

t h e u n f i n i s h e d w o r l d

M a r c o H a r n a m K a i s t h

Material Topography

The pale light of other bodies
fills your body,

like salmon eggs rising
to the blue crook of your elbow.

The other bodies in my body
flush outwards, with the still small wings
of songbirds.

What a kind and terrible thing it is
to have been led up to, to be

pregnant with the past. Do you remember
Lahore burning? The camps

sprawled like thighs
across the city of poets?
Do you remember

trains departing?

The flowing warmth of bodies
transfigured to the smell of bread?

Your migrations beat out

from within you, the journeys of your bones
and your irises. There have been
many ships and many trains,

many long walks taken
with empty pockets
to bring you here.



कर्पूरगौरं करुणावतारम्
संसारसारं भृजगेन्द्रहारम् ।
सदा वसन्तं हृदयारविन्दे
भवं भवानीसहितं नमामि ॥

For the Center of the World

The plain states here throw down their jewels and flats, and fold to coal country's ridged slopes, as belly curves to sex and neck curves to chin.

Muddy Ohio, dun and dim, segments each span and runs, runs full and freely, from this tug to the yoke of Mississippi

where each red run of clay and bright of lime and frag of gypsum will be, once and for all, accounted for.

The Real Lives of Others

Beth enters paroxysms of library-use.

Mackenzie leans her elbows back on the quad
next to Richard and Jeff
and thinks slowly of nails.

Steadily, Matt and Chris walk
in the bow orbit of a gull.

The lake is beautiful, here,
in an oxidized way.
Beautiful like baby carrots
glistening in the bag.

It is outrageous
and sometimes overwhelms passers-by.

What Was I When I Could Not Be Your Dog?

A list of equivalences? A list of something?

A squirrel dragging a bagel,
a flea market teapot,
another blue...

another animal:
vague and indecisive,
the opposite of a barn cat.

Was I scrawny or calico? Enameled
or nude? A folk-punk act
called Renegade Sad?
I was probably not that one.

I do not remember what I was.

I do not remember
the beauty or the ugliness there,
when I could not be your dog.

I only remember the white, fleshy
planes departing Midway airport
like so many plodding dragonflies.

I only remember the yellow sweep
of kitchen light, and a longing,
sudden and deep,

to be a swimsuit:
to be neutral and bright
and cleaned in use.

All Seasons

“The dead are together as pure souls.”

- Mei Yao Chen

I

I have been in Japan 34 days when a man jumps onto the tracks of my train. I am on the Tozai line from Nihonbashi towards Nakano. I am closest to him, just across a set of doors. I see a twitching arm pointing up, a narrow run of blood.

I am sorry for my indiscretions. For the people I do not keep in touch with and for the things I wonder if they feel.

I wish to grow roses on the high central plains, to turn inward and rust as lost tankers in the bay.

The dead are together as pure souls. It is enough to be simple and to desire simple things.

II

The dead are together as pure souls.

Out in good winter, carrying that old joy in each other’s open places:

in each other’s eyes and mouths, in the little of their memories

where it (that old joy) clicks like brittle kindle.

The dead are together as pure souls.

I think we need new words and new fingers with tight nails to pierce the skin of fat peaches, to slint open the plastic wrap on those chicken hearts. There’s an easy joke here somewhere. I wake up underground and say:

“I’m alive! I can feel again!”

and laying there in the dark, bite my nails.

The dead are together as pure souls

turning over perfect cuticles they rise and look at their gravestones broken down perfectly.

The dead are together as pure souls

smiling their own hands’ webbing to ripe, blessed open.

The dead are together as pure souls

shuffling against us, here, against each other’s nothing. Carrying that old joy for us, carrying it on their backs and under their fingernails, in the holes of their cheeks outwards, like water, like winter filling open places.

The dead are together as pure souls

and they don’t mind being porters, we’ve joked about it, about getting them velvet doormen coats, gold-fringed fezzes.

