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## Keep Moving: Stories

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# KEEP MOVING: STORIES

By

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Bachelor of Arts – History  
Yale University  
2013

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing

Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts  
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## **Thesis Approval**

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## **Abstract**

My thesis is a collection of short stories, all of which revolve around themes of travel, migration, and displacement. Ranging from short, one-page flash fiction pieces to longer stories, the six pieces in the collection are put together with the hope that they will thematically interact with each other and provide new meanings and interpretations for the whole collection, even as they continue to stand as distinct narratives in their own right. Through their interplay, I hope to throw light on the way human relationships are challenged by movement and migration.

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## Looking for My Dead in Someone Else's Land

This is Kafka's grave.

I am the only one in the cemetery. I am trying to read Kafka's tombstone, but the words do not make sense to me.

The words are in German. Autumn has set.

There are pebbles around the grave. The pebbles are shiny and smooth. I think to myself that the pebbles are solemn.

The Vltava is chopped. It is a rainy morning in Prague. It is early; a gray mist is folded around the city.

I wonder if Kafka will wake up. Someone told me: *the dead will rise to the sound of raindrops.*

I want to leave the cemetery. There are many trails crisscrossing the cemetery, but I do not know which one leads to the exit. I do not remember how I entered. I choose a path and begin to walk.

I have a sinking feeling that I will not return home.

The cemetery is far from the city; it is far from the river, the castle, the Jewish quarter where the hands of the clock run backwards.

*The dead will rise to the sound of raindrops.*

## Native Whistles

Barcelona! What a beautiful, dirty city!

N. – my roommate at our American university, who is doing some fellowship or the other in Barcelona for the summer – is waiting for me at the square outside the train station, waving – yes, he is actually waving – this infectious young man dressed in a proper flannel collared shirt tucked inside his jeans, rather indie in an adorable kind of way.

“Oysters?”

I ask him about his health as we are gulping down oysters and he informs me that he has spent all his fellowship money and must now leave Barcelona soon though he has become rather fond of the city and does not want to leave, especially in his current mental state, which is fragile to put it rather mildly, he says with a concerned look as an oyster waits poised in his hand waiting to be slurped, then he continues on telling me about a recent break-up and the subsequent heartbreak, anxiety, (oyster is slurped), worthlessness, which has brought him to this mental instability that would not allow him to leave the city despite the pressing manner of a negative bank balance, but then he cheers up and sits straight and sniffs the air and asks the waiter to bring us more beer and we toast and he says what a beautiful city and I nod, what a beautiful city.

We step out, staggering like drunk elephants under the oyster’s influence.

“Coke?”

He cuts two lines – two enormous, hideous, fat lines. I gulp. I don’t want to say no – he looks entirely happy – yet I have never really liked coke and anyways even if I did, a line like this



would be enough to get this whole street high. I look up at him – he is smiling, the bastard is smiling from ear to ear, tapping his foot on the ground and his hand on his knees while I inspect the pink-striped straw he has handed me. He looks up and smiles even wider as if to ask me if something was wrong with the straw and I want to say why the fuck have you handed me a pink-striped straw and why the fuck are we sitting under the light of a single naked bulb on a mattress laid out in the middle of a room and why the fuck are the walls covered with giant black rabbits munching on little patches of grass?

Okay, I did the line. It was good, shit, it was very good.

“Water?”

The bar is dark and loud and I’m having a piss-all time drinking whiskeys and sprites surrounded by vintage Indiana Jones posters. He says haven’t you thought about opening a door for people and becoming a portal into this whole new world they have never experienced and they can now know about it because of you, isn’t that exciting, thrilling, AROUSING, isn’t it?, I mean it must be, the very thought of an action that lies outside comprehension and history and all of culture and civilization, it’s like a BOMB, you know, the edge of the desert, the horizon of the sky, the golden rainbow savage pot of gold like a whistling wind that makes music, because, you know, I make music and I try to mix all that energy, like whistles and stuff, the native stuff if you have ever heard it, have you heard it, you will like it.

I want to punch in his satisfied smile, but I don’t. I turn to N. and say:

“You brought us to get drinks with the one fucking American you could find in Barcelona?”

We must keep moving until we find somewhere we are comfortable. We? You know, us, immigrants. N. looks at me like I've lost my mind. You want to keep moving? Moving from where? Moving to where? He questions me with a ferocious intensity in his voice, nearly shouting the words across the dark silent street, as if challenging the night itself, or at least some greater higher power than myself, someone capable of answering his questions, his flannel shirt has come untucked by now and the first few buttons are open revealing his light brown patchily haired chest, a whiskey bottle, Cardhu (why Cardhu? *why the fuck Cardhu?*), dangling from one hand. I don't quite know how to explain it to him right now, here in this language, what I feel, something like drowning, like the air I'm breathing is being sucked out and soon there won't be any left to breathe. I want to tell him about kindness and bitterness and love and hate and how sometimes we have to choose between the two even when we don't want to choose, how sometimes I feel as if I didn't hate, if I didn't stay prepared to face an attack, than I would be naïve, I would put myself in danger, after all, weren't they killing Muslims, immigrants, people of color, like us, every day, here and over there and over there too and when they are not killing them they are watching them die – sometimes sympathetic, sometimes less sympathetic – and you feel like there will be no stopping the whole damn machine until it comes gets you, yourself, and then there will be nowhere to run, but maybe that will be best, and I still haven't said any of this to N., who is now staring down at the pavement making short breathing noises, I am not sure if he is going to puke or not so I edge closer to him to find out when suddenly we are both hit with an avalanche of brown, stinking water accompanied with someone's faint roar from a balcony:

“Keep moving, assholes!”

N. is pissed off, determined, the buttons of his shirt are all the way open now revealing his slight, elegant belly, also patchily haired, and he stands there, what seems like a long dramatic moment to me, open-chested, daring the night, or whatever greater higher power there is, to attack or surrender. He stands upright, composed, shifting slightly from foot to foot, wholly transformed from the choking, shaking, inebriated mess he was a second ago. He calmly puts the whiskey bottle down on the street and then begins to shout insults at the row of apartments rising behind us, where, somewhere in there, hides the coward who drenched us with water, probably left-over water from cleaning dishes, in the middle of our midnight stroll. Sister-fucking worthless shit-piece mother-daughter-fucker who the fuck do you think you are don't you know any fucking manners fucking savages...I stand a little further away from him, anticipating the next wave of attack, shifting ever so slightly towards the unclaimed whiskey bottle. Then he abruptly stops shouting and looks at me, bewildered, and says, you will never guess this, and I say, what, a little annoyed and worried somebody would call the police, he bursts out laughing, waves of pleasure rippling through his whole body, and he says, I thought whoever shouted at us must have been some racist who didn't want us on his street, but, he looks around and opens his arms wide like he was announcing a grand punchline, this whole street is full of fucking immigrants so it's highly unlikely that it was a racist, more likely a hard-working low-paid fellow countryman who needed to get sleep.

“You want to hear a joke?”

“Sure.”

“A Muslim walks into a London pub and asks for an Irish car bomb.”

“...”

“That’s it.”

“You have a terrible sense of humor.”

“Man – fuck off.”

The small park is deserted, hidden in the dark from the narrow street running past it. Somewhere close by, I can hear the slithering *whoosh* of water being sprayed across the avenues to purge them of last night’s filth. The sky is becoming light, gradually, cautiously, inevitably. I am lying down on a bench while N. is steadfastly squatting on one side of a red seesaw. He abandons the seesaw, walks up to me, commands me to sit up, lights two cigarettes, and hands one to me. I ask him if he really is heartbroken and he smiles and says that he is but it is okay because he is happy for the girl and wishes her the best and soon he will not be heartbroken and then they will both be happy and move on with their lives. Then he takes out some cocaine wrapped in paper from his pocket and we both do a line and he touches the metal bench we are sitting on and asks me if I see the bench. I laugh and tell him he’s losing his mind. He says, I’m serious, look at it, you know, this bench, this park, these streets, cars, apartments, food, water, everything, I really do mean every-*thing*, all of it, whether you are here in Spain or in Liverpool or in Paris or in New York or anywhere, all of it, all this money, wealth, it is here here because of the looting, killing, and selling of our ancestors and our lands, it was our riches, our capital, our people who built this. This is our fucking money, you get me? We have as much a right to this as anyone else and if we choose to stay here and enjoy all of it, then so be it, who the fuck should they be to tell us to move? I don’t want us to move. I want us to stay right here and know that this is our land – not because of some charity, but on our own terms.

Searching for breakfast when the rain comes softly pouring down and the hills look clean and refreshed and the sky looks blue like a blue I've never seen before, like a blue of the gods, like the gods decided to show all their blues, all in one morning, on this sky, careless and childish in their impetuosity, but also generous, sweet, kind, perhaps, I thought, just for me and N., but N. was having none of it, steadfastly hopping across the paved street, already many paces away, stealing bits of shelter without stopping, emitting small yelps at the splash of each puddle, determined in his advance towards the safety of the metro.

## **Why Don't You Take It To The Bridge And Let 'Em Know How You Really Feel**

*Las Vegas.* The cocaine is cheap and impure. You are asleep on my bed. The sun is rising – a faint splash of startled red against the open desert.

I arrange a line. It is early May. I turn down the volume on the speakers. Q-Tip's voice vanishes. All that is left is silence.

