

# THE SIGH PRESS

ISSUE 22 • AUTUMN 2019

## NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The tempting body caging the ghost  
was leaving a world which loves to forget.

Our journal's 22nd installment explores "Legacy." The theme is captured in lines like these from our Ampersand 14 interviewee, poet Sonnet Mondal. "Family" echoes throughout the issue, with creative nonfiction by Elizabeth Logan Harris and Patricia Silva, and a stark Cultural Commentary of parallel legacies by Charles Halsted. Our youngest contributor to date, Savia Forsyth, delivers photographs that hauntingly resonate with the writing and quicken our perceptions.

We've been bringing you quarterly issues since our founding in 2014. Our next issue, Winter 2019, will be our last. We've been the Little-Engine-That-Could before kids wake up in the morning and need breakfast and packed lunches, before work, between other deadlines, late at night, and always for the love of bringing together talent with the common denominator of Tuscany, a place we've lived and loved. Our next issue theme, our last, is "endings." Please send us yours by Dec 1, 2019.

Thanks for reading our pages and stay tuned for future iterations of The Sigh Press.

Lyall Harris & Mundy Walsh

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SAVIA FORSYTH



OAK

[ ]

DERECHO

ELIZABETH LOGAN HARRIS

I travel on the heels of a massive storm. Below Culpepper, the train rolls through darkened country, stopping at every junction so the engineers can signal by hand. When the train finally pulls into Lynchburg, I wander down the dim platform amid the disoriented throng. I strain for a familiar face in the headlights of the waiting cars.

It's a hot July night and I'm sweating by the time I see my father's stork legs against the moonlit cement. His cane is only a little thicker than his calves.

Happy Birthday, he says with open arms.

I've just made fifty.

He leads me to the car. My mother is behind the wheel, the engine is running, the AC full blast. Enjoy it while you can, she says of the car's cool cocoon. Who knows how long the power'll be out?

Some parts of Lynchburg—the outskirts near the mall and the airport—still have power. But all of old Lynchburg is dark. And we hale from old Lynchburg.

Behind the train depot my mother turns down the cobblestone lane. The storefronts in shadow, the street has a spooky, desolate vibe. My mother slows at a useless streetlight. She indicates our usual route home.

Four trees down in that direction. My father gives a backward nod. The way home by the high school is blocked, too, he says.

The only clear route is down Hollins Mill Road where the drive-in used to be.

I miss the drive-in, my mother says. There's a word for the storm, she adds.

A Durango? she says. Or no, maybe—what was it Katie said they called it?

I thought she said, *Chericho*, offers my father.

But for the dark, my mother and I might exchange a conspiratorial look in the rearview. Though it's hardly necessary. She and I do not need to confirm our mutual doubts about my father's interpretation. My father is notorious for his malaprops. He once introduced a university official as the Pro-Most.

Whatever the name of this storm turns out to be, I'm glad to hear my father contributing to the conversation. He recently plunged back into the depression that has dogged him for years. And he plunged with a vengeance. Some days he lies in bed till afternoon.

The storm was enormous, an unusual weather system that cut a seven-hundred-mile swath from Fort Wayne to Annapolis. Lynchburg has some of the worst damage in the state.

It blew up, just like that, my father says as we swoop down the big dip past the Hollins Mill waterfall. You never saw anything like it.

I squint into the darkness, into the wooded berms and yards of old Lynchburg. I see enormous trees and limbs bestriding lawns and streets. It's just as my mother has described. Roof after roof is crushed. Garages

pierced, vehicles flattened. Powers lines loose, dangling from branches. Some hang in low swags like bunting for a sinister parade.

We pull into our driveway. As the headlights sweep across the yard, I see our once-mighty oak, the hard heavy fact of its giant trunk just inches from our three-story stucco.

Twenty-one and one half inches, my mother says. That's how close it came. I measured.

We pick our way around its top branches. Watch your step now, my father says, his flashlight bobbing as he speaks.

