattering of silence.

1

A flurry of taffy pink butterflies pranced round the dahlias. To study their gambol, I squinted closer. Out of nowhere, a pearl-white member frolicked on the gale, in an endeavor to join its tribe. It whirled around them, ignored yet willing. The tinted comrades turned away, accessing other dahlias. For about a quarter on the clock, they turned a blind eye to their pale companion. It forced itself into solitude, camouflaging once again.

The leaves clapped and swished as they arched away from the tranquil zephyr. Sunrays split through their crevices, deviating hither and yon. Hands in pockets, I stared at the turquoise sky. Beneath its hushed magnitude, a shelter was to be sought. An uphill track nudged my desires. The barefoot trek did not derange the serenity of the ambience. Having trailed past a few hovels, I closed in on the zenith of the hillock. I leaned against a larch trunk. Very gently, the breeze calmed my senses, pacifying my mind of every mere thought. My eyelids were relieved of labor— I slipped into the world of sleep.

2

Grandma lifted her tiny dolly up in her arms. She welcomed the blossom with teary eyes. But the newborn only returned a curious gesture. I watched from a distance. The house was enlightened in no time. Grandma's gout retired as she bolted in each time the little angel gave out a cry. New miniature dresses were unpacked, washed, and rinsed, and tried on the baby every evening. She burnt her fingers while extracting her granddaughter's feeding apparatus from the boiling water. When on unfortunate days her darling bore an odd temperature, grandma sat up all night long, not paying heed to her own perspiration, but warming the child up with the finest blankets.

And one night, I peeped into grandma's room.

## Roshmi



"Then the angel flew away. Higher and higher, bidding the little children good-bye. So, now? Won't my little girl sleep?"

"Good night, granny," said a voice, gradually losing its shrillness with approaching sleep.

3

The play of yellow and orange was splendid. Streaks of light on the blue sky sometimes became the central allure. No words were enough to elucidate the beauty of the sunset. Sitting alone on the mango tree, the little girl soaked in the beauty of the sun. She became dreamy and had for a while perhaps become the Alice in her Wonderland. The mango leaves brushed against her forehead.

Her seat shook; she jerked up, terrified.

"Stole some of the jam!" Her brother grinned from the branch below.

Unamused, she reposed her spine and closed her eyes. The boy savored his marmalade. He flicked away the restless ants crawling up the branch. Strange how they are never weary...

Smack!

"Ouch!"

"That hurt? Are you so delicate!" His sister giggled. The marmalade jar was confiscated.

I surveyed their tussle from the terrace.

The sun set. They returned unwillingly, still threatening each other.

4

A forest raven cawed incessantly from the tree next. My zizz having ceased, I rubbed my eyes and searched for the cause of its displeasure. Its caws were answered by a distant shrill, the source of which I could not find out. Having lost my interest, I tried to focus elsewhere. The moon was a thin white pencil stroke on the evening sky.

From nowhere, a raven flew past my sight. It landed beside its partner and the cries broke off. Soon, they were feeding their little ones in the decent nest. I smiled. My stagnation soothed me to slumber yet again. 5

I saw two people cuddling a tiny tot. Their fingers played through her meshy hair, and as they smiled, boundless emotions were revealed through their teardrops. The mother held her tightly to her chest, caressing her cushiony cheeks. Her arms trembled with the newness of handling something so delicate. Little did mamma know what comfort her hands bestowed upon the newborn. She sat there, still amazed at the sight of those teensy-weensy fingers.

Only two years later the cuddly baby wore a tight uniform, with an emblem on the chest-pocket and the belt, bewildered by the suddenness of the kindergarten arrival. When the teacher ushered her in through the gate, her cautionary eyes rolled around to mom and dad. What about them?



How I wished they appeared in my vision prior to reaching for that dilapidated building!

Years of love, care, support and trust: demolished by a single act.

My ears had burnt as I had stood on the terrace, contemplating only about myself. I had shouted loud enough to hear a shrill beep pierce through my ear holes. The veins in my forehead had thrust themselves across the skin, wearied by relentless sobbing; repenting for all I never achieved, for all the expectations I never fulfilled.

Then? I had barely thought about the aftermath imposed on myself.

The hill-apex induced solitude in the noiselessness of the night. Not a frog croaked, not a cricket chirped. I buried my head amidst my folded limbs. Even tears seemed too fatigued to appear.

Across the planet, the teeming millions looked forward to their dicey existence. They were treading on the 'sands of time'. Mankind's anticipation for happiness and success is customarily unassailable, I thought. The moment they find their road to these elements too vulnerable, their delight evaporates, gone is their buoyancy and the animation ahead loses its hue.

The brightest color in the universe, life, appeared to be smiling at my despondency. Time stopped before me.

In an abrupt impulse— I broke down. I craved for a shelter, longing to get back to my 'home sweet home'. It's all past now, I consoled myself. A redundant indecision suffixed to my dilemma: should I repent for my demise or look ahead? Look ahead to what?

I perceived a light flickering above my head. No, not one, but thousands of dotted lights twinkled around the larch trees. A stunning show of moving goldens played around me. The fireflies flapped recurrently from one tree to another, thousands, millions, trillions of them filling the air with myriads of glowing beams, concentrating round the branches. The luminous insects transformed the gloomy night into an apparent twilight. Life bloomed all around, the grasses danced in limelight, the trees gleamed with mirth.

The fireflies still flutter. Like sunflowers to the sun, they flap under the moon. Life encircles me. And thus, I pursue walking on what every soul chooses as the ultimatum: hope.

## Feminine Melanin

I am the embodiment of feminine melanin, A  
symphony of hues that paints my skin. My  
ebony roots stretch deep and wide, A  
legacy of resilience and pride.

I am a daughter of the sun and earth.  
A goddess of beauty, of infinite worth. My  
curves and lines tell a story so true, Of  
power and grace, of what I can do.

My eyes are unlike the stars that sparkle,  
But rather like the moon that steals the show.  
My lips are full and sweet like honey, An  
invitation to taste my inner beauty.

I am the embodiment of feminine melanin  
I am a force to be reckoned with, A  
warrior who refuses to quit. My skin  
is my shield

My melanin is my sword, Protecting  
me from the world's discord.

So hear me now, and hear me clear, My  
melanin is not something to fear. It is a  
symbol of my strength, my power, might, A  
reminder of what is beautiful and right.

I am the embodiment of feminine melanin  
I am a force of nature that cannot be ignored  
I am the embodiment of feminine melanin  
Planted in Zimbabwe,  
Sprouted in Africa  
But growing as a plant of the world.



**Tanatsiwa**

## Company

The cliff  
is barren ; the drop  
is steep.  
There's only one  
guard  
and it's you.

Overlooking  
dusty stone  
and purple-pink  
We sit  
on the edge  
of the cliff. Your  
soft calves  
dangling off  
my knees  
crisscrossed.

As we give  
each other  
Company  
the precipice  
grows  
getting farther  
and farther  
away  
from us.

# Elizabeth



# Elizabeth

# Elizabeth

# Elizabeth



# Azaadi

"Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the Dijlah, or Tigris, will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an azad, or free man, like the cypress."

—Henry David Thoreau, Walden, quoting Saadi Shiraz's Gulistan

Father said Great-Grandfather built the haveli from the ground up. His estate was his personal memoir, passed down two generations like a family heirloom. Each and every chamber represented chapters of our mundane lives. Every new wallpaper plastered over corridors once covered by prints decorated in success and failure, despair and harmony, and compromise. I remember back when dusty vinyls and newspaper clippings still outlined

Mother's boudoir. Slowly, they became stocked in forgotten boxes hidden behind family photographs framed in fake silver and her exhibit of open caskets of gin, vodka, and whiskey. Everyone thought she was the next big ghazal singer, the pinnacle of her pandit heritage. She joked that when she returned to the earth, her epitaph would read, "If only I were born a man." Father blamed himself for her situation, but he, too, was victim to the times.

At the head of our dining table stood the candelabra. Childhood me named each pillar after the members of our family: Mother on the left, Father on the right, and of course, me in the center. And that was my world. The righthand two burned with fiery passion, their blistering wax welling up and overflowing out the silver bobèche onto the gilded drip pan. The left one melted slowly, like a broken fountain spouting occasional tears atop a steep marble baluster. Father loathed making all those trips to the bazaar, compensating ebbing stubs with fresh victims right before they melted entirely. Mother always warned that extinguished candles called forth the worst nazar, and to never, ever let any perish. But I spent many

My day of reckoning arrived sooner than expected. It was me at the dinner table, ready to share a hearty meal with our antique porcelain cabinet and the fresh dust outlining the crevices of our dining hall. There was no audience, no ears to hear my cries for companionship, only labyrinthine corridors ready to reverberate the echoes of my solitary screams back at me. Another day in the hollow haveli, if that was all. Across from me lay three articles: two burnt-out stubs glued by wax onto broken prongs and what remained of the golden trident. All that stood was one derelict, amputated stand, topped by a fresh candle smeared with ashes. For some time, I stared into the single golden light above the dark, ceraceous pillar, envisioning the remainder of

# Sahil





my life as prisoner to the haveli, playing the role of custodian for the manor that never truly welcomed me in it; I would rather sit in the flame.

Finally, the dagger jabbed into my breast. It carved out a cordate incision, cutting through rib bone and muscle to pierce through my pulsating heart. Blood duly drained from my eyes, crown, hands, fingers. Nobody existed, not one single life form sought me in their life at any moment. The last shreds of worldliness grounding me to humanity disintegrated, even from within my tight grasp; no consent, no closure. No shackles bound me to my dungeon any longer. Bereaved but liberated, I left my meal-for-three on the table: maybe as a housewarming present for the life that reclaims that mausoleum holding my youth. I grabbed the candlestick and rushed to the vestibule, opening the door to the streets, never to return.

Fissured pavements and dirt pathways embraced me with open arms. I enjoyed the ascetic life, wandering down dirt gullies and orchards, seeing which kajor trees would offer their produce to me. On days of good fortune, I would encounter enough donors to survive through night; on others, I sustained myself on whatever scraps topped local rummage bins: leaves, roots, bark, whatever kismet sent my way. I found companionship in the candlestick that wore the breast pocket of my torn clothes every day: I considered snuffing its flames too. Some days, I would peddle chai on behalf of the local vendor, watching as the grimy, dirt-bound coins fell from his furrowed, wrinkled fingers into my dark, lacerated palms. I wondered if this was what Great-Grandfather endured. Every few days, I found myself returning to the candle store, bargaining for a new little column to finance my pitiful voyage. Mr. Candlewala grimaced at me every time, finally relenting and reluctantly handing me a new lifeline.

Life changed once I met the man reclined on the cypress branch, whose waxlight was reaching its embers. I called for his name and offered him my own, finally becoming the kajor and making my miserable life worth something. "You need not offer me dates," the man uttered atop the branch, mustering energy from beyond the catacombs themselves. "I do not need to produce fruits of labor to have value. I am the cypress, forever azaadi, free in life and in death. Do not mistake Death's impending visit as an escape from this world. I transform. I leave this mortal plane, and my soul unwinds beyond this world currently within your gaze." When his sermon ended, his candle fizzed out. He lay slumped, his formerly interlocked fingers loosening and hanging off the branch's sides, his smile wider than ever despite all of his agony and suffering. His soul waved at me, azaadi like the humble cypress he fashioned his deathbed, as he departed for the heavens, alone like the swan.

# Fred Rogers' Mom Was Wrong

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

- Fred Rogers

We wander through rooms,  
filled with people  
and empty of helpers.  
We are looking;  
we are not lost,  
only stranded,  
left behind because  
we aren't the fittest,  
because we "can't be helped."  
Left behind because  
we can't sleep from  
the chronic pain, the panic attacks  
the flashbacks  
or maybe it's that  
we sleep too much  
because we know there's nothing  
for us out there,  
because we won't eat right or shower  
anyway, so what's the point?  
We have never found people  
who are helping.  
Hell, you tell us we're not supportive enough  
but we torture ourselves to  
communicate with you,  
a communication you don't  
reciprocate,  
because when we ask for patience  
we get dismissal and dirty looks,  
nevermind more times than  
we've ever counted.



IV

Ankita

Ankita

Ankita

Ankita

An



## Elderly Women

An elderly woman was about to die.

Death was in the mood for an easy guide. Someone who had made peace with meeting her years ago.

People died every day, but Death chose who she wanted to guide to the gates.

Those who weren't chosen were forced to find their own way, and Death didn't particularly care whether they made it to the gates or not.

She had a soft spot for old women though.

The majority of those she guided to the gates were silver-haired with crepey skin and she liked to keep it that way.

Sometimes, they even had a recipe or two to share. On days when the black felt too much,

Death would bake and eat them near their tombs or old homes.

It depended on the woman she guided as well.

Some of them were fiery. For others, life and death meant no difference to them.

Some were just as soft as their skin: quiet and barely speaking.

She didn't mind what they were like because they all had so much within them. It's easy to forget their years when they let their wisdom speak for itself.

