

LAUGHTER

by

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The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Mahrukh Aamir, and they evaluated the student's presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found the student passed the oral examination.

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## ABSTRACT

Set in Boise, “Laughter,” is centered on a gullible anti-heroine and an aspiring writer, who is infatuated with a poet.

The novel is about relationships with parents, friends, strangers, complete strangers. An inquiry into what it means to live an authentic life; and what to make of “other” people in fiction: people in books, films, songs.

It’s about blurriness: funniness and sadness; creepiness and devotedness; fiction and reality.

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## PROLOGUE: LOOK—A TREE!

I am writing this story because I have a fear of it being reduced to a dinner party anecdote. I imagine, several years from now, hosting a dinner party with a husband. The dining table looks full: an embroidered runner along the length of the table; placemats that either match or complement the runner; napkins folded with brooches; the glasses are clear, not a stray water stain in sight. There must be art on the walls in the room, too. Blurry, laughing faces gathered around the table.

I imagine wanting to tell a story there—a story that the husband has heard countless times before—and someone being distracted by a nagging child. Maybe the child wants to use the restroom. Maybe, in between the telling of my story, we hear thunder, and someone else—a blurry laughing face—comments on the monsoon rains at this time of the year. Or else, maybe someone wants me to pass them the salad. Whatever the distraction, my story is interrupted.

Later, someone on the dinner table nudges me to continue, and I do. I talk about the time when I had no kids, no responsibilities, was perhaps a little sexually deviant—if it can be called that. But the story is an anecdote, something to entertain our guests, and so it must be told a certain way.

I can't betray an emotional attachment to it. Most of all, I am aware, in the telling of this anecdote, of my husband sitting at the head of the table.

He, unlike, the guests knows how attached I am to my stories. I wonder if he feels a little sorry for me in the way one feels sorry for people who tell their stories over and over again, stories you have heard countless times before. And stories you still listen to because you like the way the teller's eyes light up in the telling of it.

It is not the love of the story that compels you to listen, it is love of the person.

Later on in life, that love turns into respect. But truth be told, the image of the dinner party is never as detailed as the one I have described above. The image is produced by a feeling, and the feeling is that of a fullness: a liveliness that is so colorful that it subsumes my story, and spits it out. Something to be washed away, like leftover crumbs on dinner plates. The dinner party is much too grand for an anecdote.

—

My parents have hosted many dinner parties, and I have sat around that table. So, essentially, I stole the idea of the dinner party from my parents' lives. I stole the idea of the husband, too. If I had to attach a picture, as if I were giving a powerpoint presentation, to the idea of a successful adult life, I would attach the picture of a dinner party.



Minor adjustments: instead of Coke, Sprite, or Pepsi, I would have red wine. Instead of art that is calligraphic Quranic verses, I would have something more modern, more abstract. Or maybe I would keep the Quranic verses around because I would like the idea of alcohol being served around them. In any case, the picture showcases the ability to afford good things; the charisma to entertain; and the success of a marriage.

I have a hard time putting a face onto my husband, but I imagine he is not unlike my father in that he is more successful than I am—I being his wife. He is well-respected—well-liked, too. He is well-connected so he is able to pull strings for his friends. When he talks, everything goes quiet.

—

In my naïveté, as I write this, I think finding a husband like that would be would be easy enough. Perhaps that's how all children feel when they think about their parents—that they can, at least, have what their parents have.

Often, children to these parents are told to be mindful of their privilege—even the love that they receive. And I must admit that it took me a good while to realize that other families weren't like my own. That some mothers had, say, schizophrenia and that their medicine had to be mixed into their food without their consent since their schizophrenic mind did not think there was anything wrong with it.

That fathers were hesitant to send their daughters off to college alone, and had to be convinced by other parents. When I was young, no one discussed their parents. Maybe they saw mine and felt shame.

Whatever the reason, the point is that I am scared of wanting to tell a story, and finding no right vessel for it. More and more, this fear creeps in when I recognize that I am living a life which calls on me to feel a lot of things. And more and more this fear becomes palpable when someone close to my age dies, and someone else writes a social media post about them. These days this fear has a heartbeat of its own. What will my friends say about me if I were to die right now? I can predict the post with ease, and their feelings with lesser ease.

*She was kind, generous, a great friend.*

Of what I am certain: I will become subsumed in their stories, even if not dinner party ones. But maybe dinner party ones, too.