You wake up and squint to look around. You look disorientated. You stretch your arms in front of you, as if creating tides in a swimming pool.

“Good morning.”

You look up. “Hm.”

The mattress is spread on the floor. You drift your head, both ways, slowly, hinting at your inability to rise. I vacate my chair and come sit with you on the bed. You are naked. Your tall, pleased nipples peek over the pillow spread over your stomach. I brush your thin, weightless hair off your face. You groan and turn on your side, facing me, plopping your plump right thigh on my legs.

The small window on the top-right corner of my room: you can see the outline of the Las Vegas casinos, unyielding against the desert sky, and the sun's blinding reflection.

*Accra.* Black clouds are gathering outside my covered balcony. I stand – expectant. The rain begins gently, hesitant, before it breaks in strong, rolling bursts, shaking everything; within minutes, the city is invisible and the smell of earth wafts through the student hostel.

It is Sunday morning. You are far-away.

I light the joint. The weed is smooth, but heady. It doesn't taste like lemon and pine, not like American weed; it is rough-textured, with a smell of dirt and soil.

You are far-away – in Japan. Kyoto, to be exact, a place I know nothing about. You describe it as an old, traditional city. When we talk on Skype, you show me the rice fields outside your window, and the quaint hill beyond. A blue haze hangs about the hill.

You ask me about Ghana; your motherland, as you call it.

I tell you I haven't seen much of the country as yet, but the music is good, and the weed is potent.

*Las Vegas.* You are worried about the cat. She was right there.

You try to relax. She will show up. You repeatedly tell yourself – she will show up.

She does show up, poking her small head from underneath the couch, then stretching out and clawing at your feet. You relax. You do another line.

Your friend calls. You excuse yourself and go inside your room.

I play with the cat, tempting her with a long woolly orange thread.

You come back. "Everything good?" I ask.

"Yes, it's fine."

You pick up the cat. "*Booobi.*" You nuzzle your face in hers. She fights you off.

The carpet is purple – dark lava purple. My socks are pink. Yours are green with lighthearted red-stripes.

Gordon Ramsay insults someone on the television screen.

You look disgusted. "Fucking imperialist."

*Accra.* The room is small and comfortable, long enough for me to walk eight paces front and back, wide enough for me to spread my arms twice.

The single bed is dressed in a clean, sky-blue bed sheet. A dark-blue blanket is folded at the bottom. The pillow is sturdy. Two cushioned chairs face each other. I use one for sitting, the other to dump my dirty clothes.

Other than the chairs, the room has a wooden cupboard, writing desk, writing chair, and three bookshelves attached to the wall.

There are windows on the front and back; I open them to allow a cool breeze to circulate during the early evenings.

The room has everything I need.

*Las Vegas.* My mother calls and asks if I will come back to Pakistan for Eid. I tell her I will try. She is not happy. I tell her I will come.

I ask her how to garnish Ginger Chicken. She laughs, and says, “With ginger – you’re useless.”

I say: “I know *that*. Anything else?”

You look on, straining to decipher what I’m saying. You want to learn Urdu.

She says: “Coriander leaves.”

I say: “There are no coriander leaves in America. You know that.”

She sounds surprised, but she is only pretending.

I get off the phone and glance at you preparing a line. “Can you hold off for a minute? This chicken is almost done.”



“Don’t get in a bad mood.” You walk over. You peer inside the pot. “It will turn out great.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, impatiently rubbing my hands. “I just want to get it right for you!”

*Accra.* I am sitting on my bed. Eugene, my smoking partner, is sitting in the chair across from me. He is explaining the lasting appeal of Aaliyah.

He says: The reason people love Aaliyah is not her voice, though she has a damn near perfect one. It is her sincerity, and her vulnerability. Charli, you understand? She’s not RnB, whatever the fuck (he looks contemptuous, shakes his head) that is supposed to mean. She is SOUL. You feel me? SOUL...SOUL (he whispers, his eyes drifting off into the distance, like he was trying to grasp something unthinkable, then he snaps back and pronounces) S.O.U.L, SOUL – Like a howl, like a rushing, melting glacier – endless grief – like something that possesses your whole body, and in that moment of possession, in that space, in that slice of time (his hands form and deform, shake the air around him, eyes glinting) you know what existence is because you can feel it all at once (he stops, pauses, takes a few tokes, exhales, looks at me, he seems exhausted, as if each word he spoke was being revealed to him) but only because it is absent. You understand? SOUL is a feeling – a hungry, desperate, feeling – because it is born in starvation and loneliness. It is the name you give to the feeling (or memory) of life when you have no life left, when everything has been taken away from you, when the whole world has become – no, has been rendered – unsubstantial. Finally, then, you *feel* existence because you don’t have it anymore, the way you feel love when it is gone...(then, brightening up, passing me the joint) Aaliyah knows it, and when she sings, *you* know it (his index finger condemns me) *you* know SOUL. So motherfucking get on your knees and thank her for it. Feel me? Thank her for

the most precious gift you will ever receive in this life. The gift of SOUL, the gift of absence (silence).

*Las Vegas.* “Let’s get fucked up.”

“Yes, homie.”

“Stop  
here.”

“Here?”

“Yes – this liquor shop is owned by a Punjabi, so I like buying from here.”

You laugh. I stumble out of the car. My fists are clenched; I keep grinding my jaw.

I walk into the shop. A Bollywood song is playing on the television. I stop and stare, watching people fall in love. I recognize the song. I sing it in a low voice.

“How are you?” The woman asks me in her delicious Punjabi.

I snap out of the song, remembering where I am. I wonder if the Punjabi woman knows I’m always coked when I come here.

I greet her enthusiastically. I grab Modelos, and pay for them.

She looks me up and down. Then she asks: “Are you okay?”

Her Punjabi, the affection in her voice, makes me halt. I want to sit there and talk to her for a while, listen to her roll and savor the language in her mouth before she gifts it to me.

I say, “Yes. How are you?”

She says, “God’s grace.”

I nod and leave.

I hand you a Modelo and you start the engine, saying, “What took you so long?” “Nothing. I like talking to the woman in the shop.”



You begin driving back to your home. It is late at night; the streets are empty; we are quiet.

Three lights from your house, you shout, “Fuck!”

“What?”

“Cops.”

I look in the side-view mirror. A lone police car is trailing us. “Oh shit.”

I throw the joints and the coke in the dash-board, and hold my breath. You turn the music low.

One light from your house, the police car turns right and disappears.

You exhale, then bang the steering wheel with your right fist. “Fuck...Fuckfuckfuck.”

You pull over. You keep hammering the steering wheel. I close my eyes, lean back in my seat.

The desert sky is vast, forgetful.

I open my eyes and hold you by the shoulders. “It’s okay.”

You sit back and take a long swig.

“Let’s go.”

*Accra.* Your e-mail is short. It makes me cry. You talk about our brothers and sisters who are dying in America, remorselessly murdered by the police. You talk about our friends, who are sad, afraid. At least – you say – the two of us have escaped, for a while. Enjoy your time in Accra.

I take your advice. I walk outside to greet the city, the strangers.

I walk and walk, but I can’t leave the feeling behind. The feeling of loneliness.

I notice the trees – they are old and large. I walk up to one and touch its trunk. I cannot believe it has life inside.

*Las Vegas.* The sex is incredible, but I don't feel anything. Her white skin is turning pink under my hands. She is moaning – a low, steady rhythm. I am looking straight ahead, out of my window, and into the dark evening.

I turn her around. I hold her legs high. I open her mouth with two fingers and place them inside, pushing her tongue down. She comes; streams dampen the bed. Feeling her wetness, I come, too.

We stop fucking and lie on the bed.

I stare at the ceiling. She says, "It's not weird at all."

"What?"

"People say it's weird fucking a brown guy."

I don't know how to respond.

Later, when she is gone, I feel angry with myself. I feel frustrated, exposed by her comment. It cuts through me. I feel altered, as if I had been tested upon without my consent, as if I was unworthy of love, or erotic interest, simply a lab rat, someone to verify hypotheses.

I call you and say: "Why do I bother fucking white girls?"

You laugh. I relax, and laugh too.

"Fuck

it."

"Fuck

it."



*Accra*. When I am alone, time moves slowly. I smoke weed, then I sit staring at the wall, or I watch Jackie Chan movies. While the movies are good, some brilliant, I tell myself I can't spend my life watching Jackie Chan movies. I must go outside.

I spend hours debating whether Rumble in the Bronx is better or Shanghai Noon is better.

I remain inside. I watch more Jackie Chan movies.

Have I come to Accra to meet people, or have I come to Accra to hide?

I never thought I would end up here, it makes me laugh, my monastic foray in this alien town so far away from anyone I know.

I decide to stop smoking weed.

After two days of not smoking, I feel awake, implacably lucid. I can feel my brain, really feel it, alive and pumping.

I write to you and tell you what a sensation it is to stop smoking weed after six years of smoking it every day. You laugh, which is to say, you reply, "lolololololol."

I smile. I miss you. I send you songs.

I wonder why Obama doesn't stop the drones.

It must be out of his power. Why would a black man intentionally fuck up the lives of people of color around the world?

Don't be naïve, I tell myself. Things are not so simple.

I play Aaliyah's first and best album, *Age Ain't Nothing But A Number*, and put on my headphones.

By the time I reach halfway through the album, the SOUL is unbearable.

The rolling papers stare at me from the wooden table. It takes all the muscles in my body not to pick them up.

