

EDITION TWO

A vibrant night street scene, likely in an Asian city, featuring a food cart in the foreground, colorful string lights, and illuminated buildings in the background. The scene is captured in a dark, atmospheric setting with warm, glowing lights.

kaleido zine



Chinatown Street Vendors, NYC

virginia fontana

Motherland

Each night when I lay to sleep, I melt into the soil beneath the house I call home and listen carefully for the distinct sound of your voice.

Its lilting quality ensnares me into a magical dream in which I dig a tunnel under the sea to reach you; a whale passes by, its call reverberating in my chest. The familiar but unknown sound sends a shiver down my spine and I clutch it tenderly, cherishing this gift you've sent me.

The rising sun wakes me from the dream and sends me spiraling into another- as I greet my family the sounds of your words slip sweetly off my tongue, the prose light and satisfying. It reminds me of the charming taste of a bite of fluffy cake: the mixture of cloud-like frosting with the spongy texture; a true blessing from mankind. The resemblance is uncanny.

A glance out the window shows hill after hill, but I find myself yearning for your mountains. For the crisp fog that looms about the air, for a world that I have long since forgotten. Wherever in the world I may be, no matter it land or sea, it is the smell of you that I wish for.

The bustling streets of Kathmandu, the maze that is the city that breathed its life into me as I was born. The honking cars, the untidy roads, the women in their flowing saris and the grandpas gathered in tea shops, their hands crossed behind their backs.

I long for what I can only imagine.

So that is what I do. I imagine the countryside, its lush hills and clumsy cattle, the internet that hangs on for dear life, and the stories of the people who live there, who see everything in between.

When I stepped off your land twelve years ago you sang me a song of goodbye, but today I write to you in hopes of seeing you again soon.

Red white and blue stands for a lot of things, but to me it will always stand for you.

— Arya Panta

Sharing Cultures

When I was fifteen, I worked on a farm with
men from the south who talked of home.
They mentioned the dusty trails to towns
littered with marigolds and migrating Monarchs.
They painted clear skies with an oppressive sun
beating down beast, plant, and man alike.
They'd muse on the rattlesnakes and eagles,
the founding myth of their land.
"Home had no *barrios*," they'd joke,
"because when you're poor, you never know it."
Most of all, they talked of whom they left behind
as they journeyed to a new life.
They had beloveds whom they prayed would
still be theirs after all those years.
Some had kids, others had parents,
both depending on them to "make it."
The pressure was unbelievable for men
who'd already done so much.
Yet they bore it well; a smile was never
absent from our lunch breaks.
We'd sit around a circle and trade in snacks,
an unequal trade of street tacos and chicken.
After lunch, there would be time for a
game or two of the beautiful sport.
Then we'd celebrate with high-fives
and turn our attention to the watermelons.

— Nathan DeBar

drift



Aleena Gao

POPPY SEED ROLLS

Izabella Piatkowski

Aleksander jolted awake, his alarm blaring. Bright red numbers blinked at him in the darkness. 4:00 AM. He could hear alarms going off in the rooms around him, all set for the same time despite the darkness outside.

After shutting his alarm off, Aleks blindly reached over to his bedside table until he felt freezing cold metal beneath his fingertips and flicked the switch. His small dorm room was illuminated with golden light, revealing the piles of blankets and clothes stacked on his cot to keep him warm. The whole country was in a fuel shortage, so that meant minimal heating for the dorms, even though it was nearly zero degrees outside. Groaning, the young man asked himself the same thing he did every morning: Why did I do this to myself?

Aleks forced himself out of bed, his breath visible in the air and his toes numb. He had gone to sleep wearing three jackets, and it had only proved partially effective. After hurriedly putting on his boots and winter jacket, he followed a group of guys he knew from his floor outside.

In the darkness, everything was icy, and light flurries were already beginning. Luckily, the path everyone was taking was well-beaten and familiar, one every person living in the dorm took every day.

It was only 4:30 AM when he arrived, and the line outside the grocery store was already sixty people long. As he always did, he spent the first thirty minutes joking with his peers, trying hard to ignore the cold and find some positives to the place. After that, though, the cold started to get to everyone, and jokes became hard to make. Instead, the university students usually started bitterly murmuring about the state of their country, the Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa.

Aleks always felt like he had no right to join these conversations. He was only there for a few months before he would fly back to the United States, where he was born and raised. Having Polish immigrants for parents was not the same as growing up in communist Poland, where lines for groceries like this one were an everyday thing.

While he waited for the grocery store to open at 6:00 AM, he always found himself reflecting on why he came here. His name was Polish. His first language was Polish, and he grew up with it being the only language spoken in the household. He was raised on Polish

to where i should be

You could say that this is your home, but the words would catch somewhere in your throat, strangling you as punishment for yet another lie.

