

Between Cave and Canyon

written by Samina Najmi | February 19, 2021



Year fifteen at Fresno State: empty classrooms and empty nest. I begin the online semester fearing that my efforts to gain institutional support for outreach to southwest Fresno in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement are stalled and sputtering in a new era of budget cuts. The virtual Democratic National Convention is on, its tone as somber as the threat to democracy feels real. Someone I knew in graduate school has died suddenly of a heart attack in Boston. America's death toll from COVID-19 stands at 175,000, and the Central Valley is a hotspot. In California, an existential crisis, an apocalypse. Triple-digit heat, rolling blackouts, and over 11,000 bolts of lightning in 72 hours. As I begin the first week of classes, more than five hundred wildfires rage in Northern California, covering an expanse greater than the state of Rhode Island, and leaving the skies above me opaque with smoke and thick with ash. Ancient redwoods, witness to fifteen hundred years of history, have died a terrible death. With 120,000 people evacuated, Governor Newsom has ordered all of us in California to be ready to go. (But go where, Governor? How do we empty out the entire state of California?)

Disasters on a scale too vast to take in. Fires I don't know how to put out.

Yet somehow, come Friday afternoon, I must tend to the one little flame that is my life. I have never lived alone before now—now that both my children have left for college. My writings have been anticipating the empty nest for the past five years, but I never imagined that it would coincide with a pandemic. No students or colleagues in the flesh, no café, no library. No family nearby, and friends isolating indoors because a masked, socially distanced visit outdoors is unthinkable in the record heat. This Friday, even as I have virtual meetings with Fresno State's tech staff for Zoom and Canvas help, conclude that my Kaiser Permanente health insurance won't suffice for Cyrus at Rice University, mail the vehicle registration sticker to Maya in La Jolla, and make the virtual physical therapy appointment I should have made weeks ago for my impinged shoulder, I know that I draw closer and closer to the cavernous mouth of the weekend. I must walk into it alone, unseeing. I'm determined not to run away from my life, but I am afraid.

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I place one foot and then another into the daunting darkness of the cave. There's no telling what rock might trip me up, what creature tear into me. I don't know where I am, where I go from here. The ground feels unfamiliar underfoot and my hand has no muscle memory of the craggy surface of the cave's walls. The silence threatens. Faces I have loved, that tell me who I am, are out there somewhere, but this absolute, untethered aloneness is the only thing that's real.

I recall the terror of driving east on Route 152 from Los Baños one winter's night in a tulle fog so dense you can't see five feet ahead of you. There's no safe way to stop or turn back or determine where you are. You can't tell if you've veered off the route because nothing is visible—not the highway signs, or billboards or any other marker that locates you in space. Not the dimmest of tail lights to assure you that even if you don't know where you are, you follow a road that others are traveling with you.

Eyes on the ground, Samina. Don't try to see beyond five feet. Because if you look up now, the immensity will swallow you whole, and you will indeed be lost. Trust the tires on the road, your hands on the steering wheel, the momentum that carries you forward. And know that the fog will lift as suddenly as it has descended on you.

Eyes on the ground. Surely, I come prepared for this moment? Think, what resources have I brought with me, neatly packed or randomly thrown into the backpack of the years?

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The therapist I saw for a few years after my father died emphasized the vital necessity of keeping the body moving. But I knew that already as a young teen watching my mother dance solo to Fleetwood Mac's "Say You Love Me" or Boney M's "Rasputin." I knew of no other mother in the Pakistan of forty years ago who did that. Ammi would insert my cassette into the player, turn up the volume, and go. Too shy to join her, I marveled at the unselfconsciousness with which she would twirl and flail her limbs, alive to the music and nothing else. Today I know that what might have looked like unconventional, goofy abandon to her children must have been an often desperate attempt to find meaning in the mundane. What demons of isolation was my mother confronting even before any of her children had left to study in America?

Now, the moment I feel the heart hollowing, I reach for the headphones my son has left me, stream "Say You Love Me" on my cell phone, and dance.

