POEMS



Migrant Wish

Moni Brar

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Book Editor: Ashley Elizabeth

Editorial Assistants: Brendon Blair, Kanika Lawton, and Erin Elizabeth Smith

Editorial Interns: Ines Pinto and Nic Job

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Cover Art: Coral Sue Black

Cover Design: Coral Sue Black

Book Design: Ashley Elizabeth

For my kin, especially the women,
who are not named
but inhabit each *we* and *you* on these pages

I came here to complete a thing I began in another place.

"The monster is that being who refuses to adapt to her circumstances. Her fate. Her body. Great Britain." — *Bhanu Kapil*

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It begins

with or ends with a red dot on a brown forehead.

A tikka, a bindi, a sparkle of a third eye, a small circle of knowing. It begins with a streak of vermillion poured down the centre part in raven hair already greying deep in the skull. These are the things a brown woman's body knows before it's born. That it will mix with almond oil and jasmine, know the touch of a marigold, vie for the attention of the sun or a son. That it will strain under too many layers of fabric. That it will rail against the power of a crown on another continent and wish for beginnings and endings. Soft endings. Then, there is the time in between. The time spent on growing things like cilantro from seed or bitter gourds as heavy as a fist. And the time spent going places. Slumped in a passenger seat. Thoughts reflecting in the sideview mirror. Counting down the miles between destinations, counting the space between the broken lines down a street with no lampposts. Life pitching in the dark.

ਭੂਰੇ ਮੱਥੇ 'ਤੇ ਲਾਲ ਬਿੰਦੀ ਦੇ ਨਾਲ ਜਾਂ ਖ਼ਤਮ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ। ਇੱਕ ਟਿੱਕਾ ਇੱਕ ਬਿੰਦੀ ਇੱਕ ਤੀਜੀ ਅੱਖ ਦੀ ਚਮਕ ਜੋ ਜਾਣਨ ਦਾ ਇੱਕ ਛੋਟਾ ਚੱਕਰ ਹੈ। ਇਹ ਖੋਪੜੀ ਦੇ ਡੂੰਘੇ ਸਲੇਟੀ ਹੋ ਚੁੱਕੇ ਰੇਵੇਨ ਵਾਲਾਂ ਵਿੱਚ ਮੱਧ ਹਿੱਸੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਵਰਮਿਲੀਅਨ ਦੀ ਇੱਕ ਲਕੀਰ ਨਾਲ ਸ਼ੁਰੂ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ। ਇਹ ਉਹ ਗੱਲਾਂ ਹਨ ਜੋ ਇੱਕ ਭੂਰੀ ਔਰਤ ਦਾ ਸਰੀਰ ਆਪਣੇ ਜਨਮ ਤੋਂ ਪਹਿਲਾਂ ਜਾਣਦਾ ਹੈ। ਕਿ ਇਹ ਬਦਾਮ ਦੇ ਤੇਲ ਅਤੇ ਚਮੇਲੀ ਨਾਲ ਮਿਲਾਏਗਾ ਮੈਰੀਗੋਲਡ ਦੀ ਛੋਹ ਨੂੰ ਜਾਣਨਾ ਸੂਰਜ ਜਾਂ ਪੁੱਤਰ ਦੇ ਧਿਆਨ ਲਈ ਲੜਨਾ ਹੈ। ਕਿ ਇਹ ਫੈਬਰਿਕ ਦੀਆਂ ਬਹੁਤ ਸਾਰੀਆਂ ਪਰਤਾਂ ਦੇ ਹੇਠਾਂ ਖਿਚਾਅ ਜਾਵੇਗਾ। ਕਿ ਇਹ ਕਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਮਹਾਂਦੀਪ 'ਤੇ ਤਾਜ ਦੀ ਸ਼ਕਤੀ ਦੇ ਵਿਰੁੱਧ ਰੇਲਗੱਡੀ ਕਰੇਗਾ ਅਤੇ ਸ਼ੁਰੂਆਤ ਅਤੇ ਅੰਤ ਦੀ ਇੱਛਾ ਕਰੇਗਾ। ਨਰਮ ਅੰਤ। ਫਿਰ ਵਿਚਕਾਰ ਸਮਾਂ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ। ਵਧਣ ਵਾਲੀਆਂ ਚੀਜ਼ਾਂ 'ਤੇ ਬਿਤਾਇਆ ਸਮਾਂ ਜਿਵੇਂ ਕਿ ਬੀਜਾਂ ਤੋਂ ਸਿਲੈਂਟੇ ਜਾਂ ਕਰੇਲੇ ਦੀ ਮੁੱਠੀ ਜਿੰਨੀ ਭਾਰੀ। ਅਤੇ ਸਥਾਨਾਂ 'ਤੇ