“You know,”

they say

“we never really set us apart. I’ve visited the Artificial Life lab at Todai and know well the thesis that consciousness arises out of complex systems. But you are made of a hundred billion systems, and you make up a hundred billion more, many of which include us!”

so we break and talk about it (with hot chocolate), our particles banging together. Our old

joy clacking together, like river rocks

drifting downstream.

Constant Pleasure

It came everywhere at once. A plague of wasting. People get tired and die. It doesn't seem to pick any group in particular: cities, farms, the monied and the poor. Middlemen die on the toilet, in their white button-ups; children keel over on playground sides.

From what anyone can tell, it seems like the slump happens first, followed by a gradual and harmonic decline in functional neural amplitude and, eventually, body function. Before the slump, in most cases, there is a slight smile, a fixed turning-up of the edges of the lips, although scientists are unable to pinpoint a fixed cause. Theories range. It could be the first slowing of the maxillofacial nerves.

People die everywhere now. When my grandfather died, it was in hospice, in a room that smelled like dying. My grandmother kept sleeping there; I slept outside of her door that first, short night, after his heart stopped and his lips changed color and he stopped huffing. She went back to sleep, in the same room. I remember thinking: "How could anyone do it?" I remember the smell of a sputtering body, a wasting one, flowing steadily from their room towards my bed in the hallway and out the window above me. This morning, I saw a man die at マクドナルド, filling his cup of sprite. It was like that small push: the steady weight of cold drink from the nozzle, somehow bent him to its dull will. With the bottom of his cup, he bent over and over, until he was on the floor, and had dropped it, its sticky liquid soaking the back of his shirt.

Other than the smile, specialists have noted that about two weeks before dying a host of small mental phenomena may appear. These include perfect quantization (the ability to visualize quantity accurately, to picture 1,000 as 1,000 and 1,000,000,000 as 1,000,000,000; my favorite story so far about this one is an Investment Banker who couldn't stop laughing, before, of course, he remembered the Holocaust, and couldn't stop weeping), increased desire for touch, intense love of children, and an unhurried sense of doom.

Nobody wants to check anything off a bucket-list, to go anywhere or do anything special. They may have felt attentive towards their lives' work, but they felt no particular stress about finishing it. They might vaguely gesture at the final chapter of their novel, or reveal to their children - *You know... I always wanted to be a composer* - but it didn't keep them. The Chairwoman of the UN's Committee on the Rights of Women and Girls proposed renaming women as Men 2.0. It would be easier, she thought. The dying are nothing if not practical. She was noticed, two weeks later, by the fastidious crew of a noodle-joint, who were used to looking out for customers in her position. They shuffled her off to a backroom, discreetly alerted the municipal morgue. When I graduated, my University's Dean gently shook his fist and said: "I just think everyone deserves an education, I just think everyone deserves it," and paused to collect himself. We debated if it was a sign. He held on for four weeks, or, it was just him, and he was first struck two weeks later. I used to mourn my friends when they died. I hold them in my head, roll them over still, but it feels different now. We trundle through the land of the living. We ball up our coats and take the subway in the rain.

In マクドナルド, I went up to him. I thought (it's stupid): *the back of his shirt in a pool of cool, bubbly liquid, it must be nice*. It reminded me of playing tennis with my dad, him pouring ice water down my back after a drill: that slow movement from absolute cold to pleasure, the look in his eyes holding a racket and a ball. So I went up to him. His lips pursed and drifted up. His eyes closed, but his head held still. I could see his heartbeat in his pale eyelids. The sprite under my knees warmed on the linoleum. "What is it like?" I asked him.

He said, "I can't tell you."

After Tamil Sangam Poetry

The last fruits
have hardened and fallen
from the slender trees
outside my window.
Crows carry their seeds
leagues across the flat-land.

Does he think of me in the mountains
breathing my ghost into the cold air?

(the girl to her friend upon her lover's departure)

My mind has become a mud-alley
strewn with thin and brittle reeds
stirred by the cold winds.

(the boy to his father after restless travel)

Ice bloomed in slow cracks.
Even dark birds averted their eyes
from her golden freckles.
The trees, freed of their leaves,
fashioned marriage-clothes from the snow.

