

## Poetry, KY

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There is no poetry in being lonely in Kentucky. There are pretty houses sprinkled on hills. When you go for a drive, they revolve gently around you. You live in a big apartment with your husband. You have a balcony. From the balcony you can see woods with trees whose leaves have turned red and grass that is still an undulating green. It's picture-perfect pretty, like an *Incredible India* poster selling the Himalayas. If you close your eyes, you can smell pine resin.

On cold mornings, there is frost on the ground and the scene looks like the Christmas cards your family used to send out years ago, with your father's name stamped inside with his official seal. Everyone is nice to you in Kentucky. The airport personnel at the security check even look apologetic for making you take off your boots.

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In Bombay, twenty six years old, you had your first warm autumn. Those seaside dusks were incandescent. The sea breeze nibbled at your upper arms and the sky was claret, wine, deep purple, the colour of Himalayan plums, overripe and bursting.

On your way back from office at nine pm, you tried to read in the darkness of your taxi, jerking forward in the traffic. You hopped left and right on the

back seat, trying to catch bars of light from the next street lamp, the next shop selling plastic buckets and bamboo brooms, the next sugarcane juice stall. Sometimes you asked the drivers to switch on the tiny neon blue light inside, which took the taxi somewhere between seedy and sexy, as if the taxi smelled not of old sweat but of fake Jovan White Musk.

Sometimes you bookmarked the page you were at with your index finger, looked at people on the sidewalk rushing by and took a deep, satisfying breath. The walkers were redolent of jasmine hair oil, of paan and Charlie eau de toilette, mostly of cheap but strong deodorant sprays.

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Kentucky, of course, has no smells. At interstate exits, signboards announce that there is a five hundred dollar fine for littering. On your way to Kroger, you photograph one of these with your new smartphone and email the photo to your father. He is impressed.

You return from Kroger armed with shiny peppers, juicy strawberries and crisp cabbage. You always keep basil in your Kentucky refrigerator, and feta cheese. Sometimes you even have fresh rosemary and sage. There is no toast sprinkled with red chilli powder and salt for breakfast, lunch and dinner here, like you ate in London. There are no stories of losing six kilos in a month because you were depressed – how angsty.

In Kentucky, you devise impromptu lunches of toasted multigrain bread

slathered with homemade salsa, covered with a bed of baby arugula, dotted with brie. Mint chutney spread on buttered toast, and a dessert of Nutella finger-scooped from the jar. You stuff jalapeños with grated coconut and simmer them in a tamarind sauce. You braise eggplant with soy sauce and fennel seeds. You grow nicely fat, spread out on the Ikea Poäng chair, eating blueberries and biscuits and butter-fried eggs sprinkled with pimiento. It's most satisfying, this business of eating well. Where is the poetry in that?

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Kentucky is fuzzy and warm with central heating. There is no nonsense here about shivering in the cold while walking against the cruel English wind under inadequate clothing. You have a thick, white jacket filled with down. It keeps you toasty even in subzero temperatures. You hang the jacket in a walk-in closet that holds thirty pairs of shoes and piles and piles of sweaters.

In London, for a week you slept only on the left edge of the twin bed because the rest of it was covered with your roommate's abandoned clothes. She had permanently left London for India with her clothes in your care. On the seventh day you had stuffed eleven plastic bags and made five trips to the neighbouring Oxfam to give all those clothes away.

On your way back, Bangladeshi men stalked you outside the red phone booths. How your hair so beautiful? they leered. Only recently you had doused your hair with chemicals to make it wavy, like seaweed. You hurried

into a double decker bus and spilled tobacco all over the ticket machine.

It had taken you a week to get the knack of curling the Rizla with just the right amount of pressure so it fit perfectly around the tobacco – not too loose, not too tight – and licking its edge in one swipe to seal the cigarette. Now there's just a Camel Crush shared with your husband every other night on the aforementioned balcony, taking delight in the popping of the menthol ball.

You snap at him as you smoke. Ever the optimist, he is encouraging, bracing, positive, he tells you to not lose hope, to continue to apply to job postings that never get back to you. You roll your eyes and raise your hand for the cigarette. The cigarette tip carves luminous shapes in the dark as you pass it back and forth.

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Kentucky has twenty-four hour electricity but at night your bedroom becomes so dark that you feel unsettled and order a nightlight from Amazon. It charges all day and glows softly at night. There is nothing in your life these days about postponing to pay the electricity bill for three months in Bombay – waiting for the month when you had just an extra bit of cash – and coming home one night to a house fallen in darkness.