migratory patterns

our stories entwine, then diverge. we wait for this landscape to become ruin—to become

memory. we oscillate between the need to surrender or survive, wait for the anonymity

of history. she remembers palm fronds scratching the back of her neck, hands fanning long after sleep,

body filling with tamarind dreams, awakening in the damp hours to watch a mourning dove

swallow the moon whole. I marvel at how prairie wind can blow and blow on a mirrored surface

and soothe a raven's head. I've learned how to watch the skies on a sliver of lake,

how a chinook arch can bend the universe or follow a corridor of veins on every plot of skin.

migrant wish

1

They keep telling you to go home. Loudly, emphatically. Fearlessly. *Go home. Go back to where you came from.* Don't they know that such a place no longer exists? That you are firmly wedged between two worlds that continue to reject you? That the notion of home exists only in their minds? You travel back in time to tell this to your classmates in the playground, to the man who drove by in the white truck when you were walking home from campus, to the woman outside the shopping mall last week. They retract their pale tongues and listen.

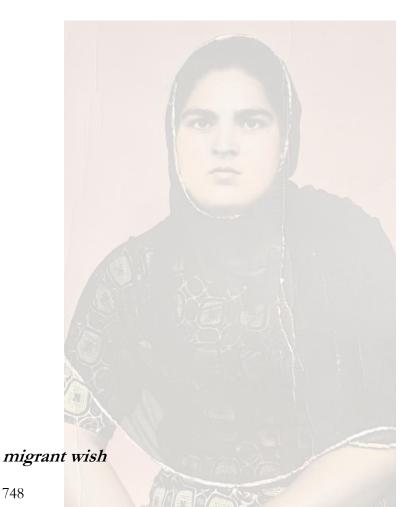


To return to your place of origin is no small feat. You must navigate a multitude of forms. Tiny print and short spaces for long names. Sit in front of stone-faced officers. Present your landing papers to prove that you left this place and chose to land elsewhere as if you were a ship or a plane, effortlessly gliding to land in a place of your choosing. But only you know that you grew up in the hull of a ship along with a multitude of kin. Shoulder to shoulder, waiting to land on a ship's name you did not learn until you were 28. There were no pop-up books in grade school to explain migration or how you came to be here. There's talk of revamping the school curriculum. You wonder if the SS Komagata Maru will ever grace the pages of a lesson plan.



97

You have become preoccupied with the business of wellness in an obsessive, unhealthy way. You have an aversion to the appropriated ayurvedic miracles of golden mylk lattes and turmeric face masks, and instead turn to the words of people with authority. People named Simon, Carol, and Brené. You work hard at cultivating a growth mindset. Embracing vulnerability. Practicing radical acceptance. You exert so much energy leaning in that you find yourself ground down to something resembling a fine spice. Like turmeric.



748

You rail against a brief for the defense, against the fetishization of the other, the romanticization of poverty. The fertilization of greed. You want to ask Jack Gilbert if he saw the caged prostitutes in Bombay laugh or just imagined they did. Wished they did. You want to meet this God that tells him to risk delight so you can ask for permission to do the same.

remind me one more time

Our father just out of reach in the frame of the photo except for his hand on the steering wheel of his first car, all his fingers still intact. The photo will make its way to his village to be passed from hand to hand. They will look at it in awe: He made it out.

Our father is not an architect, nor a carpenter, framer, builder, or construction worker. He builds our house in Canada. Divides rooms, tears down walls, creates new ones. Adds additions to the additions. Builds a three-car garage for our one car. Installs a monsoon in our living room, a jungle in the kitchen. The floor is sugar canes, the roof bamboo. The walls neem leaves. Mother watches and disapproves.

3

As the forest fires encroach, we are most worried about the sunflowers. The thick smoke blocks the sun. The golden heads droop, look down and to the sides, unable to locate the sun. We use our hands to prop up the bee-less heads of unformed seeds, whisper to them that the fire will soon abate. We hate ourselves for telling a big lie.

7

4

Our brown bodies are bent. We are brown sugar mounds in the fields that know no time. Our days are anchored by sunrise and sunset. We pluck fruit, count our labour in pounds picked. Later, we learn to replace the word peasant with farmer, rapeseed with canola.