The woman awoke, her eyes widening at the sight of a stranger in her home.

Death calmly covered the woman's mouth as she spoke.

"Miss Ruth, you're dead. I'm here to take you to where you go after someone dies."



The woman removed Death's hand from her mouth, "You're Death? I didn't expect someone who works in such a morbid profession to be so pretty."

Death laughed, "Appearances are not everything. Come, let me take you to a new home."

Death could tell she had died in her sleep: no one else would be so calm about it. She offered Ruth her elbow and she accepted it, walking beside Death.

"What's this new home like?"

"Whatever you'd like it to be. Nirvana, reincarnation, Heaven. Whatever you believe in and think you deserve. Death is indiscriminate." Death said, leading the woman to her black chariot. It had been centuries since anyone had used a chariot in the mortal world, but she rather liked the look of it.

"A chariot? Wouldn't you rather use something more modern instead? I feel like I'm in a Roman history textbook."

I like the look of it. There's no reason why. Would you want to change the ride? I'm guiding you, not dragging you along," Death said.

"I don't exactly have a choice not to be guided, but I see your point. No, I don't mind at all. It's interesting to spend my last moments in something I've never been in."

Death grinned. She liked this woman. Quite a bit.

"Do you have anyone you're leaving behind?" Death asked, curious.

Ruth shrugged, "No one that matters."

Death smiled a little bit as she drove the chariot towards the gates, "You seem unnaturally alright with death. Is there a reason why?"

"None really. I believed I would die much early on. It's a surprise that I've lived so long. And a surprise that it's so calming."

Death smiled. At least she had made one woman's journey a pleasant experience.

"We're almost there," Death let the woman open the gates herself. "I hope you find that what's inside the gates will be just as calming as the ride here was."

The woman smiled, "You're sweet for someone who has likely done this a million times over."

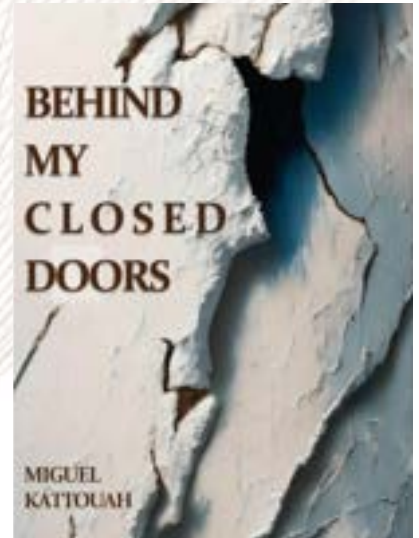
Death shrugged in response. "Perhaps I've just perfected the script, Ruth."

Laughter rang through the gates as they shut behind her.

# Miguel

## Behind My Closed Doors

The room is silent, completely quiet. I hear nothing at all except the creaks in the bed as I move. I'm sitting there staring at the white wall, at the cracks that come from the paint. The stain on the upper lefthand corner has been growing for a week now. It has been raining a lot recently; the cracks cannot live without the rain. They are in an uneven pattern. It bothers me. But the wall cannot live without the cracks. One is going left, and another is going right. No two are like the other. They converge at one point and some form one line. Some end. Others leave the intersection and go on to extend all throughout the wall. In some ways, they stem from each other. Every crack from the other. They give off a black reflection on the wall. A kind of smudge or texture. It gives it life, reality. The stain keeps growing further and further as time passes. It has been raining a lot recently. The rain is pretty. It's quite relaxing. It helps the stain grow. I feel more comfortable as it grows. I feel happier. It helps me think. At least one thing is constant. My mother doesn't like the rain; I like the rain. The stain will always grow as long as it is raining.



My mother wants to cover the stain. I keep on saying no. It does not bother me. It's good that it is out. I hear the bed creak. She says that the stain looks ugly, and it needs to be proper, tidier. I don't like that. Why does she call it ugly? It's beautiful, it's growing. It engulfs everything. It's like a black whole. Then, when the entire wall is transformed into the greyish color of the stain, then we shall break it. Build a new wall, without deception. But the rain still falls. She will paint again. And then the stain will form again. This will always happen as long as the cracks are on the wall because reality, darkness will always leak. But the cracks will always form because there will always be layers upon layers of paint, of masks. And the paint will not be taken off the wall because it keeps them alive, it keeps the deception alive, it keeps it growing. It is support. And the wall will always remain beautiful. Proper as my mother calls it. It should be proper. Hiding the crumbling toxicity beneath it. It's secret. Always secret. Always proper. I don't like proper, so I let the stain grow, but the whole process starts again, and again. It's a never-ending cycle. The bed creaks.

The cracks create torment in the wall, an uneasy feeling to the room. They each have their own story, but the cracks create bigger cracks as it ripples throughout the wall. It is a living organism, each with a shadow reflected from the light above my bed. The stain has to be there. It portrays the reflected darkness upfront. It does not let it hide. I like the reflection. My mother wants to hide it. It has to be proper. But the addition of paint will break the wall; it will become too heavy. It cannot hold. It will crumble the organism. She does not understand. The bed creaks. Without paint the cracks would not exist, without paint the stain wouldn't form. It bothers me. She keeps hiding to keep them alive.

The stain gives me joy that everything is as it seems. I hate deception. I hate when they hide their reality. They poison others and let them fall. I see through it; I see against it. My mother cannot hide it for long. The bed creaks. The rain will always pour. The darkness will always affect her white wall. My grey wall will always remain. The outcome is the same, but she doesn't care. She wants to keep painting it.

I move in my bed. I have a book open in front of me. The bed creaks again. The bed keeps on



creaking. It's an old bed. It belonged to my grandfather or my uncles. I don't really know. I don't know my family that well; they are all the same. I did not think I should get to know them. They are very different from my complexity. They don't let the stain grow. The bed needs to be changed. My mother doesn't want to change it until it breaks. I want it changed. Clean slate. My mother says it would be improper and embarrassing. I think she doesn't want to pay for a new bed. I have never asked. If the bed falls and breaks, then let it be. Either way, the sound will always be constant. I do not know if changing the bed will help; I only know the creaks have become loud, too loud. Sometimes I feel tired of telling my mother the right way to do things again and again. She does not want to change the bed then it is her fault. It will crumble. But she never learns her lesson. I will not live past her; I am tied to her. I need to listen; I cannot change things. So, I let it be. I hate letting her be. The bed creaks.

The cracks are alive. It's like they move. It's very organized. It's stem after stem in a tree that does not rest. It keeps growing and growing. It converges. It's chaos. It's relaxing. The lines are lifelike. Each a story of their own. It does not bother me. It's chaos that makes sense; her proper order does not. That bothers me. I hear the bed creak. My book is structured the same as the wall. A doorway to different places, different fields of grass and different houses of different colors. It is chaotic, all events playing at once. Something no one understands but me. Something no one should.

I read a few pages from the book. A few words. I see shapes. The bed creaks. I imagine the situation. The characters playing in a green field of purple alyssums. The flowers are everywhere. The characters all play around together without the interruption of an outsider. Sometimes they fight for control creating a disturbance in the field where orange lilies sprout; it's her interfering. Some are shy and do not speak much in the book. Others are very open. Some are scary. The bed creaks. They make it their intention to ruin the others' paths. Each is unique but they are all whole. Complete characters. All in the same field. They seem to be most present in certain environments, in certain sections of the field. They are made to fit her.

This is all new to me. It is overwhelming. Characters I did not know were present suddenly arise as if they were always there. The characters are deceptive. They are not honest. They are painted. This is not what I know, this is not what I want. The bed creaks. I am a liar. I promise I did not know. The bed creaks. It seems I am my mother's child. Yellow tulips sprout. They point to me. Tulips don't point. Hypocrite, they whisper. I need to leave. I go back to the book. I need the book.

The pages flip another chapter begins. The field is suddenly empty. A door stands in the middle of it. Open windows. The bed creaks. A storm is brewing. It is far from the door, behind the mountains, but it is approaching quickly. The mountains are high; they are strong; they are powerful. They were built by people like my mother. But the mountains create a bigger storm; it lets it anticipate awaiting its sudden burst. This might blow me away. The bed creaks. I come into the house. It is cozy, very cozy. I sit on the comfortable warm yellow chair. I put my hands on the arm rests and lean back. I'm very comfortable. I look outside and suddenly see shelves upon shelves of books in the middle of the field of alyssums. The yellow tulips are there too pointing at the house. Tulips are the storm's favorite flower. They always come after a winter. I do not know why they appeared now. It's all a ruse after all, a lie I put on. They know my secret. I do not want to have a secret. I am forced to have a secret, or the storm blows me away. The storm approaches. It becomes stronger; it seems rain is coming. The rain is scary now. I look outside the open window to the books. They are still intact. I close the window because of the storm. It would be more violent if I let the storm close it. I sit inside. But the storm doesn't end. The air is getting thin. The windows have been closed shut. It is okay. It is safer this way, with the windows shut. The bed creaks again.



The chair is getting too comfortable. I try to get out, but I can't. The bed creaks again. I fight my way up from the chair. I charge to the window. I'm suffocating; I need air. The bed creaks again. I cannot open the window. I fight. I pull with all my strength. I am unsuccessful. The storm has closed it shut. The bed creaks again. I look outside and see the books going farther and farther away. They cannot help me.

I fall to the ground. The bed creaks. I'm slipping away. My vision is getting blurred. The room starts turning. The bed creaks. The room starts turning yellow. It's all yellow. The bed creaks. The storm circles the house as I fall to the ground. The bed creaks again. I fight for my last breath, and I try my best to see clearly. I've left the house. But I'm in a gray storm engulfed by a safe and quiet, too quiet feeling. I give in. I give up. I slip away into a dark thought. I see my mother painting the wall. The stain has disappeared. I need help. I need to change it. I need to change my bed. It keeps on creaking. Again, and again and again. I can barely hear my own thoughts anymore. I have no control. Whether I fight or give in, the bed always creaks. It's a constant. Like those lines on the wall. The cracks I look at. It's a constant. It's a never ending, never changing feeling.

I'm trying to fight. I'm trying to wake up. I'm trying to ignore the constant ticking of the bed. It won't work. It doesn't leave. The light is just there. I can reach for it. But I don't. I fight. I'm not enough. I'm never enough. But I keep on fighting. I will keep on fighting; I promise I won't give in. But it's so easy to. You don't see it. No one sees it. They don't see it. They don't see that I'm fighting. They don't see that I'm changing. I am changing because of them. Why did I open the book? I am different, I am different with you than with others, a different character. But there is always one fact the book does not have to show me. I'm always an underachiever in your eyes. But I'm trying, I promise I'm trying. This is me trying my best to survive. And I do. At the end of the day, I always do. I'm always alive. The mind that keeps fracturing and coming together, the scene keeps changing, the setting keeps shifting, I live through it. I've lost who I am by trying to fix myself for everyone else. I hate the stain. I hate what the rain has done to me. I want it to stop. I cannot do anything right. I am a victim to their oppression, but I have stopped fighting. I am an accomplice to their norms. They still make me feel guilty at the end of the day; I am blamed for everything that's going on in their lives. I'm blamed for being the darkness, the storm, the grim reaper. They have a hold on me. I cause death and suffering for just opening up. I've tried and tried but no one seems to understand me. I'm affecting the people around me. The flowers are turning grey. Soulless. The water is draining. I don't mean to be the sun. I don't mean to kill everything around me. But when I fade, when the storm comes in, everything goes crazy, it all burst and shifts. I don't know how to control my heat. I don't know how to help them. They need me, without me they'll die, but they're dying either way if I'm staying. So, what do I do? I'm torn, literally. I'm stuck between two weathers. I try to be the middle ground but I'm never enough. And here I am sitting in the middle of the field as I see the flowers dying. There is no escape. I'm their doom. I'm their death. I'm their black hole. I will always be incomplete. The complexity and insanity of confusion between contradictory sides of emotions cannot reach a solution, bridge, or a silver lining. I'm played as a villain. Am I the villain? Do you understand now why it feels good to fall into the tornado, to cripple in the storm? If I choose myself, if that's what I should do, then it's easier to give up. It is easier to accept myself as a villain. Villains are broken and torn by the heroes. They're killed. The villain kills the hero. This is how a story ends. My shards of the mirror finally break. I've been held up together for so long by tape; I finally fall apart. The real question is if I grab the knife, if I become the hero to my villain, will my broken shards hurt anyone else other than myself? Will the glass cut anyone else? Will I be the cause of anyone's misery? Well dear reader, by now you should know I am no villain or hero. My mind is a complex mechanism the book should never reveal to the person in the bed. But the uncertainty hurts more. It's the uncertainty that cradles my pain and keeps it alive; it's the oil to my fire; it's the life I'm living,

well for now. Soon the cracks will stop growing and the growing tree comes to its maximum height. I hope then I will rest. So, I'm left alone, on the bed, with everything I have, holding on as much as I can to dear life, not for me; I am tired, for everyone else. I hate myself, know that dear reader, and I will never change. I will never love the person I am, past, present, or future. May the creaks take over me, either way it's not going to matter. The day starts and I open that door. The one that's always closed. The one I will never open for anyone else. The one that hides the deep secrets. My white paint. I open the door and return to life. Trust me, you do not want to enter the room. I wish I could escape. I wish I could burn my room, burn its transformations, burn everything, and start over. I can never escape my thoughts. The ticking time bomb will never rest until the bed is changed, until the knife finally cuts through the anguish and the hurt and ends it all, until the pages are burned. Everyone has dreams right? I guess this one's mine.