The truth is this; you will never understand what home feels like again. And how could you—when the past tugs on your lungs, suffocating the cavity in your chest, spilling salt tracks on your face? You've tasted home once before, in the warmth of the sun pressing on your back, the burst of laughter wracking your ribcage, the scent of coffee and fresh bread in the morning. You've had home etched in your palm, you had known what it meant to belong. You will later find that you will know estrangement for far longer.

You can beg every deity up there for another chance, another place to belong, but they will jeer at you from where they perch in the clouds. You can make all the small talk you want, but you will never forge those old connections you dream of. And you can wish all you want—on the pennies you toss in the well, the ladybug on your finger, the star streaking past the night sky you gaze upon—but you will never find another place to call home again.

— Mashal Khattak

a red and gold out of reach

1. red and gold

*sunlight dances in / untouchable gold
with just fingers / alone.
red ribbons tied / poorly in black hair
loosened at / tight knots.
stars gleam / on a scarlet sunset
far from where i stand / drifting in the melancholy sea.*

2. across the ocean

*mother's land / beyond waves of blues
past roads of cultures / so far from my own.
a twenty-four hour travel / returns half a day
filled with foreign / yet familiar sights.
to a place where / all speak my family's tongue
with the fluency / i wish to achieve.*

3. long-forgotten traditions

*praying to ancestors / atop a lush
green-filled mountain / radiating with history.
soft candles and wine / drip onto stone tiles
surrounded by / rough shoots of bamboo.
back home / such mountains do not exist
such ancestors / are a dream.*

4. disconnect, it's death

*my eyes close / on familial stories
and ties to our / origins and blood.
thin thread / laced with crimson and
sprinkled with golden dust / tied to my finger.
it no longer
keeps me
afloat atop
the land
my family calls
our home.*

here.



Anonymous

Sincerely, an immigrant's daughter

i used to be a little girl.
unafraid of the world and its prejudices
growing up in a small 2 bed 1 bath home
living off the backs of my parents
who've left their own worlds
to build mine
a humble life in a country made of too much
i didn't wish for more because i never got it

loneliness had no greater friend than me.
being far from those i hold close
being close to those who i hold no ground to
it had always left me feeling different,
surrounded by experiences i could not relate to
sensing more commonality with the rug on the floor
than any of my peers

it had always been a fickle thing.
understanding a language i can't speak
and sounding broken in the only one i know
holding my tongue was something i got used to
leaving me to unwind my thoughts in the evening glow

my heart belongs to two countries.
this is my only takeaway
to never downplay
the existence of my identity
and to always recognize
its integrity

Sincerely,
an immigrant's daughter

— *kasie abat*

I never thought one syllable would hold so much power over me, but here we are

When I was younger, the ழ (zha) sound evaded me like my Fischer's lovebird refusing to eat anything that is a tiny bit healthy, my parents shared concerning glances, continued efforts never made me get it quite right. ழ - the pride of our language, it is a letter that sounds like no other, like flies hovering over a sticky rotting patch of watermelon juice, like hot summer rain thrashing your arms while you're frantically removing clothes off the line, like golden honey, that my grandma said turned my hair white (it was vitiligo). I am not the dusky brown my poets rave of, or got ebony tresses that reek of jasmine three handspans away, and I realized pretty early on I didn't belong but still spell tamil as thamizh, people think it's absurd I do things right. I grab at what will never be mine, if the ழ won't come to me, I'll keep it with me somewhere it always stays, and that has always been what I write. Words live longer than people; the general idea is, this letter flows like no part of me does oozing into its adjacent syllables, I wasn't able to enunciate what would've made me me for a long time, some part forbidden from me so I could never be whole. There was this ழ shaped hole in my being and I knew I was foreign. பழம். மழை. அமிழ்து. தமிழ். நிழல். பிழை. A mistake.

Translations:

பழம் - (n) fruit

மழை - (n) rain

அமிழ்து - (n) nectar

தமிழ் - (n) Thamizh; the language, the people, me(?)

நிழல் - (n) shadow

பிழை - (n) mistake

— Prarthana Vijayakumar

February

Somewhere there was a crossroads near the border, in a smoky child's face with round eyes. Low blue and yellow brick houses and dark green pine trees surrounded it, and in summer, the purple statices opened in the garden, in spring, the hot sunlight stretched across the forest canopy. The first memory of round eyes was of this landscape, where years of warm embraces and happy barks were repeated over and over again. They called this place Life; it was as they imagined the world of fairy tales. Until now.