_

After 84 years of toil, our father dies alone in a hospital bed. We are on the other side of a blue wall. We wonder if he remembered the softness of the sun on his eyelids, the taste of summer on his tongue.

before dispossession there was just soil

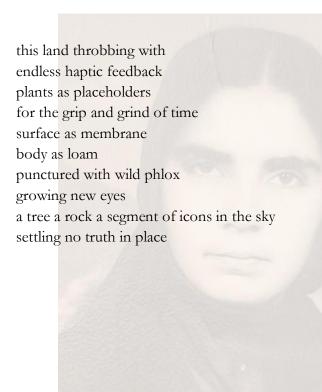
what if this land
was not laced with rows
not fraught with trellised vines

what if this torn surface was not coaxed into offering fruit or the dying sweetness or splendour

what if it was meant only to support a hoof or the indent of a crow's foot not a mouth tamped with transgressions

what if the soil heaved itself into your hands and the sky laughed out loud at this infestation of bees infectious as the feeble caws echoing off clouds the fragility of anemone blooming white as dawn as ever

what if we knew we were never good at survival knew too well this land could never be conquered





after the aftermath of text

There are a few dots begging to be connected, to be sewn together into a formfitting suit that's snug in all the right places. One that can be smoothed down with a blunt swipe of the palm. For an outsider, that is the allure of suits—to step into something that can wrest the self into being an insider with the help of a zipper.

ਇੱਥੇ ਕੁਝ ਬਿੰਦੀਆਂ ਨੂੰ ਜੋੜਨ ਲਈ ਬੇਨਤੀ ਕੀਤੀ ਜਾ ਰਹੀ ਹੈ, ਇੱਕ ਫਾਰਮ ਫਿਟਿੰਗ ਸੁਟ ਵਿੱਚ ਇਕੱਠੇ ਸਿਲਾਈ ਕੀਤੀ ਜਾਣੀ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਜੋ ਸਾਰੀਆਂ ਸਹੀ ਥਾਵਾਂ 'ਤੇ ਸੂਸਤ ਹੈ। ਇੱਕ ਜਿਸਨੂੰ ਹਥੇਲੀ ਦੀ ਇੱਕ ਧੁੰਦਲੀ ਸਵਾਈਪ ਨਾਲ ਸਮਤਲ ਕੀਤਾ ਜਾ ਸਕਦਾ ਹੈ। ਇੱਕ ਬਾਹਰੀ ਵਿਅਕਤੀ ਲਈ, ਇਹ ਸੁਟ ਦਾ ਲੁਭਾਉਣਾ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ - ਕਿਸੇ ਅਜਿਹੀ ਚੀਜ਼ ਵਿੱਚ ਕਦਮ ਰੱਖਣਾ ਜੋ