I sit there, watching the body. Watching the body that was not chosen. The consciousness that has been discarded. Thrown away. The decisions I have taken to fit them. The body that has been stabbed to death. The heart that has been consumed, overused. The mind that has not been used. The life that has been tapped together a million different times. Rule of 5: Destruction. Disappointment. Despair. Disapproval. The depth of my existence. Why is it I talk to you directly? You are not real. None of this is. As I open the door, I live my life. Without the room, the wall, the book, the bed. Without the thought of my different life or reasons for living. I will just go on living. My mother's mentality cannot be changed. I should live with this reality. Can I live with it?

I come back to the wall, the cracks that never end. The people outside this house are all the same. Pieces of this wall I am controlling. Yes, I am controlling them. I am living my life knowing I am its center. The center will always grow. But I cannot change the stems of this tree. Well, to hell with the flowers that have died, to hell with the storm that has burst, to hell with the people that have called me the villain. Let the stain regrow. I know I am right. They do not understand that I am right. I will rewrite their reality. I will build it as my own. I am the one that should be treated as the hero. I am going to change the bed and let the stain grow. I am going to let the chapters live their written story. The heat I portray is one I will control. I cannot be ignored; I cannot be escaped. The feeling of oppression has led me to domination. A burst the storm has finally unleashed. I broke the mountains, I broke the house, I broke the bed, I tore the book. I need to change it. I need to change you. How can I change an entire organism?

Well, Dear reader, it seems I have passed away. The tape finally broke. Death. Last, they had met me, I was screaming in my hospital gown at the nurses around. They stated I had turned into a mind of my own. It seems the stain took over me. The book should've remained closed. But either way the paint would've been covered, the bed would've remained the same. I would've died a boring death, a normal one. I could not have lived. The wall finally crumpled. But the cracks' reflection will always stay. The creaks will always be there. My anxiety will always be constant, a reaction to the life I am forced to live. This is my story dear reader, my mind shattered. The room is now ash and dust. Welcome to life, the tree is never ending, and the yellow tulips are always growing, the rain is always pouring. I have finally escaped it. Clarity is in death. I do not want to be reborn again. But know, there is no changing the mechanism of deception. I tried. I guess I should've let the characters play their role. I should've stayed in my bed, enduring the creaks, watching the cracks, closing the book, and living the life outside it. Staring at that white wall and understanding that their reflection is the only reality I should see. At least with my death, they can relax. They can stay as a single, toxic, organism, at least now their cracks can keep on growing, in deception, undisrupted, and their bed will always creak. Constant.



# Shalom



## That House

It used to be the biggest house in the area. It was also where I used to live. It's been thirty years. Time has been rather cruel to the once black gate. Rust has ground its wheels to a halt and continues to wreak havoc on the rest of the gate, leaving it with the need to be protected.

The grey walls are so full of cracks, it's a surprise they remain standing. The electric fence is now a very supportive friend of the bitter melon that twists and turns loosely around it. The garden lights are now home to more than a few spiders, for they are completely covered in cobwebs.

The coconut trees stand upright though they are burdened with fruit. The grass is overgrown. The hibiscus trees are riddled with diseased flowers.

The guava trees are clouded from view by the ever-hungry flies feasting on its fallen fruit. The pomegranate trees, relenting to the pressure of their succulent fruit bend sideways. The once neat blend of flowers is now an unkempt mass of green with yellows and oranges peeking out while purples desperately struggle to get a glimpse of sunlight. The two Ivory Coast almond trees stand tall as guardians, their dense foliage protectively spread over the compound. The rocks stand still as they've always been, gray-dark in all their rugged splendor. Age doesn't seem to have left its rather indelible mark on them.

A few dejected pegs, faded and weathered by time, hang from the worn, shredding rope that was once the clothesline. At the backdoor, false ashoka trees, fourteen of them, stand tall with age. Their narrow leaves droop, making the trees look like long green arrows that tower up to the sky without quite meeting it. The ixora trees grow between the false ashoka trees by the wall. Due to the vast contrast in height, the ixora appear to be peeking from behind the false ashoka, tiny red and yellow flowers smiling mischievously. The walls of the reservoir on the left side of the building are cracking. The reservoir is full of greenish water. Part of the water is covered by algae and the loud croaks of frogs can be heard. The holy basil form a small grove just by the reservoir. Their aromatic smell is strong in the breeze.

In front of the house, the ackee tree is tall and loaded with fruit. There many cotton stainers feasting on its fallen fruits, making the area under the tree look like a reddish carpet from a distance. The lime tree to the right of the ackee tree is out of season. Its thorns are long and visible since most of the leaves have fallen. The avocado tree is beautiful as always. I get comfort from it. Just like I used to. Its fruits are a lighter shade of green compared to the leaves, making them more noticeable. It's an almost mesmerizing sight for some reason. The stone tiles on the compound are mostly covered with sand, diminishing their beauty. The dog kennels are empty with the exception of a few curious lizards and spiders who have made it a home. It's deteriorated and it brings tears to my eyes as I remember the dogs that used to live there. It feels like a lifetime ago. The bluish grey roof has faded beyond recognition. The building's beauty has not faded over the years. The walls are still grey. Just

paler than before. The outdoor air conditioning units are so old and rusty it's a marvel they are still clinging to the walls. All the windows look intact from the outside. The railings used to be black, with pretty silver flowers. Now, they are so reddish brown with rust that their original design is no longer visible. The four main pillars at the front haven't changed. They are thick and imposing and grey. Just like they used to be. The staircase leading to the front door runs between the pillars. The peach colored tiles are cracked, and they crackle noisily as I trudge to the front door. The electricity meter's screen is blank and dusty. The handle of the front door is weak. The original color of the door can no longer be recognized. I open the door and I see swarms of roaches scurrying for safety in the semi darkness. I walk in and close the door behind me. Three more steps and the living room is on my left. The black sofas are very dusty and they all have large webs in them. I look straight ahead and I see the first family picture to ever hang on the walls of this house. That was August 2014. I was six at the time. It feels like I grew up overnight because I clearly remember my childhood. Time really flies. There's no one to watch TV so it sits, cloaked in dust. The dining hall is adjacent so I walk in there. The six chairs are still there, only they're rugged and dusty and torn. The sink in the corner is filled to the brim with roaches. It looked a bit like potpourri until I got closer. My heart feels heavy as I remember the meals I had with my family many, many years ago. The kitchen is very dusty. There are no dishes in sight. The fridges coughed up the last of their strength long ago so they sit still. And empty. I head to the study the table is barely standing because it is almost buried in its own powder. The papers have been shredded by mice. I turn to go towards the front door because I want to see one of the guest rooms.

I walk in. the bed is bare and grimy with years of disuse. The room smells airless. I open the bathroom door. The bathtub is filthy. The originally white color is now a pale yellow. The plastic is peeling and there are huge cracks in the tub.

On sudden impulse I run out and go up the stairs. I go to the master bedroom door and I proceed to open it. My parents' marriage bed is empty. They're gone but there's no need to cry. They'll always be with me. I go straight to their bathroom. Their perfume bottles are in front of the mirror. Their Jacuzzi is cracked and dirty. In my mind's eye, I see my parents: my mom spraying her perfume to go to town and my dad dousing me with his perfume because I wanted to smell like him. Then the tears start to fall. There is so much I could have done, instead of being so caught up in my work. Well, regrets always come later. I run out and go in the direction of my bedroom. As soon as I run in I feel like I made a big mistake going in there. My wardrobe is empty and so is my bed. Slowly I go and stand in front of the mirror. The curtains seem dark with silent rage while the walls glare at me disapprovingly. Then it hits me: this place belongs to my childhood and its innocence, two things I don't have now. I'm an intruder so I turn to leave immediately but I can't leave. I got lost the moment I stepped in here to accidentally ruin those memories.



# Nazrul's Immaculate Rizz - My Experience with Bangla and Internet Culture

My relationship with the language I was born with has changed significantly over time, and this particular metamorphosis has come at a time of self-actualisation as I grow into adulthood.

I strongly believe that language shapes the way we perceive the world. There is the English I speak and breathe, then there's the broken business English that my father uses to communicate emotionally difficult confessions because Bangla strikes too hard on the heart. There is the Bangla I hated so strongly in fourth grade and the Bangla the people in my life speak with patient, observant love. All of these languages in their many faces coexist in my life and my perception changes with every one of them.

A couple of months back, I wiped the dust off my mother's dying hard drive to upload it to Google. After shifting through random wedding photos and quite a few birthdays, I found an old video of me speaking to my parents. I was four years old at the time and talked a lot. What I did notice was that my speech was entirely in Bangla.

As a child, the media I consumed (over which I had no control) consisted of UNICEF's Meena cartoons and children's poetry my parents would make me learn. Another major source of content were the stories that my aunt, a cultural anthropologist, would read to me. Two years later, I would have a music teacher who would teach me how to play harmonium and sing Rabindra Sangeet, all of which I have now forgotten.

It seems very impossible now. I have to put in a lot more effort to speak entirely in Bangla, or even read it. I genuinely try, but constantly find myself unable to express my thoughts the way I want to. English has become the language that I think in and exercise so much control over. I understand its tones, its nuances and cultural references. In my mind, it feels like home. It was the language that accepted me, or understood me in an intolerant society. That allowed me to exist as more than my mother's thinly veiled "do you have a different type of problem?" - the concept of queerness being so shocking that she never said it out loud.

I hated learning Bangla when I started going to school. I was mostly guilty and shamed into it for the entire time I had to learn it there. We had only one class for it and had very little exposure and practice with its written form. On the other hand, English literature classes had books so pretty they never felt like studying for me. Bangla had stories written in verbose words I was too young to comprehend. (This is why Shakespeare should be taught in tenth grade, not seventh).

তোমার নিজের মাতৃভাষা তুমি শিখবা না?

Won't you learn your own mother's tongue?

When I write in English, I have verisimilitude, the

## Uzayer



"truthiness" that makes you believe that what I'm saying really is true. In English, I have flow, and more importantly, experience. I have a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, with Bangla, I have none of that.

I find myself having cultural clashes with my mother, someone I have been living with for the past 18 years. I feel a sort of guilt and disconnect. I struggle to understand her completely. I write unfinished poetry in a language she was beaten into memorising. Despite that, through many conversations and introspection, I have narrowed down the reason to the fact that we as a generation simply no longer occupy the cultural or literary spaces that our parents did.

Instagram and TikTok (far, far more than Facebook), are a sort of abstract neighbourhood that we hang out in when we have time. As a former 14 year old, I understand the lack of demand to learn the language because Bangla simply isn't how we communicate on the internet. Our generation has moulded English into further sub-dialects that don't belong to an area and introduced nuances that would be indiscernible to the outsider who has no concept of what "rizz<sup>1</sup>" is. Teenagers in the 80's did not speak in fluent, well articulated sentences and they will certainly not start now. Language will continue to evolve as long as people evolve. Languages are fluid and English has changed, Bangla, at least for us, has not.

This abstract space that we occupy is an oversaturated representation of reality in the middle of the AI revolution. It is not a real place yet it is the unshakeable town square of our generation. It is the perfect place for us to lose our sense of self. In our hyper-targeted, curated feed, we see so many people in there from around the world (mostly from the US) and so many cultures (again, US immigrants). Our desire to fit in contradicts heavily with the notion of learning a language we speak well but cannot write properly.

Our consumerist, secular, modern life leaves very little scope to break from the perceived norm. The way we have built up our lives in my particular demographic, has left no room for original thought, or a moment of calm. Relaxation is essentially consuming hyper-curated media (that sometimes create echo-hells) on our phones, and all of this is in English. Language shapes thought, and thought shapes culture. And that is the one that we internalise and inhibit.

On another observation, my brother is six years younger than me, on the cusp of adolescence. His clashes with my mother remind me exactly of the miscommunication that I faced when I was younger, precisely due to this cultural disconnect. Only I had no one who would understand me at home back then.

I noticed a friend of his, Samara, shortening her name to Sam, and eventually changing it to Samantha on Instagram. A complete deviation from the original Bangla. This anglicisation of her name was deliberate, yet very much a subconscious move to fit in with a growing global world. Another attempt at avoiding social rejection.