*Las Vegas.* You look beautiful. We are watching Gordon Ramsay. I am watching you. In the dark, the light of the television falls on you faintly. You turn to me and catch me looking at you.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Sheepish, I look back at the screen. “Should we cut more lines?”

“Okay.”

I get up and begin to crush the powder. I glance at the TV from time to time. We are watching the tenth season of Hell’s Kitchen. We have seen all the previous seasons in the past three weeks. In fact, we haven’t done anything but watch Hell’s Kitchen and snort lines.

Money is running out, like this last gram of cocaine.

I say: “I need to go back to work, so I can make some cash.” “I know, me too.”

“We are doing too much blow.”

Our eyes meet; we burst out laughing.

“Fuck yes, homie, we riding this wave like its Adderall.”

*Accra.* I tell myself, I am allowed to get as drunk as I want. I got out and get wasted. I come back to my room, drunk, but not drunk enough to pass out, and feeling worse than I had left.

I pick up the glass of water on my bedside table and smash it against the wall. It makes me feel great. I pick up my pen, then my notebook, then a few books, and throw them all against the wall, one by one, as hard as I can. For a few minutes, I feel as good as I have felt in a long while.



I sit down and take a couple of deep breaths. I think about the reasons for my depression. After all, I have made friends in this city, as always, I make friends, try to surround myself with people so I can forget that this is not my home, that perhaps nowhere is my home. But that doesn't cure my loneliness.

I close my eyes. I wonder what you must be doing in Kyoto. I imagine you on the subway to work, wearing your purple headphones, listening to music and wondering what you will eat for lunch. Or maybe you are on a bus, watching the colorful, summer trees, reading the book you have been assigned for class. Maybe you are alone in your room. Maybe you are looking out your window at the blue haze that surrounds the quaint hill. I don't know. I can't know. But it helps to think about you.

*Las Vegas.* I haven't seen you in three days, so when I see you, I feel good. It is late at night. I am slightly tipsy. You offer me a line. I think: I have good friends who care for me, who offer me lines when I am drunk. Isn't that all one needs?

You say you have been doing acid and reading poetry. You have discovered something important. Oppression distracts us from life. In tiny ways, when we should be living, we lose our time, depressed. We mourn the dead, and sometimes, the living, too. We portion our grief into more and more portions until there are no portions left, and no time – we have spent it all protecting ourselves, or lamenting the ones who were left unprotected. How else do you live when they are killing you off?

You get up and begin to clear the cluttered glass-top table in front of us. You stop in the middle, put the things back, and walk towards the speakers, saying: "What do you want to listen to?"

“What do you want to

play?” “I don’t know”

“You don’t have work today?”

“No, I called off.”

“Nice. I have something special for  
you.” “What?”

“Special K.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

“Should we go somewhere to dance?”

“Yes.”

We go to a bar with a big, empty dance-floor. We dance and dance. People look at us,  
wondering where we get all the life from.

*Accra.* I feel disjointed.

Out of sync. With myself? With the world? I don’t know. With something.

I wonder if I will ever see you again.

What will I say if I see you again? Will you put me back together?

It is impossible.

I want to call you and tell you: I’m scared of this loneliness. It terrifies me to be  
confined in this room.

I walk to the balcony and look down. If I jump, will I die, or will I only break a few  
bones? Maybe if I jump head-first, I will die. Otherwise, I will only break my legs. I climb onto

the metal railing and look down. I squat at the edge, watching myself breathe. I grip the railing in my hands and lean forward. I rock back and forth on my toes.

I get scared and climb down. I walk inside the room, telling myself not to dangle from the balcony again.

I pace around my room. I want to roll a fat joint and smoke it until I forget...forget what?,,,not a concrete memory, no, more like a habit...a kind of acquired terror, I want to forget that...that feeling of dread...it is following me around.

*Las Vegas.* The cab rushes through the neatly ordered streets, the wide, level desert, and the thin, smart billboards. I prepare myself to leave America. I think of you and the nights we spent together – listening to Midnight Marauders, coming off cheap cocaine, clenching and unclenching our teeth. I remember the comfort of your body, your breath, so close and near to me, as we held each other and tried to sleep, despite the cocaine's crystals knocking about our brains, zipping through our consciousness.

Do you remember what you said to me before you left this country? You said: "I am sorry I am leaving you alone in this warzone."

I cried when you said that. Because you were leaving, but also because you were kind. Kind enough to know I was lonely, kind enough to know a war was going on. I wanted to thank you for saying that, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

Now, I am leaving, too. There isn't much left after you. Or perhaps I have just had enough of the paranoia, the maddening feeling of living in a country that doesn't want you happy, or alive.

What can they offer?

Hot water? Electricity? An endless high?

The cab drives towards the airport, and, as with any spot in this city, I can look at the casinos of the Las Vegas Strip.

I can picture the people inside – dancing, gambling, shopping – wholly unaware of the war going on around them. Or maybe not. Maybe they are just as aware as you and me; consuming alcohol and buying clothes with the same fervor as if they were praying on bended knees, weeping and beseeching the good lord to absolve them of their sins. Because I cannot believe that they do not see, that they are not even aware of the costs which others have to bear so they can keep on drinking under these bright, neon lights.

I wonder if thinking about it makes them feel out of sync, like me, like they were falling from a great height.

I look away. I don't know if I will return to America, but, I think, remembering to check for my ticket and passport, I also don't know if it will ever leave me.

## **You Forget Everything**

*She was sitting in the school library, inside one of the alcoves that lined the south wall, framed by a large window behind her. She was reading a book.*

*I said: "I'm sorry. I was intrigued by the book you were reading. Is it about the '65 war between India and Pakistan?"*

*Her thoughts were broken by my appearance. "Huh? Oh— yes, there's a section on it." She looked down at the book and then looked back up at me. "Have you read it?"*

*"I read it a little while back." I extended my hand. "Haider; I am from Pakistan." "I don't know much about Pakistan," she said, "Other than Benazir Bhutto." "That's more than most people know."*

*"I guess."*

*"Do you know about her father?" "No."*

*"He was hung by the military coup." "Oh, when?"*

*"Long time back."*

*There was a pause. She looked out of the window and I wondered why I had steered the conversation to such a morbid note. What was the point of bringing up Bhutto's hanging? Was I disturbing her? Should I leave? She looked back at me and said: "What kind of books do you like to read?"*

*I said: "I don't know....there are so many." I stopped and thought about it. I said: "I like to read diaries, you know, the kind of stuff they publish posthumously." Then I said: "What kind of books do you like to read?"*

*"History books."*

*"All kinds of history books?" "All kinds."*

*"I like your ring." "Which one?"*

*"The blue one. What's your zodiac?"*

*"Aries."*

*"You should wear a red rock, too."*

*"Are they good for Aries?"*

*"No, I just think it will look good on you." I stopped. "With the blue – I mean." I stopped. "Are you from here?"*

*"Wales?"*

*"Yes."*

*"No, I'm from Finland. Helsinki." She extended her hand. "Laura."*



I am visiting Paris for a month, but I do not like Paris, so I have begun to write a novel to entertain myself. I say I have begun to write a novel, but it might lead you to think the novel has a beginning. I do not think it does. It most certainly does not have an ending. Maybe it is not even a novel. Maybe it is a play. I do not know.

What I do know is that like all bad and desperate novels, it is about a person I love very much. I did not meet her – the person I love very much – in Paris. I met her in a small boarding school on the Welsh coast bordering the Atlantic. We used to go walking.

She liked to walk the narrow dirt path along the coast and I began to accompany her on the walks. She would go down to the ocean and find caves in the cliffs, dark and empty caves like windows that had been left open for a long time. She would sit inside those caves for hours, content and serene, like the caves belonged to her, like she had made them for herself.

But in the beginning, we didn't go on walks, we simply looked at books. In our last year of high school, we took the same history class. The class was taught in an old, musty room with books stacked against the walls. After class, we would both stay back and look at the books: dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, books detailing legal cases in chronological order on the subject of livestock ownership, books detailing the proceedings of the British Parliament from 1857 to 1947, books containing folios of medical photographs taken of rare diseases in towns of South Wales, school yearbooks from previous years, and then, rather surprisingly, a whole wall covered with volumes on the history of the Soviet economy.

We would not say anything to each other. We would go about looking at the books, moving our fingers across them, reading their titles in low whispers, stopping to caress them out. She was studiously working her way through the volumes on the history of the Soviet economy. I would watch her study page after page detailing statistics on the production of important metals



in obscure Russian towns. One day, she caught me looking at her and said hello. I said hello back and walked up to her to kiss her cheek. She told me she remembered me from the introductions at the beginning of class. “Jaleel, right? From Pakistan?” I nodded. She looked at the book and told me she had a particular interest in Soviet history because she was Finnish. I told her I didn’t know anything about Soviet history. I told her when I was young my father gave me an Urdu translation of Gorky’s novel ‘Mother’. I told her I really liked that novel. I asked her what kind of books she liked to read, and she said she liked to read history books, but nothing else.

When I walk the streets of Paris, I think about Laura. She always said she read all kinds of history books, but she didn’t, at least I don’t think so, because there are too many kinds of history books. Too many, if you think about it. But it doesn’t matter, not in the sense that it changes anything about those years, those memories, those sweet words of hers that keep replaying in my head: “All kinds.” “All kinds.” “All kinds” Those sweet, generous words.