It did chip a corner off the roof, my father says.

This house on the Avenue has been in our family for seven generations and entering the house after not being home for a while is to enter a chamber of childhoods, not only mine and my mother's, but her mother's before her.

My father lurches up the stairs behind me. He wants to have another look at our damage from the upper story. We enter the guest bedroom. It is stifling. Out of the room's six windows, two are open. These are the only two screened windows in the whole house. My mother has told me as much downstairs.

My father shines his flashlight out the windows where an enormous bough is pressed against the back windows. The branch broke off the sweet gum and fell onto the roof of the back porch during the storm. We are lucky the whole tree didn't fall, he says.

Looking out the window, I realize that what little breeze might ruffle through the night will have to pass through this leafy protrusion before it gets to me. No more screens? *Really?* I ask.

The storm windows are still in, he says. The screens are still in the storeroom.

The storeroom is around the back of the house, dark and buggy under the best of circumstances. I can tell from the aggrieved look on my father's face that we will not be going there tonight. He would want to supervise it. And since he doesn't have the balance or the stamina to do so, he would stand there getting crabby, worrying whether we were doing it right.

It's not a big deal, I say. I raise another window.

I wouldn't if I were you, he says. We tried that last night in our room. The skeeters ate us up. Finally went to the basement, slept on the sofa bed. It's ten degrees cooler down there. Wouldn't believe what a difference that makes.

I hear my father but having lifted the window, I set about trying to lift the storm pane. I lift it but it won't click in place; the latches are sprung. It falls down. I look around for a book, anything to prop it open. Sweat runs down my face.

I hear my mother coming into the room. With just us in the house, your father didn't think it was necessary to take out the storm windows this year, she says.

I let the window drop. I turn to find my mother standing in the doorway with a blazing candelabra. She gives me that *he-wanted-to-save-money* look.

By the light of five tapers my mother's exhaustion is apparent. Her narrow face seems to have narrowed further, her small features withered, her fine hair, absent its usual blow-dried *umph*, clings limply to her head.



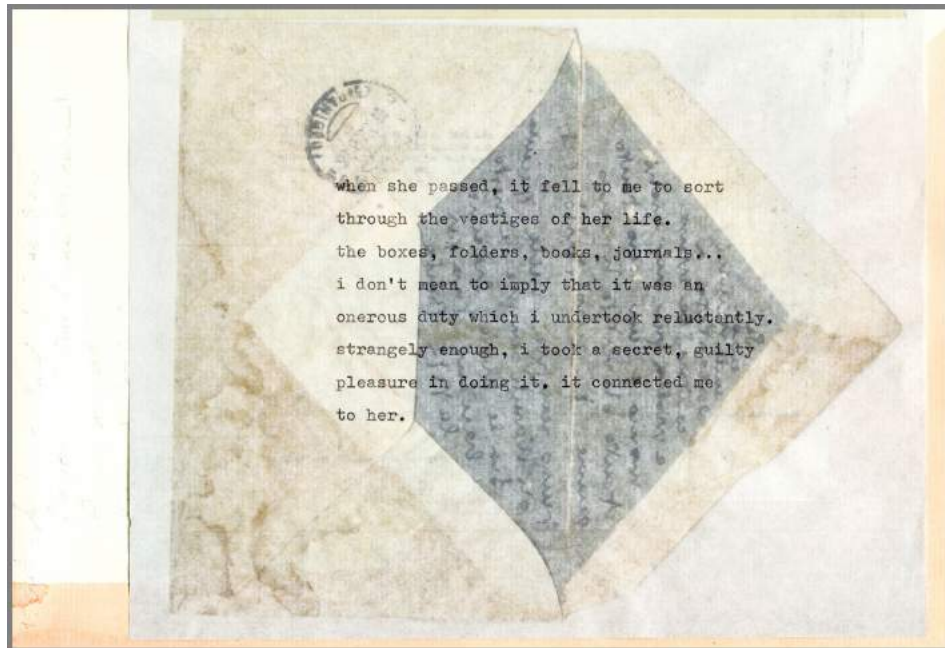
And yet she is rising to this crisis as she has risen to so many others and I recall the kinetic black-haired beauty who raised me: art historian, gourmet cook, passer of the Episcopal chalice, member of the book club and the quilting circle. Here she is, come to meet catastrophe with equanimity and family silver.