Your sister and you had splurged on a Domino's chicken tikka pizza on that power-less night and eaten it by candlelight, slapping away the mosquitoes

that hummed at your ears. Both of you were hysterical. You giggled over the five hundred millilitre bottle of Coke that dripped condensed water all over the tiled floor. What was funnier was the look your office friends gave you the next day when you reached late, after a trip to Chembur to pay the bill. Dude, um, you need money?, one of them had asked, and you had giggled more.

And your landlord, Mr Kambli, who, even as he invited you over for authentic Malvani pomfret curry that his 'Missej' would make, refused to install a western-style toilet in your bathroom.

Missej has knee prablem, we prefer Indian-style sundaas, he had repeated to the property broker who was playing mediator.

Your sister and you had sat stiff on swivelling stools in the broker's steel-and-chrome office. No proper toilet, no security deposit, you'd repeated, without a hint of mirth or irony. The broker had soothed the landlord in reassuring Marathi, murmuring the benefits of a Western-style toilet. Now there is nothing to laugh at, not even yourself.

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In Kentucky, you go on the Bourbon Trail. You drive past fields so neat they look like background images for a doctored photo shoot. There are cocoa and white horses grazing in fields outside mansions with porches and cane

chairs. How southern, you exclaim and wish for an iced tea. Then you remember you got this stereotype from *Gone with the Wind* and feel slightly ashamed.

In Delhi, on your way to Gurgaon after the 'Popular Literature' class that was a mishmash of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Spy Who Loved Me* and *Gone With the Wind*, young boys were selling jasmine flowers at traffic signals. They knocked at your car windows and thrust the flowers at your face, and even when you pretended to ignore them, the perfume made you sigh. The sidewalks were covered with scarlet blossoms of gulmohur trees. The city flamed red in their shadow and palpitated in the heat. A feral wind lashed at you all day and the pale pink bougainvillea pulsated with it, cascading down the college walls.

You were searching for beer on alcohol-free Independence Day. Finally, you had found a theka where a man had raised the shutters by a foot and handed three contraband bottles of Red Horse Beer to you. You had driven your mother's Santro to one of the hundreds of half-made, desolate roads of Gurgaon sprinkled with yellow dust and had drunk the beer with your sister and your cousin. The lukewarm beer made you gag but you coolly finished the entire litre. If only those stupid girls at college could see you now, you had thought, those fair ones with golden highlights in their hair who the boys called 'item'. Ha, you had sneered in the haze induced by warm beer in a rapidly warming car. The air conditioning worked only when the car was in

motion. So you'd driven up and down that fallow road, the beer bottle between your thighs.

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In Kentucky, there are no places to walk to and only one car, so you mostly stay at home, suspended in the labyrinths of job application portals, the internet a whorl of data and despair.

You stare a lot at the woods behind the house. In summer, the cicadas raise a storm, chirping their desires away under a neon pink dusk. You count your days with pressure cooker whistles. Your reflections are circular, no end, no beginning. You knit and unravel the same thoughts all day, minute after minute, until your thoughts are sore.

You haven't had a conversation with a human being who wasn't your husband or the USPS delivery person in thirty-two days. As you watch your husband leave for work, you finger the apartment's keys and imagine yourself screaming your head off, running, running, running.

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Staring at the locked house in Bombay one afternoon, you had called up the maid.

Didi, did you put this extra lock on the door?

Nakko baba, she'd said.

You'd walked down to the building office, the apartment keys jangling in your purse, and explained to the building manager that someone had played a prank and placed an extra lock on your latch.

A taala, y'know? You were going to break it.

The manager had stared at you for three whole seconds and just as you turned away had said, with the contempt reserved for unmarried women living alone, But where is your husband? We can't allow this. Bring your husband.

I'm not married, you had spat and stormed out. Later, three police inspectors and two constables had broken the lock, expecting a suicide victim inside, relieved at the empty rooms. They had clucked their tongues, berating the rude manager, and tried to have a conversation with you in Marathi, all of you nodding and shaking your heads. When you offered them water, they had said 'thenkyou', tilted their heads back and poured it into their open mouths without touching the glasses to their lips, and gone away.

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There he is on your Kentucky balcony, your husband, who holds you at night, cooks dal-rice for you when you're homesick and imitates accents from around the world to make you laugh. In Bombay, you had reaped and

sown your loneliness even before he had left for America, missing him even while he sat holding your hand. You'd often thought about how he was not going to be sprawled on your mattress on the floor for a really long time. You had pictured yourself lamenting his absence by sighing on Bombay's rainy afternoons, those damn rainy afternoons with the air so thick and the hills from your window so covered in mist. Now there is nothing to complain about. Life's so unfair, I tell ya.