*An unspeakable loss. A tragic accident. Hold your loved ones close today, and tell them that you love them.*

I noticed that a friend had taken to wishing people birthday with words like “resilient” instead of “beautiful.” I had once read a social media post that said that one ought to give compliments that don’t have anything to do with physical appearance. It suggested words

like resilient, brave, kind, et cetera. On my birthday, the word “resilient” was used for me, too. But when had I ever showcased any noticeable form of resilience, and especially to her? I would much rather be called beautiful.

If I had to use such words for someone, I would use them for my grandparents and great-grandparents. *Resilient*. All of them lived through the 1947 Partition of India. My grandfather likes to tell the story of how they left everything behind in India; how all his uncles were killed by Sikhs who had swords. Swords!

My grandmother tells me about how her family crossed a river in the middle of the night to escape any notice from the Hindus.

The first time I really listened to these stories, it was in 2014, for a final project for an undergraduate class titled, “Literature of Conflict.” The professor emphasized the importance of talking to our grandparents, old people, anyone who had any memory of the Partition. Everyone who lived through it was most likely dead, and those who were still living, probably had these narratives passed down to them from their parents.

Together, as a class, we worked toward building a Partition Archive.

In 1947, my grandfather was eleven.

When I think of my grandparents—particularly my two grandmothers, one dead and one living—I think of white women. I think of Virginia Woolf (born in 1882), Sylvia Plath (1932), Susan Sontag (1933), Joan Didion (1934).

At the time of my writing this, Joan Didion has been dead five days. She was the only living writer on my wall: a black and white printout of her sitting in a car, staring out of its window, with a cigarette in her hand. I have spent many a time looking at Didion's pictures; at Sontag's, too, attired in her signature turtleneck sweaters. At Plath, at Woolf.

Once my grandfather held up a picture of his wedding day. It was double the size of a postage stamp, but not any bigger than that. In fact, it gave the impression of being smaller, still, because it was the photograph of an entire wedding party. The bride, my grandmother, wasn't in it.

When I think of my grandparents, when I'm physically with them, I don't think of anyone else. Instead my eyes dart to the space underneath my grandmother's pillow: there is a single apricot seed there, visible when the pillow, against which is resting, lifts at an angle. And there is also a case for her eyeglasses.

On a stand by her bed, there are bottles of cough syrups; a small digital clock; a box of earbuds; an orange, a cylindrical container of vitamin C tablets; a comb. And then there are small rags, hanging here and there; one of them is on the stand, one could be underneath her bed.

Other things underneath her bed: a can of *Pediasure*; bottles of *Ispaghul*. There is a dustbin there, too. I haven't ever lived with old people—my father is in the military—so, the details form an impression on me.

Old people wearing diapers forms that impression, too. I am fascinated more by the space that they inhabit than anything else. If the camera were to focus on things other the two single beds—one my grandmother's, the other my grandfather's—they've had single beds for as long as I can remember—you would see the wallpaper peeling off the walls in big chunks.

And when I cross my legs to stop my bladder making demands on me—left leg over the right, and then right over the left—I look at the door to their bathroom. I speak to my father in English: I need to use the bathroom. He looks at me, and says I'll have to make do with the one in this room.

English is a secret language, one that my grandmother doesn't understand. My grandfather, on the other hand, refuses to get hearing aids even though he needs them.

The commode has a rusty “support” around it, to assist getting up and sitting down. In a corner, there is a plastic baby potty seat. Is it for babies?

When I pee, I hover over the commode. And of course, a thought passes about how my own parents are building their retirement house in Lahore, too. The house, almost completely built, is in a golf course.

One of the reasons my father cites Lahore as being the city of his choice is because he wants to be closer to his parents. But when I think about the newness of my parents' house, and the stale state of my grandparent's house, which none of the grandparents' children are too eager to renovate, I wonder if they are all aware that old people die.

It seems obvious enough in the sense that my grandparents—the only two living grandparents—are in and out of hospitals as old people often are. They are both in their late eighties. I talk to my father about a lot of things, but not about why neither him, nor any of his siblings, will do anything about the state of this house.

I do not want to witness him scramble for an answer.

Patti Smith: another white woman that reminds me of grandparents. She is seventy-five at the time of my writing this, and when I think of her, I wonder about her Instagram account. She is quite “good” at Instagram for someone her age: all her captions are written in the format of a poem, and none of the pictures she posts have a blurry, pixelated quality that betray an ineptitude at social media apps.

In an essay (“The Double Standard of Aging,” 1978) Sontag says that an obsession with age is a symptom of modern urbanized societies. That the “reevaluation of the life cycle in favor of the young brilliantly serves a secular society whose idols are ever-increasing industrial productivity and the unlimited cannibalization of nature.”

That in rural, nonindustrial places, the fact of someone’s age is “trivial” because life cycles are divided, instead, into “long periods with stable responsibilities.”

