



All The Rivers in Paradise

by Kirun Kapur



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book design: Maya Jain

migration stories

The Migration Stories Chapbook Series, 2022

Drawn from the community at and around the University of Chicago

Edited by Rachel Cohen and Rachel DeWoskin

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in Paradise

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“Who hears the rippling of
the rivers ... will not utterly
despair.”

—Henry David Thoreau

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the cabinet
of your dreams
and the sun
of memory shines
on willow roots and reeds.

Just wait,
just press
these watery kisses
to your own
clavicle and cheek —

under the dazzle
of dragonflies,
all you've lost
will re-bloom here.

Jannat

The gate has slipped
its hinge. It gapes—

We're a square of light
on a square of dirt—

Delight, I hear you say.

Every mourner knows
a loved voice lasts like lilacs.
The air is full of bees.

Someone is laughing in the road—
I turn my head to catch
the memory, to latch your afterlife

to my bones. Mostly,

we carry on
as do the willow and the fence
bowing to each other,

gulf of greenery between.

I'm trying to believe in Paradise,
so I make a garden,
traipse around the dead,
the might-soon-bloom,
speaking and speaking to.

Did you know in paradise
beetles bury each other
in heaps under the pear tree's
shadow-light?

Did you know
paradise is cleaved
by powerlines? Four
divine rivers, forty nights
of dreams, spiders' streamers

electrifying the air
from quince twig to rose hip
to telephone wire. Did you know

grown ghosts sob in paradise,
right there looking

at lilies? Blasphemer,
insect, crier, streamer,
root and post and stone—
I didn't know. I didn't know

it's too hot for English roses
and gladioli will be killed by frost.

I've planted this greed

for peonies, for reckoning
a place where we can meet
and I can double over
the rosary of dirt and work.

Kala Pani

A fish twists where my heart should be,
waits for the tide to climb high enough
to soak my chest, that current
abyss from which
two cormorants are rising.

Who Patrols the Borders

keeping the rivers from making a sea,
keeping the dead with the dead and the living
obedient to their beds and passport lines?

I lodge my complaint with the language,
pitch my case to barbed wire and weeds—
I shout down the soldier beetle.

What government can direct
the army of memory? The Cardinal
Flower raising her red flag again?

My Father's Hopscotch, 1942

Five rooftops—wide and flat— lie shining
between his father's and his uncle's house.
Five rivers in Punjab. His path spools out,
a conqueror, marching through the Khyber Pass.

First jump: Auntie Shara's wicked chilies
smirking in the sun. Second: Rana Bhai's old goat,
who gives no milk and bites a younger brother's ass.
On Naana's roof, a locked-up room, a sharp-nosed girl

whose only word is snakes. At his command:
a village burns, troops swim the Jhelum in the night.
Midway, my father stops, salaams
the black-draped Begums who come up to take the air—

They praise him as their *naughty one*, feed him
chunks of jaggery, never exposing their hands.
Who are you today, little son? Alexander? Shah Jahan?
Don't tell us you're an Englishman!

The infantry is restless. Rumors in the street.
Some rumbling, a mutiny: the East is lost,
turn back, return to Greece. Roof to roof,
he leaps, he presses on across the map.

The History Family

They left by train,
One bullet-proof vest between them.
My grandfather and his brother raged,
We can't leave! How can we stay?

One bullet-proof vest; eight people.
There are limits to what you can share.
How do you know what's worth leaving?
The brothers debated and raged.

In a family you have to share everything,
I can hear my father explain:
Whatever may rage between brothers,
A family shares what it has.

I can hear my father explaining,
When a cousin loved my bright red bangle—
A family shares what it has—
You must take it off and give it to her.

When a cousin loved my favorite bangle,
A mysterious fact was explained.
I took it off and I gave it—
It was lovelier on her wrist than on mine.

This is a fact of the family:
Even fate must be shared between us.
My grandfather wanted to leave,
But he agreed to wait and see.

He wanted the family to leave;
His brother thought it would all blow over.
How much are you prepared to see?
Whose fate are you willing to share?

His brother was sure it would all blow over.
Their neighbors had been neighbors for generations.
They had a long, shared history:
A cup of sugar, an extra rupee, advice about the weather.

The neighbors had always been neighbors
And now they'd become something else.
Scrounging up extra rupees,
My grandfather bought the vest.

No one can guess what will change them.
One day a blind man was found dead;
My grandfather finished with waiting—
He knew who would go, who'd be left.

