

# THE SIGH PRESS

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## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

Does fragility live in the space before we “reach an acceptance of multiple truths” or is it intrinsic to that very acceptance? Wallis Wilde-Menozzi’s faceted essay “Fragile States” touches many truths as she explores our issue theme, “fragility.” Poetry and a riveting Cultural Commentary, both by Jalina Mhyana, offer further truths. And exquisite paintings by Janet Gorzegno are at once delicate and bold, tenuous and concrete, interior and manifest.

We’ve had some great feedback from our Ampersand 11 interview with Wilde-Menozzi. We hope you’ll take a few minutes to read it if you haven’t yet. Please look for our next Ampersand interview in late winter with San Francisco-based writer Mark Wallace and remember to visit [thesighpress.com](http://thesighpress.com) for our next issue theme and submission deadline. We post at least three times a week on our Facebook page.

Mundy Walsh & Lyall Harris

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A QUESTION, The Sigh Press



JANET GORZEGNO



CELEBRANT

,

THE CRY CATCHER

JALINA MHYANA

On my bedside, a divorce  
gift: diminutive bottle  
to pour my grief in—

Victorian vessel for tears,  
midwife to despair.

*Lacrimosa*, a Latin  
word that tastes of salt.

I'm shit at this,  
aiming my grief into  
the dainty mouth of it like a boy  
learning to piss within the rim.  
My ache dribbles  
down the sides  
and into a palm.

Crying into the neck  
is difficult as pumping milk  
into two-ounce bottles. I stopped  
nursing when my girls bit.

When tears have teeth,  
I'll wean them.

This is eternal, though  
they say mourning ends  
when the bottle dries.  
Evaporation is the finish line  
of a broken heart.

I think of the water cycle,  
something about the ocean,  
vapor, clouds, rain.

A circle of arrows.

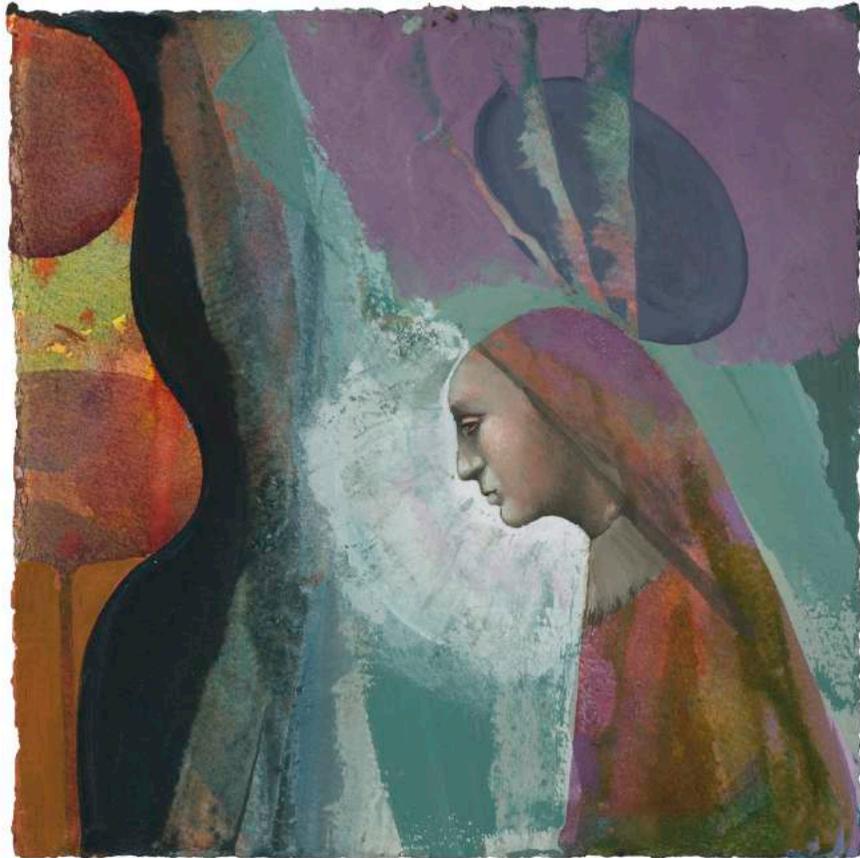
How it all starts again,  
the breasts engorge, tide-line  
of salmon skin.