And then what would John Berger say about my looking at the images of these women? Would he make a comment about “glamour” of Instagram pictures; the glamour, also, of a portrait of Didion for a Céline ad in 2015.

She wears big sunglasses and a black turtleneck. But maybe, since she was eighty in that portrait, she used a support in her toilet, too. A bin under her bed.

—

At this point in my writing this, I am tempted to pathologize myself. What I am doing is comparing something of my own, to something that I have only known about at a distance.

Shouldn’t it be obvious to me that some people live certain kinds of lives, and that other people live other kinds of lives?

That this thought is an ever-revolving thought in my thought-universe is symptomatic of how social media has re-wired our brains, caused us to be chronically dissatisfied with what we have right in front of us. The rise of comparison, envy, unchecked narcissism. The temptation to pathologize a feeling itself a symptom of how irrevocably affected I am by living in the present moment.

Here's the feeling: After my maternal grandmother died, my mother, sounding desperate one day, told me to write about her, because I was the "writer in the family." When I thought about the details of my nano's life, very few things came to mind.

Whenever she saw me, she said I needed to consume more butter because she had been to Italy for the summer, and over there people took butter with everything. Everything about my nano about her was relational. I knew, for example, that everyone thought that she was kind. But what else? And is the difference between my grandmother and the white ladies, the literary grandmothers, simply that one set wrote about their lives and the other didn't? That one set, perhaps, had a life worth writing about?

In the years after, I occasionally had dreams about my nano. In one, she was wearing yellow. What else could I put together? What more?

And then, are our stories really that precious? How likely is it that the dinner table scenario will ever come true? I have been thinking about how memory is a living animal



of sorts, too. It is susceptible—like any organic being—to rot, decay, and worst of all, indifference.

Gigi, my friend, once brought me a big balloon that was inflated in the shape of the word, “love.” I hadn’t known her that long at this point, so the gesture—unexpected, undeserved—was especially surprising. A few years later she told me that the balloon was a Valentine’s gift by a male friend, one that she didn’t want to keep for herself. And I told her that in revealing this detail, she had changed the shape of a pet memory.

What Maggie Nelson said: that over the course of our lives, we tire of our own stories, so we find new ways to recast them in a different light.

What I am saying: I once lived, too. I walked past this tree, too. You are not the only one. I thought something about it, too. You weren’t the only one. Look, I wrote it down. And now look at us: we’re in our graves. And I am mad, but not at the people for moving on. I am mad at this earth. The seasons, they still keep changing—as if I never lived there, as if it is okay without me.

My nano is in her grave, and, now, I am in my grave. John Berger is in his grave, too.

And Woolf, Plath, Didion, Sontag. So, really, what was the point of it all?

I used to look at a tree and feel so much longing—but for what? Maybe for someone to point it out to. To say that I had seen it, too.

A professor used the phrase, “reification of lived experience.” I felt excited by the word.

To *reify*. And I felt moved that he used it all, at the moment when I needed the word

“reify” to become part of my vocabulary.

The tree doesn't care.

## PART I

## Chapter 1: I WANDERED LONELY AS A CLOUD

On the sidewalk by the Boise River, a man and a woman—crunch crunch crunch—were walking right behind me. The man was talking about how healthy-eating is important, supplementing with fish oil especially.

And then both of them overtook me, and I stared down at the man's calves in front of me. The only skin that was exposed to the evening light. The pair of calves—muscular, almost hairless, wisps of hair actually—were gold like how bare treetops change color at this point in the day. How branches—brown, gray, dark—are dipped in gold when the sun starts to go down. The man and the woman probably felt the need to overtake me because I was walking too slow. At this point in my life, I was always walking much too slow.

My first year in Boise, I become especially enamored with the sky, the moon. The river, the trees. Big fluffy cumulous clouds would bring me so much joy. I discovered René Magritte's paintings, and felt moved by them because they rendered all these things in an unfamiliar way.

A floating boulder in the sky. A cloud, the same shape and size as the boulder, floating over it. Hundreds of pictures of clouds. In wine glasses, or inside an eyeball. Things that I had come to know very intimately in my daily life, now, in a new light in a painting—as if I was seeing, up until now, a hidden aspect of them.

A romantic reading of why I became so moved as to browse for these paintings online, to print them out to put them on my walls, and to borrow them from the public library as coffee-table books, is because I was lonely, and I didn't have the daily drama of human relationships: I had just moved to a new city, a new country altogether, and was enrolled in a three-year graduate writing program.