The blind man had lived one street over,
Left dead, on the porch, under a spotless sheet.
One brother would go and one would stay.
Their fates split between them so cleanly.

He left them behind on the porch,
His brother, his nieces, his nephews.
Their shared fate shattered between them:
A family is just you and a mirror.

My grandfather's eight went to India,
Were there when Independence was proclaimed.
A family is a house full of mirrors.
I've never asked, *Who wore the vest?*

My father was there on Independence Day—
Freedom flags, banners, fireworks and a long parade.
The vest was saved for another day, for the family
In the mirror, that would never leave by train.

The Blade

first appeared
in my heart, a thick wall
of muscle, accustomed
to beating. It hardly hurt.

Then I began to feel it
in further regions, sloped
liver, the coastal spleen.
I knew it could maneuver

and multiply, laying waste
to my forests, making camp
in the gravel and fear. I tried
to explain: tent after tent,

a sharp army. Everyone
thought I was crazy. My brother
begged me to write it all down,
imprison my deserts on paper

we'd burn late at night. Then,
my body could no longer
contain all the heat
and the metal. There were blades

in the earth, in the sky, under
everyone's feet. We struggled
to locate our voices. Come,
we said to each other. Pack

your pillow and teapot. We
must travel even further inside.

My Father is Peeling Oranges in Paradise

with fingers like a pundit
plucking sitar strings, plucking
peel and pith, pulling away
the thin, clear membrane
of the world to show me
the birthplace of suns, teaching
me how to wait for sweetness
to be tuned and seasoned
with salt, black pepper, chili flakes.

Mourner with Tree

Backed by river and mud,
the hopeless fence rests

four pickets
on the willow's trunk.

The woman swallows each hour
that the long green fronds mete out.

*

Don't blame her for anthropomorphizing.
She didn't call the willow *weeping*.

Or claim the fence
wears *caps*, or grass seed sprouts a *head*.

She consults the always-thinking breeze.
Who knows the way to live

season after season
of wildfires, hornets, disease?

*

In the third month, she began to love the tree.
All the changes she sees, courting it morning and night.

Just this week, dark-eyed Juncos have moved in
delighted to discuss the afterlife of happiness.

*

Like a nail driven into the trunk:
the present. The branch

is scribbling out notes
on the wind. How many years

has she tried to scry
her own face?

*

She dreams of the garden:
moon flowers, jasmine, snap dragons—

She dreams of a painting:
a woman shining like a lemon tree.

She can't look away
from the almond eye, the tidy, little feet—

In the morning she practices
in the river's brief, slack-tide mirror:

she tells herself there's paradise
in learning the body's calligraphy.

*

A red and gold vine up the trunk, a chilling
wind. It's getting late. The river churns

in bed, unable to sleep. Her mind, too
is late and plated with gold.

The *I* and the *other*, always entwined,
just not the way she thought they'd be.

*

Who is the best companion
for grief? She's come out to ask

the tree, to listen to the low,
lush branches rushing

like a girl's voice in a wishing-well—
She looks straight up into a cup of green

where the barren limbs sprout fresh, bright shoots.
Half the tree leafless, the other half so new

it seems possible to be both brittle
and bedecked in tender chartreuse skirts.

The Urn

Father, the lilacs are dying.
We're all losing

our heads. The scent
fills the evenings

and the ones we love
fill cardboard boxes on a shelf.

My chest holds bag after bag—
an aunt, a friend, a man's memory

of a thousand lines of Persian verse
fits in a zippered gallon-size.

The days his fingers worked
the buttons of a pressed white shirt,

her scarves with ink and saffron stains,
his taste for fruit, black salt and syrup

contained. My head is a plastic cup
filled with water, jammed with bouquets.

The Mughal Miniature

You are the prince with the hawk
and I am all the feathers.

Who knew the pleasure
of being leafed in gold together?

Who knew we'd recognize
the script etched on our bones—

Alif alif. Here's a hairline crack
in the heart's glaze,

silk brocade inscribed
with the eyelash of a camel.

What a gem of a haunting.
So glossy and refined

are the tears of our ghosts,
they glisten in exquisite whorls:

ruby-studded sword hilt,
waist-length string of pearls.

Shalimar

It's time to cut the garden to the root.
Who will I be without you?

I make quick work of the end
of every stalk, helping

a whole summer surrender.
I imagine you

stranded in the eternal gardens
of Lahore, a boy in short pants

worrying the annas in your pocket.
You study the Persian rose

trained by Ranis, Begums, Viceroy's wives
to perfume the red walls of the empire.

