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"Mother of the Universe"
by Stephenie Bushra Khan

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FEATURED COVER ARTIST:

STEPHENIE BUSHRA KHAN

Mother of the Universe

Stephenie Bushra Khan is originally from Winchendon, Massachusetts and a graduate of the School of the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester Massachusetts, 1980. She is inspired by the Massachusetts woods and finding the Oneness of God there, the subcontinent culture, Sufism and Transcendentalism.

Stephenie belongs to Interfaith Council and Dorland Mountain Art Colony. She is a professional artist and writer, who has exhibited and published in magazines and newspapers internationally. She lives in Temecula, California.

"Mother of the Universe" is about the feminine aspect of God... taking care of all of us like children and protecting us from evil. The peonies represent the flowers of her home in Massachusetts.

NONFICTION

Ghosts on the Landing

George Blecher

The following is an excerpt from a manuscript called HOW TO BE ALONE IN DENMARK, which centers around a 300-year-old peasant's cottage where I live during the summers. It's also about other houses in my life, including the house where I grew up, and about the concept of home itself: what constitutes a home? Does one ever really feel *at home*? Is there such a thing as an ideal home?

Shortly before he died, my father told me through gritted teeth that he'd bought the biggest house in our neighborhood to show the Christians that he was as good as they were. This was not something that he said easily; it must have been grinding inside him for decades.

Not that Jews had never lived in our house. One of my camp counselors had grown up in the same house 20 years before. But not our kind of Jews—first and second generation immigrants who'd lived in cramped apartments until World War II, then made money in the post-war years and put all their cash on the line and the future. As the years went on, more and more of us moved into the neighborhood, sending the Christians out to the Northern suburbs and Connecticut. But the feeling of trespassing, of stealing someone else's treasure, hovered over all our years.

A wide, three-story faux-Tudor house, it had a weathered slate roof with a pitch as steep as a ski jump. It *was* big for its time—11 or 12 rooms, depending on how you counted—but what it didn't have was land: it sat squeezed between other houses on a minuscule piece of earth, spreading itself like a portly dowager from one side of the property to the other. Two- hundred-year-old oak trees in the backyard made it impossible to grow anything there but pachysandra and ivy—after a few years, my father covered much of the backyard with a concrete slab—and walking in the backyard always felt like tiptoeing through a dank, high-ceilinged church, the oak boughs crisscrossing the sky like the ribs of a nave. But the front yard was bright and unthreatening, and sloped down to an ersatz country road—ersatz because our house was part of a subdivision, a Development, built in the 1920s on estate land once owned by moneyed WASP families.

The mood of the house was as divided as its yards. The rooms were spacious, and the builders had taken great care to make them tight and secure; but it was also a lonely, brooding house. Or maybe it was just us.

My mother filled the house with auction-bought furniture. She had excellent taste, but for a boy with no taste at all, every oversized, overpolished, overstuffed piece seemed hazardous, mined with pitfalls. Everything existed to be spilled on, broken, scratched, ruffled. Pillows had to be puffed hard as alabaster; glass and porcelain had to chime. Years later, when my mother covered the hallways with palace red carpets, it reminded me of the Queen of Hearts—formidable, unforgiving.

There was an *inner* house that gave us some of the security and dream-space that we secretly longed for. Each of us had his pocket of calm. For my father, it was the tile-floored Alhambra of a sun parlor with its fish-head fountain that my mother dammed up for fear that it would overflow and stain the rugs. He would lie reading on a garden lounger, his head next to a futuristic hard-plastic globe of a radio perched on a chrome pedestal whose stations changed merely by rotating it. My mother's haven was the kitchen, untouched and unrenovated, with an ancient sink and brown Formica-topped table; my mother read her newspaper every evening from cover to cover, turning the pages with slow, sensual delight.

On the house's far borders and under its skin were spaces that my parents hardly noticed: these were my refuges. Neglected, unexplored, these places scared me at first. But gradually the terror wore off, making room for imagination and longing.

Mr. Zambetti was the keeper of the house, its *genius loci.* Bald, with knotty muscles, rivers of veins and a swirl of wooly gray chest hair that made him look like a King of the Apes, he had been on the crew that built the house and most of the others in the Development—the Moorish, the Colonial, the Southern Plantation Gothic. His English was a transparent film over the Neapolitan that kept pushing through, making him sound like an organ grinder in the movies: "This is da best-a house I eva build. I know it betta than this-a hand." He was the one we called on when the house sprang a leak or dropped some stucco, when its wiring had to be traced down passageways or pipes had to be replaced. Whatever the weather, he never seemed to be wearing a shirt, and I followed close behind him, smelling his pungent, comforting sweat as his shoes left Plaster of Paris imprints on the immaculate carpeting.