(the old man speaking of his wife's return from her natal
place)



P o e m A f t e r I n s c r i p t i o n s o n M i n i a t u r e P a i n t i n g s i n J a i p u r ' s A l b e r t H a l l M u s e u m

" R a g i n i A s a v a r i i s a t r i b a l g i r l , w h o p l a y s w i t h s n a k e s . "

No one is loved the way I am loved my dear this night stretches a thin skein across my soft palette and in a rush of bees and vipers ruptures into another tongue:

" T h e m i n d a d v i s e s a g a i n s t f a l l i n g p r e y t o i l l u s i o n i m p e l l e d b y y o u t h , b e a u t y , a n d t h e s e n s e s . "

I w i l l c u r v e y o u t o t h e r o o f o f m y m o u t h .

I will tie you down, my second, l e s s e r l o v e r ,

t h e w a y i t w a s y o u t o o k m e b y t h e w r i s t

and showed me: a fox, a crow, a w i n t e r t h i n g s p i t t i n g –

 a p l a c e f o r f a l s e e m e r a l d s w h e r e y o u k n o t t e d m y h a i r .

"Kamandki professes her helplessness in the face of the king's decision to marry Malti to his friend, who she compares to the lunar node Rahu about to eclipse Malti's moon."

s h o v e y o u r n o s e i n t h e d i r t

 s h o v e y o u r n o s e i n t h e d i r t

 s h o v e y o u r n o s e i n t h e d i r t

 s h o v e n t h e d i r t

b r i g h t s & f e e l e r s & t h i g h s a l l w a

i n t o y o u r f l o c k m o o n s

 i s y o u r t e n d i n g :

t h e y f o p l a i n .

" R a d h a i s t o l d t h a t K r i s

Time is that gallery y e r a l l y w i t h t h e G o p i e s . "

i n t h e m o r n e r e d h o w b i r d s f u c k ;

t w o s m a l l t h e m i r r o r

" L u s t s a y s t h o s e w h o s e h e a r t s a r e

I n t h e d u s t y m a r e o f w a n t i n g y o u

 t h e w a y I a l w a y r e c e s s e d l i g h t i n g ,

 a g o t c h .

W a n t i n g i s t h e f i r s t s t o m a c h o f t h i s w o r l d .

T h e s e c o n d i s m e m o r y .

" K n o w i n g t h a t t h e e n d i s c e r t a i n , m a n f a c e s m a n y p e r i l s . "

I l o v e o n l y m e n w h o m o v e l i k e m a r s h - b i r d s o v e r t h e w a t e r

d i v i n g l o w i n t o t h i n s h e e t s w i t h t h i n l i m b s a n d e a g e r e y e s

 t o s t o p t h e i r b r e a t h i n g

 a g a i n .

" Lover's inconsolable separation being eased by application of sandalwood paste, sprinkling of water and waving of fan."

c h i c o r y & j e e r a & t u l s i (d a s) b a s i l & s a g e & c h i c k e n f e a t h e r s & c h i c k e n f e e t

&you alone r i n g

 e a c h p u r p l e c l o u d t h e t e a b r o w n e d s u n

 finally the peacock throne t h e h o n e y s p o o n

t h e g r e a t p a n o f t h e m o o n

S t o n e F r u i t

M a n y o t h e r s h a v e t o l d t h i s s t o r y b e t t e r t h a n I e v e r c o u l d , s o I ' l l s t i c k t o w h a t I k n o w :

I started in spring, two years ago. Homes near graveyards noticed first as winter thawed. Light, uneven thumps from below the ground. Gas companies were called, and then geologists, biologists, paranormalists. After, there was n o t h i n g t o d o b u t s t a n d a r o u n d , s e n d f o r t h e g r a v e d i g g e r s .