My goal is not to critique social media but to provide a window for understanding and consolation into the growing cultural disconnect that I have with my parents, and that the



vast majority of my generation and peers have had. It is also important that we recognize what the world is as of now. After 200 years of British rule over Bengal, and English being the language of the ruling class, it has been ingrained into our collective consciousness that English is the superior tongue.

We also lose more of our own culture as we try to fit the mould of another, and our literature reflects that. Rabindranath's writing has incredible undertones of femininity in it, despite him being a bearded man. The concept of gender being intrinsically fluid in nature is prevalent all throughout his work. It is not black and white. His characters are androgynous and the ideas are far more freeing: a break from the monotony we face with the English (precisely due to the church and the state deeming all of this as savage demonic ideas from an uncivilised people).

He was from a wealthy family that had supported the humanities for generations. He learnt English well enough to translate his own work, ultimately winning himself the Nobel Prize in Literature and exposing Bengali literature to the West. By comparison, Kazi Nazrul was born to Bengal's poorest of the poor. He had no interest in English. His works were later crudely translated, which the then British government used to label him as an anti-British, anti-government rebel.

English was, and still is, the lingua franca for the world we live in. Ignoring it would be a grave mistake but not learning Bangla as well provides a hole for us to fall into wherein we lose our identity.

Very recently I have started to reconnect with the culture I grew up in. I started watching movies by Satyajit Ray, and listening to Nazrul Geeti (which I wish I understood as well as I understand Sylvia Plath or Arundhati Roy).

Because after all this time it gives me a handle to a part of my psyche I had forgotten. Self-identity has always been something every person spends their adolescence and perhaps a fair part of their twenties trying to find and establish. I enjoy listening to this music, despite not understanding it fully. I love watching these movies. It gives me a space to occupy in the abstract neighbourhood I call home.

সৃজন ছন্দে আনন্দে নাচো নটরাজ

হে মহাকাল প্রলয়-তল ভোলো ভোলো।।

- কাজী নজরুল

Oh Notoraj!  
Dance to the joy of creation  
Bury your fervour of destruction  
- Kazi Nazrul

Rizz<sup>1</sup> - 2020s internet lingo for one's ability to attract another person in a romantic sense.  
Short for "charisma"

Notoraj<sup>2</sup> - The deity of dance. A depiction of the Hindu god Shiva as the divine cosmic dancer.

## Once, Now

Once, she would bathe her, caressing  
Her pliant skin with a gentle touch, whispering  
Sweet tales to her young ear, as  
She looked with gleaming eyes, at  
Her sweet child.

Now, roles reversed, I see  
Her aid her, become a pillar for her brittle bones,  
Reminiscing alone, on  
past memories buried by time-  
And age, as she looks- at her  
Mother

Once, she would soothe her cries, in  
The night, sweetly sung lullabies, blowing  
Away at the ear, present  
At the oddest hour

Now, she stays through the moaned murmur,  
Hysteria creeping in at night, while he  
Comes and goes with a promise,  
To visit once again, "same time next week."-  
He says.

Once she beamed at me,  
Now I gaze down at her,  
"It's just us now, huh", I  
Murmur to myself  
gazing at her milky eyes.

Shamiso



Shamiso

# Just a Minute

I wonder when I started waking up later.  
It was the warning sign of a chronic illness I did not yet have the words to  
describe. A telltale symptom.  
My birthday looming, every summer in the mid July heat. Now closer to 21 than 10.  
Nobody warned me that my increasing number was not a promising statistic. The  
doctors of time had no prognosis.  
I noticed my condition worsening slowly every day.  
Asking for a treatment, asking for anything to stop the breathless feeling  
like a train running off a track, hurtling towards a great precipice at blinding  
speeds.  
One day, when the world feels heavy and a part of me drifts between the real and  
imagined, my symptoms now  
accelerated to the point of no return,  
I will speak to my 16 year old self.  
I will ask her why she stopped talking to that girl that had once been like a sister to  
her  
and why she looked in the mirror and only saw everything that was broken  
I will be angry with her for thinking her worth was based on test scores and what  
they whispered when she wasn't  
around and like buttons  
and hate her for thinking she knew everything  
I will cry tears of pain again and again for the people and places that hurt her  
and tears of happiness as I remember she left home so young because she had a  
dream.  
A dream that would come to her when she closed her eyes.  
I think that I started sleeping in at 16  
because I had so much to say, so much to think about  
the sanctuary of intentional unconsciousness allowed me  
just a minute more to dream.



## Brynne



# Nina



## Just a Minute

You carry me home like a gentle lover, a warm embrace as your arms make sure they are a part of me. Summer is a silence awakened by light, it moves like the ebb and flow of sea water and finds itself naked like an unfinished love poem. Death whispers its existence every time I find myself, and you lose yourself to yet another heartbreak. Sometimes I wish to write in a language that you understand, perhaps there isn't one that we both love in, speak in and breathe in. Although, like everything else language is an imperfection and we humans are its flaws.

My skin petals off like glued insanity. Is it from the wound you gave me? Or the one I carved myself as you drowned in a half-emptied bottle of irish whiskey? The night sky purples around us like the bruise on my collar-bone — it darkens with every fleeting moment in time. I am a mother, a wife, a daughter — a label of respect and responsibility. I am the homemaker of my family, I am, I am and I will be. Fostering a home that is loose on the root, resilient by its ends. It is shatter-proof, shock-proof — proof.

You are a soldier fighting for a country that doesn't love you. She remains displeased despite your attempts to lure her in your chest, clutched like a tapestry. I sit and I stare like an immigrant on guard, wanting to scratch off the feeling of not belonging. Your irisedent irises gaze at me with apathy, as a swiftness carries me toward dissociation. I want and I want, never to have — a half-prayer scratched onto the bathroom wall, dipped in hope, forged in despair. Never to have, never to get.

Pain cuts through me like a knife, my love for you is like absinthe and I am the addict. The blood in your mouth is not mine to keep, and yet, and yet I drink it like repressive sunlight, I chant it like it's a politician's campaign anthem. Our clasping hands detangle like the heartbreak of a million stars. The seperating of our vows and the commitment we addressed to each other clobbers me with a grief that blows into my skin. Perhaps the forever we promised each other is parted by life, before death could touch our ruins.

# Crimson Reverie

In the heart of this forest lies a sanctuary only a few are fortunate to encounter if they ventured long enough. This mystical haven is said to be home to a plethora of natural wonders. Any herb you may need for a concoction or just a flower as a whimsical gift to your lover, it is here. Glowing translucent leaves, flowers and herbs which cast a magical bioluminescence illuminate the shadows even under the moonless night sky here.

Getting here is by no means easy. After all, such treasure deserves to be guarded, accessible to only those who are deserving. Those that do not give up midway and scamper back in fear, giving into the ominous whispers from spirits. They stand strong and make their way, while treating the forest with delicacy and slashing through opposing entities. And they do so for however long it takes them. Such is the value of this hidden sanctuary, this safe haven.

You will know you're near when suddenly the ground beneath your feet feels a little softer, easy on the bruises and blisters you've gained on your way, soothing and calming them. Velvety soft grass that glows will surround you, and you will feel nature's embrace in every step as the gentle whispers of the wind guide your path.

During the daytime, overhead are ancient trees creating a natural dome, allowing the dappled sunlight to filter through, creating an ethereal atmosphere. The light catches on the leaves, setting them aglow in hues of emerald, amethyst and sapphire. It seems as if the very essence of life is radiating from this vibrant foliage.

And the flowers! Oh, the flowers, they are unlike anything ever seen before in this forest, and in this world. They bloom in an array of neon colors, their petals emitting a gentle, phosphorescent glow, illuminating the air around them. A few even have little jewels floating right above them, transparent and clear, filled with mysteries and qualities unfathomable to the ordinary. Don't try to pluck them though, they need love and care to be coaxed into giving up their precious jewels. If you're fortunate enough to get that trust, definitely consider yourself lucky and cherish those. You will find their purpose and message soon.

Oh, but when you are there— if you “can” get there, that is— there is not a single herb you cannot find. Some emit a soothing fragrance that calms the senses, while others shimmer in radiant iridescence, hinting at their mystical potential. They're sought after by even the wisest of wizards, witches, and alchemists.

Winding through this enchanting haven is a babbling brook, crystal clear and cool. During nighttime, the water glistens with reflection of the glowing leaves and flowers. It forms patterns of ever-changing luminescence that shift with the passage of time under the bright, white glow of the moon.

Who am I, you ask? I'm one of the fortunate ones who has found my way to this safe haven, this sanctuary. All of the descriptions, the imagery; in-person, they're a hundred times more vibrant to

However, my primary goal is not to pluck flowers or to hoard herbs. I have a higher purpose.

After 204 long months of loitering around this forest to get here, studying this place and referring back to all the resources and scrolls I brought from back home, I wipe my brow beaded with sweat



## Azima



today as I finish drawing a moon diagram for the night. I have been keeping count since the time I got here.

Phases after phase, waxing and waning, the moon has almost become a friend of mine. Every night, I sit at my wooden trunk makeshift table with my ink pots and geometrical equipment and parchment paper scrawled with past investigation, so desperately looking for one particular face of my moon. As the saying in old legends goes:

Slim and slender, red as blood,  
the crescent moon's tale is understood,  
On this night, the guardian awakes,  
a creature born from ancient woods.

The mythical guardian of this sanctuary is who I truly seek. No one has seen them in all their might, and no one can tell of their appearance. Not to kill or to capture, but to see and know; I want to connect with them to get the highest understanding of their realm.

I've tirelessly taken note of the stars and their alignment, the sun and its positions relative to the earth. I'm sure it is tonight.

I follow a path, adorned by glowing lamp flowers on the sides leading up to a creek I stargaze on. It's an open space under the sky, the stars twinkling down upon me, usually graced by the elegance of the moon, its size and shape varying everyday and sometimes not appearing at all.

I head to my favorite sitting spot, right under a small tree near the edge; not too close, not too far, and surrounded by faintly sweet smelling flowers and little sweet berries to eat while I'm waiting. With anticipation, I look up to the sky.

No moon in sight, yet.  
...  
An hour goes by, and still no sign of the moon.

Strange.  
...

3 more hours pass like this. Nothing in the sky save for the twinkling of the stars that look like mockery to me right now.

After all of that effort... it feels like it was all for naught. I let the moon map in my hands flutter away in the gentle breeze, much like my hopes. I drearily stand and turn back, with the intention of leaving this sanctuary back to my home.

TWINKLE

Something in the sky is changing.

I'm met with the edge of the horizon staining a mild Auburn, slowly spreading through the sky. A



point is visible slowly, but just as swiftly.  
My eyes simultaneously widen.

*There it is,  
a shining slice of celestial light,  
burning red and smiling bright.*

This only means one thing.

A glimmer runs along the edge of the horizon, and suddenly I feel a presence behind me, so I turn curiously.

There towards the inside of the forest beneath a canopy of ancient oaks and dappled red moonlight stands a stag.. but made of sheer glass. A presence both majestic and otherworldly, a sight that could captivate even the most jaded of hearts.

Crafted from shimmering, translucent crystal, adorned with delicate lines of silver and gold that seemed to flow like veins, carrying life and light within, the Glass Stag stands tall and proud. His antlers, reaching toward the sky like branches of a crystalline tree, reflect the colors of the forest, casting rainbows in every direction as if the spirit of the forest had materialized into this exquisite form.

His eyes are the most captivating feature, two radiant orbs that gleam brighter than the brightest stars in the night sky. When those eyes meet mine, it feels as though the stag is looking through my very soul, understanding the depths of my thoughts and emotions.

Despite an appearance of fragility he moves with grace and strength, his hooves barely making a sound as they touch the ground. An aura of tranquility and wisdom surrounds me, as if he holds the secrets of time itself.

Unknowingly, my arm reaches out to him in awe, and despite the bold move, a shiver runs through my entire being.

With a gentle nod of the head, he nudges my hand with his antlers, inviting me to share in the magic of the moment. Up close, despite the sharpness of his crystalline antlers, there was a sense of vulnerability and calmness.

I felt a surge of connection to nature, as if I were a part of the forest and the Glass Stag a guardian of its secrets.

The Glass Stag leaned down, a silent invitation to climb on.  
Without hesitation, I get on swiftly and I am met with a surprising comfort and softness.  
A gentle flick of the antlers, and a whoosh of colors ensue.

*Through trials endured, the prize is gained,  
On Glass Stag's back, our fate ordained.  
Into the horizon, we took flight,  
To realms unknown, where shadows alight.  
With guardian stag, my heart at ease,  
The reward for perseverance, a legend to please.*

# The Dance of Existence

Life has always been full of trials and turmoil, full of ups and downs, and full of sadness and happiness. There are times in life, we get to a point where as much as our hope gets bigger, our disappointment gets bigger too. Sometimes the weight of a dumb grief presses us under its pressure; a grief we haven't experienced before, a totally overwhelming one. Sometimes, we feel as though we are destined for a destiny we are unable to escape. In some instances, we may desire to put our hands over our ears to become deaf and suffer until the end of our days. Sometimes...