The streets of Paris at night are overtaken by a flood of immigrants. The waves crash and rush through the streets and avenues, breaking, writhing, and flowing while the rest of the city sleeps. Many times, I find other Pakistanis and loose myself in the flood, in its giant engulfing waves, in its chronic depressions and homesickness, in its humiliating sales pitches for water bottles on street corners, in its chest-beating performances of masculinity, in its group-jerk sessions of nationalism, in its warm affirmations of lost loves, in its rehearsing and revising of loss itself, in its hot samosas and curried chickens, and in some parts of the flood, in its cold, chilled beer (“no pork though, what do you take us for, some swine-eating motherfuckers?”).

Sometimes I meet other immigrants: Algerians, Moroccans, Senegalese. I like having

conversations with them, getting to know them. You have to. It is the only way of forming some kind of family: meeting and knowing others who have lost their families.

*The only soup she ever made for me had no spice. She served me a soup of barley and lentils accompanied with neatly cut slices of black bread, an unusual type of black bread whose origin she painstakingly detailed for me at the time but which I have now forgotten. I do, however, vividly remember noticing that the bread smelled like her. Not only her, but I associated it exactly with the smell of her neck and her hair early in the morning. She was proud of the soup and I ate it quietly. I don't remember the soup's taste anymore, but I enjoyed eating it; I remember that much clearly. We were sitting on absolutely green grass and there was a cliff descending to the ocean a few feet away. We could hear the waves crashing against the rocks. In my memory of this scene, the air is crisp like a starched sheet – taut – like it would get wrinkled if pinched too hard, or at the wrong spot. We sat in silence for a long time, only taking breaks to stare at the ocean. At some point, while I was eating my soup and she was looking at me (she almost never ate with me) she began to cry – big, fat drops. I stopped mid-spoon, I laid the spoon down, I said: what is it? I knew what it was. It was that we were leaving and we would never come back. Not to this grass, not to this side of this ocean.*

*I said: "Don't cry."*

*She said: "How do you like the soup?"*

*"I like it fine...please don't cry."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Fine – cry."*

*"Do you remember the lentils you cooked for me on our first date? It was my birthday."*

*"I know – a week after we had met."*

*"I liked that you cooked. I liked that day."*

*"I liked it too."*

*“Did you read the poem?”*

*“Please don’t cry.” “Did  
you read it or not?”*

*“I read it – of course. Who is it by?”*

*“Owen. You don’t like the soup, do you?”*

*“Please don’t cry, just please don’t cry.”*

*“Don’t you feel bad?”*

*“You will make me cry.”*

*“Why don’t you?”*

*“This soup is really good.”*

*“It has no spice.”*

*“It’s good.”*

*“My mother used to make it at home.”*

*“Helsinki?”*

*“No, Bali.”*

*“She stopped cooking it after Bali?”*

*“Yeah, she stopped cooking it. Why are you distracting me? It’s not important.”*

*“I like hearing your stories.”*

*“What did you think of the poem?”*

*“Blah”*

*“I knew it; I knew you were going to hate it.”*

*“It wasn’t so bad.”*

*“I guess it wasn’t so good.”*

*“Definitely not worth crying  
about.” She stopped crying.*

*“Haider.”*

*“Hmm.”*

*“Will you forget  
me?” “Of course  
not.”*

*“We don’t have to do this. I can come to Pakistan. At least for now, we will figure  
something out.”*

*I looked at her. I said: “You know it won’t work out.”*

*She said: “I will miss this.”*

*I put my head in her lap and I cried. I clenched the grass in my fist and I tore it out. She  
held my head. I shook. I punched the earth. “Shhh,” she said, as tears tore through her eyes. I  
gripped her legs. She took my hand. I pulled her close and wiped her tears. Everything was pain.  
Everything was the pain of our youth and our love.*



Today, I met Laura. She told me she did not like the part of the novel I read out to her. She said it was sentimental, stretched to absurdity, redundant. Then she said nothing had happened the way I had written it down. She said she had never cooked the soup that day, that the soup in question did in fact have some spice, that the bread was served with an entirely different soup at an entirely different time, that the air was not crisp, it was heavy, it was humid, it was many things but crisp. She said it was not as painful as I made it out to be, and that we are still very young.

And then she didn't say anything. We were silent.

Outside, the French countryside rolled outwards towards the horizon. The day was gray and the air was moist; sparse trees guarded the road; stacks of hay reminded me of home and the fields of Punjab I grew up in. I was especially vulnerable to the memory of home because we were playing Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Laura was driving with both hands on the wheel, shades on her eyes. She looked alert, but also tired. She broke the silence and said:

I know this story is close to you...

No – you are right. I will tone it down.

I didn't much care about what happened to the story because I knew that the novel wasn't very good. I didn't plan for it to become something good, something to read. I didn't plan for it to end because if it ended then what would I do? How would I spend my time? I wanted the novel to stay and float, suspend itself around me, become my home. As long as the novel didn't end, I could take it anywhere, I could play with it; it was something alive. I could even discard it if I wanted to – wrap it all up and move on. The novel didn't need me. So I told her:

No – you are right. I will tone it down.

We were driving down a narrow highway on our way to Chartres, a small town two hours away from Paris, famous for its gothic cathedral.

We kept our windows up while Nusrat made bitterness sweet for us in his songs. Laura pointed to the radio and said:

Do you remember when we first heard this?

No, I don't.

You don't?

No.

You forget everything.

Really?

No, not really. But you forget a lot of things. Or you make them up, like your story.

So when was it?

We were in my room, lying on my bed, and I asked you if you liked any music from home that you would like to share. Let me think: you were wearing a white t-shirt and brown corduroys. I was about to go for a run when you came over and I postponed it and we spent the evening lying on my bed and talking. I really liked that room, and my roommates. I had a bookshelf right above my bed and those small colorful string lights on the ceiling. Evening was falling, remember? We were thinking of going to the dining hall for dinner.

We didn't really know each other then, it was nice, it was a giddy feeling to be sharing yourself with someone new like that...

I rolled down my window to smoke a cigarette but she asked me not to because she had borrowed the car from a friend and she didn't know if her friend would mind. I put the cigarette



away but I kept the window down; the sun was becoming brighter; it was past noon now. I asked Laura:

Why Chartres?

What do you  
mean?

I mean you just got to Paris today, this morning. We had breakfast and we were on the road. I feel like you came to France to perform some kind of mysterious pilgrimage to Chartres.

No, no, I just don't like Paris.

So why did you come?

To see you.

I shifted in my seat to look at Laura. The car was filled with her smell, which I remembered so well, not remembered always, but now that she was here, sitting next to me, I could remember it so well. There were two beauty spots next to each other on her neck. I remembered drawing a smile around them.

I'm glad you came. It's nice to see you.

It's good to see you too, Jaleel.

Before we arrived at Chartres, I could see the cathedral from the highway, looming against the cloudy sky. It looked abandoned on top of the hill, left as a sacrifice. But when we got there, the place was buzzing with tourists and restaurants and amused local businessmen. We went straight down to the crypt, walked through the tunnel, peered down a well and came back out to look at the statues. We went inside and sat for a long time looking at the stained glass, at least I looked at the stained glass; I'm not sure about Laura, her eyes seemed to be closed.



On the way back, I drove because Laura was tired. She soon fell asleep and when she woke up we were halfway to Paris. It was beginning to rain. Little drops splattered on the windshield quietly. I turned on the wipers and asked Laura if the music was disturbing her. She said that it was not. There were few cars on the road. I was happy to be driving. It had been a long time since I had been on the road, especially in a place I had never seen before. I missed it; I missed movement, the disruption of time and space, the feeling of being in flux. Laura's voice brought me back inside the car. I asked her to repeat what she had said.

Why didn't you want me to come to Pakistan?

Pakistan?

Yes.

When?

When I asked you, Jaleel. The time you wrote your story about. I was silent.

Why didn't you?

I don't know, Laura. I don't know.

We were in love. It could've worked out. We have always cared for each other. But you never told me why. We talked to each other, we wrote to each other, and we just accepted that our lives were separate. It could've been different.

We didn't just accept it. Our lives *were* separate. I was going back to Pakistan, you were staying on in the UK...

It could've been different.

I know, Laura. It could've been different, I agree, but it was hard to take that leap back then. I'm sorry. I *am* sorry.