ਉਸਨੂੰ ਟੋਰਾਂਟੇ ਦੇ ਉਹ ਦਿਨ ਯਾਦ ਹਨ ਜਦੋਂ ਉਹ ਇੱਕ ਕਮਰੇ ਦੇ ਬਕਸੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਤਿੰਨ ਆਦਮੀਆਂ ਨਾਲ ਨਿਰਾਸ਼ਾ ਅਤੇ ਤਲੇ ਹੋਏ ਪਿਆਜ਼ਾਂ ਨਾਲ ਰਹਿੰਦਾ ਸੀ। ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਦਿਨਾਂ ਵਿੱਚ ਇੱਕ ਘੜੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਚੌਲਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਪਕਾਉਣਾ, ਫਿਰ ਧੋਣਾ, ਫਿਰ ਰਨੀ ਦਾਲ ਪਕਾਉਣਾ, ਫਿਰ ਚਾਰ ਦੰਦਾਂ ਵਾਲੇ ਚਮਚਿਆਂ ਨਾਲ ਖਾਓ। ਜੀਰੇ ਅਤੇ ਰਾਈ ਦੇ ਬੀਜਾਂ ਦੀ ਅਣਹੇਂਦ ਨੂੰ ਛੁਪਾਉਣ ਲਈ ਵਾਧੂ ਲੂਣ। ਦਾਲ ਅਤੇ ਚੌਲ ਹਰ ਰੋਜ਼। ਮਹੀਨਿਆਂ ਦੇ ਰੂਪ ਵਿੱਚ, ਫਿਰ ਸਾਲ ਇਕੱਠੇ ਘਟ ਗਏ। ਉਹ ਦਿਨ ਜਦੋਂ ਉਸਦਾ ਰੂਮਮੇਟ ਉਸਦੇ ਗਲੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਇੱਕ ਮੱਛੀ ਦੇ ਆਕਾਰ ਦੇ ਇੱਕ ਗੰਢ ਨਾਲ ਇੱਕ ਚੌਥਾਈ ਮੰਗਦਾ ਸੀ। ਕੰਮ ਲੱਭਣ ਲਈ ਬੱਸ ਦੀ ਸਵਾਰੀ ਲਈ ਇੱਕ ਚੌਥਾਈ। ਦਿਨਾਂ ਅਤੇ ਤਿਮਾਹੀਆਂ ਦੀ ਇੱਕ ਸਥਿਰ ਰੇਲਗੱਡੀ। ਅਤੇ ਫਿਰ ਉਹ ਖਿੱਲਰ ਗਏ। ਉਹ ਕਿੱਥੇ ਗਿਆ? ਕੀ ਉਸਨੇ ਕਈ ਚੌਥਾਈ ਕਮਾਈ ਕੀਤੀ? ਮੈਨੂੰ ਪਤਾ ਹੈ ਕਿ ਇਹ ਕਿੱਥੇ ਗਿਆ: ਕੈਨੇਡੀਅਨ ਸ਼ੀਲਡ ਦੇ ਪਾਰ ਪੱਛਮ, ਫਿਰ ਉੱਤਰ ਤੋਂ ਪਾਈਨ ਦੇ ਜੰਗਲਾਂ ਅਤੇ ਮਿੱਝ ਦੀਆਂ ਮਿੱਲਾਂ, ਸਖ਼ਤ ਟੋਪੀਆਂ ਅਤੇ ਸਖ਼ਤ ਨਰਰਤ।

He remembers those days in Toronto when he lived with three men in a one room box reeking of despair and fried onions. Those days with one pot to cook rice in, then wash, then cook runny dahl in, then eat out of with four dented spoons. Extra salt to hide the absence of cumin and mustard seeds. Dahl and rice every day. Dahlrice-dahlrice the years slumped together. Those days when his roommate would ask for a quarter with a lump in his throat the size of a melon. A quarter for a bus ride to look for work. A steady train of days and quarters. And then they scattered. Where did that one go? Did he earn many quarters? You know where this one went: west across the Canadian Shield, then north to pine forests and pulp mills, hard hats and hard hate.



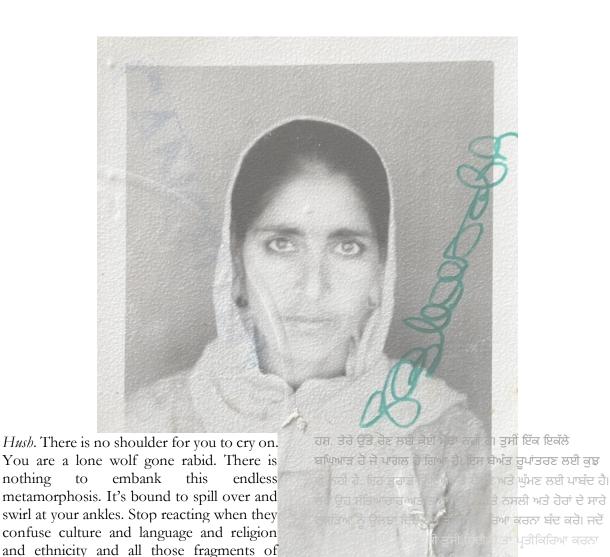
On Tracey Street, we picked rocks from an empty field. Piles became mountains that blocked the sun. We didn't know if that was part of the plan. We cut down the plum trees and giant oak and flattened the earth. We filled every crack with fertile hope, lit incense, and willed crops to grow. When father was away, we'd listen to Blondie, sway in the living room with our crooked bodies, momentarily happy and rock-free. *Colour me your colour, baby* knuckling its way into our heads.

