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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COLOR BROWN  
A Collection of Poetry

RUSHABH SONI  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Julia Spicher Kasdorf  
Professor of English, Visual Culture, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies  
Thesis Supervisor

Christopher Reed  
Professor of English, Visual Culture, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies  
Honors Adviser

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## ABSTRACT

The poems in this collection focus on identity; I aim to rediscover certain parts of my identity through writing. Many of these poems are about my country of origin, India. I've funneled my memories, feelings, emotions, and behaviors into this collection so I can truly see myself.

A lot of these poems are written in free verse, and some in sonnets and couplets. The writing process that created the poems reflects the hybridity of my identity: I am Indian, and I am American. This collection is divided into five parts, and each part contains a group of poems similar in either personal or historical content. The poems build on each other as the collection progresses. The final section is a culmination of the history and culture presented in the previous four parts.

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## Introduction

What is “brown”? Is it a singular color? Or an amalgam of all colors, the great American melting pot? This question is where I began my introspection.

“Brown” means something inherently different to each person. To some, it is just a color obtained by mixing a primary color with its complement. To others, this color represents non-white people, and their difference becomes a threat, an assertion of their identity. This color, to me, represents dirt. The dirt that many immigrants have to eat that turns them brown, a physical embodiment of the earth: “down to earth.” That phrase was probably coined by an immigrant, or a farmer. According to Richard Rodriguez, author of *Brown*, the color has always been a foundational part of America, an idea that now usefully complicates the polarization between black and white identities.

I immigrated from India to the United States in 2003 with my mother and my brother, and for seven years, I slept on a thin mattress on the floor in the center of our apartment in Edison, NJ. My dad was already here, working. My neighborhood was like a little India: kids would hang around shirtless in the summer, we played cricket in the park, and occasionally my mother, or my neighbor, would offer us water to quench our adolescence.

I did not understand how much my parents sacrificed for me then. I goofed around, never prioritized my studies, and never exercised any effort in school. For these reasons, I had a fantastic childhood; I hung out with my friends often and blew off any effort at intellectual growth. I was placed in READ 180, a remedial English program popular at my middle school, for two straight years. Reading felt like a chore, and writing was no better. And when I was finally placed into a regular-level English class, I felt accomplished.

When my family moved, I attended a high school in Piscataway, NJ, several towns over. I had to begin anew, and in that predominately white community, my understanding of the color brown evolved. South Asian immigrants are uniquely skilled at adaption, at a certain existential tailoring.

My loneliness pushed me to read. Whenever I felt alone, I would read as many words from a book or newspaper I could without getting watery eyes or zoning out. Eventually I developed a taste for reading, for eating up any piece of written content. My entire academic career turned on its head when my sophomore-year English teacher saw my effort, my strong work ethic, and recommended me to be placed into AP Language and Composition my junior year.

In AP English, I was exposed to a wide breadth of literature that I had exceptionally little contact with previously: modernism, postmodernism, novellas, and, most importantly, poetry. The class pushed me to rethink the way I approached literature and writing; the very first book we read was *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, and I saw what I was missing. We would engage in writing exercises and compose practice essays in class to prepare for the AP exam. A couple of weeks before the exam, I was writing three essays *a day*: writing became a regular activity.

My first couple of years in college, I tried to write every day, but couldn't because of Penn State's adamant general education requirements; introductory classes kept me busy and diverted my attention. Instead of writing about my passions, I was stuck writing rhetorical analysis papers for my English classes. Once I satisfied enough general education credits, I began taking classes that truly interested me. At Penn State Berks, the branch campus where I started, I took an honors independent study poetry class with Professor Kenneth Fifer, famous for

his hypercritical perspectives on composing poetry. As a part of the class, I did get some writing done; however, it was minimal, and, with the number of quizzes and assignments I had due every week, writing poetry seemed impractical. In my junior year of college, I met Dr. Kasdorf and enrolled in her advanced poetry workshop. With most of my requirements completed, I suddenly had time to write poetry; it did not seem unfeasible anymore. For the next year or so, I lived for the written word. I became a voracious poetry reader, and began to internalize poetic rhythms, as they became intuitive. Reading poets such as William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, and Walt Whitman stirred the poet inside me, and here I am, awakened.

### **This Collection**

This collection gathers memories, observations, and emotions around the central theme of identity. Writing poetry, I have discovered certain dormant emotions and memories, which, I would not have found if I had not written them into existence.

I was going through old, grainy photos of myself when this collection was in its infant stages. I realized that there are stories left unexplored and truths left unknown in these pictures, which my grandfather and his father took of my immediate family. Poetry, for me, became a means of perception and investigation. Why are certain histories the way they are? Why is my personal history the way it is? I *needed* to understand.