Without you, the days keep growing
and getting mown down. In Sanskrit,

Hindi, Urdu, Persian, you knew
verse after verse about flowers

but were not much of a gardener.
You taught me names

by which the poets praise the season
for dying, you taught me to keep listening,

keep counting the meter.
You said there's always a refrain.

River

of wine—the dark one, the pure one, the glimmering one—Yamuna, Gihon, Nile—the one where god joked with the devil and no one could tell who was laughing among bulrushes and crocodiles—unpotable one, salt-laced one, the one where girls become fish or trees or patterns of stars, the one of hard clarity—Brahmaputra—the one you must walk miles and miles to reach with a brass pot on your head—the one scorched by a puritan sun, river where the young come to shave their heads and light their fathers' funeral pyres—the one whose banks are overrun with snow-water—Indus, Pishon, Merrimack—the one slicked with oil, with ash, flashing the dyes used by factories upstream—Yangtze, Zambezi, Mississippi—the one drowned by history, estuary, tributary, creek, rivulet, run—the one she swam across into foreignness—Rio Grande, river of purest promise, purest milk—Ganga Ma, Sarasvati, the mother gone underground—Lethe—Lethe—the river of forgetting—the tidal one, the rain-fed one, the one crossed by a swinging rope—Kaveri, Tigris, Godavari, Euphrates—the one where herons compose couplets, where ducks drone and practice sorties above our heads—river of the living, river of the living-beyond-death, river of honey sealing our lips, our eyes, the river that carries us to places we have not yet discovered we need to go.

Author Acknowledgments & Notes

While most of these poems were written for this project, three of them had a previous life. I wish to express my gratitude to the generous editors at the publications where these poems first appeared:

Mascara Review (AU): “My Father’s Hopscotch, 1942”
Broadsided Press: “The Blade”

“The History Family” and “My Father’s Hopscotch, 1942” appeared in my first book, *Visiting Indira Gandhi’s Palmist*, published by Elixir Press in 2015.

“The Blade” also appeared in *Aftermath: The Fallout of War--America and the Middle East*, edited by Carol McCusker and published by University Press of Florida. It was featured in the Harn Museum’s exhibit of the same name. “The Blade” was written in response to Moustafa Jacoub’s digital photograph “Syrian Exile.”

I am indebted to Rachel Cohen and Rachel DeWoskin, editors of the *Migration Stories Chapbook Series*. Without their vision I would not have found my way to these waters. Thanks also to Maya Jain for her beautiful book design and to The Program in Creative Writing at the University of Chicago, where this book now finds its home. I’m so pleased that this collection is in conversation with Felix Lecocq’s *Mosquito: a Memoir*.

Always, my love and wonder and gratitude to the ones who make me better, especially Jamie Cash, Silas Cash, Jim and Letty Cash, Terri and Inder Kapur, Mark Vanhoenacker, Mark Jones, Elizabeth Knapp, Fred Speers, Rachel DeWoskin, Mio Osaki, all my teachers, all the aunties.

This book is dedicated to Inder Lal Kapur (1929-2020) and is in memory of the many dear ones who’ve crossed the rivers, who are the rivers—

About the Authors

Kirun Kapur grew up between Honolulu and New Delhi and now lives north of Boston. She is a poet, teacher and translator. Her debut collection, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (Elixir Press, 2015), was the winner of the Arts & Letters Rumi Prize in Poetry and the Antivenom Poetry Award. Her second book, *Women in the Waiting Room* (Black Lawrence Press, 2020) was a finalist for the National Poetry Series. Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Poetry International*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Ploughshares* and many other journals. Kapur serves as editor at *The Beloit Poetry Journal* and teaches at Amherst College, where she is the director of the Creative Writing Program. To learn more, visit her at www.kirunkapur.com.

Felix Lecocq is a writer and copyeditor living in Boston, MA. He is currently working on his first novel.

About the Designer

Maya Jain is an artist and early childhood educator living in Chicago, IL. She graduated from the University of Chicago in 2019 with a BA in Theater and Performance Studies and South Asian Languages and Civilizations. You can view her work at maya-jain.com.