My eyes are caught on  
bloodshot coral.

Waves wane then  
find their strength again,  
blankets up to my chin.

How do we grieve?  
There is no woven hair,  
no skulls or onyx pins.  
No X's on the calendar.

I feign levity but dream  
of condolences limned in jet,  
my arm ribboned in  
black tourniquet.



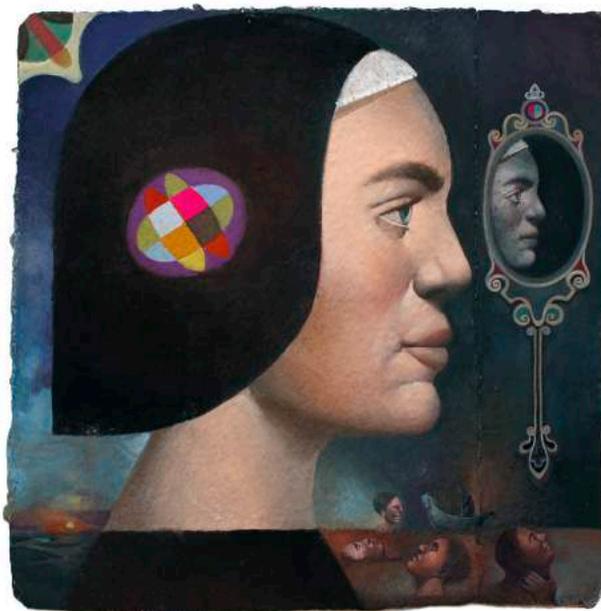
ANNUNCIATION

[ ]

FRAGILE STATES

WALLIS WILDE-MENOZZI

A friend has asked me to write on the topic “Fragile States.” For some years, writing has become polemic—a cacophony of burning volleys, with spectators crying foul and kill the referee. Yet the moment someone asks me to write on a topic, I feel that is why I was put on earth. I can’t resist trying to make come alive what I naively think no one else has written. When all goes well, I imagine creating a small polished space, restful, where a reader might stop, surprised that her own face is reflected.



ANCIENT MIRROR: *CROSSING*

The number of finches chasing each other outside my kitchen window suggests fragility: their nests are cannibalized by black and white magpies that patrol the trees. The magpies have grown to the size of bomber chickens, feeding on urban decay and stolen eggs. I love the finches flashing their green and orange specks of color like small pieces of stain glass.

I rush out onto the balcony many times a week and clap my hands to frighten the magpies off. By now, they roost on a bare branch in the next yard. As I close the terrace door, I register the minor-ness of my action. Although the jeweled acrobats looping through the birches flit largely untroubled, I know very little has changed. The magpies control all the evergreens in the block.

In Parma, these past weeks, the electric company cut power for an entire day, then another, then another until our dependence on this grid began to weigh. We lived the uncertainty of dark houses without heat and the Internet. We discovered our short tempers as well as the compensating habit: thinking it can be fixed. *They*, whoever *they* are, can and will fix it. Unless *they* can't. Unless we are hacked. Unless *they* are enemies. Unless we are bombed. Unless flood waters knock out the transmitters.

These months, I often find my thumbs held tightly inside my fingers. Unconsciously, I am repeating what I did in mittens as a kid with cold hands. Now, my captive thumbs remind me that I am cold inside. In weak moments, I want to distill our present ills down to a basic explanation. Foolish as that wish for rationality is, it is very difficult for any person of hope to accept that the present is only a synonym for a cauldron.

Yet it is. The mixture in the cauldron bubbles: it boils over; it poisons; it inebriates; it doesn't stop because we tell it to.