But even in the deepest part of your heart, though, there has always been a glimmer of hope. This hope is winking at you and keeping you away from all those thoughts you thought would finally destroy you. I have entrusted everything to the process of life since an old saying says, "What is meant for you, will reach you even if it is beneath two mountains; and what isn't meant for you won't reach you even if it is between your two lips."

Each chapter of your life, be it love, death, grief, life, pleasure, disappointment, ..., serves as an opportunity for you to become a new person.

So let's embrace every single chapter of life; it gives you an array of experiences, emotions, and challenges but they are all woven together to create a tapestry unique to each individual. Let's taste the true taste of life and experience it as it truly is



## Narges

# My Favorite Season

Is storm season

Each time the air sparks to life

Charged with static

saturated with water

Full of the fresh scent of rain

The sun hides beneath gray blankets

No matter where it is in its path across the sky

Time hides with it

Impossible to discern in the permanent state of twilight

Lightning f l i c k e r s

a branch of blue energy

gracing the sky

Thunder rolls

Booming

Demanding attention

Shutting down camps

Swim practice

Providing a much needed pause for

Swimmers

Lifeguards

Instructors

The rain comes down in torrents

Bucket upon bucketful dumped from the sky

Background noise to soothe

Loud minds

Nourishing the earth

Cooling fiery tempers of summer heat waves

Each storm a special memory

There's no season

Like storm season

## Sofia





# The Heroes of Compton

# Cyril

Mike Foster grew up with his retired military grandfather in a region on the South Side of Compton, California. Mike was raised in a crime-infested community where both his parents died as a result of gun violence. Grandpa Jim did his absolute best to teach Mike how to be independent, and to be sturdy, and to think quickly on his feet, military style-as he had been trained in the army. He was not alone. The entire neighborhood had heard of the demise of Mike's parents and welcomed Mike into the neighborhood so warmly. As the weeks went by Mike got accustomed to the new ways of living in Grandpa Jim's neighborhood and even made some new friends. Jake, who came to the house when Mike first moved in, lived right across the street from Grandpa Jim's house. Him and Mike became best friends almost immediately. Percy, who lived about five houses away from Mike, also heard Mike moved in and decided to pay him a visit and show him around. Mike didn't get along well



with Percy when they first met because he had an awful stench on him, but they eventually became friends and Percy later on got rid of the stench. Will and Nathan, are fraternal twins who try to be identical for the fun of it; by dressing alike and doing things the same way. They also lived a few houses away from Mike. Nathan the older twin, acts like he's the younger of the two whilst Will acts mature and has more knowledge about life and how to survive. They always had an ambition to make an impact on the community through fighting crime. Growing up in a crime-infested community was a huge risk on their survival, but they still pushed through. Even going out to the community park to play together was a huge problem because the slightest incident triggered a shootout. They always had hopes of making their community a better place, and although they didn't have the resources to make an influence on the community, they were still eager to achieve their goal.

Years later, the five friends graduated to Compton High School, an entire town away from their homes. They had to take two buses to school every morning, yet they were the first people to arrive on campus each day. In school, they joined extra-curricular clubs like, 'Save The Earth,' 'The Football Club,' 'The Chess Club,' and 'The Neighborhood Watch club.' During their High School year, they were known as the 'Famous 5' because they were always seen together. The twins were elected executives of the Students' Representative Council and they used their position in power to organize a fund raiser that was aimed at soliciting funds for their home community. They were able to reach their objective and gathered enough money to renovate the community library which was established in the 1900's. Renovating the library was their first step in helping the community. They contracted local architects and builders to aid in the re-furnishing of the library. They bought new books that would benefit all age groups, and filled the library with posters that were uplifting. The boys saw to it that the library gave everyone a chance to learn. When Compton High heard what the boys had done for their community, they rewarded them with medals of honor. They were also given a hefty amount of money and a one-month holiday in any country they wanted to visit. Chloe, Mike's best friend, who lived in a whole other country, The United Kingdom, heard about their achievement and decided to pay him a visit. She came all the way from Birmingham, England to Compton. When she arrived at the school, the principal made an announcement at the assembly grounds that Mike had a special guest so he should come on stage. When he got on the stage Chloe quickly ambushed him from the back with a hug. Mike was surprised to see her. He was not expecting her to show up at that time. After school Mike and Chloe went home together. Mike's grandfather was also shocked to see her. He warmly welcomed her with hugs and kisses and a cup of hot chocolate. They later had a nice hot meal and had a chat at the table. Chloe told them how she has been and how things

have been going on in school. Chloe mentioned that her dad had moved to Compton and had a severe accident recently. He was involved in a gang shootout in Compton. He was immediately rushed to the hospital and the doctors attended to his wound. He was admitted to The St. Anthony Medical Centre. Chloe also mentioned that one of the main reasons she came here was to come and visit her father in the hospital, and the secondary reason she came was to surprise Mike. Mike had been crushing on Chloe since childhood but he could not ask her to be his girlfriend so they remained best friends instead. Every time he looks at Chloe when she's talking to other people, he starts to day dream about what life would be like if the two ever got into a relationship. Chloe eventually left to see her dad at the hospital.

A few weeks later, The Famous 5 made plans to throw a beach party. They invited the whole school and almost everyone they knew. Obviously, Mike invited Chloe. The day of the beach party arrived, everyone was hyped up and excited about the party. It was a costume themed party so everyone had to dress up as anything or anyone they wanted to. The party began and a few hours into the night, Mike asked Chloe to take a stroll down to the sea side with him. On the way there, Mike was about to confess his feelings to Chloe when Chloe noticed a strange green beam of light coming out from the security guard's post. They walked towards it, Mike right behind Chloe. As soon as they stepped foot into the room there was a big flash of light which zapped the pair causing them to flake out. Jake saw the flash and called the others to go and check it out. Once they got there, they saw Mike and Chloe on the floor, which got them really worried. They tried carrying them outside for fresh air but they also got zapped by the beam of light. The next morning, they woke up and found themselves on the floor of the security guard's post. They were all so confused as to how they got there and what happened. Mike stood still in confusion for about two minutes and burst out saying, "I think I have an idea how Chloe and I ended up here." The whole place became quiet as they wanted to hear what Mike was about to say. Mike said, "I remember Chloe and I walking down to the sea-side, when Chloe noticed a strange green beam of light shooting out from this building. We walked towards it and entered the building, then we were hit by a flash of light and yes, that's how we ended up here." Jake said, "Yes, I saw the flash and gathered the others and we quickly came to check what happened. Next thing we knew, it was morning." This was really strange for them. The next day, the twins started experiencing strange sensations in their bodies. They didn't know what it was, and brushed it off as hunger. Nathan went to the kitchen to get something to eat when he realized that some of the metallic kitchen ware was getting attached to his body. He screamed for Will to come downstairs and when he saw it, he laughed at him.

Whilst he was laughing, he didn't realize he was lifting the microwave up with his right hand. Nathan saw it and his mouth fell open in amazement. Will realized and put his hand down and the microwave also fell down.

Meanwhile at Mike's house, he also experienced a strange feeling; he could lift items with his mind, he could attract metallic objects, had the ability to fly, run fast and had the ability to teleport from one place to another. Mike hosted an emergency meeting at his house because everyone was complaining that they were experiencing strange things. When they all came Mike told them all to say their problems. Jake said he woke up and noticed he was floating in the air; simply put he could fly. Percy said he woke up and ran to the washroom but he was running really fast, some would say abnormally fast, faster than lightning. Will said he could lift objects with his mind. Nathan said he could attract metallic objects with his mind. Chloe on the other hand, said she woke up this morning, yawned and froze her hand and didn't know what to do till she started crying, but her tears weren't normal tears, they were fiery tears so it melted the ice off her hand. Mike on the other hand, said he experienced everything they had been through, so he basically has all their powers. He saw this as a way to help rid the community of crime so he convinced them that this was a pathway to achieving the ambition they've had for many years



now. They all started to see the brighter side of it and came together to start learning how to control their powers. Jake volunteered to host training sessions at his house but Mike opposed saying he wanted to host it, but everyone objected saying Mike always does things for them and it's time for someone else to do something for them, so they all agreed to go to Jake's house after school for training sessions. They all took an oath not to tell their families of their new abilities until they knew how to handle them.

Training sessions went on for about a month. They later created a hideout in an old abandoned house on the same street as Jake's house. When they are not at the hideout, they push a button to turn it back into the abandoned house so no one will get suspicious. A month later, the school bully, Jack Swindle, who has always been jealous of The Famous 5 because they were getting all the attention of the teachers, students and even staff members. Swindle had been monitoring them for weeks and found their secret hideout. He decided to sneak into their hideout to see what shenanigans they were up to. When he snuck into the place, he didn't see anything but an old abandoned house, so he got upset and went back to school to confront them. When he got there, he saw them in the hallway and shouted angrily at them saying "I don't know what you five are up to but better watch your backs because I know where your little hideout is. When I got there, I didn't see anything, but I'm onto you five or six, including you, Chloe." He got the attention of the whole school. The six of them looked at each other and just burst out in laughter and Chloe said, "I don't know whether you hit your head when you woke up but we don't have any secret hideout and the fact that we would have one is very crazy and hilarious." They continued to laugh but this time with the whole school. After school, they were walking through the school hallway and everyone started hyping them up but they didn't know why until the school's news reporter approached them and asked Chloe how it feels to make a mockery out of the school's bully. Chloe didn't know what to say, she was astonished, then she laughed and said, "it's not a big deal, people like him who are proud and step on other people's happiness must be stopped." The whole school continued to shout and applauded them as they walked out of the school hallway. When they got to the car park, Swindle approached them again and said, "this isn't over, you haven't seen the last of me, I'll be back and this time I'll come with a little secret of mine." They laughed at him again as he walked away. Later that week, there was a report on the news that a high school bully was terrorizing the students of the school with secret powers nobody knew about. Mike saw it and ordered for an urgent meeting at the hideout. When they all got there, they started scheming to see what they could do to help fight against Swindle. Nathan said, "oh this is what he meant by he'll be back with a little secret of his." All of a sudden there was an earth tremor. Will ran to the telescope to check what was happening. He saw Swindle in a huge destructive robot heading towards them. Luckily when they were making the hideout, they also made robots of the size and called them "BETAWARS." When Swindle got there, he shouted using his megaphone saying, "you people in there better come out before I break down the building, you think you can make fan of me in-front of the whole school and get away with it, you must be kidding me." The Famous 5 along with Chloe burst out through the back door in their betawars and ambushing him in his robot. All of them went out to fight Swindle but Chloe and Mike went around with the intention to come back with a surprise attack. Will's betawar got stabbed causing him to fall to his knees. Just as soon as Swindle was about to stab him again Mike and Chloe burst out of nowhere and sliced him with one of his own swords he dropped. This became a handicap fight for Swindle. Everyone hit him with their finishing move and that was the end of Swindle.

Just as soon as Swindle fell down the mayor of the city rode in in his limousine coming to reward them with a hefty amount of money and a one-month holiday to any country they wanted to visit. At first, they thought he was joking but he said he was serious due to the fact that they have done a lot for the community and they deserved this reward. They gratefully accepted it. The mayor also dedicated a whole week's holiday to them, he called it the "Fantastic 6 Holiday." Chloe



had to go back to Birmingham because she had to attend her uncle's funeral. From there on they were known as the "FANTASTIC 5."

A whole month flew by really quickly and it was time for them to say goodbye to their vacation. An emergency call from the mayor's personal assistant stated that they needed to stock up more equipment because there was a new villain tormenting the city. She described the villain as "an oddly shaped squid with a human head and metallic squid legs." Nathan shouted, "O my, that's Dr. Octopus!!!" Everyone agreed with Nathan except Mike. Mike said there's no way Doctor Octopus is here in real life, he's a fictional character from 'Spiderman'. They arrived to the city in time but there was no time to head back to the headquarters, luckily Jake packed all the stuff they needed to fight crime into a suitcase when they were going on holiday. They got suited up and ready to fight. Surprisingly Doctor Octopus wasn't really too much of a hustle to fight so they won the fight against him and banished him from their world, sending him back to his universe. The whole community gathered at the scene and were in shock for a few seconds, then started cheering them on for defeating Doctor Octopus. The mayor insisted on rewarding the team again but Mike said, "it's not every time you have to reward us when we make a save in this community. This is where we all grew up and this community has given us a lot so now it's time we give back and an easier way for us to give back is saving the community from all this havoc these villains and criminals torment us with. I know it won't be an easy task but we are willing to do it. Why should we have super powers and not do anything with them, that's just a waste of ability. From now on we vow to always protect this community no matter what the situation is." "I never knew the mayor thought we were doing this because of the money," said Jake. Jake did not let this news bother him but for some reason it affected Mike making him quiet the whole ride home. No one really knew why he was so dull and quiet until Nathan texted Chloe to call and check up on Mike. Chloe called and was talking to Mike; he told her that he had flashbacks of his parents especially his mum, which made him hurt on the inside. Mike told his friends that they shouldn't have called Chloe to check up on him, they could've just asked him themselves. Percy said they thought it was about what the mayor said. Mike told them that it's been exactly fifteen years since his parents died and it still taunts him like it was just yesterday. The boys cheered him up and he felt a lot better. Later that night when they got home, the twins organized a little get-together to appreciate one another's lives. Something which they had in mind to be a little get-together turned into another big party all because of Percy. Percy never liked little things so he pulled some strings together; using his dad's money-in order to make this party huge. The party was all over social media and the news, and Percy was able to get a famous musician called 'Lil Baby' to perform at the party so it was trending all over the news and on all social media platforms. Mike got really excited because 'Lil Baby' was one of his favorite artistes. Percy said he had to do what he could to make Mike smile again and forget about his past. This worked perfectly. Mike eventually forgot about it and was enjoying himself. The night was over, and so was the party.