*Our dreams are the dreams of nomads lost in the city. I don't know how I remember it, or what it means, but it makes sense it right now. The swirling waters wash over me as I walk on the paved road towards a make-shift, portable home that always seems to elude me. People look at me. Stare at me. They want to know who I am and what I am doing here. Have I lost my way? Surely, I don't belong here, do I? Do I need help? [THIS MAN OVER HERE HAS LOST HIS WAY! EXCUSE ME, SORRY, OFFICER, THIS MAN!] Have I wandered? Have I endangered them with my wandering? Am I carrying anything dangerous? I see the fear in their eyes. Cold, excited fear. I can't leave the wandering streets or the wandering streets can't leave me, I don't know which one it is, which way is which, night has fallen now and I'm not used to such bright streetlamps. What am I saying? I'm not used to streetlamps at all. Where have they brought me? It must be another country. I want to light a cigarette but I can't find a lighter so I walk up to this man who is standing alone (oh so alone!) and I ask him if he has a lighter and he says kaifak and I say brother, I do not speak Arabic and he says aina and I say Pakistan, and he makes a long, knowing face and smiles and nods his head quickly, repeating many times Bakistani, Bakistani...he gropes his pockets, holding up one hand with the palm facing me as if saying just wait a second and then he brings out a crumpled paper and says hashish? I say yes, yes, naam, and he backs up a little bit and I reach for my wallet and take out five euros but he says no, no and I tell him oooohhhh, I'm not a cop, no cop, no. Well then what? – We walked and talked and lit a few hash joints and he told me about his grandmother who was healthy as ever and solid as a rock, about his village that was shaded with palm trees, a white horse he had lost as a child, a book of poems with scented pages, eleven skies that were spread out on top of him, ELEVE WHOLE SKIES, he would say every time with his eyes bulging out of their sockets. Then he would sit down on the pavement and shake his head and cry, really cry, tears rolling down his*



*continue walking, continue back now. We left the park and came on the street. There was an old, stone building across the street with a huge, unfurling, waving French flag and I said oh if only this flag would've dissolved too, and I laughed. And he became very serious stern-looking and shook his head as if confronted with something distasteful. He said: "No, it reminds me that there is work to be done. We can go to sleep, but when we wake up, there will still be something in this world that needs to be ripped to shreds."*

.....

*Today, I met Laura. She looked as beautiful as I remembered – perhaps more, but she still felt the same. When I held her, she smelled the same way she always smelled. Her hair got curled around my fingers in the same way it always did. She kissed me on my neck in the same place she had always kissed me. She whispered, "Go lock the door." Her lips tasted the same – the exact same. Her soft, golden pubes looked unruly and carefree. I traced the beauty marks across her body until I settled on the one that curved with her thigh. I licked her – one, two, slow. I took my time. I savored her comfort, her familiarity. I said: "You are so familiar even after five years. Like we had just slept together last night." She laughed. She said: "Stop being dramatic and come up here." I pinned her hands on the bed, but I entered her slowly.*

*Later, when she stood up and went to the bathroom, I walked to the window and drew the curtains open. There were many stars in the sky and they mesmerized me. I lit a cigarette and stood there watching the stars until she came back. She said: "Wine?"*

*I said: "Sure."*

*The room was dark like the night outside. The lamp was dimmed. We took our glasses of wine and settled back on the bed. She was sitting upright against the bed and I was lying on her thighs, resting my glass on my stomach. I said: "Are you hungry?"*

*She said: "A little bit."*

*I kissed her hand, got up, and walked to the fridge. I shouted back: "You want toast and jam or some hummus?"*

*She said: "Do you have something to go with the hummus?"*

*I closed the fridge and opened my kitchen cupboard. I said: "I have pretzels?"*

*She said: "Olive oil?"*

*I said: "Yep." I walked back to the bed with the olive oil and hummus in each hand and the bag of pretzels clenched in my teeth. She got up and walked to my closet: "Can I borrow something?"*

*I said: "Yeah, whatever you want." I began eating, drizzling the olive oil over the hummus and then scooping it up with the pretzels. I nodded to myself and said: "This is pretty good."*

*She walked back to the bed, dressed in a pair of boxers and a t-shirt. She laid down, propping her head sideways with one arm. I stopped eating and offered her some, but she didn't want any. I said: "What's wrong? You seem quiet."*

*She said:*

*"Nothing." "You're*

*tired?" "No –*

*nothing."*

*"You can tell me what it is. Or – actually, I'm sorry, I'll stop questioning you."*

*I put the lid back on the hummus and put it on the table by the side of the bed along with the pretzels and olive oil. I poured myself more wine. I laid down next to her and kissed her. I said: "Here, take this pillow, lie down. You must be tired. You travelled a lot today." She laid down. She said: "Lie down next to me." I put my wine-glass on the table and laid down. She*





*gripped my arm softly above the elbow. She said: "Haider, why didn't you want me to come to Pakistan?"*

*I said:*

*"Pakistan?"*

*"Yes."*

*"When?"*

*"When I asked you. The time you wrote your story about."*

*I was silent. Then I said: "I don't know, Laura. I don't know."*

*"Do you not want to talk about it?"*

*"No, it's okay."*

*"We were in love. It could've worked out. We have always cared for each other. But you never told me why, you know. We talked to each other, we wrote to each other, and we just accepted that our lives were separate. It could've been different."*

*I looked at her. I said: "I know it wasn't right of me to make that decision on my own, but we didn't just accept it. Our lives were separate. I was going back to Pakistan, you were staying on in the UK..."*

*"It could've been*

*different." "I know, and I  
am sorry."*

*"You dumped me! We had everything and you just left me. I missed you. I needed you. You could've come back."*

*I edged closer and began to brush her hair with my fingers. She was looking at the ceiling. I said: "Please...It was not easy for me either. I couldn't have come back."*

*"Why not?"*

*I was silent. Then I said: "I don't know how to explain it. I really don't."*



When I woke up, Laura was in my room, sitting on my desk and looking through a stack of books. When had she arrived? I checked my phone. It was two in the afternoon. I said: Hey, what's up? She said: Hey, good morning. She moved her chair to face me. You finally woke up. I said: Yeah. She said: It's my last day here and you've already wasted most of it. I sat up in my bed and stretched. I said: It's your last day? Has it already been a week? She smiled. She said: Yes. I said: One week with you in five years is not quite enough. She said: It's enough. I said: You should've woken me up. You know I like to sleep. She said: You looked peaceful. I said: I was dreaming. It wasn't very good, though. Do you want to hear it? She said: Sure. I said: I was in a field, lying down...and there was a circle of people around me, I think they were all from our school, all of them staring at me, and then I felt this feeling in my feet, like a tingle, and I noticed that one of our teachers was rubbing something off the underside of my feet, so I sat up and jerked my body away. I grabbed my right foot with both hands and turned it to look at the underside where I could make out a faint Urdu script that was fading in front of my eyes, and I watched it until it disappeared. She said: It sounds intense. That was all? I said: I think so. I think I got up and ran away, or maybe I shouted something at the people...can't remember for sure. I stopped and then said: You always used to come wake me up after your classes. She said: Yes, but it was just as hard to wake you up then as it is now. You have to get up; we have so much to do. I said: What do we have to do? Wait – do you like any of the books? She looked back at my desk and said: Kaddish. I said: People don't read Ginsberg enough, or read him too much, I can't decide which. She moved her fingers across the spines of the books and said: Aren't you reading anybody who's not white? I said: This is Paris, don't you know, the center of Western civilization. She said: I thought that was Rome. I said: I've never been to Rome. She said: Go

brush your teeth. I went to brush my teeth and when I got out of the bathroom, I said: Did you have anything for breakfast? She said: No. But I had an early lunch. I said: What did you eat? She said: Just a baguette. I said: So little? She said: You eat like a bird. Why do you care? I said: I don't know; I eat more since I started eating meat. She said: That's terrifying. I said: So what do you want to do today? She said: Many things. I was thinking we could go to the anthropology museum, I want to go to the Cimetière du Montparnasse, and I also want to eat gelato. I said: That is a lot. You took a liking to Paris? She said: Not really. I said: Which cemetery do you want to go to? She said: Where Sartre and Simon are buried. Apparently Beckett is there too. I said: That's convenient. She said: You've been here for almost a month. What have you been doing? I said: I still haven't been to the Louvre. She said: Seriously? You want to go? I said: No, not really. She said: Let's go to the cemetery. I said: Sure, why not. I think it is close by. Plus, I liked reading Simon de Beauvoir. She said: What did you read by her? I said: Parts of the Second Sex. She said: And you liked it? I said: I liked it fine. It didn't impact me as much as some other feminists. She said: Which other feminists? I said: The ones who are not white. She laughed. I smiled. I said: You fell right into that one. I put on my jeans and a shirt. I said: Let's go? She nodded and stood up. We left my room and walked towards the cemetery. She was holding my arm. Leaves were beginning to brown and fall on the pavement; a few old women were standing outside the bakery; a small boy was leaning against the railing of his balcony and I could faintly see his outline against the sky. A tram stopped next to us. It was quiet on the streets. We walked in rhythm. I said: A novel without an end is the best novel to write because it contains endless possibilities that are never resolved. I stopped and then said: Sheer anarchic leisure, an aimless walk, a search for something but you don't find anything, you don't even want to find anything, you just want to walk. I stopped talking and looked at her. She was staring at the pavement. She

rummaged for something in her pockets and then took out a pack of cigarettes and offered me one. I took one and lit it and then I lit one for her. I continued: Characters and plots and places just keep on happening and meeting and parting and meeting. It's wonderful, really. Novels without ends, or more precisely, novels without any intent of an ending. They are hot, tight bodies in the grip of fever, or the grip of ecstasy – continuous uninterrupted unmediated unadulterated *ecstasy*. She didn't say anything, so I stopped talking. After we had walked five blocks and I had forgotten about the conversation, she said: I don't know what you're talking about. I said: No? She said: No; not at all. You talk about novels the way you talk about love, some kind of consuming passion. No one writes about love anymore, certainly not in good novels, and certainly not passionately. I said: What do they talk about in good novels? She said: I don't know: pride, failure, wars, principles, history. I said: Academics and farmers and consciousness. She said: Multiculturalism, globalization. I said: Presidents, dictators. She said: They have structures, beginnings and ends, arcs, twists, plots. They are certainly not aimless walks. She stopped. She said: Why don't you write a historical novel? I said: Fuck that. I looked at her and she was observing the pavement once again. We kept walking. We reached the cemetery fairly quickly, but it took us a while to figure out the map, and then a little while more to track down Sartre and Simone's graves. Laura tore out a page from her diary and wrote something on it. She left it on Simone's grave. I didn't ask her what it was. Afterwards, she said: Do you want to go to Baudelaire's grave? I said: We should go to Cortazar's; he was a stranger in Paris like us. She said: Perhaps he was a stranger in Buenos Aires, too? I said: All the more reason to go. She got indignant and said: And Baudelaire was not a stranger? I said: Okay, okay, we'll go to both. After we had been to Cortazar's and Baudelaire's grave, I said: Do you still want to go to the anthropology museum? She said: We probably don't have time. It should be