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In an episode of the podcast *On Being*, the sculptor Dario Robleto speaks in soft tones about memory as a creative response to loss. Don't I know the truth of this from long years of reading and teaching literature? Let me call it up now: memory activated with intention. Let memory show me that loss demands invention to survive it. And once we emerge on the other side of it, that loss itself becomes a memory to be activated creatively in response to something else we will inevitably lose some day.

I have memories honed from loss. Surely, I am strong.

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Like most students at Karachi University, I commuted from home. The rest of my adult years—American years—I was either married or had housemates, including my children, Maya and Cyrus. Having always shared a room with my siblings, I didn't know the preciousness of having my own bedroom until, at 27 years of age, I left my first husband and rented an apartment in Medford Hillside, the lone graduate student among Tufts undergraduates. The exhilaration of furnishing it in mauve—a small rug, a printed comforter, solid mauve bedsheets from Sears, a lamp to read by, and a boom-box from which to play Enya and float away on my exquisite aloneness. The gift of certainty that no man who said he loved me was going to smash the small things I held dear, in a rage exceeding all reason. Profound peace wafted on that aloneness because it was hard-won.

Alone. It had been a mere two years since I had left Karachi for Tufts' graduate program in English literature and suffered terribly from homesickness. And yet I had not arrived alone but had brought with me, on a spouse visa, the angry young man I had insisted on marrying while still a junior at Karachi University. For the first six weeks we lived with his brother and sister-in-law in the suburb of Reading. That meant a commute of two and a half hours each way to Tufts: on commuter rail and subway, green line to red line, and then the walk through Powder House Square and up College Avenue, to my classes on the hill. Fall in New England, beautiful as it was, sounded the warning of shorter, grayer, colder days to come. But it was the cumulative effect of multiple aliennesses that got to me—alien faces in an alien landscape, and I a stranger to myself in Western clothes and no break from the English language. My home, my family, all my frames of reference gone. And this was before email or text, when the cost of a phone call home was too high to entertain. Some days I would dial my father's number in Karachi just to hear his phone ring and hang up quickly before he picked it up and AT&T charged me \$1.22 per minute, plus tax, for the call. Just knowing that I was hearing Abbu's phone ring in real time connected me to home for vital seconds. That first year on this continent I understood the

line between sanity and insanity to be membrane-thin. If there's nothing around you to tell you who you used to be, how do you know that you're real?

And how did my parents do it—let their children go so far beyond sight, and quiet their protesting hearts because this was what the children wanted and therefore what they wanted for them? Those childhood Saturdays when it was just Ammi and her three children at home, we would have free and open conversations that felt significant. I remember them as cheery and light, but an image stays with me: my young and beautiful mother in her cotton maxi dress, having just finished dancing perhaps, rests her hand on the door frame, her voice shaking as she anticipates a future in which her children will be gone and she is left all alone.

We didn't know then that absolute aloneness would be my father's, who never remarried after the divorce. He was my age when my sister, Sadia, and I left Karachi, as our brother had six years prior. For most of the 25 years that he lived after that, Abbu sought meaning in the Creator he looked up to, in the neighborhood community that looked up to him, and in the accomplishments of his children and grandchildren overseas. Following retirement as principal of Urdu Science College, the big revolution in his life, as Sadia reminds me, was the arrival of the satellite dish. Now he was no longer bound by the offerings of Pakistan Television. Entire evenings could be anchored in a sequence of local and Indian dramas. It amused me that his viewing schedule wouldn't budge for our visits from the U.S., but he would be greatly pleased if we watched with him. Fragments return to me now—conflicting, but belonging together—of Abbu lying on the couch in the cold and dark night, the television blaring; Abbu belly-laughing in his bedroom, where he later moved the television, at some farcical scene; Abbu speaking matter-of-factly of loneliness chasing after him, to bite him to bits.

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Loss resists hierarchizing. While you're in the cave, it hardly matters how you got there.