## To the Overpass

I grab your hand as  
You pull me over  
The fence that divides.  
Behind me is all I know,  
The familiar houses and roads,  
I am beyond it all  
The woods are spacious,  
The floor is made of leaves,  
A crackle with each step.  
In the endless trees,  
I've lost myself  
But you keep going;  
Accustomed to the routes  
Guiding me,  
Through the unknown  
Until at last the bushes part  
As sun shines through and  
Our steps harden as we depart from  
nature  
Onto concrete paved over.  
A ship of stone is upon us  
Secured with fence on both sides, chain  
linked.  
Stranded in a sea of cars  
Rushing underneath.  
We look over the wall together,  
You with familiarity  
Me with awe.  
Life continues beneath us  
Here, there is quiet  
We are invisible  
Spectators to society.



Alex



# Asma



## Quarantine Time

### THE MORNING

The sun's rays emerge from behind the mountains, casting a warm glow on the landscape. A gentle breeze caresses my face as I stand there, my hair gently tousled. The melodic symphony of birdsong fills the air, harmonizing with the vibrant blue sky above. It is early morning, and I eagerly anticipate another wonderful day ahead.

Interrupting my thoughts, my mother's voice echoes through the house, calling me by my name, "Asma, breakfast is ready!" It was during a

time of quarantine when we were all together as a family. I made my way to our customary breakfast spot on the balcony, greeted by the pleasant embrace of spring weather.

As I stepped onto the balcony, I was greeted with a delightful spread that my mother had prepared. The aroma of freshly baked bread, briefly toasted to perfection, mingled with the fragrant scent of green tea. A platter adorned with crisp cucumbers and creamy neutral cheese awaited my arrival. Surrounding the table, my family engaged in animated conversations, their voices blending harmoniously.

This idyllic scene evoked a smile, capturing the essence of our quarantine routine. Starting my day like this became the norm, a source of comfort and joy amidst uncertain times.

### BOOK CLUB...

Creating a book club during quarantine was an incredibly enriching experience for me. Together with my friend, we embarked on this journey of positive change in our lives, resulting in the formation of our very own book club. With everyone confined to their homes, we saw it as an opportunity to cultivate a love for reading and explore new literary horizons.

Each week, we individually selected a book of our choice, dedicating the following seven days to immerse ourselves in its pages. At the end of the week, we gathered for a discussion session, where we shared our thoughts on the book's content and themes. This book club became a catalyst for expanding our reading habits and fostering a genuine passion for literature.

Our book club consisted of six enthusiastic members, each bringing their unique perspectives and tastes to the table. Among the many captivating books, I delved into during this program, "The Forty Rules of Love" by Elif Shafak stood out as a personal favorite. Within its pages, I found a quote that resonated deeply with me: "Patience does not mean enduring passively. It means looking at the result of a process. What does tolerance mean? It means looking at the thorn and seeing the rose, looking at the night and seeing the dawn. Impatience is a short-sightedness that fails to see the bigger picture. The lovers of God never lose patience, for they know that time is necessary for the crescent moon to become full."



In this remarkable novel, Elif Shafak delves into the forty rules shared by Shams Tabrizi, a renowned mystic from Qunia. Rule number nine resonates deeply with me as it captures the essence of patience. Patience is not merely waiting for our dreams to come true; it involves actively working towards them with serenity and determination. It signifies the tenacity and persistence required to pursue our aspirations until they are realized. Patience, to me, is a vital key to success. This rule has taught me the true meaning and significance of patience in our lives.

### PING PONG...

The sound of the ball soaring through the sky and the joyous laughter filled the air. I found myself on the ping pong court, surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic spectators, eagerly cheering on both players. Their cheers resonated, as they applauded and smiled, displaying their unwavering support. My face glistened with beads of sweat as my body gracefully glided from one position to another. Skillfully, I outperformed my opponent, accumulating more points with each shot. A profound sense of satisfaction enveloped me, for I knew victory was within my grasp. The radiant sunlight bathed the court, as a gentle breeze brushed against my skin, accentuating the elation that was etched on my face. This exhilarating experience, vividly etched in my mind, fills me with nostalgia even now. However, it was merely a figment of my imagination, brought to life within the confines of my backyard. My cousin and uncles, assuming the role of eager spectators, watched as I engaged in a thrilling game of ping pong with my sister. Every Friday afternoon, we indulged in this delightful ritual, eagerly anticipating its arrival each week. And without fail, I emerged as the victor, cherishing the joy that this special day brought.

### SCHOOL...

After enduring seven long months of quarantine in Kabul, the much-anticipated day finally arrived when schools reopened and people could resume their regular work routines. These past months had presented both challenges and blessings, creating a unique opportunity for families to bond and grow closer. However, the reopening of schools also brought with it the impending arrival of exams.

As I stepped into the school premises and reunited with my friends, a wave of joy washed over me. It was truly heartening to see them in good health and high spirits after such a prolonged separation. We eagerly caught up on each other's lives, sharing stories and experiences from the past seven months. The sense of camaraderie and connection was palpable, and we cherished the moments of laughter and camaraderie.

During our conversations, we realized that despite the difficulties we faced during quarantine, our families had become a source of strength and support. Together, we navigated the challenges, finding solace in shared activities and quality time spent together. It was a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the importance of cherishing our loved ones.

As the exams loomed ahead, we encouraged and motivated one another, ready to tackle the academic challenges that awaited us. While the resumption of regular routines meant bidding farewell to uninterrupted family time, we carried with us cherished memories and a newfound appreciation for the bonds that held us together during those seven transformative months.

# Shards of Her

Laying on my back in my bedroom...no. Let me rephrase that; a bedroom in my parents' house. I allow my hyperactive mind to wander.

XORLALI (Conscious)

I haven't had a good birthday in a while. Scratch that, I haven't had a good day in a while. Ask me why and you would be faced with the blankest a stare could possibly be. Behind the said stare? Scrambled up words in my head, my mind defiantly refusing to recall the right pronunciations of the most basic syllabi, my tongue suddenly way too big for my mouth; countering my efforts to vocalize how I feel. You know, basically my body working against itself; in total discord. A staple in the life of someone battling anxiety. Based on my rather amateur opinion of myself, I would relate this reaction to the fact that I have not totally processed why I have not been able to have good days any more.

Let's make an attempt to figure it out now, shall we? You and me. You being... emotions...feelings? Whichever classification you prefer. 'And me', the part of this being that has to deal with the physical consequences of your awkward faulty internal workings. The sneers, judgmental eyes, long sympathetic looks of people who are in sync and do not have conflicts within themselves; like we do.

So, one on one. Let's sort this out. We need to kick this off from somewhere, a niche. A smaller conversation that can shape up into a bigger one. Birthdays? Birthdays.

## Inis

XORLALI (Sub-conscious)

I know that it's not healthy to compare what goes on in my life to that of others. However, I'm curious if it's okay when what I'm comparing is happiness? If the answer is no, then I readily admit that I am not healthy at all. I simply can't help it most of the time. I mean, I see people look absolutely ecstatic on their birthdays; surreal even. They go on trips, fancy dinners, shopping sprees, get photoshoots done (as have become the norm recently) or even spend time with family. Time, they seem to genuinely enjoy. Honestly, it all seems surreal because to me, it has become more of a chore. I can't help allowing my thoughts to wander around a number of concepts including but not limited to; "Is it all an act? "



For the past eight or so years, I have had to share my birthday with sadness or water down my excitement at the prospect of growing older solely to share in the joy of others. A trip down pain lane, shall we? Seven years ago, it was Uncle Matthew's wedding. Yes, I was the little bride and looked absolutely ethereal in my gown; a mini version of his bride's but it was also my birthday the day before. Just like that my 11th birthday waned into insignificance. I remember being subtly chided for being selfish by my mother and that got me. "Uncle Matt gets married just once Xorlali, you have more birthdays to come", she said in response to my asking whether she remembered that eleven years ago that day, she had birthed me. Then again, she was right, eleven isn't that big a deal. I wasn't even going to be a teenager yet. How dare I?



This brings us to my 13th celebration of life in this odd world. My grandad passed. One of my favorite people on this earth, who exuded a strong silence and nestled within me the love for reading, died. To be fair, I lost him two months earlier but of course he was buried on my birthday. So much for entering 'teenhood' significantly. Then again, in a twisted way it was. Obviously, the mourning of the loss of this intentional father and mentor to many overshadowed my birthday.

Many forgot, and the few that didn't were too drained and pained to mean the "Happy birthday" wishes they mouthed at me. Not only did I have a tough day, I had to come to terms with the fact that I had lost one of my biggest cheerleaders. Even worse, my birthday was permanently to be in concordance with the burial of one of my most beloved humans. Talk about depressing.

Yes, over the years I have tried to find moments of true undiluted joy on my birthdays. I have had photoshoots, gone out to expensive lunches with friends but nothing seems to leave me joyous at overcoming another year on earth. Perhaps it is because I have gotten used to watering down my joy just in case someone has a bigger or more relevant event in their life. Or maybe it's because I do not want to feel selfish. Another possibility is the fact that I genuinely think there's nothing worth celebrating.

Frankly, I believe the reason for the absence of joy on my birthday is because nothing seems sincere. It is almost as though my insides are burdened with a looming instinct that if I allow myself happiness, something horrific would go down.

I have a hard time with indebtedness and feeling like a liability. However, it seems the older one grows, the more they are made to feel like one. I don't know if this is generic, but it happens in my trajectory and I don't like it at all.

The looped reminders of braids they paid for, a pair of shoes they bought, lunch dates they sponsored as some kind of sacrifice for my happiness on my birthday rather sucking the happiness out of the celebration. Undeniably, this leaves me feeling like a liability. I am a liability.

Am I ungrateful? I do not think I am. I appreciate the attempts made to make my birthdays special. But it is extremely difficult to enjoy them with the knowledge that they would be referred to at a later time. A guilt eliciting tool. Some kind of pawn in a bigger game of manipulation from the ones I hold dearest. How can I be happy?

Do others experience this but handle it with a certain type of finesse I lack? Does my family do this to hurt me? Or am I simply selfish?

This has been seeping into even regular days, I cannot...

XORLALI (Conscious)

..."XORLALIIIIII...XORLALIIII!", my mother's rather shrill voice fills my ears with urgency.

Why do I feel like she needs the remote which is probably on the table by her resting foot? Or a sachet of water from the fridge in the kitchen less than twenty feet away?

Maybe I am just ungrateful.

Yes, I am ungrateful.



# Aleena



## Untitled

The beauty of growing up in a remote village in Pakistan lies in the simple and peaceful life it offers. In these villages, far away from busy cities, children experience the joy of being close to nature and being part of a tight-knit community.

They wake up early in the morning and head out to the fields with their friends. Together, they climb trees, discover beautiful flowers, and find hidden streams. The village itself feels like a big family, with the elders sharing stories and teaching important life lessons. Living in a village can be tough at times, but it teaches children the values of hard work and perseverance. They help their families with farming, witnessing the amazing transformation of seeds turning into healthy crops.

These experiences not only teach them practical skills but also instill in them a sense of resilience and determination. What makes this childhood truly special is not just the breathtaking scenery but also the happiness that comes from spending time with friends and feeling a sense of belonging. The love and support from their families create a warm and nurturing environment. These simple moments of joy and the strong bonds with loved ones are what make this childhood truly beautiful.

Above all, the importance of community shines through in these villages. Everyone knows one another, and people come together to help and support each other in times of need. This tight sense of community creates a strong support system that nurtures and guides the children as they grow. In essence, the beauty of spending childhood in a far-off village in Pakistan lies in the simplicity of life, the close connection with nature, and the strong bonds within the community. It teaches children the values of hard work, resilience, and gratitude. It reminds them to appreciate the small things in life and to cherish the love and support of their families and community. This childhood is a treasure that shapes them into strong individuals with a deep appreciation for the natural world and the power of community.