As far as I know, there was no “first body.” It happened all over the North Atlantic at once, Nova Scotia to Maryland, in a thousand sleepy towns with as many sloping, shady graveyards. Relatively anonymous gravesites were picked first. In those American towns that lay distant claim to the Revolutionary War, it was often a soldier of the times. If not, a forgotten drunk. Less often, an unmarked patch of grass that exhibited a relatively benign pounding.

I cannot tell you how it felt to shovel out the packed dirt from above a coffin, or to watch. I always imagine it in the cemetery near my home, moss-carpeted and pastoral. A local priest would be there, and the Imam and at least one Pandit, alongside a hunch-backed gravedigger and maybe a news crew. The atmosphere would be modest; sun would drown out the gravity of the gravestones, exposing their blacks to grey. Fat fluffy clouds would loll above. The soil would be wet and yielding, as it always is in spring. The holy men would shuffle their feet as the spade struck. After so many days of noise, and the numerous claims by experts that it had to be something, or rather, some things, moving down there, I can imagine only minor surprise when the ground was finally cleared, the coffin opened up, and the corpse, worm-eaten and in rags, adjusted its sockets to the sun attempted, feebly, to climb out of its tomb.

It happened in cities too. In Brooklyn and Boston, in the gray industrial wastes of North Jersey and under empty lots in Annapolis. But I was abroad, and can only picture it at home.

Eventually, overwhelmed by compassion at the dead thing’s stumbling tries, the religious men provided the corpse a ladder and it stumbled up, taking no notice of the people. They stood hushed as it lurched over to an old oak and slowly began to climb. It climbed like a child does, no, like a dog does, scraggling for purchase. Maybe they gasp when it falls the first time, but by the fourth or fifth, it’s routine: the surprisingly light thump, and the quick (though altogether unthreatening) reapproach. Finally, after what must’ve been a pitifully long time, it accomplished its goal, sat in the mottled sun on a thick branch, leaned back, and smiled a rot-tooth smile.

And so it happened everywhere. It was happening still when I came back. The dead only wanted to be happy. Well, not “the dead,” that term stopped getting used after we realized they were not zombies, they wanted no flesh, nor were they returned for some cosmic judgement. And, of course, it wasn’t everyone. Now, people say “invee”, like invalid. It popped up somewhere online and stuck. Rolls off the tongue.

Organizations were formed for the liberation of invees, the tearing up of graveyards. It goes without saying not every corpse is affected, some may be too deteriorated and some, though fresh, must be altogether uninterest in more (or different) living. However, the invees are harmless and cute, and most were freed in a matter of weeks by concerned citizens.

Some flocked to the beaches, walking straight into the dark Atlantic to laugh big, silent laughs with nibbling fish. Others, to the woods, to talk long walks and sleep under the stars, dotting those low Mid-Atlantic hills that, in the right light, could be barrows of some lost people. It became clear other. Each one, following an inscrutable inner compass, went recognize anyone. At first, people opted for custody, trying to regain escapes started, and the total disinterest was not only noticed, but sun on the sand, or stumble at catching tadpoles. One has become a w i t h s e a g u l l s .

Plain Honey

The world cannot be wrong.

Were we worried about diseases? Safety? Absolutely. lurch out of the family plot, only to plop down with a rather empty-claim they’re relatively sterile and benign (“no more dangerous than h a r d l y l e a v e a t r a c e .

There’s a big fat groundhog by the railroad tracks.

There are ducks in the pond.

My father, dug up that summer, set out immediately and plums – swell to bursting ripe. He moved through the trees curve. Every few hours, he’d hold one in his hands for a second, wandering chipmunk. I followed him for about a week, trying to the table for Thanksgiving (maybe with some rope) but decided to

Already, Hangnail Summer, all easy gravity gathers the world of thin sticks and low buzzes. Gathers the world and its dry grasses, as the arms of lovers gather each other, towards some morning:

No one has been able to track what fixes so firmly the determined. My father, as far as I know, never went to an orchard kids. Even then, it always seemed a cosmetic, seasonal thing.

some starting grey that thrushes out as a crown for orange light.