The first poem I wrote for this collection is titled “Reconstruction.” This poem was a risk, for I did not know how my classmates and professors were going to react to my critical, imaginative perspective on personal intrafamilial disputes. However, after an overwhelmingly positive reaction, I decided that I would move forward. After writing this poem, I was suddenly more comfortable with writing about my family.

I have always been critical of my own traditional family dynamic and that of other brown families; some of the poems in this collection reflect that, such as: “Oldest Tradition” and “Lunchtime.” These poems question the patriarchal relationship in traditional Indian communities, some run in my family and some pertain to longstanding cultural practices in India. Following tradition, many of my friends’ fathers worked all day while our moms stayed home. This domestic dichotomy brought me closer to my mother than it did my father, which is why I have a lot of trouble writing poems about him. I have never seen my father in as tender a gaze as I did this semester, when I wrote a poem about the mortality I see when I look into his eyes.

The second inspiration for this project came to me when I was reading “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” In this essay, the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, talks about something he calls “the mirror stage,” when an infant recognizes his reflection in the mirror. Lacan says:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form. (2)

This stage is the impetus to form the “I,” for the “I” is the identification of the reflection. Any moment after this stage, when the subject uses “I” to refer to himself, he draws upon his reflection, the recognition of his wholeness. This explication of the human psyche drew me into Lacan’s philosophy, and ultimately, my own mind. Furthermore, there is something more important than the “I” in Lacan’s philosophy: the “self.” The “self” is the part of the psyche that is unknowable because of our identification with our reflections; self-consciousness makes knowing the “self” difficult because humans are only conscious of their own reflections, how they look.

After reading this essay, I knew my collection of poetry would explore my inner-self, my “I.” But, what is the “I” without relational identity? Without social identity, including race and ethnicity? Therefore, I needed a stimulus to fuel my search, a piece of writing to help me think about my relationship with others in a more nuanced way.

This stimulus was *Brown* by Richard Rodriguez. My thesis supervisor, Dr. Julia Spicher Kasdorf, first introduced me to Rodriguez. This work of creative nonfiction awed me with its honesty and gratitude. Rodriguez’s identification with other people of color changed my understanding of what it means to be brown, to eat dirt. He writes about the “meeting of the Indian, the African, and the European in colonial America. Red. Black. White. The founding palette.” His insight into what “brown” represents is beautiful. From him I learned to identify with other brown races: native Americans, Mexicans, Latinos. Of course, the “brown” experience is not standardized, not universal but similar because historically all ethnic-Americans are shadowed by an institutional white supremacy.

## **Influences**

I’ve read two Indian poets this semester who have had tremendous influence on my writing: Amit Majmudar and Meena Alexander. Both Majmudar’s and Alexander’s collections tackled the relationship between the poet and his/her place of birth and culture. Majmudar’s collection *Dothead* focused more on the social and religious side of being Indian in a post-colonial world. For instance, in the poem “The Star-Spangled Turban,” Majmudar says:

Any towel,  
any shawl will  
serve as well to

bind this open  
wound atop me,  
mark me off as

not quite level-  
headed, tops on  
any watchlist. (10-18).

Here, he writes about the effect of the sight of a turban on a predominantly white population. He describes the turban and brings attention to it by the line ‘tops on / any watchlist,’ to show that certain people will approach differences in culture, especially a culture they do not understand, with suspicion. Of course, Majmudar is talking about hypervigilant post 9/11 United States when he says “watchlist.” After the attacks on the World Trade Towers, many negative stereotypes surrounded brown people, specifically those from India, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. These stereotypes grouped entire cultures together and neglected to recognize the differences in religion and ways of life. I explore these stereotypes and caricatures in “White Elephant,” which is a personal reflection of life after the British rule in India, leading up to present day.

Meena Alexander, on the other hand, engages more with memories of the concrete cultural experience; her poems inspired a deep nostalgia within me as she described lychee-picking in an Asian country, for instance. She writes:

Terrace deep as the sky.  
Stone bench where I sit and read,

*I wandered by myself  
Into the heart of the mountains of Yoshino.* (1-4).

When I was younger, I used to buy lychees at the market every week with my grandparents. This scene, of the speaker sitting on the stone bench, caused me to recall my grandparents’ house in India. In addition, Alexander is responding to the Japanese poet Basho in the second stanza. And so, in “A Lesson I Learned from My Mom,” I set out to do the same, but instead of engaging

with another poet, I tried to work with the tale of the mouse and the lion. Additionally, the poem “Parable” also retells the traditional elephant parable in which blind men come across an elephant and do not know what to make of it. From Alexander, I learned the importance of memory, but also drawing upon content that is outside of your own writing.