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In Kentucky, you go for a beer tasting. You sit at a round table, surrounded by seven strangers and your husband. You try The Drunk Monk, The Yankee, The Blithering Idiot. They taste like cough syrups and digestives. Hmmm, you still murmur. It's the hops, the lady on your left tells you ('haaaps'). She takes out a bar of chocolate to chew on along with the chilli cheddar. Oh, and the weather these days? she says. It's like the damn monsoon. ('Mansoon'.)

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During Bombay's monsoon, you routinely jumped in front of speeding taxis that vroomed down the water-clogged roads and created tiny tsunamis. You were just trying to reach office for the important meeting at ten am. The wet, wild wind turned your umbrella upside down. And when this happened for the third consecutive day, you had slammed your umbrella at the ground

and blubbered abuses at the taxies whizzing past, rain and tears running down your nose. The men at the tea shops smirked over their wada pao and chai, and you had stuck your arm forward, water dripping down your back from your pony tail, and gestured, *What*, assholes?

That night, as you came out of the office building, you stumbled over the exit flooded with chai-coloured water. You had no other choice. You waded in this water to get to the main road, all the while shuddering, imagining shit, sewer and rat tails seeping through your toes. Your loose jeans became heavy with water and you walked holding them up at the waistband, lest they fell.

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There are no sidewalks in your part of Kentucky suburbia but in summer you and your husband go for evening strolls anyway, talking about the previous night's Masterchef episode, the Obama-Romney debate, your latest job rejection email. You walk against traffic on the hard tar roads, and cars swerve to the wrong side to give you space. You wave at them in thanks.

Most houses here have large decks, and tyre-swings hang from strong trees. On a warm August dusk when you start walking back, the grounds become alight with golden pinpricks. Fireflies, hundreds of them, pulse with light, like emitting a secret in code. You come home and go to the balcony, the woods now completely dark but filled with more fireflies that thread the air like

golden-green stitches. Oh fuck, you say. Oh fuck, it's so fucking beautiful.

The balcony is where you have your first panic attack. Your heart goes wild, your hands shake and your solar plexus feels blocked, as if full of slithery worms. Your stomach is so heavy. You want to throw up, you want to run. You want to sleep and sleep.

You see many doctors. They kindly prescribe anti-depressants, thought diaries, relaxation exercises, distraction techniques, positive thoughts. As you practice deep breathing, your hair bounces and shines and cascades around your face, like a perfect salon blowout. You'd read in a Lonely Planet that Kentucky 'has a warm and humid climate', but here your nose gets itchy, and your hair, for the first time in your life, falls naturally straight in the absence of humidity.

At Macy's, the two girls at the Philosophy Hair Care counter ask you which hair styling products you use and when you say, None, they say, No way! That's, like, amazing?

You have left your apartment after eight days today. You want to sit down with these nice American girls and tell them how in Bombay the water chased you, coated you in a sticky film wherever you were. It got in the way when you breathed and percolated your hair, turning it frizzy and voluminous. Your hair absorbed the sea and fluffed up, forming curls that you never knew you had.

You want to say that in Bombay, the months before monsoon were soporific, a lukewarm reverie misty with humidity. At night you sprinkled cold water on your bed – That’s, like, so weird? – and slid all the windows as far as they would open. You slept an uneasy sleep and woke up with your mattress squelchy, your thoughts a soggy mess. You looked forward to going to office because, oh, the air conditioning would be on and the air would be cold and dry.

If you keep talking to these nice American girls, maybe they will become your friends and come over for dinner to your place. As they sit in camping chairs on your balcony, downing pint after pint of chilled beer to numb the red chillies in the saag paneer, you will narrate to them how one morning in Bombay, stuck in traffic on Curry Road, just after turning right from Bharat Mata Cinema, you shivered as sweat trickled down your shoulders. The air was full of fuel exhaust, unyielding honking and the smell of incense lit in front of two of Bombay’s favourite deities – Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and Ganesh, the god of new beginnings. And your hair? It cackled with electricity when you ran your fingers through it. Is that crazy or *what*?

Have a nice day! the girls chorus, already smiling at the next customer, and you, you turn away.

There is no poetry in being lonely. You walk past a group of teenagers wearing blue mascara and Doc Marten knockoffs outside Forever21. The

mall's kiddie train toots by. You smile at an old lady with a walker at Panda Express and she smiles back. You buy a cinnamon-sugar Auntie Anne pretzel, and drive home to the balcony to eat it.