ਟਰੇਸੀ ਸਟ੍ਰੀਟ ਉੱਤੇ, ਅਸੀਂ ਇੱਕ ਖਾਲੀ ਖੇਤ ਵਿੱਚੋਂ ਚੱਟਾਨਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਚੁੱਕਿਆ। ਢੇਰ ਪਹਾੜ ਬਣ ਗਏ ਜਿਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਨੇ ਸੂਰਜ ਨੂੰ ਰੋਕ ਦਿੱਤਾ। ਸਾਨੂੰ ਨਹੀਂ ਪਤਾ ਸੀ ਕਿ ਇਹ ਯੋਜਨਾ ਦਾ ਹਿੱਸਾ ਸੀ ਜਾਂ ਨਹੀਂ। ਅਸੀਂ ਬੇਲ ਦੇ ਦਰੱਖਤਾਂ ਅਤੇ ਵਿਸ਼ਾਲ ਓਕ ਨੂੰ ਕੱਟ ਦਿੱਤਾ ਅਤੇ ਧਰਤੀ ਨੂੰ ਸਮਤਲ ਕੀਤਾ। ਅਸੀਂ ਹਰ ਦਰਾੜ ਨੂੰ ਉਪਜਾਊ ਉਮੀਦ ਨਾਲ ਭਰ ਦਿੱਤਾ, ਧੂਪ ਜਗਾਈ, ਅਤੇ ਉਗਾਉਣ ਦੀ ਇੱਛਾ ਨਾਲ ਫਸਲਾਂ. ਜਦੋਂ ਪਿਤਾ ਦੂਰ ਹੁੰਦੇ ਸਨ, ਅਸੀਂ ਬਲੈਂਡੀ ਨੂੰ ਸੁਣਦੇ ਸੀ, ਲਿਵਿੰਗ ਰੂਮ ਵਿੱਚ ਆਪਣੇ ਟੇਢੇ ਸਰੀਕਾ ਨਾਲ, ਪਲ ਭਰ ਲਈ ਖੁਸ਼ ਅਤੇ ਚੱਟਾਨ ਤੋਂ ਮੁਕਤ ਹੁੰਦੇ ਸੀ। ਮੈਨੂੰ ਆਪਣੇ ਚੰਗ ਵਿੱਚ ਰੰਗੇ, ਬੱਚਾ ਸਾਡੇ ਸਿਰ ਵਿੱਚ ਆਪਣਾ ਰਸਤਾ ਖੜਕਾਉਂਦਾ ਹੈ।



ਮੇਰੀ ਐਂਗਲਿਕਾਈਜ਼ਡ ਜ਼ੁਬਾਨ ਦੀ ਨਿਰਵਿਘਨ ਉਚਾਈ ਲਈ ਕਿਸੇ ਮਾਫੀ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਨਹੀਂ ਹੈ। ਹਾਲਾਂਕਿ ਮੇਰੀ ਦੋਸਤ ਮੇਰੀ ਆਤਮਾ ਬਾਰੇ ਚਿੰਤਤ ਹੈ, ਇਸ ਲਈ ਉਹ ਮੈਨੂੰ ਚਰਚ ਲੈ ਜਾਂਦੀ ਹੈ, ਮੈਨੂੰ ਮੂਹਰਲੇ ਪਿਊ ਵਿੱਚ ਬਿਠਾਉਂਦੀ ਹੈ। ਮੈਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੇ ਕਿ ਉਸਦਾ ਪਾਦਰੀ ਕਿੰਨਾ ਪ੍ਰਗਤੀਸ਼ੀਲ ਹੈ। ਪ੍ਰਗਤੀਸ਼ੀਲ. ਉਹ ਬਲੈਕ ਜੀਨਸ, ਪੰਪ ਕਾਲਰ, ਪਰਫੈਕਟ ਪੇਟੀਨਾ ਦੇ ਨਾਲ ਚਮੜੇ ਦੀ ਬੈਲਟ ਵਿੱਚ ਹੈ। ਉਸ ਦੀਆਂ ਅੱਖਾਂ ਸ਼ਰਧਾ ਨਾਲ ਚਮਕਦੀਆਂ ਹਨ। ਜਾਂ ਪ੍ਰਸੰਨਤਾ ਦੀ ਪੂਰੀ ਲਾਲਸਾ? ਮੈਂ ਉਸ ਨੂੰ ਕੇਵਿਨ, ਰਿਆਨ ਅਤੇ ਜੀਨ ਬਾਰੇ ਨਹੀਂ ਦੱਸਦਾ ਕਿ ਉਹ ਮੈਨੂੰ ਰਾਸ਼ਟਰਵਾਦੀ ਕਹਿੰਦੇ ਹਨ। ਮੇਰੀ ਪਿੱਠ ਪਿੱਛੇ ਨਹੀਂ, ਪਰ ਮੇਰੇ ਚਿਹਰੇ 'ਤੇ ਕਿਉਂਕਿ ਉਹ ਚੰਗੇ ਈਸਾਈ ਲੜਕੇ ਹਨ ਜੋ ਨੇਕ ਵਚਨਬੱਧਤਾ ਨਾਲ ਭਰੇ ਹੋਏ ਹਨ, ਪਰਮੇਸ਼ੁਰ ਦਾ ਸੱਚ ਬੋਲਦੇ ਹਨ, ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਦੇ ਵਿਸ਼ਵਾਸ ਵਿੱਚ ਇਕੱਲੇ ਹਨ, ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਦੇ ਹਾਈਬ੍ਰਿਡਿਟੀ ਦਾ ਡਰ ਹੈ। ਮੈਂ ਉਸ ਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਨਹੀਂ ਦੱਸਦਾ ਕਿ ਮੈਂ ਚਰਚ ਨਾਲੋਂ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰੇ ਨੂੰ ਤਰਜੀਹ ਦਿੰਦਾ ਹਾਂ, ਇਸਦੇ ਧੁਮਾਕੇਦਾਰ ਹੈਲੇ ਅਤੇ ਬੇਮਿਸਾਲ ਰੰਗਾਂ ਨਾਲ, ਜਿੱਥੇ ਹਰ ਕੋਈ ਕੁਝ ਨਾ ਕੁਝ ਅਰਥ ਰੱਖਦਾ ਹੈ। ਮੈਂ ਉਸ ਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਨਹੀਂ ਦੱਸਦਾ ਕਿ ਜਦੋਂ ਮੈਂ ਪੈਟ੍ਰੀਸਾਈਡ ਸ਼ਬਦ ਸਿੱਖਿਆ ਤਾਂ ਮੈਨੂੰ ਕਿੰਨੀ ਰਾਹਤ ਮਿਲੀ। ਕਿ ਜਿਸਵਾ ਮੈ ਸੁਪਨਾ ਦੇਖਿਆ ਉਸ ਲਈ ਇੱਕ ਸਬਦ ਸੀ।