While the village may seem peaceful and idyllic, it is important to acknowledge that within its long-standing traditions and customs, there can be a sense of captivity and restriction. These traditions, passed down through generations, can create rigid expectations and limit individual

freedom. In such villages, societal norms often dictate the roles, behaviors, and aspirations of individuals, especially for women. These norms can confine them to predefined roles and limit their opportunities for personal growth and self-expression. The weight of tradition can be suffocating, stifling the desires and dreams of those who long for more.

There are dozens of such kind of stories though they are buried in the hearts of those people. Some choose to die with their hearts cold and eyes left with thirst of wonders and some choose to speak there experience and desires to change it.

In a small village nestled in the landscapes of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) in Pakistan, there resides a girl brimming with hope and dreams of liberation. Despite societal norms that confine and restrict, she envisions herself soaring high in the vast expanse of the sky, breaking free from the chains that bind her. Living in this traditional community, where customs and expectations are deeply entrenched, the girl dares to challenge the status quo. She refuses to accept the limitations placed upon her and dreams of a life beyond the boundaries set by society. Her spirit burns brightly, igniting a flame of ambition within her, as she yearns to spread her wings and venture into uncharted territories. The girl's journey towards liberation is not an easy one. She faces resistance from those who are bound by the familiar and fearful of change. But she remains undeterred, drawing strength from her conviction and the support of like-minded individuals who believe in her dreams. Together, they form a network of support, encouraging one another to embrace their true selves and push beyond the limitations imposed by society. With each passing day, the girl's resolve deepens. She seeks education, knowledge, and exposure to the wider world, knowing that they hold the key to her liberation. She embraces every opportunity to learn and grow, broadening her horizons and expanding her understanding of what is possible. Through education, she not only equips herself with the tools to navigate the challenges ahead but also becomes a beacon of hope for others, inspiring them to break free from the confines of societal norms. The beauty of this girl's journey lies not only in her personal aspirations but in her unwavering belief that change is possible. She becomes a symbol of resilience, hope, and the transformative power of one individual's dreams. In a village where tradition and norms have held sway for generations, she breathes life into a new narrative, one that embraces progress and empowers individuals to chart their own destinies.

# What it Means to Use the Sidewalk

South Bay  
a nothing bay  
where nobody lays  
Where girls with nothing  
On their minds  
Go to strut and parlay

Flexing the fanciest shoes found at  
walmart  
Or South Shore Plaza  
The life of a bourgeoisie was nothin to  
play with

We got off at Andrew Station  
Hands reaching over thighs  
To brush off the slick from the train  
Gathering on top of each other  
To reapply gel and slick down edges

The walk was long  
Across the bridge  
Gum stuck to shoes  
We tripped after one another  
Made jokes out of almost scraped  
knees  
Hop-scotch  
Over mystery liquids laid out on the  
concrete  
I'm almost old enough to drive  
I should start studying for my permit

The bus ride from the corner to Target  
Was quick enough  
Two new girls  
Became gum  
Bound to our group  
As we sat huddled in the corner  
Mouth like a motor  
An older woman  
Someone I'd call Auntie  
Looked over  
Wrinkles pulled tight over her face  
Smiled  
And looked away  
Will I be a rich woman  
Whose toes would stretch out into soft  
rugs  
Like blistered feet fill out shoes a size too  
small  
On the commuter rail  
I live here  
I am not from here  
Whether I belong is a question  
In a familiar place I can not call home

## Amari





I am not slick enough for city-blood

The men ate us  
Their eyes trailing as we strolled into Target  
Emelie made a beeline for the discounted snacks  
As we loaded Angie into a cart  
a man's flirt tickled my ear  
"Hey lightskin"  
I'll be a senior next year  
At the check out  
We loaded up the three dollar water bottles  
The theater would say it was five  
I watched Angie tumble out the cart  
The grace of an elephant she had

A gaggle of birds  
With new spread wings  
We walked by a group of men  
A needle or a pipe containing poison  
They held  
Steadfast  
Their baby  
The dogs barked

A young man trailed behind us  
Wrapped his arms around waists  
A fence around a garden  
We talked about school  
And wack teachers  
As if one million conversations transpired beforehand  
He was gone when we got to AMC

Eye's rolled  
And tongues lolled  
As hands struggled to swipe cards  
Knowing that nothing beat that  
Buttery  
Succulent  
Theater popcorn  
Mouths flapped and gapped  
About the audacity  
Of a dusty with no job

A wink  
And a discount  
A friendly girl at the counter  
'I get it. Y'all be safe'

My slushie spilled on my shirt  
And it felt like rain  
Like Boston rain  
That stole summers from little girls  
Who wanted to be a spring flower  
Who tasted a hint of daisy at the beginning of winter  
And wonder what happened

Little girls who would go outside anyway

That would have older women bringing them  
out umbrellas  
That brought out other littler girls  
Who were mermaids with legs  
And your parents yelled about  
"Catchin cold"  
N' "smellin like outside"  
And the community would sing  
Will I feel young forever.

# Farwa

## Afghanistan the Land of Dreams



Afghanistan, my beloved homeland, once a land of beauty and hope, where majestic mountains rise up to meet the sky, and where fields of wildflowers stretch out as far as the eye can see, now a place of fear and despair. The Taliban's regime has left us with nothing but shattered dreams and broken hearts. We have lost our freedom, our dignity, and our right to live a life of our choosing. It is also a place of great tragedy, where war, poverty, and oppression have left deep scars on the land and its people.

I come from a land called Afghanistan, a place where dreams are born, a place where the word freedom is no longer a part of our dictionaries, a place where we have forgotten what it is like to be free, to be able to study, to be able to take a walk in a park, and so on. In this land, Afghan girls yearn for education, to go to school, to work, and to university. We dream of becoming doctors, engineers, journalists, and so much more. Our dreams are not just for ourselves but for our families, our communities, our country and our world. Sadly, we are deprived of these opportunities. We are unable to attend school, pursue our ambitions, or even visit a gym or beauty salon. In our country, we do not matter as much as a penny from amusement parks to hotels, from school to universities. Workplaces and even some sidewalks are banned for women and girls in this land.

Here in Afghanistan today, we have the dream of going to school, to university, and to work. Here, hundreds of thousands of passionate, talented girls cry from night to morning for the very basic human right to education. It is exactly 654 days that we cannot go to school and get educated. We can go out with only one dress code, which is black, long and baggy. I can't even imagine what would happen if someone were to neglect this "law."

We feel pain because the most basic human rights are missing in our lives. For every girl in Afghanistan who you speak to nowadays, it's her greatest hope to be able to return to school and study. We are always waiting and listening carefully to the news to see if schools



will be open again, but we haven't heard anything positive in this case yet. Today the Taliban are keeping us away from school, but we still have hope that one day this situation might come to an end.

Despite all of these challenges, we nevertheless continue to push forward. We know that education is not just a means to an end, but a fundamental human right that should be available to all. We know that by pursuing our dreams, we can help to create a better future for ourselves and our families, and we are willing to fight for our rights with unwavering determination. We are not afraid to speak out against injustice, even if it means risking our own safety. We are true warriors, fighting for a better future for ourselves and our sisters.

For us, education is the gateway to a brighter future. It represents the chance to break free from the shackles of poverty, oppression, and inequality. It is a symbol of empowerment, a tool for transformation and a source of pride.

We, Afghan girls, are human beings who deserve to study and to work, and most importantly, to be free from the chains of oppression and violence that have held us back for far too long. The Taliban took the chance away from us to improve, get educated, and follow our lessons. Some of us abandoned our goals, since we thought we could not achieve them anymore. We have become unmotivated and disappointed because we don't have much opportunity right now, but I believe that we should never lose hope because hopelessness is a person's greatest enemy. To be a woman is not a shame, it is the source of our strengths. We have noble ambitions; nothing can stand in our way. We are ready to make the world submit to our dreams.

Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, my entire way of thinking has changed. It taught me that the world is so big, so you have to have big thoughts. As an Afghan girl, every difficulty that I have, every roadblock that comes my way, cannot stop me. I want an Afghanistan where both the young and old are literate. I hope one day to create the Afghanistan of people's dreams, the Afghanistan we've all been waiting for. My dream is to be someone who studies and works, and show that Afghan girls are capable of doing a lot of things. We can change the world into a better place to live. We can do a lot of challenging things like the other girls around the world. We have talents and great abilities that we can use to help people, communities, and the world.

My message to all people around the world, especially women, is that we should all join as one voice for Afghan women to stand with us and fight for our right to be free. To support Afghan girls in their journey towards education and empowerment, to create a brighter future for all, where we can dream big and make a statement. Together, we can break down these walls, and show the world that girls can conquer it all. We will not let the Taliban hold us back, we will rise up and make our voices heard, that's a fact.

# Panorama

I dropped your pebble on the gravel ground

I dropped your weight like a bird loses a feather

Flew away

I soared

No prick felt

Just a steady glance in hindsight

Just a scab to scratch off

Fade into the mist of those mornings

Below the beach cliff

Where I waded in the water

Tender feet sank deep into the sandy sea

I leave your pebble in the caverns I crawled through

the tide... To flow away with

Fresh breeze blows through one ear to the other

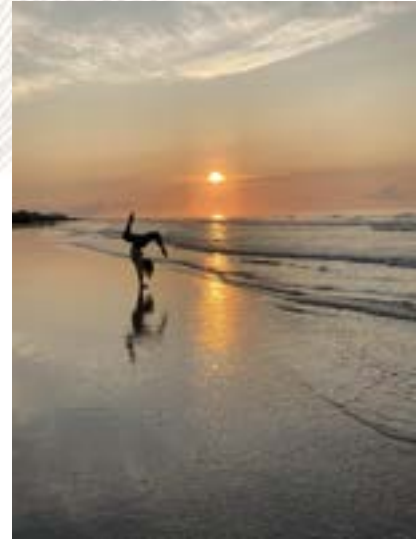
I stand cliff side above your eroding shore

In awe I

Gaze through the sun's rays

This place exists.

# Mia





# Panorama

Stumbling over tones,  
fumbling through foreign sounds  
and forgotten Chinese words,  
I say to my grandparents over Facetime,

i love you i miss you

with butchered tones  
I learned when I was young  
which have since faded  
from my tongue. Yet the words remain etched  
from countless encounters with relatives,  
repeated a million times  
until thick and emotionless:

i love you; i miss you

are measly, mispronounced words  
I wish meant more.  
My grandmother's smile fades,  
wondering how her grandchild's culture  
was erased, limited to

i love yous i miss yous

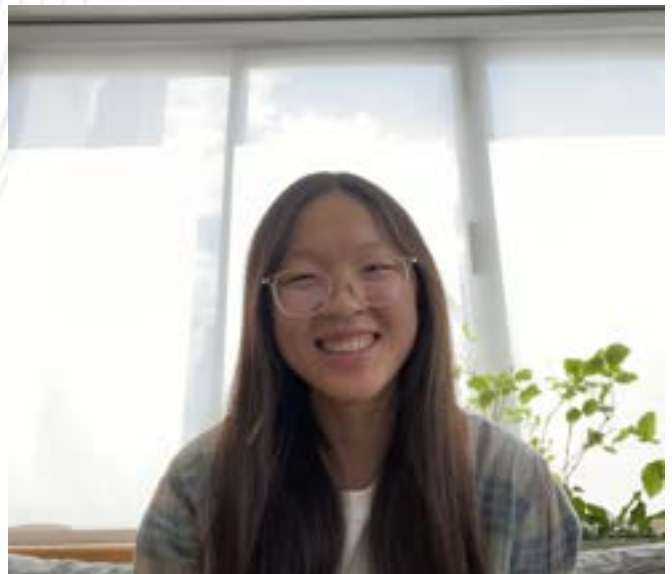
clobbered together with crayons,  
forever failing fragments, lost  
in an American-born ocean.  
Wishing to speak, yet isolated

with my embarrassing English,  
with my abrasive American accent,  
with every

i-love-you-i-miss-you

a mockery. When I say it,  
it falls short. When I say it,  
it means nothing. When I  
say it, in the hospital,  
scrambling to find the words  
to say goodbye to my grandfather,  
it is all I can say—  
我爱你。我想你。

# Ava



# Two Haibuns

## 1. Clamber

We didn't mean to get lost, but it was cloudy that day. Thirty minutes into the run, we trotted over a rusted cattlegate, feet thumping over the cracks—I felt a little fear—and beyond it lay a sweep of downhill.

Airily, you asked: "Do you think it'll be hard coming back up?" and I replied yes, maybe, we'd see. Forty minutes later we were on an upslope kicking pebbles with no clue where we were. The world was hills and rocks, green and gray, and no cell service. Eventually we asked a hiker for his map, turned east toward the trees, and began our climb to concrete.

*heaving fog:  
hitchhikers at large  
tear up the mountains*

## 2. Stay

Comfort is a creature of habit. It nestles into the living room sofa cushions, wraps around the kitchen sink and toys with the faucet. This summer is idle and unusually cold, making home—warm and safe—a prime habitat for loafing around.