There are rumors of invees elsewhere, across the US to a pleasure-land, an Eden of corpses swimming in the lakes and once in a while, surface, of a great rebirth of famine-corpses from thing I’ve seen an invee do is pull gently on the tail of a housecat and then bark in surprise. I discount the narratives too, that it’s climate change, or some other harbinger of apocalypse, that these reanimates are wandering the countryside, c o m m i t t e d e a c h t o a p a r t i c u l a r l y s m a l l a n d c h i l d l i k e p l e a s u r e . I t j u s t h a p p e n e d , a s t h i n g s d o .

I don’t worry much about my dad anymore, about his stumbling, his desire. I have a Yoko Ono meditation app. It tells me: “Make a list of 100 unrelated things.”

There are traps some people set, hoping to lure loved ones back. Elaborate guesses at their purpose. Anwidow here built a whole fake beach with a wave pool and palm trees for her husband, a swimmer. My mother will sometimes leave out a few particularly plump summer peaches, the kind that melt to sweet nothing on the tongue. They never fall for it. They’re happy out there. By morning, the peaches are gone, the squirrels fat and happy.

Religions don’t know what to make of it. I don’t know if they should. People talk about church membership plummeting. I’ve heard of pastors saying the simplicity of the invees means it is not reanimation at all, not the dead rising, but rather, other souls (of animals? children?) taking their bodies. If there is a successful cult based on this theory, on anything to do with the invees, I haven’t seen it. They seem too simple, too single-minded and soft-hearted, to be implicated in a n y g r a n d , m e t a p h y s i c a l v i e w .

The government is still passing laws for the protection of invees. That as long as they don’t hurt anyone (which none have done yet) or destroy any property, they should be allowed to go about their business. The legislation is largely based on protections already enacted for endangered animals. The public supports it. A few kids, playing pranks on invees for Instagram views, have already been generally scorned, petitions for their arrest have been circulated, etc.

I saw my dad the other day. I was out for a week in Maine, driving along the coast to a new client, and there he was, stumbling alongside the road. I slowed down and drove next to him for a while. He never looked over; one of the first disappointments of the invees’ rise was that they never so much as look straight at the living. After a few minutes, he veered into a blueberry patch. I drove on, thinking of fallow, pock-marked cheeks, surprisingly deft fingers, and bright p u r p l e j u i c e .

I hardly used to dream, and when I did, I never remembered it. Sometimes, in a dry-mouth morning I’d try and grasp the last ebb of some other vision. Nothing came back but dim intimations, black shapes in the back of my head, behind my eyes. The night I saw him, I dreamed I was a grey rabbit in a stretch of humble country. I was chewing a dandelion stem when a mother fox and her brood approached. It locked blue eyes with mine, smiled a fox smile, and trotted a w a y , c u b s t r a i l i n g b e h i n d .

I dream often now. Sometimes of swimming with whales in the Pacific, their dark masses like gathering stormclouds, or of ornately decorated cottages in towns I’ve never known. Once, of my bedroom door slowly opening, and a deep smell of earth, of cornhusks and loam, a rain-swollen river spilling through. They come most thickly with the last strokes of August, when wet heat lifts the first fall rot from the swamps all over New Jersey, and the rich smell of d e c o m p o s i t i o n f i l l s t h e a i r , s t i r r e d g e n t l y b y t h e f i r e f l i e s .

Forty-One Views of the Fight Between General Grievous and Obi-Wan Kenobi in Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith

The eros of tan
light-touched bodies and bodies.
Roger Roger. Oh!

All brown and beige, my
liege, the Christ-like redeemer
of two desert names.

A coughing machine.
A frog in a suit. A scale
poking into light.

Long hair was so in.
Were you a sex object, Ben?
I don't remember.

General Grievous,
your satellite ears pan out:
roses in morning.

The nimble jump back,
Ben, the saber flaring live.
You look so young here.

Grievous, of four arms
and four stolen things, like some
strange Kabbalah text.

Hanging, your hair sways
idly in the breeze. Do you
breath here? Do you fall?