He showed me the laundry chute. "Ever seen sometin' like this?"

At the foot of the attic stairs was a trap door that you could pull up with a brass ring. I peered down into an angled, galvanized zinc tunnel that looked like it ended miles below the cellar. "You just drop-a your socks." I took a ball of fresh socks and watched it carom down the metal cloaca. "This is so Mama no have to work."

The laundry chute was the first glimpse of the house's insides: going up the attic stairs was traveling farther into its guts. The staircase was as steep as a bell tower. My shoes echoed woodenly, but the sound wasn't scary—it was the sound of the house itself—and the narrow, tunnel-like space fit around me snugly.

At the top of the landing were two rooms. My parents called the one on the right the playroom, but since they didn't know how to play, they used it as a storeroom. Really it was a ballroom, a spreading, light-filled space maybe 40 feet long—half as long as the house's width. It was huge but not cavernous, with finished walls and sconces, a chandelier, pitched ceiling and hardwood floors whose floorboards ran lengthwise, making it look truly vast. What was most wonderful was the air itself. It felt almost solid, a magical block of air that never changed; the windows were never opened. You could feel this most in the summer when the sun heated the air so you could almost drink it or mold it into shapes, but it was like that during the other seasons, too. And always the same scent—mostly camphor but other, fainter smells, the same scents as my aunts' apartments in Washington Heights: soap, clean linen, salmon croquettes.

Zambetti showed me the room's secret. Once when he had to track down some cables, he opened a square panel fastened with wing nuts to the wall facing the backyard. "Ever seen sometin' like this?"

Inside the wall was the house's skeleton: a crawl-space as long as the room. The passageway smelled of cedar and dust; you had to stretch your whole body across from beam to beam, and above the beams the space quickly vanished into blackness. Sometimes I went there with a flashlight, but mostly without; I wanted to *feel* the darkness. And I never showed my friends. This was *my* tunnel, and I crawled through swamps and under barbed wire, picking balls of insulation out of my mouth, until I heard my mother's voice running dustily along the beams, now transformed into musical dream notes.

In the attic on the other side of the landing, the only light came from a dangling light bulb with a chain pull cord; after you pulled it, the bulb wobbled, sending flickering drifts of light onto the naked beams. In the attic there was nothing between me and the sky except the roof itself, and even that wasn't completely sealed: there were holes in the gable and birdhouses set into the wall so that I always heard strange, otherworldly shuffling of bird-families in the darkness above my head.

We were afraid of the attic. I don't remember my mother ever going there. Filled with dark corners that the light bulb couldn't find, it was more for my father and me, and for the naked pieces of the past that belong in attics: old trunks, bamboo fishing rods, leather jackets, photos, baseball mitts with cracked leather fingers, sneakers, boots, suits in airtight bags hanging like dead men with camphor amulets

around their necks. I could feel my father's discomfort: in the attic, the past was too present. He'd bought the house to escape from the past, but here it was virile and unrepentant. The hurt and humiliation that he'd felt at the hands of the Christians were still as raw as a wound; he was trying to bury them in every bit of mortar of a house that had cost him all his money and, in a sense, his freedom. But the past couldn't be buried; the attic was proof of that. So when I brought down photos and old clothes from the attic, my parents were hesitant and close-mouthed—not exactly angry, willing to talk about them a little, but they'd already turned experiences into anecdotes, memories into clichés. When I emerged from the attic onto the landing, the civilized space at the top of the stairs welcomed me back with warmth and relief. But the attic was still clammy and mocking: the past was bones, bits of hair, dead men's suits and jackets hanging from rafters.

If the attic had the power to terrify and to witness, the basement's power was to reassure. I was never frightened there, and neither were my parents; in their last years in the house they dropped any pretense of living upstairs, and sprawled on old garden furniture that would have embarrassed the upstairs rooms, and they drifted off to sleep before an old black/white TV. Even on summer afternoons my father and I watched the Yankees in basement darkness; and at night, when my parents climbed bleary-eyed up the steps to put themselves to bed, they smiled embarrassed little smiles, as if they'd been caught making love.

They never fully renovated the basement—just slapped up pressed wooden panels, painted it gray and white, and let it be what it was: a catacomb of small cells, each with a personality. The best was the boiler room. The furnace took up almost the whole room—huge, 8 feet long and 6 feet high, the house's silver locomotive, complete with doors for stoking coal. Even though the coal had been replaced with oil, you could open the cast-iron doors and watch the oil jets kick in with fountains of fire. Whenever it came on, the furnace surged with a giant's thunderous belch, and the whole house tingled with pleasure. I stood next to it in the dark, letting the heat coat my body, tickle the roots of my hair: it was like an uncle I never knew—stronger than anyone, more dependable than humans can ever be, stunning in its silver coat, godlike in its constancy.