By the same light, I see the strain on my father's face. His shoulders hunched to his ears, his full lips pursed with effort, his gaze fierce and distant as he stares down some inner ghoul.

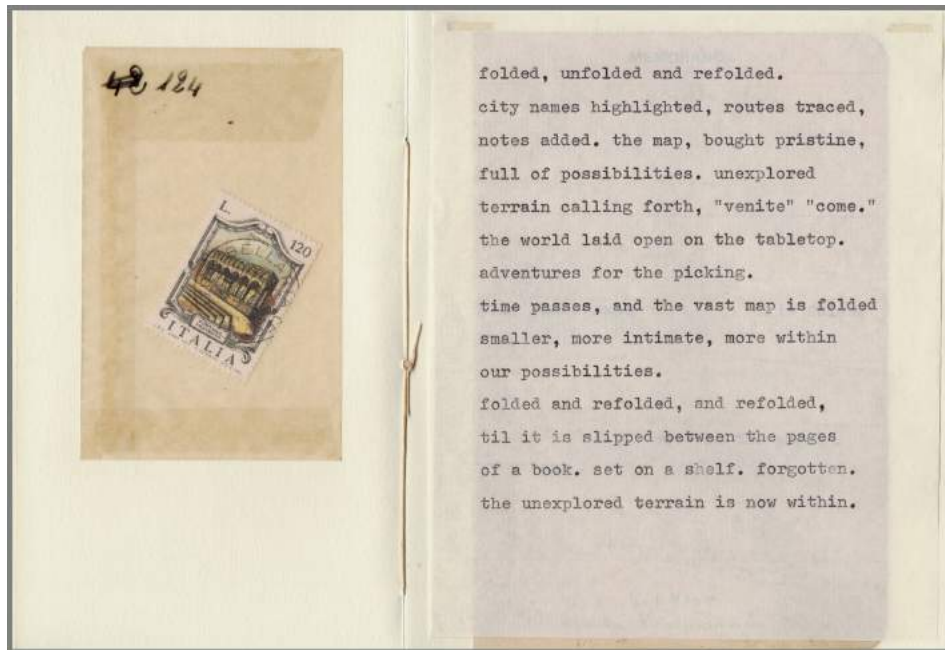
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NOTES FROM OVERSEAS

PATRICIA SILVA



the box is filled, stuffed, neatly aligned, one next to another, some tied together with old, stained ribbon. the first letter, the one that was read and reread. preserved like a talisman, a guarantee, as it were, that this would be the first of many. and so it was. letters from afar, notes from overseas, detailing the trifle moments and the grand events. a sharing of the secret and of the mundane. news that is no longer news. names which no longer have faces. bits of paper, covered with calligraphy no longer legible. clues to lives gone by. reconstructed, scavenged, by readers who themselves write epistles which one day will be but bits of paper with strange scrawls. void of meaning but to the one who reads and imagines.



day 22...mass at st. marco...museo capitolino...noisy streets...  
the entries are simultaneously detailed and inconsequential.  
an attempt to capture, to hold the moment. reports to a future self  
to remind that there were periods of joy, there were adventures  
lived, there were dreams imagined.

day 42...musee' cluny...lunch at hotel...stroll in gardens...  
entries, testaments of hope, hope that a future exists,  
that what is experienced today retains meaning.  
but when all that remains are the series of entries?  
when memory is lost, and the heirs to the stories no longer  
remember, or wish to remember?

day 75...hotel writing letters...lunch at bistro...  
the written words remain, alone  
silent sentinals testifying that  
i lived, i saw, i was here

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GRANDMA  
SONNET MONDAL

The flowers are moving.  
She must have whispered  
something to them!