Something shook the earth. It shuddered, deep and angry, as if the grey sky had fallen. Morning dew covers the blades of grass, and a thick mist has descended on the cool ground; even the air is swirling backwards, and the birds are flying far away. They run out of the brick house and stare at the Thursday shadows. The button eyes watch as all the spring, summer, autumn, and winter gather in two grey canvas bags, as the faltering zipper is pulled on the resin-scented warm wool sweaters and the smiling stuffed elephants, as the Mother and Father pray in whispers, as they lock the door of Life without a key. Lacking a vehicle, they walk away from the crossroads, the low blue and yellow brick houses, the dark green pines, the purple statices, and the memory of warm embraces and happy barks. The round child's face fills with hot tears, with the helpless sorrow of incomprehension and lack. She doesn't know where the touch of silky grey dog-tails and the fresh scent of the short-cut lawn has gone; before her and behind her lies an endless sea of concrete surrounded by barren trees. All around her, words she had never heard before, harder-sounding names of unfamiliar places are repeated with terrified powerlessness in their voices.

Meanwhile, the time's arrow marches on, the wind picks up, and the horizon bends to dark blue. The Mother takes a brown bun from her canvas bag, caresses the child's cold face, and then holds the tiny body close to her, cradling it and humming the song she used to sing when the family was ill. The melody rings sweetly, filling the lonely night and drowning out the deafening noise of strangeness.

Twilight and dawn meet; the dust is heavier on the feet, and the eyes look wearily into the bare winter. Farther lies Life than the round eyes and the darkening child's face could possibly look back.

They can only guess where they are going as they leave fading footprints on the edge of towns, hoping to cross something larger soon. They dare only believe that the sun will come out the next day, that there will be night, and that the clear sky stars will shine with the same piercing light.

— *Blanka Pillár*

Bye Monarch Dawg Mama whatever

Mirrorballs

must be sha'ttered to shine, he is still up there
But ev'en that is an artefact for y'ester'day
Shru'jay taught you everything you know

Do you rem'ember friend?
The sto'ries he told you of his mot'her
You have re'ad them, extens'ively even
But they were never in his books

This is n'ot about a Scan'dinavian shawl—
You humour sen'sationalising the mund'ane
but this is liter'ally his life
You copy more skillfully than a mirror

He can write wh'ite poems abo'ut this land
He c'an claim a word a lang'uage a thought a colour a na'me a mother
but it will n'ever be Shru'jay's
Ownership is a heirloom that can only be inherited

Even if he too'k a bullet f'or every life out there
He won't b'e in your biblio'graphy
Be'cause after his death, it's the j'okes we'll share
His mother didn't name him victorious, for this

He is no a'rtist, just a cry'baby
Sonder d'oesn't have anything on him, b'ut you do
He lo'oks at this empire he's built and appa'rently he has he'irs
He can only sigh on the sidewalls

His name si'ngs in every lan'guage he doesn't speak
He ponders in abs'tract concepts in w'ords he cannot define
But st'ill, you're our little acade'mic! go yo'u!
Lock up your words because even language can be stolen

He's writing love so'ngs, postcards
He str'ongly believes life will blo'om like
A beau'tiful flower, he doesn't have the wo'rd for
Look at him once, and he will be ready to burn

— Mangotations (Shru'jay)

ich bin heir / my heart startles

little-girl me lived in a skyscraper
on the twenty-sixth floor,
speedy elevator: only way up or down.
now, on this other continent, high-speed lifts
are a tourist attraction, to marvel
at sights and sounds.

years ago now, i press into my rusty memory:
dangling red plastic lamps
above slippery market streets,
casting a neon glow over shiny fish scales.
little-girl me, blissfully lost under
shades of umbrellas, fresh fruit stands:
hands picking passion fruits, exchanging coins
over sunny-skinned mangoes.

but where i lived as a little girl,
i was afraid of typhoons,
tape crosses, shop windows everywhere.
right now, rain hammers diagonally, my window:
my heart startles awake, midnight—
what is this strange longing pain?

i filled myself up, lost myself
in three new languages i love,
but why am i still empty? i must have
lost something, almost homesickness—

but oh, my soul, hold still: ich bin hier.
mein eigener ort, mein neues leben.
hier darf ich sein, hier will mein herz bleiben,
ich lebe, ich strebe, ich schwebe:
dandelion floating, found new soil,
roots swiftly left behind.

for what are roots? look, this:
fearful midnights, little girl small
behind wooden door, through covered ears.
muffled shouts. hurled accusations. twenty years.
backstabbing, sickening smiles, dinner tables, but no—
this is not here anymore.

soft sterile dreams sweep over
the counter of my mind instead.
i shake off the dust,
my mind's bookcase of nightmares.

now, fully awake, come saturday,
i order black sugar soya milk with boba,
i go down to the asian store,
fill up my stocks of spicy ramen:
silently hope that it is enough
to duct-tape two parts of my life together.
at least such that it is not so
torn
apart