CHARON

All around me fragility dwarfs my own situation. Tatania, the woman who helps me clean, is from the Ukraine. At age forty-one, she has had three marriages, and a child. She was beaten by her father, her husbands. She has harvested fields with a scythe, worked in canning factories, built houses with mortar and bricks. She paints her fingernails red. She left her daughter with her mother when the girl was eleven, and she sneaked into Italy. Without papers, without rights, she worked, changed cities, working seven days a week, sometimes twenty-four-hour hospital shifts for entire weeks. In time, she found a real job with a real

number of hours; she cleans office buildings now. She has a real permit to stay, health insurance.

Tatania has supported her daughter at a distance, even putting her through college, but her daughter rejects her as a mother. She has been gone too long. Tatania says she understands, although her eyes brim with haunting regret. She just returned from the Ukraine, where there is war. Elections were manipulated. There are few supplies in the hospitals near her village. Her friend had surgery and they slit her open from the neck to the pubis and stitched her closed with darning thread, making X's as large as half a thumb. Her scars are raw signs of how life there is degraded and cruel. Many actual states in Tatania's life are fragile ones. Yet something about Tatania is wonderfully strong and determined.



CROSSING

Guillaume Apollinaire published a poem called "Zone," not much before his manifesto "The New Spirit and the Poets," in 1917. Apollinaire, who coined the term "Cubism," understood well the effect fragmentation of society would have on art, by both depleting and enriching it. He introduced collage into his work, collage as fragments, and collage sometimes as "Calligrammes," words arranged as images: a heart, a stopwatch, falling rain. In the poem "Zone," written well before T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land," which describes a walk thorough London and then other places, Apollinaire's poet wanders through Paris showing layers and fragments of a society on the verge of something new, something that eclipsed the ancient world. Apollinaire was struck by the need to keep up with technological advances and accept them as innovations that could have transcendent value. Commenting on a motorcar journey with a friend, he wrote:

"The little car had driven us into a New epoch  
and though both of us were grown men  
it was as if we had just been born."

In his poem "Zone," the time frame is twenty-four hours and the poet reaches an acceptance of multiple truths by the second dawn: "there are Christs in different forms and different systems of belief" .... . "Let the sun be beheaded."

Soon after, Apollinaire was drafted into World War I and was severely wounded. Spanish Flu killed him in 1918, two days before the Armistice was signed. Irony, a very familiar modern stance, fits Apollinaire. The state of his life was turned fragile by an epidemic and a futile, hideous war. Art captured something of what was happening to

culture, but did not affect events that redirected his life. The center of his groundbreaking work defined energies in the new fragmentation of experience and knowledge. He identified diversity.

In “Zone’s” final untranslatable image, Apollinaire points to reality beyond any society. The sun becomes violently altered. Dawn has become or is perceived as a new state. The image of beheading, even by transposing the verb, (“Let the sun beheaded be,”) awakens a reader to what might be embedded in its irreducible proposal. The image of a beheaded sun permanently relieves this poem of the fragile state of art that eventually will lose its meaning. The poet found a way to reflect truth so that across centuries it will challenge us.



DARK ANGEL

With good reason, the phrase, “fragile states,” has a technical significance applied to real governments and populations on the verge of collapse. Statistical measurements determine the categorization: Government is toxic; subjects live lives driven by nightmare, violence, plagues, kidnappers, drug lords, arms dealers on the streets, guerillas bringing these states to a level of violence in which the human condition is about elementary survival. Pain is not measured per se. This explains why many countries, including Tatania’s Ukraine, do not appear on the list.

We who live in imperfect but largely democratic societies cannot imagine these states of fragility unless we physically and psychologically scale our situations. It may simply be a lack of imagination. Within our limits, terrifying contradictions face us. “Please don’t shoot me because I’m black.” “Please let me enter a bathroom that accepts my gender.” “Please stop selling plastic bags so that whales don’t suffocate by swallowing them in the ocean.” “Please don’t judge me by my burka.” “Please let me vote.” “Please let me tell my story of being raped.” “Please denounce torture.” “Please admit the seas are rising.”