The sheer heft of your anglicized tongue requires no apology. Your friend worries about your soul though, so she takes you to church, seats you in the front pew. Tells you how progressive her pastor is. Progressive. He's in black jeans, popped collar, leather belt with the perfect patina. His eyes shine with devotion. Or sheer lust for adulation? You don't tell her about Kevin, Ryan, and Gene calling you a heathen. Not behind your back, but to your face since they're good Christian boys teeming with noblesse oblige, speaking God's truth, singular in their conviction, their fear of hybridity. You don't tell her you prefer the gurdwara over church with its bang-up noise and audacious colours, where everyone means something. You don't tell her how relieved you are when you learn the word "patricide." That there is a word for what you dream of.



15

nothing

other. Stop reacting when they ask if you're

Hindi. Maybe you are only language.

Acknowledgements

Contemporary Verse 2: "It begins" & "remind me one more time"

The Ex-Puritan: "before dispossession there was just soil"

The Good Life Review Best of Edition': "migrant wish"

Literary Review of Canada: "migratory patterns"

Subnivean: "after the aftermath of text"

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Thank Yous

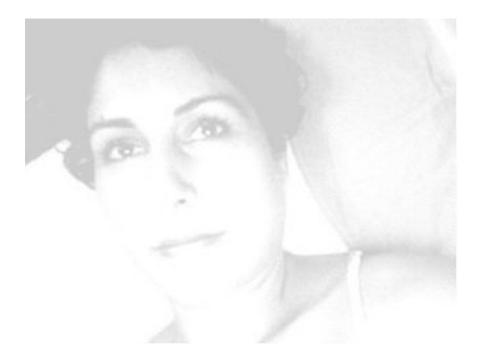
The world is a better place when we share stories. I'm grateful to have what many migrants wish for—agency, freedom, literacy, and resources—that allowed me to gather stories from dark corners, cast them into poems, and bring them into the light.

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ਤੁਹਾਡਾ ਧੰਨਵਾਦ

About the Author



Born in rural Punjab, Moni Brar comes from a long lineage of subsistence farmers and spends her time contemplating land, loss, language, and longing. Her creative work aims to open space for class, gender, and racial equity. She is the winner of writing awards from *Grain, The Fiddlehead, PRISM, Room, CV2*, and *The Ex-Puritan*. Her work appears in *Best Canadian Poetry, The Literary Review of Canada, Hobart,* and elsewhere. She believes art contains the possibility of healing.

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