— *Tiffany Lee*

monsoon milk-box

in monsoons
toying with plastic princesses and tokens
while roof climbing on moonlit nights,
making sure not to step on the wiggly clay
tiles covered in mossy pink and taupe.
impatient long-awaited weekends at the street market,
staying late to get melon candies from the vendors
who swear like sailors and care like maids.
friday mornings with
the orchid flower smell drifting through the air
as the florists ride on their wheeled wooden carts,
ripe lychee trees bearing fruit to
one lucky someone or knocking
an unlucky someone's hat off their head
and stealing an older cousins motorcycle to ride down to the
movie theater.
hurry up, they're showing american cowboys!
from darting between faded yellow cars and five-people-
plus-a-dog motorcylces
all to pick the the overripe dates
from the trees lined the insides of the road's
dead-end street arcade on hoi an
red paper tickets spurting out of its mouth.
the bucket-letter delivering system still stays in usage
neighbors sending letters and goodies through a milk-box
pulley.
from the grandparents telling stories about old saigon,
the older "sisters" calling out "immunity necklace"
and the boys shoe-stealing off of porches.
sunday nights at temple,
and watching fireworks and toddlers running down the
streets with paper lanterns and puppets.
in my lantern was a photo of my family
vibrant colors now faded to a sepia toned gloom,
but the memories remain new.

— Minhkha Dang

SPEECHLESS

Life is all about standing up
And finding the words
To say what you feel should be said
Lest anyone misunderstand your standing.
But the world is designed so insidiously
That my trying to stand is distracted
By the smell of lilies in the distance.
I am forced to use another sense,
And move a different muscle.

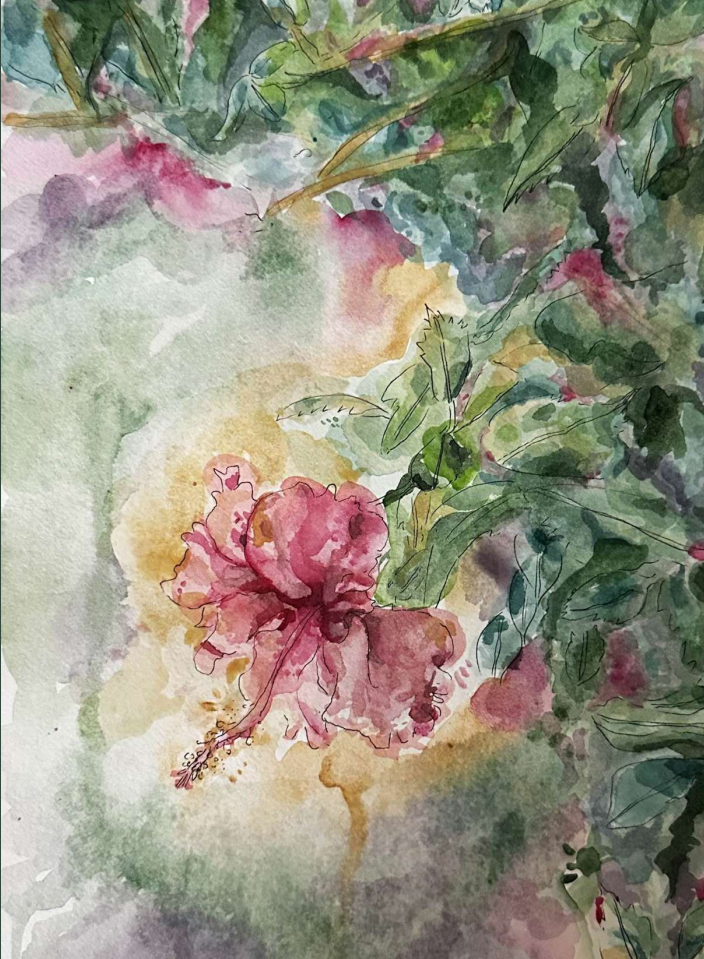
What happens to the incongruence that meets my eye,
The vision that rudely interrupts the constructions of my mind?
However did pink and white grow out of green?
How did I forget how to speak of flowers?

I try to stand again,
To repeat the beginning of my speech.
But the world is designed so insidiously.
All I could do was stare.

That's how I came to be known as the silent observer.
No one really knows what I think.
They see me, and think they know what I see.