Simone Weil, one of the most esteemed philosophers of the twentieth century, in her philosophical explorations of action and faith, used concrete examples for moral action. She was committed to empathy as a means of letting our spirits move on to higher ground. Outside of the beauty of her logic, in order to translate her ideas into practical actions, she made what many considered clumsy, utopian efforts to directly share the pain, fear and exhaustion of others. She worked on factory assembly lines, and was injured many times. She eventually died of malnutrition in a London hospital, having gone too far in trying to experience what

concentration camp prisoners were living. Nevertheless, her life's passionate search for unifying love and social justice shines so far that it touches our searches today.

Let's take a step back and use one of her examples. She pointed out that standing in line for a loaf of bread is not the same as standing in line for a loaf of bread in a concentration camp. And sharing this bread assumes different levels of meaning. An action has a context for its significance and impact. This thought (far less simple than it seems) has often helped me consider not only what action to take but how to weigh what it might mean. It is not difficult to sign a petition if I will not lose my job. If I might, the complexity of the commitment changes a great deal. When I was at University, sit-ins were common. When we were told these actions would become part of our academic record and follow us for life, the action became more serious. Inaction, indifference or silence around nearly everything in modern complexities, starting with a danger as perilous as nuclear stockpiling, suggests that much human inertia collects around the reality of fragility. Sorting glass from plastic from paper from organic is a virtuous and valuable task. How do we know what to choose if discomfort and danger deepen? What if we discover that our assumed virtue has generated enormous networks of corruption?



INITIATE

The fragments in this essay are materials from the present. Tatiana's red fingernails. The magpies swaying on the branch. Millions of bodies too malnourished to move. The artist's courage to name the beheaded sun. Science that we will never grasp, while we consumers use it. The critical decisions for the essay are endless. How truthful is it to join the seams seamlessly, without using rough X's like the Ukrainian surgeons, for lack of supplies.

Fragile states:

old people,

children,

the difficulty of communication,

the absolute beauty of a yellow crocus,

the signatures on a cease-fire,  
a woman's scream,  
respect for the fatigue of knowledge.

They need a place to be settled in the mind.

Unfathomable realities: the melting Arctic, the dangers of opposing  
a dictator, new outbreaks of Ebola, an iPhone with more computer power  
than that used to land a man on the moon.

I cannot write with closed fists. I know that I am shivering inside.

To be determined: the meaning of a loaf of bread.

POETRY IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

JALINA MHYANA



DREAMING WHILE AWAKE

It's been a month since my detention at London Gatwick airport, and I find I'm still deeply shaken by the experience.

The word *still* is apologetic, as if I'm embarrassed for not having healed yet. What is the shelf life of trauma? How long does healing take?

I was torn from my husband's side at London's Gatwick airport, sobbing, shrieking, convulsing with a panic attack while hundreds of travelers watched two guards lead me through the crowded arrivals terminal to a detention room. I was left in a locked room for eight hours with no charges and no indication of how long I would be there. I was fingerprinted and my prescription medication was confiscated. I was searched and interrogated. They said I could not have my phone. I could not see my husband. They told me that people who suffer from panic disorder don't have seizures. They told me that in their professional opinion I should just relax and take deep breaths. They told me they would call an ambulance if I needed one, but that I shouldn't ask them to because that would be selfish. They threatened me with a stay in a maximum-security immigration detention center.

*We don't make the rules, Ma'am. We need to be vigilant in the fight against terrorism.*

A month later, and I still go to sleep in a rage and awaken in a rage. Instead of cooling off or "getting over it," my husband and I become more and more indignant as the days go by and I surprise myself by shaking and sobbing out of the blue.

*Out of the blue*, as if there's no good reason. Language victimizes.

My husband Sean says anyone would have been broken by the Border Control's intimidation tactics – luring me into the holding cell by promising to get me water to take my medicine with, and then confiscating the medicine once I was inside. A *Private Eye* article entitled "Welcome to Britain: Poetic Injustice" reads, "Disturbingly...the immigration staff confiscated [Mhyana's] prescription medication, clonazepam, for a panic

disorder involving both anxiety and seizures, escalating a frustrating and upsetting situation into a terrifying and potentially dangerous one.”