The waters are murmuring  
She must have shown them a path!

I lie on my knees  
mystified beside her bed  
waiting for her to speak  
and deliver me from my despair.

Wrinkled skin  
pressed against the edge of an old cot  
hangs out to touch my forehead.

GrandMa is not dead. Her spirit is.

I am being killed by her ennui  
and her feeble longing to work again.

Neither am I dying nor her languor.

Reflections as skipping stones  
are leaping over my melancholy.

Why do I feel my years  
getting locked in a second?



WHEN YOU LEFT

ANSWER MAA

I still sense your presence  
around that door  
but a sound from this opening  
seems like an echo in the wilderness —

warning as well as bewitching me  
to reveal myself to the untraveled.

Still for my senses,  
like a deserted impala calf —  
I am hurling questions and calls  
to the woods drowsy in meditation.

Maa, I know you won't answer.  
I am therefore standing

soaking myself  
trying to find answers  
in the undertone of this rain  
falling on the tin house.

In a skirmish with anxiety  
I am awake — waiting



to meet sleep in person:  
*if she has heard you somewhere*

Answer Maa

Or what's the purpose of  
perpetuating the thirst of my eyes?

Tears are digging deep inside.

A canyon of remembrances  
is getting drilled.

Answer Maa



WHEN YOU LEFT (II)

## BEGINNINGS

When I read a book of poems  
I try to think of the moment  
when the first flow of thoughts  
gushed through its pages.

When I hear a music album  
I try to think of the moment  
when the first note  
of the first track in it  
kissed the muse of its roots.

When I walk barefoot, pressing  
ageless soils and gravels —  
I try to think of the moment  
when the earth was reared from ashes.

But, never do they recite  
the first anecdote of the planet.

My head like a shapeless asteroid  
revolves around beginnings —

to peer inside

the static stance of time  
and the state of mind  
that sets it in motion.



TOMORROW

## IN FRONT OF A BURNING CORPSE

A corpse was burning in the burning ghat by the sea.  
A dog was looking at me and whimpering.

Amid the flaming sounds and laughter of waves  
the sea seemed to be in a gossip with the skies  
and the burning corpse looked like an ignited cigar —  
smoked by the rolling drunk waters.

I felt like an infant ghost watching at its birth.

The tempting body caging the ghost  
was leaving a world which loves to forget.

Breathing seemed as trivial as the cries of the dog  
and life was no longer a doubt.

The roaring clouds above were like memories  
warning of its presence to the transforming soul.

The flickering sodium lights were trying  
to lighten the worth of loving and leaving.

All that was spoken and done

floated like vain lies over untiring waves.

I felt I was someone else  
and while battling to become that someone else  
I lost myself like a trifling dot in the infinity.



1863

*DADAJI*

The birds were returning home  
in the backdrop of an amber sky.  
Some kites were circling  
above their newly-built eyries.  
My house has always been a landmark  
for whom the whole sky was one path.

Watching them yesterday  
from a caged balcony —  
I was thinking of my *dadaji*.  
His image clear enough  
to lead me through forests  
through stories surprises.

I had a strange joy in my infancy  
sitting in hutments with him  
throughout the harvest  
overlooking lush paddies awaiting  
the clean sunny smell of stacked hay.

Today morning  
*dadaji* visited me uninformed.  
Leaving the doorstep

he held me by my shoulders —  
*you aren't that little child anymore*  
*you won't come running behind...*

I stood bidding adieu.  
He smiled    still aesthetic in his nineties.

Above — birds flew in an ultramarine sky  
to start their day. We are the same but  
our priorities    have shifted their course.