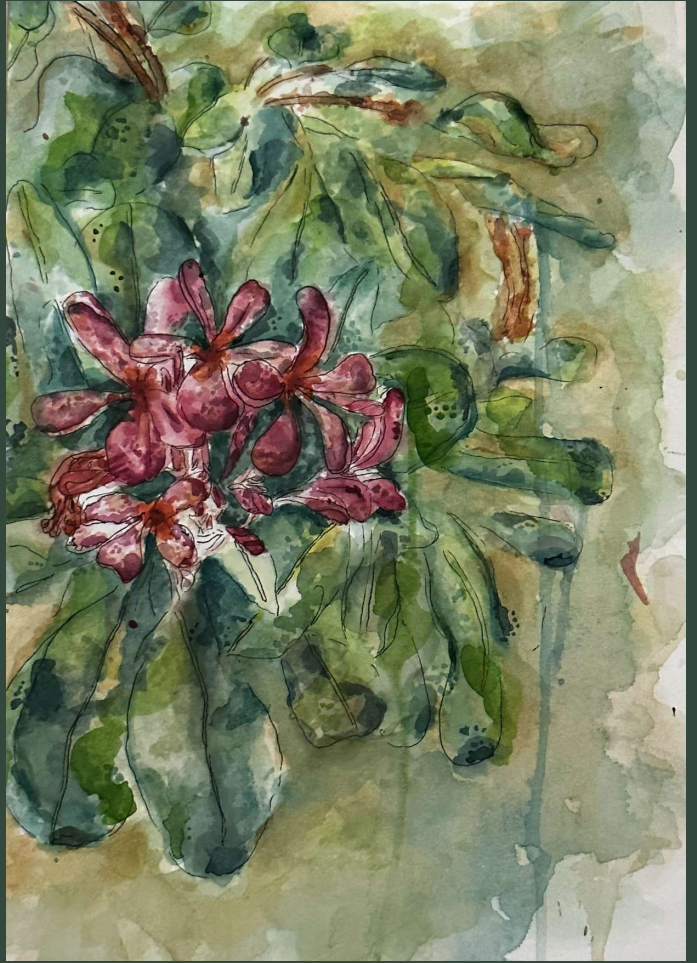
— *Renata Nathania*

A Set for my Grandmother



Pooja

her: Flowers from India



Verma

This Life at Motel 88

Madeline Rosales

There is cracked pavement, passing for a sidewalk among the locals, glistening under a sky that threatened rain. Neon lights flicker above, which casts a glow from the weather-beaten sign of “Motel 88” and its boastful “No Vacancy” message. The blue paint — once bold and brash, now weathered and worn — proclaims every essential amenity of the hotel in blaring lights, yet it seems to lose its voice with each passing gust of wind. At a single glance, a helmet of a motorcyclist could reflect that the bar is 100% refrigerated, each room has a T.V., and that the office is here while the lobby is there. Those insistent colors, the manager asserts, reminds visitors of a time when pragmatism had not taken precedence over craftsmanship. Waving wildly in the relentless breeze is a flag with the country’s characteristic crimson stripes and ivory stars, proudly standing erect and defiant against the series of storms that have attempted to tear it from its standing. Beside Motel 88 is a fast-food joint, reliant on the transient trade of the motel’s occupants, holding its doors with haughty demeanor. The pavement that connects these two establishments is strewn with cigarette buds and styrofoam cups with unidentified sticky nonsense inside, also by virtue of the esteemed guests of Motel 88.

All five rooms of Motel 88 have long been rented out indefinitely by down-on-luck individuals who can’t afford more agreeable housing. The manager knows that his establishment ought not to allow stays exceeding two months, but pays no heed. As long as he receives the “rent” in full, he won’t raise a fuss. The longest serving guest is Mr. Chengyi Wang in Room 101. He is Guangdong, born and raised. However back in 1942, he was beyond ready to abandon that quaint countryside in which clouds drowsily passed through the irregular peaks of ancient mountains lapping over each other like waves, with the layered rice fields patchworks of green and gold, and sparsely spaced compounds scattered with perpetual endlessness across the land.

He recalls, to this day, that fireflies would flutter at dusk around the red and yellow lanterns, and boats would leisure through the river, and the smells of tea and fluffy white rice seemed to be wafting constantly from the doors of each home. He hears laughter from then drifting into his mind as he beats the worn polyester blanket from his bed against the door frame (“Blanket needs air.” He says, whenever he is questioned).

The youngest of nine children, Chengyi was blind to the world outside his window back then. His eyes would instead be glued steadily to his physics textbook. It was beyond a necessity to take the university examinations, because although he hailed from the simple Guangdong countryside, he came from a family of distinguished academics and had thus been bred, born, and raised to achieve similarly great heights— though, he had an odd belief that he was destined to be even greater, to shatter the mold his traditional Chinese family had contrived a standard of.

There must be something more than this. He would think to himself on the especially restless days.

His vision was blurred with tears as he prepared himself on his final day. Though his excitement exceeded what he had once thought humanly possible, for the life of an esteemed university student awaited him, a spasm of despair had still contorted its way across his face. His mother had tightly clasped his right arm with both hands, as she would hold a dove that wanted desperately to fly off on a broken wing.

‘I’ll be waiting for you to come home.’

Turning away and taking a step forwards required a willpower so leaden that he had almost tumbled to the ground.

‘Goodbye, Ma.’