closing by now. I said: We can still get some gelato? She said: Sure, where could we go? I said: There are some places around Notre-Dame. A little bougie, but it's good. She said: That's cool. We should bike there. We walked to the closest Velib station. I said: When is your flight? She said: It's late at night, after midnight. I said: Do you know how to get to the airport? She said: Yeah, I'll just take the metro. We returned to my place after we had eaten gelato. We got some groceries on the way because she said she wanted to cook at home. She wanted to make a fish soup with potatoes and leek. In the kitchen, we chopped vegetables side by side. She cut the leeks and potatoes, and I did the onions and chervil. We took breaks to cut and eat radishes with bread, butter and salt. She played Vorel's *Kour* in the background (it was her favorite movie) though neither of us was really watching. Once we were done chopping the vegetables, she cooked them in butter and then wine and then placed them in a pot of water on the stove with some salt. We weren't in a rush, the evening felt slow, we had all the time in the world. The weather was pleasant and we opened the door to the little balcony that was attached to my room. It was beginning to get dark. We opened two bottles of Red Stripe and stepped outside to smoke cigarettes. I said: How is London going for you? She said: I like it fine; a lot of old friends from school. I said: That must be nice. She said: It is - but sometimes I feel like I have moved on from that. I said: And the work? You like the internship? She said: I really like it. I would love to keep working for them. You should come to London. I know so many friends from school who would love to see you. And you can come stay with me. I said: I will definitely try. It is a hassle to get a visa. She said: Try. She was standing against the balustrade, looking out at the city block, her Red Stripe perched stoutly on the metal handrail. I moved towards her and held her from the back, my arms circling loosely around her waist. I kissed her neck. I said: Why don't you move to Pakistan? She said: Pakistan? I said: Yes, I'm going to graduate in a year. You can come live

with me, and then we can go wherever you want. Maybe I will apply for graduate school in the UK. We can even go to Finland. She turned her head to look back at me. I said: I'm serious, Laura. I missed you. I didn't realize how much I missed you. She said: Jaleel...I said: I would love to show you Lahore! She said: There was a time when I really wanted that. I said: We can still be together. This past week has been amazing. I felt happy. She said: Me too. I said: Come live with me. I know you will like it. She said: It's too late, Jaleel. I'm sorry. I let go of her body and moved to her side. I said: I get it; it won't work; it's too late. I didn't look at her. She kissed me. She said: Don't be sad. We will always meet. We stubbed out our cigarettes on the handrail and walked back inside. The potatoes, leeks and onions looked well done and we added cream and fish to the soup. After a few minutes, we took the soup off the heat and added the chervil. We were hungry and we ate the soup standing up from the kitchen counter. We both got a second helping and went and sat on the couch. After dinner, she said: I need to go back to my friend's place and pack my stuff before I head to the airport. I said: I will come with you. She said: You don't have to do that. I said: I want to. She said: Thanks; it will be nice to have you around. I said: We should head out. I don't want you to be late for the flight. I put the rest of the soup in the fridge and closed the balcony door. We took the metro to her friend's place. Her friend was not at home. We had sex on the couch she was sleeping on, and then sex on her friend's bed. She packed her clothes and tried to remember things she knew she was forgetting. There wasn't much to pack. I gave her a book. We left her friend's place, a packed suitcase with me and a backpack on her shoulders. It was late at night by now. We could hear the people outside the cafes, the tinkle of glasses, the soft and sharp hues of laughter. We could hear the cars from a nearby avenue. The apartment was on Rue de Gergovie, not very far from the Cimetière du Montparnasse. We took line 13 at Pernety up till Gare Montparnasse, where we changed for the



4. At Denfert-Rochereau, we changed for the B line to Charles de Gaulle Airport. We rattled through the tunnels and she scanned the book I had given her. After she had read some pages, she put her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes. I read the various advertisements in the subway. I didn't understand any French and I tried to guess what the different words meant. I tried to catch glimpses of people's book covers and phone screens and iPod displays.

*“Why didn’t you want me to come to Pakistan?”*

*The question has drilled its way inside my head and settled there, and now I spend all my time figuring it out.*

*“Why didn’t you want me to come to Pakistan?”*

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*“Why didn’t you want me to come to Pakistan?”*

*“Why didn’t you want me to come to Pakistan?”*

*“Why did you want to go? YouTube is banned there and the power is out all day.”*

*“It’s not India, not Mexico. It’s not a resort for First World tourists.”*

*“Why did you want to go? The only white people in Pakistan are CIA agents – of one form or another.”*

*“We don’t even need to go to Pakistan. We can just go to Shalimar restaurant, right here in Paris. I swear they make better curries than my mother.”*

*“We would have died in a terrorist attack. Didn’t you hear the news? Somebody bombed the airport yesterday, the police station the day before that, the dam blew up last week, and the gas pipeline...”*

*“There’s nothing there but flood victims and heroin addicts and lost mystics and sad children. There’s nothing there but kites and curries and colors. Dead bodies on lamp posts.*

*Wedding celebrations. Civil unrest. Endless fried food. Bootleg porn. Liberation armies. There's nothing there. You should never go."*

## Speaking of Pakistan

Father waits all the time. He waits for dinner to be served, he waits for the newspaper to arrive, he waits for work to end so he can leave the office, he waits for his favorite talk show to air on television, he waits for his son and daughter – who live far away – to plan a visit back home, and sometimes, he sits on the wicker-chair in the common room of our house and fixes his stare on the window behind the television, as if he had found a new television, but I have a feeling that at these times he doesn't find anything, instead his sight simply swerves off the window into nothingness and he waits – I don't know what for – but I can tell that he is waiting because his hands are folded over his chest and he is breathing deeply, rustling the stray ends of his mustache, which is what he always does when he is waiting. He gets startled if I say something or turn on the television, but he doesn't get angry, he simply looks around, and it looks like he is seeing the common room for the first time. He acknowledges everything with a slowed movement of his eyes and head: the wicker chair, the dark brown sofa opposite it, the wooden table next to it, the white vase on the wooden table, the Afghan carpet, the Samsung television, the Sony DVD player, the twin fluorescent light tubes, the calligraphic painting of the Shahada on the north wall, and right next to it, the framed photograph of the Himalayas.

He looks back down at himself and acknowledges his own body. He looks amazed, as if in disbelief, but also disturbed, off-balance. At times like these, it feels like he is waiting for the day when he will no longer be able to build the world back up, wait for the newspaper, wait for dinner, wait for work to end, sit on the wicker chair, fold his hands over his chest, breathe deeply, and rustle the stray ends of his mustache.

Or maybe it's just me, maybe I am the one who is scared, because Father's death is something I think about – more and more these days.

I never realized it was something Father thought about too. But then just this morning, Father talked about his death so honestly, he talked about it so openly – without any excuse or pretext or preparation. He said it with a face so blank it felt like the idea of death had taken hold of him, clutched his body so tightly that he was paralyzed by his own thought. There was a hint of disorientation (a hint of the absurd) in his expression because I remember that right when he mentioned death the fragile wrinkled muscles below his eyes twitched – an imperceptible twitch I could have barely seen – but I took it as a proof that he knew, or at least had started to know, he was becoming irrevocably old.

It happened when we were sitting in the common room after breakfast. Mother sipped tea and scanned the newspaper. Father scrolled through the television channels. I struggled to pay attention to the television; most of the channels showed a cricket match I had already seen. Mother looked at me and asked: What are you working on these days? I said: I'm working on my thesis. She said: How is it going? I yawned. I said: Good. She said: Have you thought about what you're going to do after college? I said: I am thinking of applying to graduate programs in creative writing. She said: Since when do you want to write stories? I said: Since a long time. Father looked away from the television, and asked: How long will this program be? Two years? I said: Maybe three. Mother said: Another three years! I said: Probably. Father said: How will you pay for the program? I said: A scholarship. He said: Like at college? I said: At college, it is financial aid; for this it will be a stipend for teaching. He said: And after the program? What will you do with creative writing? I said: Hopefully a PhD. He said: Creative Writing? I said: Not

sure, maybe History. He said: A PhD is another five years? I said: At least. He said: Who knows if he will even be here when I die?

There was a long, dreadful silence during which the television played endless looping highlights of Pakistan's half-hearted batting performance. Then, Father said: I'm not getting any younger, Ali. You're my eldest son. Do you know I retire in three years?

Mother stood up and announced that she was going to get herself more tea from the kitchen. Father asked her if she would bring back biscuits. I didn't say anything.