A less romantic reading would be that I was finally around nature in a way that became a part of my daily routine. That to see a river wasn't a chance happening—viewed from the inside of a car as it sped by—but it was, rather, a route to my classes.

And because Boise is a small city, there was less light and noise pollution, too. I could see the sky.

In this way, I could fancy myself as a flâneuse for the first time in my life.

It was in this plotless dailiness—concurrent with the Boise River, the trees, the sky—that I met one: Poppy, and two: Gigi. They are both characters in this story. I met them in my classes because Poppy was a poet; and Gigi, like myself, was a writer of fiction.

## Chapter 2: FLANEUSE IN BOISE

I must have come across the phrase, “romantic friendship” in my frustration to not feel myself completely alone, to fancy myself as the carrier of some knowledge that my friends were not aware of.

So I read articles that talked about the history of “female friendships,” and saw pictures of women in Victorian-style gowns, arm-in-arm, with a parasol. The husband off to war—maybe the Second World War—and the women, alone, with a female friend.

I posted excerpts to my social media: I carried knowledge! Maybe some girl would see, and think about her relationship with her female friends; think about whether this relationship was laid hierarchically lower than a heterosexual relationship.

A male friend acquaintance—if barely that, because I had only met him once through another friend—sent a “clapping” emoji as a “reaction” to it.

—

In March 2020, when COVID had affected all parts of the world, which meant Boise, too, walking gained new significance as a social activity. It was during one of those walks that Gigi talked about how she thought of love in terms of how many years of her own life she would give up for someone else. Five years? Ten years? We were walking downtown,

turning corners, crossing cross walks, and it sounded like a dramatic way to think about love.

I didn't want to lie, and say that I could bring myself to sacrifice anything of myself for a friend at this point in my life. Why did it have to be a *sacrifice*, anyway? And because I couldn't answer this myself, I didn't ask her whether she would give up anything for me.

Walking with Gigi, this way during the peak months of COVID, just when it become real in this city, was like walking in a movie. I interrupted her to say that it felt like we were in the "Before Sunrise" movie, the one in which Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke meet each other on a train, and spend the rest of the day walking around Vienna. Later, when they have to part they make a promise to meet each other a year from now at the same train station.

I told Gigi that whenever she spoke, it sounded very scripted. Not in a bad way, but just that she had something profound to say at every turn, and that I couldn't think like her—think on the spot. But I was glad that I had found her, glad even for COVID, which had brought us closer.

It was during that time that I went on hikes with her; her boyfriend with us when we needed to be driven anywhere. Her boyfriend, who was Chinese like her, was four years older than Gigi. He had moved in with her, into her apartment because COVID had a put a halt to his work. He was an actor.

Once we, all three, were hiking up a steep path on the hike, and I lagged behind, looking at the two of them at the top, two figures talking amongst themselves, and occasionally looking back to see if I was doing okay.

I kept my mouth tightly shut, making sure I wasn't breathing audibly. When I caught up with them, the two parental-looking figures, I planned to say, "the hike was pretty easy, but it's the steep path that gets me!"

Around this time, on April third, George Saunders published an article in the "New Yorker" titled, "A letter to my students as we face the Pandemic." A line from the article read: "What new forms might you invent, to fictionalize an event like this, where all of the drama is happening in private, essentially?"

Alone in my own apartment—my undergraduate roommates had managed to leave for Korea for the summer now—I sat in my living room couch and rolled one joint, and then another. And then a third one for good measure.

The rationale behind the three joints was that I didn't really know how to smoke, how to inhale the smoke, and how to exhale it out. That you couldn't suck on a cigarette like a straw, could you? I was sure I was wasting more of the smoke than I was being affected by it.

On another hike, this one to Camel's Back, Gigi and her boyfriend were ahead of me this time around too, but only a little further. All of us on a steep incline.

We had people pass by us who smelled, strongly, like cigarette smoke. The boyfriend, usually without expression, wrinkled his nose and said that he found the smell gross.

Something about people, who, even after meeting you several times, don't make eye contact, and are quiet, wrinkling their nose to comment on smoking as a gross habit, let me in on preferences.

For me, most couples operated as a unit anyway, so I assumed Gigi—always immaculately dressed, who had once written an essay about she woke up at 5 a.m. everyday, even on the day she had landed in Boise all the way from China—disapproved, too. I had never seen Gigi take a sip of alcohol. She said she didn't like the taste.

“Keep the smoke in your mouth, at the back of your throat, and then slowly exhale.” I facetimed with another couple, this one back in Pakistan. My best friend and her husband, both of whom had been friends of mine since college.