*Dadaji-* Grandfather in Hindi



## LEGACIES

CHARLES HALSTED

On a clinic visit she confided to me her ancestral African slavery, her people brought below decks in terrible chains to Trinidad to labor for generations for a succession of Spanish, British, French, and Dutch plantation owners. Freed in 1833 by British abolition, slaves continued to work as indentured servants, growing and harvesting the principal crop of sugar cane, which could be converted into coveted rum. In the next leg of triangular trade, rum was exported to the United States and back to Britain.

Coincidentally, in 1826 my fourth-generation forebear established the family fortune in a textile mill on the Merrimack in New England where children were paid in pennies to make clothing out of cotton, the slave-dependent Southern crop decades before emancipation. Rum slaked the thirsts of the ruling class, the New England aristocracy, whose fortunes were made on the backs of these children, and on the backs of African slaves and former slaves toiling in southern cotton fields and in cane fields under West Indian sun.



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ROSALIE

Who feels the reverberation of Rosalie?

## CONTRIBUTORS

### BIOS & TSP QUESTION

TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS: Tell *The Sigh Press* what your legacy will be.

\*

SAVIA FORSYTH is a budding American-Italian filmmaker, actor and writer-artist. And a volleyball player.

[HTTPS://M.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=G4POX-FBMIU](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=G4POX-FBMIU)

FOUR DIGS, FIVE ACES and an assist to a kill.

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ELIZABETH LOGAN HARRIS received the Mississippi Review's 2018 nonfiction prize. Other journals where her work has appeared include *Colorado Review*, *Conjunctions*, *Glimmer Train*, *New England Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *The Rupture* and previously in *The Sigh Press*. She is represented by Union Literary, NYC.

[WWW.ELIZABETHLOGANHARRIS.COM](http://WWW.ELIZABETHLOGANHARRIS.COM)

WHAT BECOMES OF MY WRITINGS, which I consider a link in a chain of collective legacies, will not be up to me. But I like to think that I will become a busy ghost—helping to hasten justice.

[ ]

PATRICIA SILVA has been a Professor of Books Art and Printmaking at American university abroad programs in Italy since 2000. She has also led workshops at numerous private and public institutions throughout Italy and maintains a studio in Florence where she creates limited edition, one-of-a-kind and commissioned bookworks.

Instagram: PBSILVA\_ARTISTSBOOKS

“WHAT WILL BE MY LEGACY?” An impossible question. I can only offer the following reflection. An early work of mine is entitled *I am afraid of forgetting*. In the piece, a series of short texts recounts moments in my life I am afraid I may one day no longer remember. As the work unfolds, it ultimately becomes clear that what I am actually afraid of is not so much forgetting as being forgotten.

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SONNET MONDAL writes from Kolkata, India. His latest poetry books include *Karmic Chanting* (Copper Coin 2018) and *Ink and Line* (Dhaulti Books 2018). He has read at numerous international literary festivals and his writings have appeared in publications across Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia. Mondal edits the Indian section of *Lyrikline* (Haus für Poesie, Berlin) and serves as editor in chief of *Enchanting Verses Literary Review*. He has been a guest editor for Poetry at Sangam, India, and Words Without Borders, New York. His works have been widely translated.

WWW.SONNETMONDAL.COM

*When I am here  
there is a world locked inside me.  
And when I am gone  
my world would roam the earth.*

(from Mondal's book *Karmic Chanting*)

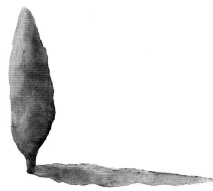
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CHARLES HALSTED is a retired academic physician who published over two hundred original research articles, book chapters, and reviews during his medical career. After ten consecutive online poetry courses from Stanford Continuing Education and numerous poetry workshops, fifty-one of his poems appear in thirty-three poetry journals and two books of poetry have been published. Many poems explore relationships between physicians and patients.

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A BODY OF POETRY that brings unique perspectives on human nature. As a former physician turned poet, I hope to inspire other and future generations of physicians to bring theirs as well.



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