Only three years prior to my arrival in the U.S., my family suffered the staggering of loss of my cousin Rubina. She was three years my junior, and we had grown up together, living many years under one roof. At eighteen, she opted out of life—snuffed it out with a knot tied by her own hands, in a room that she shared with no-one. With all of us around her, how lonely was she? In the Karachi of 1985 we had no real concept of mental health—its complexity flattened into two categories, “sane” or “insane”—much less any thought of tending to it with professional care. We saw behavior problems and attitude problems, and there was enough blame to go around, but we could not imagine Rubina's suicide. Her violent absence has lingered with her mother, who keeps her long grief to herself, the anguish flaring into visibility only on the page, in her sporadic poetry. But Rubina's intended self-erasure has also shaped the rest of us in our own ways, including the generation we raise

after us, the nieces and nephews Rubina never knew. That includes my firstborn, Maya Bina, whose name echoes her Rubina Khala's, and whose choice of clinical psychology as a major in college is prompted in part by this family legacy of loss.

How did we survive it?

Did we survive it?

The family that has endured without Rubina is, for better and worse, not the same family. Recast in the kiln of memory, our glass lives, molten, have flowed into the void to assume unintended forms. But if we can withstand so agonizing a transformation, what matters the crucible of an inevitable empty nest? Rubina, who had been admitted to Smith College in Massachusetts with financial aid that's so hard to come by for an international student, would have been the first girl in our family to study in the U.S. On that pitiless June afternoon as her body was being carried out of her parents' front porch amid a throng of family and friends, the mail carrier handed me a big white envelope from Smith College, addressed to Rubina Najmi. I stared at the letters, struck by the absurd irony that they no longer referred to a living person. Rubina never left for college, as Maya and Cyrus have. In our family we don't take for granted that our children will turn nineteen.

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A month after I began writing my way through the cavernous unknown, I had to flee from the smoke of the Creek Fire burning in Shaver Lake, just an hour northeast of Fresno. I didn't lose my home to the wildfire as a colleague of mine did who lived in the Sierra Nevada foothills, and I didn't have to be evacuated as a student of mine had to, who kept going back to help extended family, neighbors, and livestock out of there while he was based in a temporary shelter in Fresno. But the smoke was making me sick despite my sealed, airconditioned condo in the city. Taking advantage of the portability of online teaching, for a couple of weeks I am nestled amid close family in San Diego, in the home of my aunt Talat—my Khalammi, the poet, Rubina's mother. After thirty years of scattered lives, my family is concentrated here, including Maya, who goes to UC San Diego. On Friday evening, Khalammi's younger daughter, Sheba, wants us all to see the sun setting over the canyon in the neighborhood where my mother lives with Sadia and her family.

There's 19 and then there's 79. Ammi is a buoyant, youthful, forward-looking elder, though her body often refuses to carry her. In Pakistan, she broke molds and blazed trails for ensuing generations—not just in the family, but for all the students in her care in the school she founded in her early thirties.

And she danced.

At a moderate pace, the canyon is a five-minute walk away, some of it steep

and uneven, but Ammi wants to test the strength of her legs and walk the distance herself instead of letting Sheba drive her. Cane and sneakers, she places one tentative foot before the other as we—daughter, niece, and sister—slow our pace to match hers. We take photos to document the rare moment of Ammi's excursion and our togetherness on the sidewalk. At one point my mother, in her teal top and black pants, and hair pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail, passes under an arch of bougainvillea across from a little bench. She is framed by its fuchsia splendor. Even in slow motion it's a fleeting moment, seized only by my cell-phone camera for a digital eternity.

By the time we arrive at the canyon, able-bodied people, forced by the pandemic to take life at a slower pace, have gathered on their feet and on bikes to see the sun go down. They are oblivious, as Ammi can not be, to the absence of benches around them. She watches the peaching sky for a minute or two before she says, in a voice as shaky as her legs have become, that she can't stay for the sunset; we must see it for her.

"Where's that bench?" she asks in Urdu. "It had seemed so much closer."

I see Ammi turn her back on the setting sun and make her way toward that elusive bench. Trees line the sidewalk, some sporting hibiscus flowers as orange as the skies above the canyon she has left behind. My mother rests her weight on her clawed cane. She places one foot and then another into the daunting distance.

Say you love me.

Cacti, six feet tall, obstruct our eastward view, but I know how far she must go.

Eyes on the ground. Don't try to see beyond five feet. If you look up now, the immensity will swallow you whole.

Across from the bench we can not see, a burst of fuchsia beckons.