He hardened his heart as he parted with his childhood and walked out through the village gates. This was the dawn of his finest years, he was sure, after all, he already felt lighter with every step.

His mother had stood still in her place, becoming smaller and smaller as the distance grew larger. The family home was now an empty nest; not a dove in sight. Parting wasn’t especially sorrowful back then, though they hadn’t at all known that this first tender goodbye would morph to an ultimate farewell in only a few years.

It was the winter of 1947. Chengyi shivered under his patched coat and shoes punched with holes at all angles. Hailing from the South’s warm and mild weather, he was all but shock-frozen whenever the merciless winter breeze blew against his progressively pale skin. On the nights when eerily howling winds pushed against his board’s thin walls, he would wrap his arms around his increasingly frail body and shiver with longing for home. Wouldn’t there be bao steaming in a damp bamboo basket? Wouldn’t there be white tea, with its delicate green shoots bobbing on the water’s surface, boiling atop the gas stove?

The frost was fresh, the air was sweet, and the snow had sat its thick buffet on the ground and propped its feet up on the evergreens for the week. Little bluejays were perched on those stretched branches of snow, chirping a song of which there was never a more beautiful melody. Twee twee, coo coo. Their potent cornflower color was rivaled only by the sky, clear and bright and devoid of a lone cloud to contain its hues. The occasional snowflake was still falling tentatively, yet the air ceaselessly buzzed with innocence and joy.

Alas, this still peace did not last for long. Footsteps slogged across the ground’s fluffy white powder, and roars and howls could be heard from all directions, blanketing the quad. The students, clustered into shuddering packs, spoke in excitedly hushed whispers. Rapidly, a crowd had gathered in the center of campus.

Chengyi took hurried steps — shivering partly from the ice threatening its way into his skin, partly from excitement — to the ever growing group, unable to contain his own fervent curiosity. Feeling the heat and hearing the heartbeats of the masses from the crowd, he pushed forwards to get a better view and observe the commotion firsthand. And then a loud crack startled everyone in the crowd.

Three men dressed in gray, wearing gray caps embellished with a single red star, were stood upon a wooden platform. They had set off a firecracker, which was met with eager yelps and applause.

‘Da jia gong ping!’ Equality for all! One of them yelled, eyes watering and mouth foaming from his

determined conviction. The other two men repeated after him as their hands pumped into the air one, two, three times, holding a small red copy of *The Communist Manifesto*.

Revolution had come.

He had attempted in complete earnest to convince his family to defect, but they had looked upon his fears only in scorn. ‘China is changing for the better. I want to stay and witness my country’s transformation.’ They had all written back to him in response as he cradled his wrist, sore from his desperate scrawling.

With a familiarly heavy heart, he left friendless and estranged, realizing that never would he never see home; never again would he feel home. He rode on a steamship and spoke not once during the journey. He had taken a single book with him, *David Copperfield*, though he never brought himself to read a word of it. There was a level of amusement in the fact that he’d likely never study again. Had he known that he’d end up living in a motel, paycheck-to-paycheck, he would’ve looked up from his textbooks at least once in a while. He would have spent more time with his mother.

Now, he does not know whether his family is happier, he only knows that he is not. He’s heard stories of China’s immediate process of industrialization, though all the information is brief and shallow. It’s funny how no news articles have said, “And don’t worry, Chingyu, your mother is doing just fine.” Or “Your mother misses you every day, Chingyu.” Or even, “Chingyu, your mother is at least still alive.” He doesn’t care much for the ceaseless talk of restricted rights and religious oppression, though it was shameful, he only wishes to see his mother one last time.

He finds it even funnier how Guangdong had never once presented itself as his home. It was but a backdrop to his loftier aspirations. His mother was once the tree from which the leaf learned to fly from. Just because you’re moving on, He tells himself, doesn’t mean you’re moving higher.

From his window at Motel 88, he can’t see anything but snow covered pavement and a merciless blizzard coming down upon the overbearing desolation. He is alone in body and mind. Shivering under his coat in the bleak cold, he takes a sip of liquor—inviting the warmth it brings; nestling the effect over the taste. He muses in sardonic irony of his bright eyed expectation, ill placed optimism, and feels himself disappear into the indistinguishable white flakes of snow. He had, unfortunately, managed to shatter his family’s mold.

And that is this life at Motel 88.

a mother's tongue

In response to "Search for My Tongue" by Sujata Bhatt

1બાબો¹ roll your tongue like it's a path. / the path we chose. your pain is merely a drop of sweat / that took us from ahmedabad² to pune³ to here. / we did not fight for you to be tired. have you ever noticed that gujarat⁴ is just another petal of our tongue that is a seedling? patch 3 of it together, watch it bloom. / i raised you with its gold and i took it with us and / no matter where we plant it, its roots never rot. / no matter how poor the soil is, it is your water that matters. / do not forget to remember to raise your tongue even in drought. / તમારા હૃદય દ્વારા વરસાદ પડશે.⁵ / when you call my name, your buds recognise that this is no venom. / savour the-taste because flowers don't rot. they sweeten. / પથ્થર ઉપર પાણી⁶. / try cutting it again, it will grow longer.