The evening noise is crickets and owls outside; rubber slippers on hardwood floors inside. A box in my father's closet houses stacks of Yeye's ink paintings, pictures of a boyhood Baba crawfish hunting in urban creeks—way back before America, way back when home was cars blasting Danny Chen and fried fishballs with sugar soda and Hong Kong in its glory days.

*hallway light—  
baba hums tunes heard  
aboard an '86 boeing*



# Emma





# ***Faculty & Staff***



**Rochelle Potkar**  
Instructor

Poet | Novelist | Screenwriter, Rochelle Potkar is the author of *Four Degrees of Separation* and *Paper Asylum* - shortlisted for the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize 2020. *Bombay Hangovers* is her collection of short stories. Her poetry film *Skirt* featured on Shonda Rhimes' *Shondaland*. A few of her poetry readings feature on Disney+ Hotstar/ Shorts-English. Her poems *To Daraza* won the 2018 Norton Girault Literary Prize UK, and *The girl from Lal Bazaar* was shortlisted at the Gregory O' Donoghue International Poetry Prize, 2018. She is an alumna of Iowa's International Writing Program (2015) and a Charles Wallace Writer's Fellow, University of Stirling (2017). Her first screenplay was an NFDC India Screenwriter's Lab 2018 selection and a quarterfinalist at the Atlanta Film Festival Screenwriting Competition 2020 and her sixth screenplay was selected for the Writers INK Screenwriting Lab 2022-23. Her upcoming books include a first novel and a third book of poetry. She lives in the bustling city of Mumbai with a slow-swirling Goan heart. <https://rochellepotkar.com/>

Rumena Bužarovska (1981, Skopje, North Macedonia) is a fiction writer, literary translator, and social commentator. The author of four volumes of short stories translated into fourteen languages, her book *My Husband* (Dalkey Archive Press) has received critical acclaim in Europe and has been adapted into five stage productions in several European countries.

Her literary translations into Macedonian include works by Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, Lewis Carroll and John M. Coetzee. A 2018 resident of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, she is a professor of American literature and translation at the state university in Skopje and co-author and co-organizer of the women's storytelling initiative PeachPreach. In 2023 Dalkey Archive Press published her most recent short story collection *I'm Not Going Anywhere*, translated into English by the author and Steve Bradbury.



**Rumena Buzharouska**  
Instructor





**Mary Hickman**  
Instructor

Mary was born in Idaho and grew up in China and Taiwan. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was an Iowa Arts Fellow. Hickman is the author of two books of poems, *This Is the Homeland* (Ahsahta Press, 2015) and *Rayfish* (Omnidawn Publishing, 2017), which won the James Laughlin Award, given by the Academy of American Poets and chosen by Ellen Bass, Jericho Brown, and Carmen Giménez Smith. An assistant professor at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska, she also teaches in (and loves!) the University of Iowa International Writing Program's Between the Lines exchange program.

---

Tariro (poet, fiction, nonfiction) is the author of the poetry collection *Agringada: Like a Gringa, Like a Foreigner* (2019), which won the inaugural NAMA Award for Outstanding Poetry Book from Zimbabwe's National Arts Council. A finalist in several other poetry competitions, she has had her work anthologized and translated. Ngoro has a BSc in Microbiology and an M.A. in Creative Writing; she lives in Harare. Her participation in IWP's 2021 Spring Residency is made possible by the U.S. State Department.



**Tariro Ngoro**  
Instructor



**Vladimir Poleganov**  
Instructor

Vladimir (b. 1979, Sofia) is a Bulgarian writer, translator, and screenwriter. He is the author of one collection of short stories, *The Deconstruction of Thomas S* (published in 2013 by St. Kliment Ohridski University Press) and one novel, *The Other Dream* (2016, Colibri), which won the Helikon Award for Best Fiction Book of the Year in 2017. His short stories have appeared in various literary magazines in Bulgaria and abroad. "The Birds", a short story, was featured in Dalkey Archive Press' anthology *Best European Fiction 2016*. In 2016, he participated in the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. This was followed by residencies in Shanghai and Sun Yat-sen University in China. He has translated novels by writers such as Thomas Pynchon, George Saunders, Octavia E. Butler, and Peter Beagle into Bulgarian. In 2020, his translation of George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* won the Association of Bulgarian Translators Prize. He is currently working on a PhD in Bulgarian literature at Sofia University where he also teaches courses on creative writing and fantastic literature.





Sean Zhuraw's poetry and translations have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Tin House*, *The Offing*, *Defunct*, *New Session*, *Denver Quarterly*, and as an editor's selection in *The Hopkins Review*'s inaugural translation contest. He teaches English and Creative Writing at the Community College of Philadelphia and at Widener University. He lives gayly in West Philly with his husband and two cats.

**Sean Zhuraw**

Teachers' Assistant

---

Delaney Nolan is a fiction writer and journalist based in New Orleans. She is a regular feature contributor for *Al Jazeera*, and her writing has appeared in *Tin House*, *Electric Literature*, *Oxford American*, *Mother Jones*, *The Intercept*, *BBC*, and elsewhere. She completed her MFA in fiction at Iowa in 2016.

**Delaney Nolan**

Teachers' Assistant



Hélène Sicard-Cowan lives in Iowa City with a husband, a son and three cats. A native of France with a Ph.D. in French Studies, she has taught French and Francophone literatures for a long time. Her first book of poetry, *Heart Openers*, is forthcoming at Green Writers Press. In addition, she has been training in family and systemic constellation therapy, as well as Reiki, and she holds a certificate in animal communication.

**Hélène Sicard-Cowan**

Teachers' Assistant



**Sibani Ram**  
Teachers' Assistant

Sibani Ram is a native of Iowa City, Iowa and a recent graduate of Duke University. She's interested in medicine, journalism, and entrepreneurship. While she hopes to become a physician by training, Sibani is also interested in what healthcare can learn (and re-learn) from the humanities, specifically literature. In her free time, she enjoys reading, running, listening to music, and writing.

Henneh Kyereh Kwaku is a poet & health educator from Gonasua/Drobo in the Bono Region of Ghana. He's the author of *Revolution of the Scavengers* (African Poetry Book Fund x Akashic Books, 2020). He was a 2022 resident at the Library of Africa and the African Diaspora (LOATAD) and a two-time recipient of the Samira Bawumia Literature Prize (2020, poetry and 2022, Nonfiction). He is the founder and co-host of the Church of Poetry on Twitter Spaces. His poems/essays/hybrids have appeared or are forthcoming in the Academy of American Poets' A-Poem-A-Day, Poetry Magazine, Prairie Schooner, World Literature Today, Lolwe, Agbowó, Tupelo Quarterly, Air/Light Magazine, Tampered Press, Poetry Society of America, Praxis Magazine, IceFloe Press, Random Photo Journal, Lunar Review, CGWS, New South Journal, & Olongo Africa. He lives in Orange, CA, where he studies Creative Writing at Chapman University. He shares memes on Twitter/Instagram at @kwaku\_kyereh.



**Henneh Kyereh Kwaku**  
Teachers' Assistant





Arinze Ifeakandu is the author of *God's Children Are Little Broken Things*. A Dylan Thomas Prize and Republic of Consciousness Prize winner, he is also a finalist for the Kirkus and LAMBDA prizes, and a recipient of the Story Prize Spotlight Award. He was born in Nigeria, where he currently resides.

## **Arinze Ifeakandu**

**Special Seminar Instructor**

---

ESTHER IFESINACH OKONKWO is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a third-year PhD student in Creative Writing at Florida State University. Her fiction has appeared in *Isele Magazine*, *Guernica*, and *Catapult*. She's a recipient of the 2021 Elizabeth George Foundation Grant. Her debut novel, *THE TINY THINGS ARE HEAVIER*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury USA in 2025.



## **Esther Okonkwo**

**Special Seminar Instructor**

---



Moriana Delgado is a bilingual Mexico City writer, and recent graduate from the Iowa Writers' Workshop this spring. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois Chicago. Her first poetry collection, *Peces de pelea*, came out summer of 2022 with Libros UNAM. Her pieces have appeared in *The Poetry Review*, *Poetry Foundation*, *Tierra Adentro*, and others

## **Moriana Delgado**

**Special Seminar Instructor**



**Saleem Hue Penny**  
Special Seminar Instructor

Saleem Hue Penny (him/friend) is a Black, disabled, "rural hip-hop blues" poet who punctuates his hybrid/mixed media work with drum loops, Jim Crow artifacts, walnut ink, & birch bark. He is the coordinator of programs and partnerships at Zoeglossia, an Assistant Poetry Editor at Bellevue Literary Review, a member of Obsidian's Inaugural "O|Sessions Black Listening" 2022 cohort, and a proud Cave Canem Fellow.

He is compiling his first full-length poetry collection and pursuing archival research for 'The Happy Land Liniment' Project: an oral history, digital field guide, and chapbook-length lyric essay set in Reconstruction-era "Affrilachia".

---

Hera Naguib holds a doctorate in creative writing from Florida State University, focusing on global and transnational poetry. Winner of the 2023 John Mackay Shaw Academy of American Poets Award and the 2022 Quarterly West Poetry Prize, her work has been published or is forthcoming in Poetry Northwest, TriQuarterly, The Academy of American Poets, New England Review, The Cincinnati Review, Wasafiri, World Literature Today and elsewhere.



**Hera Naguib**  
Special Seminar Instructor



### **HENRY LIEN**

Henry Lien is an author from Taiwan, now living in Hollywood, CA. He is a graduate of St. Paul's School, Brown University, UCLA School of Law, and Clarion West Writers Workshop. He is the author of the award-winning and critically-acclaimed PEASPROUT CHEN middle grade fantasy series. Henry also teaches writing for institutions including UCLA, the University of Iowa, and Clarion West. He previously worked as an attorney and fine art dealer. He is a four-time Nebula Award finalist and won the UCLA Extension Department of the Arts Instructor of the Year award. Hobbies include writing theme songs for his novels and losing Nebula Awards.

### **JERRY LEE DAVIS**

Jerry Lee Davis is a meditation instructor and writer from Appalachia. He is the founder of Meditative Intuitive Sessions in Los Angeles. His first novel TWIN CITY was nominated for the Townsend Prize for Fiction and the Georgia Author of the Year award. In addition, he has written several plays that have received successful stage productions, and has had several of my screenplays optioned.



## **Henry Lien & Jerry Lee Davis Special Seminar Instructors**



## **Camisha Jones Special Seminar Instructor**

Camisha Jones (she/her) is a writer, spoken word poet, workshop facilitator, and gathering cultivator. She is the author of the poetry chapbook *Flare* (Finishing Line Press, 2017) which focuses on her experiences with hearing loss and chronic pain. Her poems have been published in *The New York Times*, *Poets.org*, *Button Poetry*, *The Deaf Poets Society*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Typo*, and *The Quarry: A Social Justice Poetry Database at Split This Rock*, and elsewhere.

Camisha is a 2022 Disability Futures Fellow, a multidisciplinary award designed to amplify the work of disabled creatives supported by United States Artists, the Ford Foundation, and Mellon Foundation. She was also selected as Franklin & Marshall College's 2017 Lapine Poetry Fellow and one of the Loft Literary Center's 2017 Spoken Word Immersion Fellows. Camisha competed at the 2013 National Poetry Slam on behalf of Slam Richmond. She is a co-editor for a forthcoming anthology of disability poetry with Travis Chi Wing Lau, Naomi Ortiz, and Michael Northen.

Camisha has close to 30 years' experience organizing and leading programs, gatherings, and people at nonprofits and institutions of higher education. Currently, she works to create space for gathering and connection as a Co-Producer of LAB with the internationally-recognized disability arts ensemble Kinetic Light. For nearly 9 years prior to this role, she was Managing Director at the national social justice poetry non-profit Split This Rock. There, she provided leadership for four poetry festivals, a poem of the week series, readings, open mics, a bi-monthly writing workshop series, and the expansion of the organization's core commitment to accessibility and disability inclusion practices.





**Romeo Oriogun**  
Program Coordinator

Romeo Oriogun is a Nigerian poet, essayist, and author of *Sacrament of Bodies*, *Nomad*, *The Gathering of Bastards*, and three chapbooks. He is the winner of the Nigeria Prize for Literature, the Alice Fay Di Castagnola Prize, and the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. A finalist for the Lambda Prize for Gay Poetry, his poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Harvard Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *The Poetry Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *The Common*, and others. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, his poems have been translated into several languages.

---

Razan Hamza is a junior at Cornell College studying International Studies and Psychological Sciences. She is a poet and an eboard member for *Lyrically Inclined*, Cornell's poetry organization.

Also for Cornell, she is a coordinator for the International Student Orientation. A member of the International Student Association as well, she takes part in the annual Culture Show, for which she represents her home country of Sudan. Razan spends her weekends tutoring immigrants in English, and all in all enjoys every opportunity in which she can engage with a group of people of various cultures.



**Razan Hamza**  
Between the Lines Assistant





**IOWA**

International Writing Program  
Between the Lines