It’s been a month and I’m still traumatized. Embarrassed that I’m not over it yet.

*Still. Yet.*

These words are harmful and shaming. They add to insult to injury.

My mom had a serious case of wanderlust, so my childhood spans the US, and as an adult, I became a military wife raising children overseas in Japan, Germany, England for twenty years.

The ground has always been restless beneath me, scrolling like a conveyor belt or threatening to break open. When I was pregnant with my younger daughter and living in rural Japan, we were just getting used to the earthquakes. The tremors were a frequent occurrence, like shivers on a horse’s back – surreal moments of rocking. The ground beneath my feet being honest for once, admitting it can’t be trusted.

I think of those earthquakes in Japan, the process of breaking, the planet cracking apart like Gibran’s immortal stone or seed: *Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its / heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain. I’ve taken those tremors inside.*

I grit my teeth and think of earth’s thousand furies; tectonic plates forcing ruptures, ravines. If our planet can crack open, bleed lava, and heal, then I can too.

I’m still shaken up, those earthquakes trapped inside of my body. Finding it hard to leave my apartment.

I count the injustices in my sleep, grinding my teeth.

Left, right, left.

My jaw walks a thousand miles of curses as I sleep.

One morning I found I had cracked a tooth, the enamel chip like a pill on my tongue. I terrorized the bathroom mirror with it, leaning in close to inspect my otherwise benign face. My smile is crumbling from the inside out. It's so sharp, I sliced my tongue on it.

I try not to feel like a victim but I'm falling apart on my pillow, awakening with migraines, sweats, night terrors, palpitations, a broken tooth. All because I dared enter England to read a poem for Poets of Peace on Armistice Day.

I try to find a balance, to situate my trauma on a spectrum from light to severe: my pain isn't as bad as so and so's, thank god, but it's a thousand times worse than so and so's. Comparing and contrasting perpetuates a cycle of invalidation and victim-blaming. *I shouldn't be in trauma because so many people have it so much worse than I do. Or: that person should buck up because I have it so much worse than they do.* As if there's only so much compassion in the world and we're all fighting for it, performing our hurts to a jury.

As if compassion were a scarce resource.

I'm done with that. When my skin is cut, I bleed. It's that simple. These sobs are my soul's hemorrhage. I don't chide my blood.

Healing is personal. You can't rush a wound or blame the skin's loud-mouthed abrasions. Collagen knits itself fiber to fiber as slow as it pleases.

My dad, like my husband, honors my brokenness. He says I've cracked open so many times, I'm all scar tissue now. I'm *indestructible*.

Is it possible to be so broken, you come out the other side  
invincible?

To paraphrase Leonard Cohen, are these cracks how the light gets  
through?

My apartment is dark these days, and I rarely go out. I make up  
excuses, tell my friends I have a migraine or a looming deadline. They  
must be sick to death of my depression and debilitating panic disorder.  
They want to have fun, go out for margaritas, yoga retreats, shopping, have  
their nails done. They don't want to hear about trauma, especially  
protracted trauma over the course of many years. Compassion has its  
limits, so I keep quiet and lie. I turn my sharp edges inward.

It's been three years since my deportation from England under  
threat of arrest and imprisonment, three years of displacement in Italy  
since I was escorted out of the country by armed guard. And then again,  
last month, after letting me in twice in 2017, Border Control assured me  
that I would be allowed into the country without any problems from then  
on.

The very next time I came, I was detained without reason.

In the past month I've received so many beautiful letters of  
solidarity. My story was picked up by *Private Eye* magazine whose  
indictment of UK immigration policy validated my rage. I also received  
calls from *The Guardian* and *The Evening Standard* who were appalled by  
the treatment I was subject to as the wife of a British citizen.