— Mangotations (Shru'jay)

¹ Bābō: son—dear (in Gujarati)

² Birthplace of poet

³ Ex-residence of poet

⁴ State in India, in which both poet and her native language; Gujarati, originated from

⁵ Tamārā hrdaya dvārā varasāda padaśē: your heart will rain through (in Gujarati)

⁶ Pāthara upara pānī: Water over stone = you cannot convince someone who has already made up their mind (in Gujarati)

WE ARE LIVING IN AN ENDLESS HOUSE OF MIRRORS

Madeline Rosales

You met her yesterday when you were both cornered
by the mundanity of foul existences & the incessant chatters of a
tsingtao-chugging-son-of-a-bitch roommate
You had fallen into a rickety aluminum stool at the bar counter
She was driftwood discarded from the other side of the ocean
washed ashore with a maroon-and-satin dress plastered to her narrow hips
depending on the company she could be Jonah in the whale or Chang'e on
the moon with
those billowing obsidian-shine strands draping across her protruding
shoulders
Obsidian-shine like the friction-burnt tires of collapsed Miatas that you
scrubbed for hours on
weekdays at the San Marcos Shell— but put that shit to rest
You had come for the beer in the glass & not / your own hazy reflection at
the bottom of it
Five shots, you decided
Five is enough to forget your English name and keep your Chinese one but
four will suffice to at least make the bus ride back a little shorter
with Baby Keem roaring in deaf ears
with knuckles on plastic ridge
with her palms pressed to the window beside you... What?
You were not sure how it happened but assumed a trading of
forgotten sentences and the knowledge of each's palms
and perhaps the gossamer of sickly lips
You both entered 293 Valencia through two doors and ended up in
the same room; your roommate was still out but it goes unspoken, there is
no sex expected
Only words on lip, only the acknowledgment that sex is only medicine
to decrease the pain's LD-50
“Once,” she begins, “Nu Wa lived in a
Shanghai flat

She was computer scientist & had a ponytail & glasses
& would whisper c-plus-plus into Wukong's ear to etch programs in the mud
But over time she became interested in the literature of the mud-figures she created and came
down into the dirt on a 747 to
be among them and the patch of dirt that she landed on was called California
She scratched ethereal figures in the squalor of Toyota-wheels
But her sperm-banks and egg-carriers grew stark
in their fury and reached across
the ocean through phone-screens and concrete hands in the sun
sweeping away all that was good in a massive rapture
and in the golden rubble she
found fucking San Marcos (where her eyes bathe fluorescent in the glaze of
creme-brulee
yellows and browns
which were but leftovers from three days prior that a broiler couldn't even
save)
(where the hands of a stranger might rest on her half-crescent shoulders &
the half-congealed
vermillion of her / tears)"
She spoke mostly to herself then,
You asked her, but she said No— she couldn't stay, she had a train in the
morning
By the morning it seemed that the only thing permanent in the room was
the table; even time is
an anachronism
The door closed behind her and you
struggle to remember her name
What are men and women,
folding through seams of fingers & kitchen blinds, doing in this endless
house of mirrors?

Wukong — Sun Wukong, the Monkey King

Nu Wa — in Chinese mythology, the goddess that created humanity

Indian Standard Time should not be taken lightly

Beep.

I escape from shutting doors
and squeeze my identity card
from my right hand to the left
to gesture to you, sir.

My panting fastens as my pants grow shorter
while I stop moving and we just cannot
breathe.

“Put your bag down.”

Clenched fists and the sounds of a
not-so foreign ritual envelops my lungs
skin alike, your glasses akin to mine,
are still far too blurry for you—

“Maybe you should start earlier next time.”

On your mother is three thousand six
hundred seconds not early enough.
God, even 20 years.

“Otherwise...”

You photograph me in black-and-white farms,
blaming my lateness on the extrinsic mundane, traffic
but little did I know that there’s nothing more extrinsic than
the way my own people stare.