I also wrote the title poem “A Brief History of the Color Brown” in conversation with Jean Toomer’s *Cane*. In this book that is said to have launched the Harlem Renaissance, the poem titled “Portrait in Georgia” reads:

Hair—braided chestnut,  
                   coiled like a lyncher’s rope,  
 Eyes—fagots,  
 Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters. (1-4).

This poem has a dual meaning: one can read it as a description of a mixed-race woman or a description of the lynching of a mixed-race woman. I was particularly attracted to this form because of its succinctness and its ability to inspire an ambiguous reading. My own poem, “A Brief History of the Color Brown,” is more than just a list of brown objects; it is a self-portrait written with postcolonial history in mind.

Most of the poems in my collection are composed of short lines because I admired this method in the writings of Ross Gay. The poems in his collection, *Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude*, are written colloquially, as if Gay were just talking to his audience about his experiences of loss and gratitude. Most of the poems are written in short lines with enjambment. Gay’s “Catalogue of Unabashed Gratitude” starts:

Friends, will you bear with me today,  
 for I have awakened  
 from a dream in which a robin  
 made with its shabby wings a kind of veil  
 behind which it shimmied and stomped something from the south  
 of Spain, its breast aflame,  
 looking me dead in the eye

from the branch that grew into my window,  
coochie-cooing my chin. (1-10).

Gay's lineation works to emphasize line five, for it is longer than the others. His short lines move with the cadence of natural conversation. I wanted to bring this element of his poetry into my collection. For example, the poems "Journey," "Poem," and "Stinkbug" reflect this sort of lineation.

Finally, the biggest influence on this collection is the great modernist American poet from New Jersey, William Carlos Williams. I share his goal to write American poetry solely in an American form, and of American subjects. When reading his poetry, I thought: what does it mean to be an American?

It seems that the immigrants' loyalty to this country is questioned daily; this I attribute to the language difference. English is the language that signifies status, and it seems that many immigrants, when they migrate to America, have a weak command of the English language. I believe Richard Rodriguez addresses this problem clearly: "Americans do not speak 'English.' Even before our rebellion against England, our tongue tasted of Indian – *succotash, succotash* – we love to say it; Mississippi, we love to spell. We speak American." (111). The 'American grain,' to borrow a phrase from Williams, is more than just the English language; it's also the languages that come together to make up what we call "speaking American."

### **The American Tongue**

The most American piece I read by Williams was *Paterson*. It is an epic poem that explores Williams's home city of Paterson, NJ. When I say this is the "most American" poem I've read, I don't mean to say that it's the *whitest* poem I've read; when I say "American," I do not mean "white." *Paterson* is an American poem because of its acknowledgement of true,

unfiltered America history, not some myth passed around in the offices of certain media outlets today.

One big theme of *Paterson* is language, for language is what guides certain natural processes, the flow of the gushing river as it moves. Williams writes:

the river comes pouring in above the city  
and crashes from the edge of the gorge  
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—

(What common language to unravel?

. . . combed into straight lines  
from that rafter of a rock's

lip.) (7).

Here, the language of the river is important. This common language is the American language, not only English, but the dialects and ways of speaking that English raids from other languages and cultures. Multiple times throughout the poem, Williams has used the word “incommunicado,” which comes from Spanish. The way that word is woven into the narrative about Paterson Falls shows that the language of the river, the most natural language, is the American language, the language of a sort of natural freedom. I get a sense of unity in *Paterson* that I didn’t get in reading any of the other book projects.

From Williams’s writing I learned a large part of my own poetry writing style. His poetry showed me the importance of developing a visual image, even though he uses colloquial diction and seems to be merely talking to his reader.

Williams also practiced the selective use of punctuation. The poet must decide whether or not a certain punctuation mark is valid within the context of his poem and not just employ traditional punctuation rules when composing. I have always argued for selective punctuation; certain poems require it, while others simply do not.

After reading *Paterson*, I wondered: to what extent is Williams “brown”? Is he “brown” because he recognizes the diverse sources of languages; or is he “brown” because he understands that English is not the only language that you need to learn to be “American”? Or is it because his middle name is Carlos and his mother was Puerto Rican? His name, itself, is a testament to the brownness Rodriguez discusses, the stratification, as “Carlos,” his middle name, is sandwiched between two iterations of the same white name: “William.” In *Paterson*, he acknowledges the role the Ramapo played in the development of *Paterson*’s history as well as African Americans and immigrants.

Brown: a racial identification with non-white Americans.

Language: hybrid, amalgam, changing, flowing, like the Paterson river.