The white-silver strokes,
the bulging green organ sack.
The light, falling West.

My girlfriend's bike, crushed
by an icicle. And you,
Obi, steely eyed.

Supremacy dawns.
We will all be lizards. And
maybe robots too.

When you burst his guts
you win another right, Ben:
To fear, to suffer.

I am all guts. No
stomach, no liver, no eyes,
no lips, no gums. None.

Chicago, you fuck
er, you dipshit city. I'm
sorry, I'm sorry.

Dancer-thing, thing-of-
bugs-and-beetles-and-metal.
For sixteen years, dance.

I had the lego
of you and the mount. I spent
days stroking its mane.

The love in it all!
The cough, a spare change sputter.
That big stupid wheel.

I remember the
projector screen, my dad. I
think he liked this one.

Did he? I can't place
it. The love in the air, in
the bright antennae.

You two quarrelers!
Kiss and make up. No more this
मैं मैं तू तू. वा!

Swinging wildly,
you charge. A frigate. A tank.
A mother in white.

And Ben, back-flipping
callously. Your son will leave.
He will kill for love.

Independence! The
Invisible Hand, flagship
of the cruel general.

I watch this muted
in class sometimes. I don't know
why I think of you.

General Grievous!
You never thought: "My name, it's
perfect for haiku."

The youngest member
of the Jedi Council. Not
here. Not by your side.

Wrath smells of pennies,
and bodies and spilt fluids.
It drifts on the wind.

Do you dream in broad
daylight of your dead wife, Ben?
Of his flowing hair?

Thorny and horny
and ornery and boring
are we, General.

You and I, Ben, may
practice forgetting. May cowl
our heads from the sun.

The world is a room
with another room through it.
And a droid, somewhere.

Where are we that there
is no sweat on your brow? No
stain on your nice coat?

Are we mirrors to
shine torchlight on? Or just hard,
cold bodies in wait?

I stumble, and must
look up the actor. Fitting:
Ewan McGregor.

Poetically,
with beauty, your skull bursts out
in flames from the eyes.