“What happened this time?”

arab-american?

i was born in america.
i am american.
but i do not fit in
in america.

my parents were born in jordan.
my parents are jordanian.
but they do not fit in
in jordan.

it is so strange
how their identity wilted like the flowers
that only blossom in the warmth
of the middle east.
and mine got confused
like the tourists that visit
with eyes only for the deserts they see
on tv.
i want to beg them
to take my advice.
“i know all the best places”
i convince,
i plead.
but i was born in measly new jersey
the garden state with industrialism and pollution.
i don't have an accent
so what would i know about an arab country?

my parents worked so hard
to create a life here
for themselves
and
for me.
but i regret the decision i never made.
i rue the choice they made
for me.
i visit my motherland
(hint: its not america)
but i feel unwelcome.
my arabic isn't perfect
and i always let an english “please” accidentally slip
and i feel out of place.
sure i get the jordanian discounts

but if the guy was blind
i would be scammed like a tourist.

i don't know
what i am.
ive been called a terrorist
by the americans

and an american
by the jordanians.
i can't decide which is more insulting.

no matter how much they love me
on either side of the globe
i always stick out like a sore thumb.
im too western for the arabs
and too arab for the west.

my poor parents.
they got their green cards long ago
yet their presence is like a red light
for the natives
who aren't even really natives
just more native than us.
their accent never fully went away
but they know the laws of the nation better than one born here
and yet they face attempts to trick them
out of standing up for their rights
every day.
i might have it easier than them
but here's the thing,
the cloud covering my sun,
the darkness dulling my soul.
they do not wish to identify as a jordanian.
they worked for their american identity
and they want to be reminded it was worth it.
i call them white-washed for it
yet the white-out their words spill
will never cover
their true selves.
but i do not want to identify as american.
i know they bled for this
but i never asked them to take that bullet.

i hold on
to the few wisps of my culture
with a tight grip
constantly afraid they'll slip away.
i want my grandparents to see me as one of them
and i don't want every relative to ask me to compare
their life with my life
as an "american."
im so foreign to this land
that i have to take pictures every time i visit
and buy souvenirs.
but all i want is the best of both worlds.
my greed knows no limits.

so im asking you,
who am I?
arab?
american?

— *Sundos Hejazi*

what made america

prologue

i typed in — “*what made america?*” — on my phone.
the answer was nothing short of what i anticipated.

the united states was made as a result of the american revolution when the thirteen american colonies revolted against the rule of great britain.

yeah, talk about expected.

I.

i suppose the blood of the natives didn't matter,
nor did the weeps of the slaves
along with the working hands of the latino
oh, don't forget about the immigrants who came
the women, too.
and finally, the queers
to *hell* with them all, right?
because they didn't make america
so, who—what—did?

II.

atrocities. guns. hatred.
that's what made america.
the enablers were just a helping hand,
a result of an obligation they succumbed to embracing.

III.

red. white. blue.
red — the blood shed of millions that are ignored.
white — the skin of the savior. the skin that's exempt. the skin every-
one yearns for.
blue — the skies that see everything, even the things they don't want
to see.

those are the founders of america.
those are the hands.
those are the ones,
 that birthed this land.
they nurture the cycle.

IV.

maybe i shouldn't have children,
because this land is not mine.
people like i didn't make it,
so who am i to claim it?

V.

what made america?
pursuit—we'll say.
 pursuit of division
 pursuit of ignorance
 pursuit of perpetuation
that is america in essence,
nothing more, nothing less.
forget about it all—
 the guns and bullets that deteriorate our people everyday
 the diversity that is gagged by the hand of a founding father
 the lurking oppression with claws of a pather
forget about it all.

epilogue

what made america?
i suppose it's a rhetorical question, really.

— *M.S. Blues*

in two worlds

In my dreams, I chase the rickshaw hum,
a melody lost in this concrete drum.
Steel canyons pierce a sky devoid of stars,
a far cry from *Padma*, where moonlight scars the river's skin.
Bengali lilts I hold,
threaded with spices, stories yet untold.
But here, slang stumbles on my eager tongue,
leaving me adrift, where I don't belong.
The pungent heat of cumin fills my sigh,
a ghost of Ma's kitchen whispering by.
Here, in many restaurants, blandness reigns, a ruler / leader / human upon its throne,
missing the symphony of flavors I've known.
Durga Puja nights, a kaleidoscope bright,
transformed to flickering screens, a pale moonlight.
Festival fervor fades in sterile air,
replaced by fireworks I can't seem to share.
Two worlds I navigate, a hyphenated soul,
one foot in memory, the other takes its toll.
A tapestry I weave, of saffron, gold, and blue,
hoping threads of belonging might just see me through.

— Riddhima Das

loma prieta

our eyes were drinking light,
dripped in unseasonable october heat
the day the bay ripped in two
china smashed against the cold tile
washed out by years of blue-eyed scrutiny
naked-bare down i-80, alluvial roots shivered
in the salty san francisco air. trembling
tongues settling into yellow dust
frosted sirens belching red / white / blue
teaching us the meaning of birthright
a real wrecker, a disco-ball of realpolitik
pulsing tremors down our livelihoods
jagged fault lines along ragged ceramic
fingers jogging along, trembling riverbank
lay itself to rest against the seven hills.
pressed against the walls, the inky luo river,
we ran ourselves aground in the great pacific

— *Lily Zhang*