This recognition, or identification, is expressed not only as skin tone, but also in language and literature. Richard Rodriguez writes: “I cannot imagine myself writing these words, without the example of African slaves stealing the English language, learning to read against the law, then transforming the English language into the American tongue, transforming race, rescuing me, with a coruscating nonchalance.” (31).

American poetry, then, must include all experience and colloquial diction of the brown. That is the true American poem.

**I.**

## The River Ganges

### I.

streams through my body, carrying the charcoal ashes of my great grandfather  
still in its brass urn.

My vocal chords are a gift from Mother, my voice remains unshaken  
by the looks of pale faces.

The Phoenix that raised me told me to speak  
louder than a booming gong  
that reverberates through the walls of any room.

### II.

my father speaks English like he was born with it  
my grandfather's English is as cracked as his dentures  
and his father only heard English whispered into old grainy pictures  
by his great grandson who only heard of his death through the voice of his father

### III.

O Mother

though you float under rough scraps of plastic trash

men still bathe in your waters and pray to you.

### IV.

I walk into you holding a steel urn high  
above my shoulders as your waters slowly drift over my feet  
and cover my knees

I take the white cloth off the top and scatter the ashes  
of my father and before I can stir them into your body  
a plastic bag wraps around  
my leg

My forehead becomes a storm like  
Nataraja's eye  
and my legs dance with vehemence –

my inner Tandava alive—  
your followers melt  
and a hole opens in the earth  
the shape of the slit on my forehead

**II.**

**In the Heart of Gujarat – 2000**

The cows run across  
a muddy road  
away from the man  
with the sword  
Lahris

roll down  
my front yard  
as sellers retreat  
with handfuls of  
fruits  
The front gates

open  
as the smack  
of the police baton  
falls on the spines of the  
farmers

Meanwhile

my arms  
stick to my sides  
I wear a brown  
vest and a white shirt

A gust of wind  
carries dust  
into my eyes

**From Ahmedabad, India**

In the humming lull of the afternoon  
my grandmother's footsteps  
fall on the squeaky floorboards of her kitchen.

The pressure cooker hisses and steams  
like a whistling locomotive  
as she carries it to the marble table.

The aroma of smoking okra,  
a smothered dollop  
of ghee on burnt roti,  
jerk my stomach  
from its lazy arch  
on the chestnut loveseat.

In the background,

the aches and thrums  
of her electric fan.

**Ode to The Water I Swallowed from My Friend's Swimming Pool**

*after Ted Berrigan*

The boys pull my legs and  
    a lot of water but it can't drink  
my body drops in the shallow  
    the whole pool. My eyes open and shut as  
water; they want me to learn how  
    my arms whip the water and immediately  
to swim on the deeper end so  
    I use my friend's body to push myself up  
they tow my body on a floating  
    to the edge and cough and spit until  
ring towards a bottomless finish.  
    the water comes gurgling out like  
An open mouth can swallow  
    a rushing hurricane hitting a thirsty shore.

## Allegory of a Pigeon

### I.

I found a pigeon with a broken leg  
limping across the road  
so I put him in a cat cage,

jailed the bruise. I didn't know  
what to feed him except  
cut up roti and boiled yellow vegetables,

he became an Indian pigeon.

### II.

The orange foot of a pigeon makes a cracking sound  
when it breaks.  
One foot ends up inches longer  
than the other  
like a trembling nightstand.

*Go around the car he said  
grab it and put it in the cage,*

and so I did.

Pigeon lies  
inside a steel cat cage,  
Pigeon rolls  
around, hits  
the metal bars,  
practices self-affliction.

We just left it behind  
some boxwood  
over a small ditch.

### III.

Pigeons have strong beaks,

and maybe they have even stronger wings  
to carry away something  
as heavy as a steel cage.

**Parable**

A group of blindfolded white men discover a native. One man touches the native's face. Another feels his chest. Another follows his hands down to his fingers. They conclude that what they are touching is indeed a man, muscle and bone and flesh. It's all there. Until they take their blindfolds off. Then it isn't. They stare at the native's redskin face, untamed. This is not a man, they say, but a brute. An animal. The men decided to put the blindfolds back on.

**Poem**

An old Indian lady  
sells copies of the Bhagavad Gita  
on Allen St. She wears flip-flops  
with toe loops and a red sari  
covers her head like a thin scarf  
to shield her skull from the mountain wind.

*Bhagavad Gita 10 dollars,*  
she says.  
I keep walking.

She wears a coat the next time  
I see her.  
I walk by her and she asks,  
*Bhagavad Gita 10 Dollars?*

Several days later she is still there,  
trying to sell scriptures in the winter.  
Her stack of books looks untouched,  
she probably hasn't sold a single one.  
Her voice is hoarse from all the begging.  
As the wind blows up the pleats of her sari,  
I see her feet, brittle and black.