Before today, I do not remember Father ever displaying any signs of weakness, let alone referring to his own death. I do not remember him ever shouting or frustrated or worried. I do not remember him ever being admitted to a hospital. I do not remember him ever shying from a fight over a parking spot or some other alleged disrespect. He must have developed such guarded instincts during his college days, or so I thought, when he was a political leader on campus, associated with a right-wing Islamic party. More likely, he developed the instincts much earlier, perhaps as early as childhood, being the only son of a single, working mother. But I know little about that life, even the few second-hand stories are hazy. I imagine him scrawny and bookish, silent and thoughtful. He was a poet throughout middle school, spending his time loitering in parks and writing ghazals to an imagined beloved. It was not until high school that he discovered his fiery voice on the mosque's loudspeaker and a passion for radical politics.

I do not know why I was thinking about Father's childhood while I packed my bags. I told myself I needed to concentrate on the task. I opened my suitcase. It was all there: clothes, a new toothbrush, books I brought with me as well as old books I wanted to take back, two cartons of cigarettes, a few notebooks, a ring and a chain I always carried for luck, and lastly, a transparent folder with my passport, airline ticket, and I-20 form. I checked my pockets: phone,

ball pen, keys to my rented apartment in America, cigarette packet, lighter and wallet. I set some clothes aside to wear after my shower, along with my only pair of shoes.

I locked my room and lit a cigarette.

Father called from downstairs, “Time to leave for the airport?”

I shouted back, “Coming! Bags are packed; going to jump in the shower quickly.”

I stubbed my cigarette and washed my mouth with mouthwash. I showered and changed and then went downstairs to say my goodbyes.

I was not sad. I was happy to be leaving. I looked forward to arriving in New York, taking the subway, taking the Metro-North, taking the cab back to my apartment in the university town where the parched brown leaves on autumn trees would be beginning to rustle and fall in the dry chill of New England.

It was early afternoon – unbearably sunny in Lahore. The streets were dusty and sour with car fumes. People grouped under the shade of bus stops and tea stalls. The canal was dotted with shiny, wet heads bobbing up and down – adolescent boys diving inside the cool, muddy water from bridges – shalwars ballooning around ankles to make floaters. Lovers sat at the banks, shaded by cool trees, nestled between the racing cars and the flowing water.

Father left work early to drive me to the airport. “Do you have your passport?”

I opened my backpack and checked. “Yes.”

“And the money,” he said, “in your bag?”

“My wallet,” I said, “what time is it?”

“Half past one. We have four hours until the flight.”

“Hmm.”

“How long is the flight?”

“Three hours to Abu Dhabi.”

“And then you fly to DC?”

“Yes; around fourteen hours. Then New York. I take a train from there.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Cheapest that way.”

“When does your semester

start?” “In two weeks.”

“You could’ve stayed around for longer.”

“I know. I prefer to get back early and get started on some things.”

“As you wish.” He looked at his watch and said, “You think we can quickly stop at your grandmother’s grave?”

“I think so. Traffic’s not so bad.”

He turned left towards the older part of the city. I looked out of the passenger seat window as we drove by billboards advertising a new Turkish television series, a new fashion line from a local designer, a new discount package from a telecommunication giant, and a new burger from McDonald’s. I said, “Have you tried the new burger from McDonald’s?”

He said, “No.”

I said, “Lahore has changed even in the past seven years I haven’t been here.”

He laughed and said, “McDonald’s was always here.”

“Not when you were a student.”

“No; this whole area of the city was pretty much unpopulated back then.” He braked for the security checkpoint ahead. Three heavily armed soldiers stood in front of a barricade that blocked three lanes out of four. A fourth soldier rested his gun atop a temporary wall made out of



sacks by the side of the road. The soldiers looked bored; they peered longingly over their guns and barricades towards the shaded parts of the sidewalk. The sun fell on top of them, making solid, unmoving shadows. I said, “More checkpoints, too. They are routine now.”

“Because there are more bombings.”

“The state is being paid to wage war against its citizens.”

“By who?” He smiled, said, “You shouldn’t talk like that going to America, with all that NSA surveillance.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that what’s happening is happening.”

“Don’t get angry. I wasn’t trying to accuse you.”

After we crossed the checkpoint, he said, “That’s just the city. Apparently, there’s going to be extra security at the airport.”

“Why?”

“They’re not allowing any cars inside, not even to drop people off. You have to get off on the road and then walk to the building, that’s what a friend of mine said.”

“Something happened?”

“There was a plan to attack Karachi Airport last night. The people were caught before it happened. All the airports are on high alert for a few days.”

“Probably a response to the slaughter in Baluchistan. The hunger strike in Quetta is still going on.”

He didn’t say anything.

“It’s ridiculous; people are getting ready to celebrate Eid at a time like this.”

He didn’t say anything.

“What do you think about all the—” I paused. I looked at Father and his face was expressionless like a sheet of unlined white paper, like all of a sudden he wasn’t even there, like he had migrated to the underworld, lost himself waiting for death, or thinking of the wait of death looming over us, over the road and the sky, over Pakistan, over the land that was our inheritance.

I said, “Father?”

He shuddered. “I’m alright.”

“You want to stop and get something to drink? You look a little pale.”

He didn’t say anything.

I didn’t press him to say anything.

We parked outside the cemetery and stopped to buy roses and petals from a vendor near the entrance. When we got to the grave, he brushed off the dried rose petals from the previous visit, handed me an empty water bottle, and asked me to fill it up from the hand-pump a little further ahead. By the time I got back, he was already praying; hands raised to his chest, the right hand resting on the left, palms open towards the heavens. I used the water to clean the headstone as well as the tiles around the grave. I sprinkled the remaining water on the soil and raised my hands. I recited the Fatiha and then prayed for the peace of my grandmother’s soul. By the time I finished, he had already stopped praying and was busy placing the roses on the grave. I stood by, shifting my weight from one leg to the other. He said, “Next time I should bring some incense.”

I nodded, but he wasn’t looking. We walked back to the car in silence.

I looked past the passenger seat window at the sun-blinded city. My thoughts drifted to my grandmother. She died fourteen years ago. I don’t remember the exact year, but I know I was still in middle school because our family was living in Karachi at the time. I remembered the

bedroom I shared with my grandmother and my younger brother: both my brother and my grandmother on a double bed, me on a separate, smaller bed next to them. The cramped room constantly reeked of rose water, a smell I hated. I remembered waking up each morning and sorting my grandmother's medicines for her, which I especially hated, because there were many medicines and she constantly complained of their uselessness.

I felt guilty for having hated it, for having being annoyed. She died in the bedroom I shared with her. Her last wish was that she didn't want to die in a hospital bed, not with all those wires going in and out of her, all those strange and alien doctors. She wanted to die in her own bed. She said she would never find peace otherwise. And she wanted to be buried at home. She made Father promise to take her back to the town in which she was born and in which she raised him and to bury her there. Being in Karachi was the first time she had left her native Punjab. She said: I know you will never come back to pray at my grave if you leave me in this foreign city.

My grandmother used to tell us stories of her life, before we went to bed she would aimlessly narrate an event that happened to her, who knows how long ago, and my brother and I would try to stay up and listen until we fell asleep. She loved remembering her childhood, or at least, what sounded like a time when she wasn't completely alone, a time when she was still surrounded by people who looked after her. In particular, she told me about her grandmother, a strikingly beautiful woman who lived in Germany for many years, along with her husband, who served in the First World War as part of the Indian Army of the British Empire. She always remembered and spoke about her grandmother's haircut. Nobody had ever seen a woman with a haircut in her neighborhood before. She thought it was scandalous, but also glamorous and attractive. She longed to go to Germany and get a haircut like that because she thought only German women got their hair cut. As a child, I was fascinated by her stories of her grandmother.

Germany seemed as exotic to me as Antarctica, or Mars, or fifteenth-century Samarkand, things that only existed in my school textbooks. I wanted to go to Germany and come back with a scandalously attractive haircut. I wanted to be able to tell stories of strange lands.

Father interrupted my stream of thought with a loud, blaring horn, the sound cleanly cutting through my thoughts and bringing me back to the car. I turned my head with a sharp jerk. A broken truck jammed the traffic, parked in the middle of the road. Our car stopped; we were surrounded by other cars and drivers honking dutifully at regular intervals. Some people climbed out of their cars and walked around to survey the damage. Some tried to clear out one or two lanes. Some turned off their engines and retired to the side of the road to enjoy a cold glass of lemonade. “Son of a bitch truck!” Father banged the steering wheel, and then he honked a few more times. He opened the dashboard with a quick thud and fumbled through the cassettes until he found Mehdi Hassan. He held up the cassette. “You mind Mehdi Hassan?”

“No; go for it.”

He put the cassette in the stereo.

I was getting anxious. I checked my watch. I wanted to move. I wanted to get to the airport, make sure I catch my flight. Father saw me getting restless. “Relax. What’s making you nervous?”

“Nothing.”

“We have plenty of time.”

The car began to move, slow at first. When we finally crossed the truck, Father accelerated the car and slumped back in his seat, visibly relieved. I asked him if I could play the radio instead of the ghazals and he said he didn’t mind. I skipped through the stations. He told me to stop at the news; the broadcaster was reading the scorecard from yesterday’s cricket

match. Father gestured towards the radio and said, “We are going to lose this series as well.” Then he laughed a short, witty laugh and said, “Obviously, we will consider it a victory as long as nobody gets shot or blown up.”

“You shouldn’t joke about death like that,” I said.

“Hmm.”