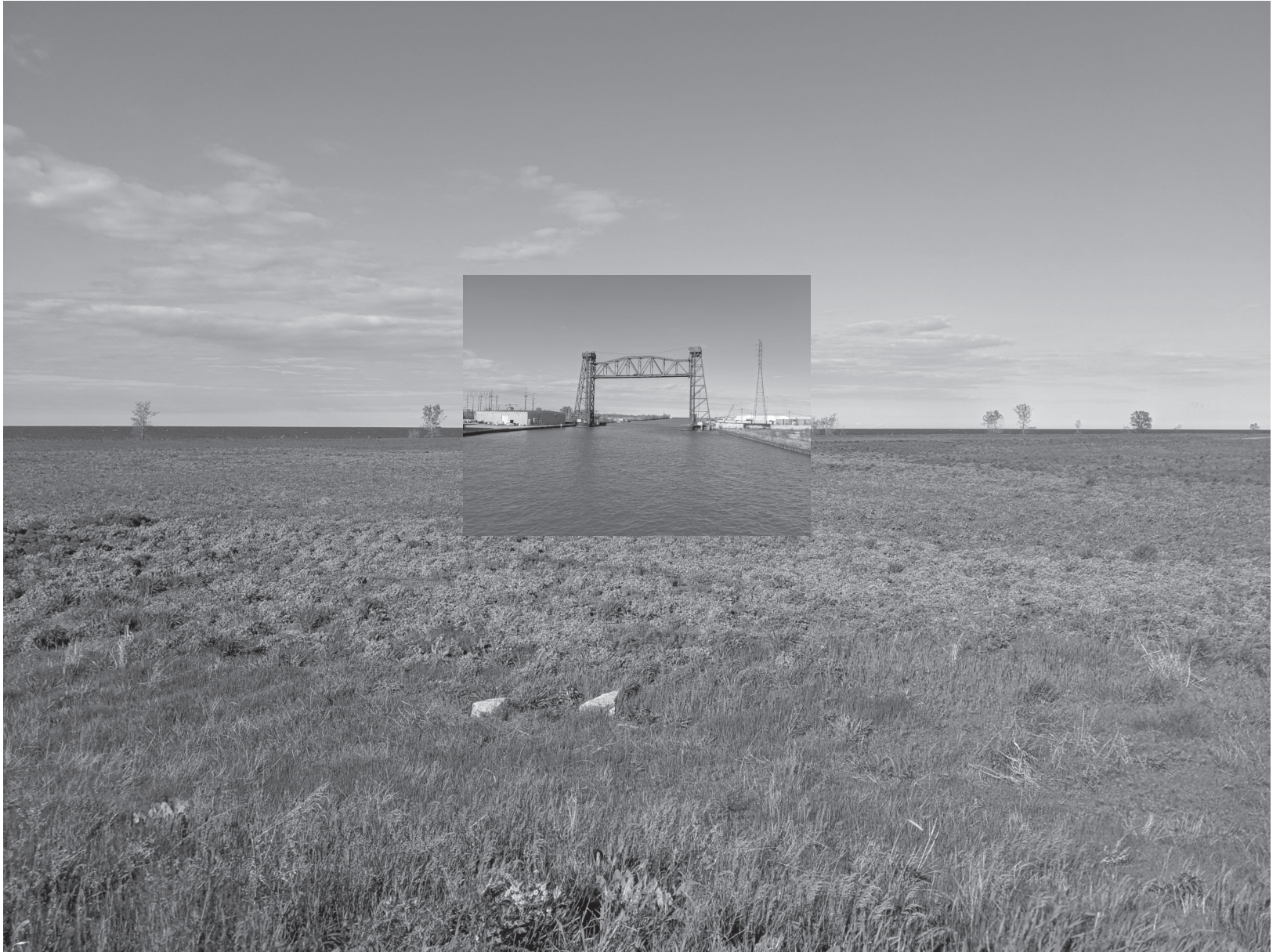
"So uncivilized."
You Colonizer dick. You
unlearner of life.

Is it still good? Was
it ever good? It's joyous.
It's a loving thing.

Do you need joy, Ben
Kenobi? Do you need sex?
Do you drink coffee?

Does it matter? At
the end, we clatter and fall
and shake into bits,

cellophane-thin; like
the last colonization
of the body, by



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Process

This chapbook was created in response to research into the provenance of two Indian miniature paintings: the first, in the Smart Museum's collection, the second, passed down through my family. While differentiated by region, subject, and material, the works themselves were unified by the lack of information available about them. The work in the Smart, presented on the left below, had no information associated with it in the museum's online catalog, and limited details available in the object's physical file. The work in my family, on the right, had even less information surrounding it: we only knew it likely depicted an ancestor, and was older than my grandmother.

Through consulting scholars of South Asian art history, I was able to trace the Smart's miniature painting to early 1800s, pre-Vaishnavite Rajasthan, and discovered it likely depicts a courtly figure of some renown. While it is likely to have originated in Jaipur, I was unable to confirm or deny this via archival research. The painting in my family has a similarly murky origin: it matches my family's origin, as from the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, and fits in neatly with the accompanying style of Pahari miniature paintings. The subject is marked by the artist (who we can tell is illiterate, by their mock-Urdu) as a scribe at work, in service of some unknown customer. Additionally, further inquiry into the object reveals something fairly unique among miniature paintings: a landscape-sketch on the back of the portrait itself.

When I set out on this project, I knew I would have to gain comfort with a lack of information, with stringing together what loose facts were available about these pieces, out in the world, into a satisfying object. This is the essential nature of diaspora: it makes us tug ourselves together, build ourselves piece-by-piece from the old and the new, from absence and from presence alike. I could not have predicted the messy year over which this project would come into being but creating this chapbook has helped serve as a kind of anchor, a way of constructing stability and meaning in a time without much. This chapbook served as a locus for revisiting and retooling earlier work with a focus on finding meaning in distance and trajectory, an opportunity to layer the past with light.