I saw my grandfather in her that day,  
his feet the result of years  
of walking.  
The salt of her labor darkens  
her brown eyes,

no one was buying her  
books.

*Bhagavad Gita 10 dollars?*

She smiles.

## **Journey**

My grandfather walks  
dozens of blocks  
with this small Spanish man  
about 70 years old  
who has trouble lifting his legs  
so he drags his flat  
bony feet across the pavement

One day his toes started to bleed  
but he didn't wince  
or shrink  
he simply just kept  
walking

On grey days  
they disappeared  
into the traffic of the evening  
leaving behind the setting sun  
to greet the rising moon as  
streetlights illuminated the concrete  
path under their heels

My grandfather knows few English words

*hi how are you do you want to go for walk?*

and the man only speaks Spanish

*quieres ir a caminar?*

I wonder if they talked at all

or if they just listened to each other's

thoughts

*Ah, see see walk*

before he died

and my grandfather

was forced to walk alone

## To Those Who Think I'm Checking Myself Out When I Look in the Mirror

I'm really looking at my skin,  
my kidney bean skin, ruffled hair and receding  
hairline, the fifty out-of-place eyebrow hairs  
that I forgot to pluck;

and my pointy nose that captures the sun's rays  
and radiates the light making my cheeks red  
and my eyes squint, and beside their brown bodies  
I see my ears made pronounced by my cousin  
who stretched the cartilage inside them and called me  
Dumbo.

I want to see my whole body, arms and legs and  
head connected to the torso, unified,  
to remind me that I am, indeed,  
one.

## Photos of My Brother Taken at 26 Lucille Court

### I.

his vacant brown eyes  
his round cheeks  
and bumpy nose  
*you look*

*good*  
they say to him  
you can spot the insecurity  
on his cuffs and on his fist  
as he clutches them in the wake  
of the flash

### II.

blue bow tie  
off-white shirt  
classy black coat  
black derby shoes

the fingerprint on the camera lens  
rendered the shots unusable

### III.

*Stand still* she said as my arms  
searched for the correct fit around  
my brother's back,

our coffee-colored skin  
turned radiant against the sunlight,

*smile*

and his teeth became a beacon  
for the flash.

### **III.**

## **A Lesson I Learned from My Mom**

*Woken up from his afternoon slumber  
the lion traps a woman with his palms  
“let me go” she says  
“one day I will repay you”*

*amused he opens his hands  
from her wrists and lets her go*

*one day that lion left his home  
and the woman was the one  
to give him shelter  
feed him cooked lentils  
and hot chai every day*

And that is how you stifle  
a lion’s roaring strength.

## Switzerland

When my father asked my mother  
*Where do you want to go for our honeymoon?*  
she said *Switzerland*  
as if he had the money

When she told me  
I could imagine  
a 15-year old schoolgirl  
jumping in puddles  
made by monsoons  
in her old village  
going to school in a bus  
with only 6 children  
going across the street  
barefoot to pray  
at the small temple

Leaving her parents  
and her sister and her brother  
to live in a home  
where the third eye of Shiva  
manifests itself inside  
the wrinkled skin of her in-laws  
and sometimes all they do  
is throw dirt  
on the dreams she had as a child

I wonder how many times  
she's even seen Switzerland

in airport layovers  
on the way to India.

## Reconstruction

I couldn't look at my grandfather's face  
after he screamed at my mother  
for taking the key to his burgundy car.  
She should've swallowed it instead,  
let the raging inferno within her  
turn steel to liquid,  
and like a tortured Phoenix  
spit up the metal  
onto his balding head.

Now I just look at his shifting old feet  
(my father's feet are balanced)  
and I wonder how I inherited his tawny  
toes and dirty callused nails  
stained by the fury of his searing temper.

## Cutting Fruits

I miss the cuts  
my mom would make  
to the fruits  
she bought from the market.

I ate her sliced mangoes  
with a fork on the kitchen counter.

She gave  
strawberries haircuts  
and gutted the kiwis.

The days I made her mad,  
in the cuts of my apples  
I felt the slice of her steel blade  
on my lips.

## Oldest Tradition

An ivory chair is worth more  
than a woman,  
flesh and bone,  
skin and hair, nails  
and lips small enough to be  
covered by her thin hands.

Brown husbands  
who can't stand on their feet  
scream at their wives,  
twist their wrists to obedience;  
brown fathers  
send their daughters away  
with one hundred thousand

forgetting the grip  
of the girls' palms  
around their index fingers  
when they first learned to walk.

When my mother married  
she didn't pay upfront,  
but after  
facing my grandfather  
in the comfort of her home.  
(Too much given,  
not enough taken.)