On my laptop screen, the husband sat with the college best friend, his wife, and said to follow his instructions. I remember changing into one of my good sweaters, and wearing eyeliner. I listened to his instructions, and rolled the first joint of my life. Then I smoked it in front of the laptop, them smoking their joint of hash in their bathroom in Pakistan.

I coughed, and they laughed. And when I slammed the screen of my laptop after saying goodbye, the silence felt like it had a deep sound.



George Saunders emphasized the importance of record-keeping at this time: “Fifty years from now, people the age you are now won’t believe this ever happened (or will do the sort of eye roll we all do when someone tells us something about some crazy thing that happened in 1970.)”

I remember walking into *Albertson’s*, with a blue bandana tied around my mouth, fancying myself as some sort of bandit.

A gaping hole in the place where there ought to be toilet paper. A empty aisle save for packets of napkins. In the “feminine hygiene” section, two young girls talked amongst themselves saying that the tampons won’t last either, and they ought to stock up. I put three boxes in my basket too.

I was on my couch again—and high again—and this time listening to Björk. I didn’t hang out with Gigi, unless she invited me to hang out with her. She had the car, and the boyfriend who could cook elaborate meals for us—Oysters!—with seemed easy enough for him.

In any case, she was the one who had the scripted things to say. And without a car, it wasn’t me who could take her to the Boise Forest for a ten-mile hike. I couldn’t even take her to Camel’s Back.

My position in this new friendship became one of gratitude, in that sometimes I would make Gigi and the boyfriend some Pakistani food. A great feat as I walked to the grocery store to get ingredients for “butter chicken.”

Chopping onions on the bamboo cutting board, my tongue in between my teeth, and breathing through my mouth, because according to the internet that prevented one’s eyes from watering. The day of the cooking the biggest project of the day, now that I was done with the first year of my MFA, and Gigi with her second year.

“It will take half an hour more, so don’t leave your place just yet” I texted Gigi, so that her boyfriend could drop by a little later.

George Saunders, again: “What will convince that future kid is what you are able to write about this, and what you are able to write about it will depend on how much sharp attention you are paying now, and what records you keep.”

On the same couch again: I looked straight ahead at the parking lot though the window, and make eye contact with a car. The headlight looked straight at me, as if it would wheel itself into the living room. I felt nervous because the car was a police car, and it knew that I was smoking weed not just in student housing, but in Idaho.

So, I waited it for it go away, but it wouldn’t stop giving me that mean eye contact.

Lights coming out of its eyes. I felt my heart all over my body, as if it was working itself

toward a bigger beat, each beat louder than the last. I was sure my heart my would explode. I was sure, also, that I was experiencing an unwanted side effect of smoking too much weed.

So I called a friend who would be awake at this time: this one was studying at Duke—she was in America—and I told her that I knew why I was feeling this way; that I had had too much weed, and I knew that weed sometimes made some people paranoid; but even in the awareness of it all, I wanted her to stay on the phone with me in case something happened to me; and could she also google if anyone had ever died from weed consumption before because I was too afraid to google it myself even though I knew the answer; and if no one had died, I was sure I was going to be the first one.

*Please stay on the phone with me, okay? I know what I sound like, but my heart beat keeps getting louder and louder.* She laughed. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears.

What I like best about Björk: that you can hear cracks in her voice as if she were crying. That, lyrically, she says simple things in simple sentences, but with so much emotion as if she can't sing at all.

*I live by the ocean/ And during the night/ I dive into it/ Down to the bottom.*

Maybe my favorite genre of music is when women are screaming, so that I can say that I feel that way too. PJ Harvey is also a screamer.

I didn't Venmo Poppy—Poppy the poet—any more money for the weed for a while—after that incident.

Poppy, who would leave me weed in a Ziploc bag, with filter papers inside, at a hidden spot near my door. She said she had plenty of weed that she got from Oregon. Indica or Sativa, I asked, not sure I had smoked either, but the friend in Pakistan had asked me to ask her.

Poppy also added, unnecessarily, that she couldn't see me because she was planning to quarantine with a friend. I hadn't asked her to see me at all, but it was nice to know, yes, that she was quarantining with someone.

The Ziploc had a smiley face on it, with an M on it for my name. I took a picture of it.

Saunders: "I wish you all the best during this crazy period. Someday soon, things will be back to some sort of normal, and it will be easier to be happy again. I believe this and I hope it for each one of you. I look forward to seeing you all again and working with you. And even, in time, with sufficient P.P.E., giving you a handshake or hug."

I remember witnessing the toilet paper shortage, and the pasta shortage, and anything that wasn't easily perishable. I remember going into the grocery shops, and feeling this pressing sense of doom not because I needed any of these things very urgently, but the

lingering feeling that if anything big were to happen, no one would care about anyone else.