Afterword

We are glad and grateful to publish *All the Rivers in Paradise* and *Mosquito: A Memoir*, two new additions to our chapbook series, part of the ongoing Migration Stories Project at the University of Chicago. The chapbook series is our way of making a place for longer reflections about histories and experiences of migration. In these pages, poet Kirun Kapur wonders who patrols the borders: “keeping the rivers from making a sea,//keeping the dead with the dead and the living//obedient to their beds and passport lines?” She “lodges her complaint with the language,” and asks: “How much are you prepared to see?” Poet and essayist Felix Lecocq launches an extraordinary investigation of mosquitoes, spinning a mosquito on a ship, with “nowhere to go but around,” creating sense, “I pore over the mathematics, the geometries of suffering. I look at the numbers like they’ll drive me sane,” and navigating the concentric movements of working to be loved: “It’s all I ever do, it’s what I do, it’s the extent of what I do, everything that I am, all that I have, it’s a torturous and euphoric effort to be loved.”

Together, these works illuminate ways human beings traverse places, eras, and selves. Each book gives us bodies; in Kapur’s poetry, a head is “a plastic cup filled with water, jammed with bouquets.” And in Lecocq’s lyric essays, organs “tussle and screech and mill about,” as the person who contains them sits, exasperated, waiting to be beautiful. Both explore transformations from the most granular to the most profound, with water at the center, a liberator and a threat, allowing for change and movement, while also creating danger. Water is a marker of both damage and hope, and our bodies, like the places we make, are temporary spaces.

The Migration Stories Project began in November of 2016 as a project of the Program on Creative Writing in the hopes of providing opportunities to tell and listen to migration stories, and to help elucidate the collective history of migration in the community at, around, and beyond the University of Chicago. Over the last five years, the Migration Stories Project has created or co-hosted public readings, and has collaborated with the Smart Museum, Student Support Services, and the Regenstein Library. In 2017, we published our debut anthology, a collection of migration stories written by people from all around our community, now accessible at <https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/1236>. And in 2019, we published our first five chapbooks, also available through the knowledge@UChicago repository.

We are pleased to be a part of the Migration Studies Cluster hosted jointly by the English Department and Program on Creative Writing, which creates research opportunities for our students and fosters new collaborative relationships among our faculty. More information on Migration Stories Projects can be found at <https://creativewriting.uchicago.edu/>.

We hope these two new chapbooks inspire readers as they have inspired us, to keep reading, writing, and imagining stories of movement across time and place, toward hope.

Rachel DeWoskin & Rachel Cohen
The Program on Creative Writing
University of Chicago

Acknowledgments

The Migration Stories Chapbook Series is extremely grateful for the generosity and commitment of our authors: Susan Augustine, Felipe Bomeny, Tanya Desai, Liana Fu, Tina Post, Felix Lecocq, and Kirun Kapur. And we are deeply appreciative of the beautiful design work of Vidura Jang Bahadur and Maya Jain.

The Migration Stories Project has been sustained by the financial support and active involvement of the following institutions:

The Creative Writing Program at the University of Chicago

The College Curricular Innovation Fund through the Humanities Collegiate Division

The Migration Studies Undergraduate Research Cluster in English and Creative Writing

UChicago Arts The logo for UChicago Arts, featuring the text "UChicago Arts" in a sans-serif font. "UChicago" is in a dark grey color, and "Arts" is in a bold, red color.

For kind permission to include images, we thank:

Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; The British Museum, London; The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts; the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago; and the University of Houston Libraries, Texas.

We are glad to have the chance to acknowledge our inspiring collaborators:

The Hyde Park Refugee Project

Office of Service Learning at the Laboratory Schools

The Pozen Center for Human Rights, University of Chicago

The Pritzker Traubert Family Library of the University of Chicago
Laboratory Schools

The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

Student Support Services at the Center for Identity + Inclusion at the University of Chicago

The University of Chicago Library

Visual Resources Center (VRC), University of Chicago Department of Art History

The Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights

We are grateful for generosity of time, labor, and vision from the following individuals:

In Creative Writing, Jessi Haley, Starsha Gill, and Michael Fischer; at the Humanities Collegiate Division, Hannah Stark and Chris Wild; at Student Support Services, Ileri Rivas; at The David and Alfred Smart Museum, Berit Ness; at the University of Chicago Library, Andre Wenzel; at the Visual Resources Center, Bridget Madden.

Migration Stories Chapbook Series

Susan Augustine, *Jumping In*

Felipe Bomeny, *Leaving Xelajú*

Tanya Desai, *Dürer and the Rhinoceros*

Liana Fu, *Origins*

Tina Post, *Paper Trails*

Kirun Kapur, *All the Rivers in Paradise*

Felix Lecocq, *Mosquito: A Memoir*