When you throw kerosene

on a woman's face,  
she pays for the dowry  
with her ashes,  
cashing the check  
of God  
early.

## **My Mother's Hands**

My mom always wants to press  
her hand on my forehead  
and massage my skin  
but I don't let her  
When I was young  
she cupped  
her hand  
on the curve  
of my skull  
Fed me milk  
through a rubber nipple  
as my brown eyes  
gazed at hers  
and my stubby palms  
pulled at her fingers  
I've seen pictures  
of her holding me  
her hands steady  
spring branches  
unwavering  
in their caress  
and still  
I refuse to let her  
touch my forehead  
out of the fear  
of feeling like a child

## **Meditation**

I loved the first girl who touched my face  
because she wasn't afraid  
of getting her hands dirty.  
She held it tight with her palms,  
as if she were gripping a melon.  
She told me my face reminded her  
of a wallflower, smooth  
with seamless transitions  
from one feature to the next.  
But I did not believe her.

She gave me a gift before she left.  
If you look closely, you'll see traces of her fingers  
pressed onto the natural curvature  
of my bronze jaw.

**Advice I gave to a Girlfriend When She Asked to Meet My Mother**

When you pull in  
walk to my front door  
ring the bell            come in  
and take off your shoes            enter  
like the house is yours  
like you see that bronze statue of Krishna  
every day

Don't tiptoe            instead  
put weight into each step  
like you're trying to break in  
the wooden floors  
mark each creak with impressions  
of your gentle feet

And when the Phoenix asks you questions  
let your iron voice fill the air unbending  
in its cadence            and tell her  
why you are here

## **My Ex-girlfriend's Father**

Meat stains your tattered shirt  
and yellows your Copenhagen gums.  
Your thick mustache and drinker's scowl  
dominate the face of an Indian boy  
who never got his hands dirty  
for any woman,  
except your daughter.

The mother of your three children  
wakes up at six and goes to the pasture alone  
to feed her goats. There was once a time  
when you went with her.

What left your body  
paralyzed on a white hospital bed –  
no bigger than a futon or a  
coffin –  
and left your speech slurred  
like you were trying to pronounce  
my name, now attacks your heart.

Stop

before you die  
only having lived  
on your father's land.

**Bacon**

Pigskin peeling  
from a bubbling skillet  
like a wing ripped  
from a dead insect body;

My hairs stood up  
as the grease cooled  
Indian red  
on the rubber meat.

Then they ripped the pork  
and bit into the cracking flesh  
with smiles on their faces,  
like they weren't just  
feasting  
on Wilbur's belly.

Pigs aren't as sacred as cows  
but the simmer  
of the sizzling meat  
spun my stomach  
into exhaustion.

I imagine a family of pigs  
cooking a human loin,  
sitting in a circle,  
using their trotters  
to peck at the swollen flesh  
because they don't have a fork,

biting down on  
the golden-brown skin,  
and the faster they chew,  
the fuller  
their stomachs become.

My tremulous hands  
struggle to make toast.

## Stinkbug

I felt its crunchy body  
invert as my fingers –  
the same wholesome fingers  
that feed me –  
pressed on it  
until it was flattened.

The first time

I saw one

I was drinking milk  
on my porch  
waiting for my mother  
to come close  
the front gate  
to keep the dogs out  
at night.

There it sat

on my wooden swing  
next to the old pile  
of grey cinderblock  
and an Indian newspaper;  
106°F brought the creature  
out of its dirt home  
and into mine.

My body shuddered  
though I let it live—  
lucky insect.

But not this time,  
now the spiked rage  
of a wrathful God

reigned upon it,  
the way tire marks  
leave a brittle leaf  
broken across the asphalt  
with chunks  
of its veiny body  
in all directions.  
I hate leaves:  
their sickening  
gaunt legs  
protrude like  
twisted straws  
with each step  
and their antennas  
wave like vibrating hairs  
left and right  
and I just –ok  
maybe this isn't  
about the leaf;  
I see that I am  
trying to embellish  
this encounter,  
but it's simple.  
This is about the obscenity  
that I killed  
because my roommates  
told me to.  
Who am I  
to crush the life  
out of the innocuous critter  
who probably just

wanted some shelter  
from the rain?

## Swiping Past Women on Tinder on a Saturday Night

When the women you like  
don't like you back,  
or when they do  
and they're not who they say they are,  
or when they do  
and don't want to be the first to talk,  
just know that words left unexpressed  
will disappoint

like the truth of the dinner date untold.

Looking for love on vivid screens  
expends the time you spend  
talking to strangers at work.

My thumb, on autopilot,  
swipes like the lover boy  
I am.

When I lie on my bed,  
I think of the women  
my thumbs dismissed,

and deep within my chest,

I bear  
a heavy regret.