One of the Poets of Peace performers wrote, "My only regret is that  
Jalina was not able to share her work with us. We entertain the belligerent  
POTUS at vast expense but we turn away a poet of peace. I'm afraid that

says a great deal about this government's world view. I was proud to be a contributor on Sunday and stand alongside other anti-isolationists. We do make ripples. We must never lose heart." A British writer wrote, "I am deeply ashamed of my country. I speak for myself and my fellow citizens when I apologise wholeheartedly for the way my country has treated you."

Though I raised my children in England, and though I've lived in Oxford longer than I've lived anywhere in my life, I have to face the fact that I will never be allowed to enter the country again, thanks to Theresa May's "Hostile Environment" counter-terrorism measures. Apparently, the UK Border Control agency doesn't know terrorism from *terza rima*. I don't want to live in a country that's hostile to poets and criminalizes beekeepers.

My husband says, "What *are* they playing at? It beggars belief!"

That's it exactly. In British English, beggar means to exceed the limits of, or to impoverish. To "beggars belief" means to exceed the limits of belief. Or, to put a spin on it, it impoverishes my belief, or faith, in the justice of an immigration system that tears families apart in the name of counter-terrorism and border control.

It's been three years since my initial deportation, but I'm still outraged. Outraged that I can't live with my husband in his own country despite spending tens of thousands of pounds on visa applications and visits. Outraged that his country uses his tax money to detain and interrogate his wife at the border.

I'm furious that after raising my children in England for seven years, volunteering nonstop, and being an upstanding member of the arts

community, the bee-keeping community, the Oxford poetry community, and the Oxford University community, I am treated like a criminal.

My fragility has made me compassionate, but my brokenness has made me indestructible. If skin stretches and heals, imagine the soul's regeneration.

We may break down, we may break open, but as a fellow poet wrote, *we must not lose heart*.

?

Is fragility liquid, solid, or vapor?



ICARUS

## CONTRIBUTORS

### BIOS & TSP QUESTION

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS: Tell The Sigh Press something you can count on.

\*

JANET GORZEGNO, visual artist, makes paintings that invent for contemplation glimpses of the human; the human head in profile recurs throughout her work as a symbol for conscious awareness, memory and the space of dreams. Gorzegno also spends her time teaching art and making music. Her current gallery affiliation is Bowery Gallery in New York City.

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WISE ONES REMIND US that in the present moment, all is well, even as we face adversity. My amazing father with the sagacity of all his years lives life fully with remarkable steadfastness and joy, and I can count on being inspired by his wonderful example. All things worldly eventually crumble, but the human spirit perseveres.

, and

JALINA MHYANA'S writing appears in or is forthcoming from *The Southeast Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *CutBank*, *The Roanoke*

*Review, Structo*, among others. She is the author of three volumes of poetry as well as *Dreaming in Night Vision*, an illustrated book of lyric essays and fragments. Her award-winning work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

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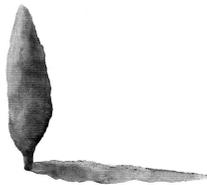
MY DAD'S FRIENDSHIP is my home, my constant, my candle in the window. His camaraderie and consolation are more reliable than the constellations—my meditation and medicine both. From breastfeeding my two girls in Japan to empty-nesting in Italy, from my ex's deployments to Afghanistan to a honeymoon in Denmark, my dad's candle lights and lightens the world for me.

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WALLIS WILDE-MENOZZI is at work on her third book with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NYC. Her poetry and essays have appeared in journals from *Granta* to *Best Spiritual Essays*. An American, she has lived in Parma, Italy, for nearly forty years. Through teaching, she shares the power of narrative and the ethics of using it to change lives.

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IT IS DIFFICULT to call it a stone, except for its half-finished face. I look up for it and sometimes it's caught in a tree or still arched over our house in the early morning. Its swelling and retreating crescents lift night from its silent dark. Once men landed on it, I feared it would be altered. But its light remained undisturbed. It still moves all night and sometimes comes as close as pressing on the window.



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