*Hope everyone feels safe and sound in their toilet paper fortresses,* I posted on social media.

Grocery stores. *Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Albertson's* had brought me the most solace in my first few weeks in America only a few months ago! I would walk through the aisles, letting myself be distracted by the abundance of different types of the same thing.

A pasta aisle. One for chocolate. Maybe, I thought, in between trying to suppress tears, I would write a story about a girl in an American grocery store who has an existential crisis in the middle of one of the aisles.

Every time I would feel a weight pressing on, especially after sunset when I was on my own, I would go inside a grocery store. And now it felt that all of them had turned on me.

*Trader Joe!*

## Chapter 3: A HORIZONTAL PERFORMANCE

A couple of things happened leading up to 2020.

Someone in the program threw a Christmas party at their house. There was an impression of red and green and the soft glow of string lights, the fuzziness of sweaters. I was wearing a new cardigan, too. And, of course, there was a Christmas tree, a big charcuterie board, and because someone—also in the program—worked part-time as a bartender, there were cocktails. Everybody was excited about those.

I remember looking at the cheese and crackers on the charcuterie board, not knowing it was called a “charcuterie board,” and thinking about how low-effort Americans were with their parties.

How all the food was cold, how it was a big party, and, how, I didn’t know who to talk to. Gigi wasn’t there, and in any case was she really my friend at this point?

The only thing that Gigi and Poppy had in common with me was they were close to me in age, both in their early twenties.

Someone asked if I wanted red wine—my first real memory of consuming red wine—and I said “sure.” Someone else asked me if I wanted a cocktail, a hand which felt heavy on my lower back, and, again, I said “sure.” Someone else said that they had heard

a professor say that they liked my writing, and I said, “really?” And then somehow I found that I dropped—my legs gave way—onto the kitchen floor.

I remember faces hovering over me, and dangling arms lending a hand to help me up; and I remember feeling so embarrassed that I was in this position at all that I said that I was giving a performance—a horizontal performance. I stuck out my arms and legs at an angle, to really sell this desperate performance on the kitchen tiles. I might have laughed out of desperation too.

I remember older people being there, or else people who gave an impression of old age; that I couldn’t yet at this point in the semester make a distinction between faculty, students, and alumni. Later, I threw up in the sink in the bathroom.

I am using the word “remember” almost as if to will a memory more fully into existence. That in between the drunken blur of green, red, and string lights, Poppy asked me if I knew where my jacket was.

“I must have left on a couch somewhere.”

And how, when, she drove me back to my apartment in a pickup truck, she kept repeating that she felt like she *had* to because she didn’t want to leave me alone with any of the men there. I felt an emphasis on the word, “men.” She said that they were pretty drunk, too. She said “men” again as if it were a code word for someone. I must have had a

refrain of my own, too, sitting there in the passenger seat of the truck. It must have sounded like “thank you, thank you, thank you.”



## Chapter 4: RULES FOR WRITING

“Do you think they admitted us into the program because they needed it to be more *diverse*?” I once joked with Gigi. A part of myself meant it seriously, but I joked with Gigi, unsure of how she would feel about coupling her with myself.

“Probably,” she exhaled a laugh out of her nose.

As is the way with most skills, writing stories has rules too. Here are a few of them:

1. A story needs *story beats*. Which means, simply, that one thing ought to happen after the other, and another thing after that other thing. The end to the beats is the end to the story. For example: A girl, who is actually a woman, walks by the river—one beat. Then, she decides to wait at the crosswalk—for the red cautionary hand to turn into a white stick figure in motion—so that she can continue walking. Second beat. On the cross walk, while the cars wait for the girl to cross, she sees a flattened brown shape on the ground. It is a squirrel that couldn’t cross the road in time. This produces a reaction—a third beat!—as the girl, who is a woman, feels this to be a bad omen; it ruins the rest of her day. But that is not enough because this girl-woman needs to interact with something, so as not to write just a long sequence of walking in Boise.
2. There needs to be a point of *conflict*, most likely from an *interaction*. The girl cannot interact with the squirrel because the squirrel is dead. And everybody is in their