#### **IV.**

**Randi**

*Ludhiana, British India – Taken from Bombay Stories by Saadat Hasan Manto*

Four or five times a month, her mother brings customers.  
The men take her off to hotels, dark places,  
to turn her into a woman.

*if he has a beard then don't be afraid to run your hands through it*

“Get up, I’ve brought a client.”

“Let me sleep.”

“Get up. How else will *you* eat?

Remember to talk like a grown-up and do whatever he says.

The poor man. He’s been waiting.”

*if he has a big belly, pat it like a drum.*

She puts on red lipstick,  
skin dry in the Delhi heat  
like a clay doll. When she made  
the day’s first dollar she would pray  
to the statue of Ganesh then stuff the money  
into her bra.

*if he doesn't say anything, watch out.*

“Dig a little hole under the foot of your bed  
and hide your money there. I swear  
to God when I see your empty bottles and smell  
the wine, I want to be reborn a whore.”

For comfort,  
she would lie  
with the neighborhood  
dog.

## Lunchtime

The women prepare the food  
with their strong hands  
and bring it to the dining table

where the men sit. Our backs  
straight, tongues salivate  
like street dogs fed  
for the first time.

Meanwhile in the kitchen,

the women sweat. Heat  
from the gas stove rises,  
makes them cough. Shrieks  
of the pressure cooker have no hold  
over our laughter.

I know that I am a man  
because in my family I eat first.

## **Eight Years Old**

He held the razor to his foamy neck  
and in three quick strokes

his hair was gone. Sometimes,  
when he nicked himself, I ripped

a piece of toilet paper and pressed  
it to his skin.

His white face smiled  
while his palms reached

for a cozy fit beneath my armpits  
to hold me up high.

I fear my father's eyes  
more than I fear dying.

**V.**

## **A Brief History of the Color Brown**

Face – English walnut shell, roasted chestnut eyes, an almond nose.

Torso – bodhi tree chest, stomach coated in hot chai.

Arms – cowhide leather.

Hands – backhands dipped in henna, palms like Whitetail deerskin.

Legs – trunks of red oak, rough coconut calves, knees liver-colored.

Feet – umber mud, and each toe a dried fig.

## White Elephant

Sometimes I forget that I am brown  
because I speak English  
more than the language  
the Ahmedabad rain taught me:

a wet brown child dancing  
in a loincloth.

I speak English good  
when I come here.  
In India, I was in school,  
English-medium school,  
with neighbor twins  
Tinu and Minu.  
We play cricket  
every day,  
good Indian kids we were.

Until I said I am leave  
to America, they sad.  
Good party for me they had  
on last day, day that I leave for  
America.

\*

In my first years  
of watching American  
mouths open  
and close,  
(the language amalgamated  
with my blood)  
my accent was gone.

Inglorious displacement

like the British men

who pulled out  
the tongues of my ancestors  
and drove them into bondage—

Christ dragged Ganesh by his iron  
chains—

colonized Sanskrit:

*gau*  
*manu*  
*duhitr*—

for the empire,

the engine,  
unrelenting  
in its explosive chug

swallowing gold,  
diamonds, oil,  
for over 100 years

then averred  
*dirty*

but the engine could run  
another 100  
because India  
cannot be digested.

\*

Bullets penetrated  
the bony flesh  
of the pacifist,  
marcher.

Godse

walked over his stiff body  
and left bloody shoeprints  
on his white robe.

Dressed as always in his homespun, sack-like dhoti, and leaning heavily on a staff of stout wood, Gandhi was only a few feet from the pagoda when the shots were fired. Gandhi quickly was borne back to Birla House and placed on a couch with his head in his granddaughter's lap. Just before he broke his 122-hour fast on Jan. 18, Gandhi had said: "I am not afraid to die, and somehow I cannot believe that I will die this time."

*The father of Pakistan*

Godse called him,  
as if a father can only have one child.

\*

What is the difference between Indians  
and Indians?

One, not from America,  
the other, made in America.

One, victim of willful misidentification,  
the other, indigenous to the subcontinent.

Europe arrived on both their shores  
in search of spices; and yet, today,  
I cannot eat my country's food  
without becoming vermillion.

*Injun*

the white man said,  
*Ignoble savage*  
*chanting babbles to Yowa,*  
then slaughtered them.

The Gnadenhutten massacre:  
twenty-eight men,  
twenty-nine women,  
thirty-nine children,  
axed down—  
their blood flowed into the Ganges

that day, I say  
(the same language).

Lenapehoking, 2006:

Emil Mann  
shot to death by a state park police officer.

These cops will pull my father through  
the bullets in their handguns

because being brown  
never means that you are bulletproof.