His comment reminded me of the conversation we had after breakfast about his death. I thought maybe I should say something now. Now that we were both alone, now that I was about to leave the country. I began hesitantly, “What you said this morning—”

“I’m sorry I brought that up. I didn’t mean to come off like I was angry at you. Anyways, I just want to make sure you know what you are doing. I want to make sure you are settled before I’m too old.”

“I’ve never asked you for help.”

“I’m not saying that,” he said, “I’m proud of you, and I’m sure you will find a way to do what you want.”

“Then?”

“I want to see you before I’m too old. See you live, I mean.”

I looked at him. I said, “I didn’t tell you this, but I decided to visit this summer all of a sudden because I saw you in a dream, and you were crying, and I didn’t know why, and it kind of scared me; I felt like you needed me.”

“It’s always nice to see you, Ali. I hope you decide to come back one day and live here, but I want you to do what you want to do.”

“I guess.”

“And what does it even mean to die when so many people go missing every day. At least when I die, you will know that I have died.”

I was surprised by the sudden rhetoric. I looked at him. I said, “Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know. I guess it was just on my mind from when we were talking about Baluchistan.”

“Can I ask you a

question?” “Sure?

“Why did you give up on radical Islam after college?”

“I don’t think I ever gave up on Islam as a means of organization, or even resistance. You shouldn’t forget that we are contradictory, as are any colonized people. In fact, we can give up on Islam as a religion, but we can never opt out of its history, we can’t avoid it as a tool for political resistance.”

“But you stopped being an active participant. You took a government job, got busy raising a family, your sympathies are empty sympathies.”

“And what about you? Are your sympathies not overly generous because you have a passport and a visa and a flight out of this country? People will risk their life for a chance to get out.”

“I’m Pakistani everywhere, especially when I’m in America.”

“But you’re not *in* Pakistan wherever you are. There’s a difference.”

I fell silent. I felt the blunt edge of his accusation: I was not in the country; I was not with him, not with my family.

He looked at me with a mixture of exasperation and apology. He said, “You left home very young, very early, at sixteen. I wonder what it would’ve been like if you had stayed.”

“What would it have been like?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s better this way.”

“I could’ve seen you grow and become who you are. I could’ve known you better.”

“I don’t know.”

He looked at me and then looked back at the road. “Perhaps it is better for us to be away from each other. I like who you have become. You argue like me; you stand by your opinions.”

I didn’t say anything.

He said, “Just be careful.” “Why?”

“What do you want to write about?”

I was taken aback by his question. He had never shown interest in what I was writing. I said, “I don’t know – something.”

“You want to write about Pakistan?”

“Not really.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s hard.”

“Why don’t you write a terrorism pot-boiler? It will sell like hot cakes!”

I knew he was only half-serious, but I suddenly got annoyed, “Maybe because there are real people whose lives are on the line.”

“People’s lives are always on the line,” he said, “Hasn’t stopped anyone yet.”

The flight engine whirred somewhere underneath as I looked out of the airplane window at the parked planes on the runway. The sun was setting and I could make out rooftops farther in the city. My mind was still stuck on the earlier conversation with Father. I imagined people sitting on the rooftops far away in the city, enjoying the evening breeze, maybe flying a leisurely kite, then I imagined a corpse lying in the middle of the rooftop, shrouded in white, and everyone weeping, then I imagined a long funeral slowly dragging through street after street after street, joining and detaching from other funerals that mapped the whole city with their steady flow. I looked away from the window. I was sweating. I tried to shake off the feeling of dread. I tried to shut off my imagination, or at least distract it. I took out the novel I brought from my backpack and tried to read, but I was unable to concentrate. The plane was now on the runway, gathering pace. I tightened my seatbelt and shut my eyes. I waited for the sensation of take-off, of being airborne, of being suddenly and miraculously detached from the land. A memory shifted and focused on the screen of my closed eyelids: I was with Father at Karachi airport. I must have been nine or ten. We sat on yellow plastic chairs outside the arrivals area. We weren't waiting for anybody, or any flight. We had just sent off my grandmother's coffin to Lahore; the family was flying out for the funeral the next day; Father hadn't moved for half an hour even though there was nothing left to do. He kept staring ahead, not making any noise. I didn't notice until I turned my head and looked: his cheeks were wet with thin trails that shone under the off-white fluorescent lights. He looked at me and said, "I have no shelter on this earth anymore," and then he continued to sit on the yellow plastic chair and cry as people arrived and departed with bags and children and shouts. I had never seen Father cry before, and I have never seen Father cry since. I could not bring myself to say anything. I felt scared, lonely. I felt like he needed me, like I should be able to support him. But instead I wanted to cry along with him. I wanted to say, "I



don't like this airport. Take me home, take me home..." and then I felt it, the plane taking off, and my eyes wide open.

## **I Protect My House with Magic**

Once, I was in New York, and I saw the sun setting on New York. I crossed 42nd Street on 9th Avenue, and I looked to my left: I could look all the way down 42nd Street where the city ended and the sky began. The sky looked like a canvas framed between buildings – its orange and yellow like Rothko's – on display to be viewed from a safe distance, as if the city was scared to touch color, content to watch it from far away.

I lit a cigarette. He came and stood next to me. He vigorously rubbed the back of his neck with a blue cloth that was squeezed inside his palm. He looked up at me and said, "Shuklak Arabi?"

I said, "No, I don't speak Arabic. I speak Urdu, from Pakistan."

"Urdu?...Ah...Kurdi? Iraqi?"

"No,no...Urdu,from Pakistan."

"Ohhhh! Urdu?...Bakistani!"

I nodded.

Then he looked me in the eyes and said, "I'm very lonely." He stuffed his sweaty blue cloth inside a sagging black duffel-bag.

I started walking to the nearest subway station. I took the C train from 14<sup>th</sup> street to meet a friend on 34<sup>th</sup> street. I watched the advertisements lining the subway cars and the subway station walls and I completely forgot to get off on 34<sup>th</sup> Street. I realized I had missed 34<sup>th</sup> Street only when the train had already reached 155<sup>th</sup> street, but instead of turning back, I got the strange idea that I should stay on the train and sing Bob Marley's Redemption Song. I thought: I have a decent voice; I should definitely sing Redemption Song. I started humming it to myself, but I could only remember two verses: "Won't you help to sing/ These songs of freedom." For a couple of minutes, I kept humming: "Won't you help to sing/ These songs of freedom."

I enjoyed humming so much that I wanted to stay and hum forever. I thought maybe one day a lonely Arab man would come inside the train and I would serenade him with my song and he wouldn't be lonely anymore. I looked around – there were only five people left in the car; they were all brown and blue like me. I stood up, and began to sing in a loud, clear voice. Everyone looked at me, and everyone was tender.

## Curriculum Vitae

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### **Education**

#### **Yale University**

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#### **UNLV**

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### **Publications**

#### **Book:**

- Hassan's State of Affairs by Mirza Athar Baig. Translated from the Urdu by Haider Shahbaz. The translation of the contemporary Urdu novel, *Hassan Ki Soorat-e-Haal*, is under contract with Red Dust Books and scheduled for publication in early 2017.

#### **Reviews:**

- "The Madness of Gangsta Rap: A Review of *Diary of a Madman: The Geto Boys, Life, Death, and the Roots of Southern Rap* by Brad 'Scarface' Jordan and Benjamin Meadows-Ingram." Los Angeles Review of Books.
- "Loop, Repeat: A Review of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*." The Believer Logger.
- "Remembering Sound: A Review of Mauricio Misle's film, *Hamule*." Jadaliyya.
- "The Architecture of Nostalgia: A Review of *The Invisible Landscape and Concrete Futures: A Solo Exhibition of Hazem Harb*." Jadaliyya.

- “Surrealist Pakistan: A Review of Mirza Athar Baig’s *Hassan Ki Soorat-e-Haal*.” Himal Southasian.
- “Archives of War: A Review of *Seam* by Tarfia Faizullah.” Tanqeed.

### **Creative:**

- “Horror Story.” Brooklyn Rail. Translation, Nominated for a Pushcart Prize, 2016.
- “Speaking of Pakistan” Enizagam. Runner-up in Enizagam Fiction Contest 2015, judged by Taiye Selasi.
- “Two Poems by Syed Kashif Reza.” The Portland Review. Translation.
- “Two Poems by Miraji” Aldus. Translation.

### **Conference Paper**

- “Queer Vision: Synthomosexuality and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” at the English Graduate Students Conference, Idaho State University, 2015.

### **Courses Taught**

- ENG 102 – First-Year Composition, 2013-ongoing
- ENG 205 – Introduction to Creative Writing, 2015.

### **Awards and Residencies**

- NYS Summer Writers Institute. Summer Scholarship, 2012.
- Hambidge Center. Creative Writing Residency, 2015.
- Black Mountain Institute. MFA Travel Award, 2015. I was awarded funding to conduct research on postcolonial literature in Accra, Ghana. I spent much of my time researching Richard Wright’s writings on Ghana as well as discussing contemporary Ghanaian literature with writers such as Kofi Anyidoho and Mawuli Adjei. At the same time, I fell in love with Hiplife music, doing my best to hear as many artists and attend as many performances as I could.

### **Employment in Writing**

- 3quarksdaily.com. Columnist, 2010-2012
- The Missing Slate. Fiction editor, 2011-2012.
- Witness Magazine. Reader, 2014-ongoing.