house, and her roommates are in Korea. So, she finds someone inside her phone. A man from her undergraduate college back in Pakistan. And while the girl is smoking, because she is finally in her apartment now, still thinking of the dead squirrel, she sends a message to him. A *hey* and a *what's up*, and in return, an *I just woke up* and a *what's up with you* from the man. Her heartbeat rises with the exhale of smoke, and the smoke alarm, which has been broken for a week now, punctuates the silence with a screech every few minutes. (She has been meaning to send an email to Housing to get it fixed, but the screech only lasts a second, and now feels like a part of the apartment.) *I feel like you're a man sitting in a chair that's right in front of me, and I really want you to keep sitting across from me, but I'm scared that you will leave. That you're in the chair, but you're looking around—motioning to leave, stealing a look at the clock—but are too afraid to leave because you don't want to be impolite. I wish you would keep sitting there.* The man, with no skill for banter, replies with a *what*. And the girl, desperate, jokes: *I think weed just makes me really horny.* The man, his senses awakened now, no need for his morning coffee, says: *too bad I'm not actually in the chair.* The girl can feel her heart in her face now. *But if the man were in the chair, in my room, what do you think he would do?* The fire alarm lets out a screech—in what? Delight?

3. And don't forget about the stakes! A workshop critique of the story might say that there are no real stakes in the story, or else that the stakes need to be higher. The girl in the story, in between masturbating, looks at her phone now. What—really—are the stakes of talking to someone on your phone? The writer tells the girl to be quiet, and to continue masturbating because this way, with all the stress of the stakes, she won't

orgasm. The writer wants to say that the girl belongs in an Edward Hopper painting. That, either everyone is looking out of a window, or else they are looking at someone in a window. Later that night, the girl browses Edward Hopper paintings on the internet. A lot of them mimic her experience. There is one in which a girl is sitting on the floor by her bed, as if she fell down and decided it was better to stay on the floor a while. She is naked. A tuft of pubic hair, and her head downcast. And then there is the image of the girl looking at this downcast girl on the internet—not a single stake in sight.

On one of our walks, I told Gigi that while I could see myself in someone like Sylvia Plath, a blonde white woman who was writing in the fifties, I wondered if someone like her could see themselves in me; in that one can always see themselves in the oppressor.

Women can see themselves in men, but I was unsure if the opposite were true. That to read something that offered a woman's experience was seen as an exercise in learning—something experiential—rather than something more meaningfully affirming of one's own lived experience.

So while someone could read my story, and find that they were learning more about Pakistan, I could read something written by a white man which would make me feel less alone. Being white was being neutral. Being brown, or yellow, was just embellishment—the exotic! *I love to travel!*

What would I reach for in a moment of emotional crisis when I really needed a book to placate me?

*Gigi: Well, if there's any better time to write an asian story, it is now—what with all the asian hate in America and Trump calling the virus “kung flu.” A year from now, two years from now, these books will do really well. I bet agents are on the look out for our stories.*

A felt a cry crawl up my throat, but not enough to affect my voice.

*But we are two very different kinds of asians,* I laughed.

The idea of seeing oneself in the oppressor came to me when I read a Jia Tolentino essay, one in which she is a child playing with a white friend. They are playing with Power Ranger action figures; and while Tolentino wants to play the part of the pink Power Ranger, her friend insists, aggressively, that she can only play the yellow Power Ranger.

Again, this idea floated back to me when I was making a male friend a Spotify playlist. I wondered, after looking at all the selections of PJ Harvey songs, whether *man-sized, got my leather boots on* or *man-sized, no need to shout* would mean anything to a man who was already man-sized to begin with.

Have you experienced anything yet? I asked Gigi. And she smiled and said she could see that people were more cautious around her, as if she had personally brought the Kung-flu virus, here in Boise, all the way from Wuhan. But she looked unfazed.

## PART 2

## Chapter 1: FORM AND THEORY

I sat in the classroom with a first-class-of-the-semester kind of hopefulness, the bright pink Moleskine on my desk opened at the first page: a blank whiteness waiting for the roll of the ball-point, and my hand slow and deliberate when it wrote “Form and Theory of Poetry” on top of the page.

And when the class ended, I didn’t linger around either in the hallway or in the classroom itself.

Probably, a shyness grew back after I hadn’t seen anyone for the entire summer, or else I didn’t feel like engaging in script-like smalltalk at this time in the evening—the class began at six pm.

And a small unsure part of myself didn’t want to speak about the decision, again, to take a poetry class. I couldn’t yet tell if my position ought to be one of meek acceptance—not participating and sitting in a corner, glad to learn something about poetry—or one of an ambitious kind of confidence.

The route to my apartment was a nine minute-long walk, much too long a time to stay with my thoughts, without headphones on my ears, or else someone to distract me.

Not once in the fifteen weeks of class did I walk with someone else on this route—probably because people had their own directions to take, and I had mine. And by the time the class ended—at eight forty-five pm—it was either time for dinner or bed.

I took a picture of the moon, thought about how someone’s hair was the most noticeable change when one saw them after a long while, and remembered that I wasn’t sure where to buy all the books on the syllabus—whether they were available from the school shop or somewhere else.