A simple traffic stop will go awry.  
A cop will brandish his gun

at my mom as she reaches  
for her license inside of her purse.

My grandfather will be mistaken  
for the neighborhood thief without question.

And I know  
I won't live  
past my thirties.

\*

*I'm just a nigga, until I fill my pockets,  
and then*

*I'm Mr. Nigga*

My skin  
pronounces its loyalty  
to this nation every day:

Land of snake-charmers whose instruments awaken cobras from their sleep and make them

dance.

Land of slums and beggars who bathe in mud and starve themselves to save money.

Land of “breeding rabbits” who fuck for the sake of fucking: with the poverty rate so high, why don’t they stop?

Land of dirt and chaos and odors entrapping the senses, trash in the temples, mosques, churches (yes).

Land of streets-shitters and nose-blowers, blowing and shitting outside because their houses don’t have bathrooms.

Land of one language: Hindu.

Land of uneducated taxi drivers and restaurant waiters and 7-Eleven stores: *thank you, come again.*

Land of a trillion gods: elephants, lions, tigers, swans, buffalos, mice, flies.

Land of *Namaste* and yoga and swamis in orange robes, hairy chests, uncut penises, undisciplined tempers.

## Notes

“The River Ganges”

Nataraja: Hindu God Shiva’s dancer form.

Nataraja’s eye: when he dances, Shiva’s third eye opens in the middle of his forehead and unleashes death and destruction upon the world.

Tandava: the divine dance of Shiva, his violent state.

\*

“In the Heart of Gujarat – 2000”

Lahri: an Indian vending cart a street vendor uses to sell vegetables, fruit, and other miscellaneous items.

\*

“From Ahmedabad, India”

Ghee: clarified butter many Indians put on their rotis.

Roti: flatbread made from wheat.

\*

“Oldest Tradition”

Dowry: money or goods the bride’s parents give to the groom upon marriage.

\*

“*Randi*”

Randi: Hindi word meaning “whore” or “prostitute.”

\*

“White Elephant”

Godse: Nathuram Vinayak Godse, assassin of Gandhi.

The Gnadenhutten massacre: a massacre in which white colonialists killed 96 native Americans.

Lenapehoking: name for the lands previously acquired by the native Americans, the mid-Atlantic United States.

Emil Mann: member of the Ramapo Indians who was shot by NJ Park Police.

*I'm just a Nigga, until I fill my pickets, and then I'm Mr. Nigga*: line from Vince Staple's first studio album, *Summertime '06*, track 2.

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# Academic Vita of Rushabh Soni

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## EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
*Schreyer Honors College – Paterno Fellows Program*  
Bachelor of Arts in English, minor in Philosophy

May 2019

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## RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

### ***Kalliope: Penn State Literary Magazine***

*(April 2018 – May 2019)*

Managing Editor

- Launched the first-ever fall chapbook in a ground-breaking effort to increase publication output, thereby further engaging with the creative writing community at Penn State.
- Distribute magazines and chapbooks to English classes to establish a stable reader base, increase awareness of submission deadlines.
- Attend biweekly meetings with editorial staff to plan team-building activities and marketing strategies.

Poetry Editor

- Meet biweekly with a staff of 11 to review and select submissions for publication, ensuring coordination of responsibilities to manage increasing submission volume.
- Evaluated ~150 submissions to date.

### **Penn State University Writing Center**

*(January 2017 – May 2019)*

Writing Tutor

- Provide expertise in various genres of writing and suggest revisions to help improve student writing.
- Employ interpersonal skills to connect with diverse writers on a personal and academic level.

### ***The Dangling Modifier: Writing Center Online Magazine***

*(August 2018 – December 2018)*

Editor

- Worked closely with staff to craft and advertise a Call for Papers to writing center conferences.
- Prepared an editing schedule for each submission and shared it with staff to ensure deadlines were met.
- Evaluated and edited two submissions weekly based on how well the content fit the theme.

### **Law Office of K. Shah, LLC – Edison, NJ**

*(May 2018 – August 2018)*

Editorial Law Intern

- Drafted and edited 54 legal documents from 23 residential property cases, 47 legal documents from 13 commercial property cases, and 3 power of attorney documents from 3 POA cases.
- Performed legal assistant duties including: filing and preparing legal documents, legal research, communicating with both current and prospective clients, and managing several file databases.
- Collaborated daily with the legal assistant to manage attorney schedule and clarify case data.

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## SKILLS

- Technical: Adobe Photoshop, Adobe InDesign, iMovie, Microsoft Office, Google Drive.
- Language: Trilingual in English, Hindi, Gujarati, with basic Spanish comprehension.
- Editing: copyediting, proofreading, technical communication, production editing.