So, I texted Poppy. A very straightforward text message that began with “Do you remember if,” and continued walking home.

**Poppy:** Hi! I wanted to say hello in class yesterday and didn’t get the chance! :(

**Poppy:** I found the two we need for next week at the book store, but the rest were unavailable.

I wanted to match her energy. Why had I gotten straight to the point?

**Me:** I WANTED TO TOO, but I had to rush :(

**Me:** And you mean the campus book store, right?

**Poppy:** Yeah, the school book store in the student union

**Me:** Thank you :) and let me know when you have time to hang

**Me:** We can get coffee too

**Poppy:** I'd love that. What about after the MFA meeting on Friday?

**Me:** There's an MFA meeting on Friday?

—

Inside my apartment: I heard my new roommate (for this year) and her mother move things around in her assigned room.

In my own room: I got into bed and downloaded *Tinder*. There was the face of a man with his tongue out, and next to him, his dog, also, with his tongue out. I swiped left. Then, there was a man by a river with a big fish in his two hands. He stood proud, a big smile on his face. I swiped left. A man who had taken a mirror selfie to show his abs. And a man with no abs—instead a prominent ribcage—also looking into his mirror.

And a man with scrunched up brows trying to look tough. And a man playing a guitar, his hair covering his entire face as he looked down on the instrument. And a military dude whose profile said “looking for the one.” And another profile of a very unattractive man saying, “only looking for hookups and friends with benefits.” Left, left, left.



I thought about the effects of watching hundreds of men in just a few minutes right before I went to sleep. The bluish-glow of my phone on my face under the covers. The man with the fish and me under the covers.

And the idea that my own face was under someone else's covers right now. Pictures of my face and body, carefully selected to showcase how attractive I was, being flung around in the Tinder-universe.

I deleted the app, and turned to my side. And right before putting my phone away, I looked up a poem to counteract any negative side-effect that downloading the app had had on my brain.

A poem, *any* poem!

## Chapter 2: MORMONS DON'T DRINK COFFEE

The day of the MFA meeting: It was late August in Boise, and the sun made all the colors more vivid—I needed shades while walking outdoors. The blue of the sky more blue, and the green of the trees more greener, as if the leaves were trying to burst free from their outlines.

I couldn't bear to look at anything for too long, because the sun had begun to press in on me as well. I put my hand on top of my head and felt my hair burning.

A quick flash of memory: when I was in high school, I asked a blonde girl to feel my hair because it was so hot. She said the sun didn't have that effect on her hair. I had never before thought about it: Of course, dark hair would absorb light, light hair would reflect it.

But blue and green were the two predominant colors of a Boise summer. And when everyone was standing around in a circle—outdoors—for the meeting, I felt the can of cold brew sweating in my hands. My insides felt parched, as if they needed to be slathered with chapstick, too.

When the meeting ended, everyone talked about the weather, and when I complained for the sake of—spirit of—small-talk, someone said that they thought Pakistan would be hotter. And I said that it was hotter in some places and colder in others. And then they

said, what about where you live, and I said that that place was hotter, but that no one went out during the day as much as they did during the evenings, which were cooler.

And then I looked at Poppy who was also talking to other people, probably about the weather too.

And so I made rounds. How was your summer? Did you get any writing done? Well, it's hard to write when you live with your parents. Yes, of course, there is a Gigi-shaped hole in my life now that she has graduated. Yes—yes—she had a very eventful summer, shooting for her film. No, mine was pretty boring, and COVID made it more boring. It's so cool that you're taking a poetry class again. When I lived in Spain, they did that too—they would have a siesta during the daytime, and hang around during the evenings. Are you glad to be back? I haven't had breakfast, so I'm going to grab those sandwiches at the table—do you want anything?

When Poppy inched nearer to where I was, I became more enthusiastic about the small-talk, so as not to look at her. I felt the wet can of cold brew crush under my hands. And only when this conversation started to trail off, did I look at her. Words tumbled out of my mouth:

“Poppy and I were planning to get coffee after this meeting. All of you are welcome to join!”

I registered shock on Poppy's face, but one exclamation point after the other flew right out of my mouth, clanging loudly against each other.

I needed water to counteract the effect of the cold brew; and the summer; and the parched feeling that being outdoors gave me. I bounced from one foot to the other, and thought about how the Mormons thought that coffee was a drug, which it was!

When Poppy moved closer, she said that she could walk with me, and I said that I noticed that she had come here with her bike, so I could just walk with the others, and she said that she could walk her bike, and I said was she sure?