There was my father's workshop in perpetual twilight from the slit of a window just above ground level: wooden shelves with plastic boxes full of nails and nuts and washers, piles of hammers and saws and screwdrivers and chisels and rasps, everything rusted into archeological treasures. Screws so long that you couldn't imagine anything thick enough for them to penetrate; pieces of old radios and magnetos and meat grinders and typewriters and fishing reels; trays of things, metal

things, that had no apparent use except to be fingered, weighed in the hand, turned over and over, caressed because they belonged to my father, whose shyness made him jump if you touched him too intimately. There was the wine cellar, the coldest room in the house with the thickest walls, the *sanctum sanctorum*; we knew nothing about wines but liked the name and kept it. It was where Dad stored his old files but also solitary objects that for some reason hadn't made it to the attic—a smoke-green vase, stuff boxes made of shells, porcelain miniatures of Pekineses and smooth-faced shepherds asleep against tree stumps. What was most special was the window. Recessed high in a corner of a wall that looked a yard thick, musty with cobwebs and banded shut, it was a dungeon window made for suffering noblemen writing with quill pens by candlelight. When I roamed around the basement, I saved the wine cellar till last: surrounded by walls dripping with petrified, butter-thick layers of paint, I felt something erotic and yearning inside me, like missing a girl I didn't yet know.

But there was an even better place. Under the basement stairs was a space big enough to crawl into and hunch up in: concrete walls on two sides, a wood partition on the third, the accordion underside of the stairs above me. A cave big enough for a boy to explore with a flashlight, to study the bulges in the walls and the pink translucence of his fingertips. If I made a sound, the walls of the house would crack. If I tried to stand up—there was only room enough to squat—and spread my arms, the house would collapse. Nothing could be broken or spilled on—or, rather, everything could be destroyed if I willed it. The world had conflated and expanded to a little pocket of air that was mine alone; in it, I was omnipotent.

Whenever there was a bad rainstorm, blizzard or hurricane, when the electricity went out with a pop or the oil man couldn't get his truck through the snow and we had to take away the brass fire screen that my mother had burnished so lovingly and fill the living room fireplace with logs that had been quietly rotting in the boiler room—*then* the house changed. I remember hurricanes splattering leaves and branches over the roof, limbs crashing down from the oak trees, snow billowing up to my chest and heaping into drifts over my head. In those times, the house became vulnerable, and we rallied to protect it—unclogging the drainpipes, wading with rubber boots in the flooded basement. Standing in snow crusted over with fused diamonds, I held the ladder as my father jammed a broom handle between the snow rails and pulled down snow in iceberg-sized chunks. As the night gathered, we collected candles and firewood and huddled together, listening to the wind rattle the windowpanes. Not that we were in any danger—even if the telephone lines were down, the portable radio's chatter was our lifeline—but during those times the

house became the whole world, the essential world, and if it was vulnerable, we were too.

We sat in the living room by the fireplace. The fire and candlelight defined a circle of protection, outside of which was everything my parents struggled so hard to keep away. We tried to read, but the flickering light forced us to shut our books. Strangely, because the unknown was so close, it didn't seem quite as threatening, and my parents let themselves drift into the past, speaking in small, cautious voices that grew louder, braver, gayer as the night went on: stories of my father growing up on a New Jersey chicken farm, the first car Grandpa bought, the time Mom and Dad met by accident in a subway station. Firelight sparkled on their corneas; they were happy. Their voices touched each other, and it wasn't that they made the fear go away, but that they made it acceptable—an unexplored part of our lives.

Outside the pocket of light, the living room was a hundred feet long, large enough to seat fifty knights. When it was time to go upstairs to bed, I clung close to my father. Bare-shouldered women in satin dresses swished along the landing. Tall men in high collars stood talking quietly, the tips of their cigars glowing red in the darkness. Boys my age with pomaded hair laughed silvery laughs as they flicked their cuffs out of their sleeves. Even though the darkness threatened to follow me into my room, the fear was a good fear, a legitimate fear, instead of the fear I usually felt—that I'd be alone forever.

These emergencies happened only 5 or 6 times in all the years we lived in the house. But there were other moments, much harder to hold onto because they were just part of our daily lives —and now, many years later, I find it almost impossible to tease them out of the general weave.

I'm thinking of moments when the house is peaceful: a water-clear fall evening, late September, when the air is so perfect a temperature that it feels like no temperature at all. Outside my bedroom is a full moon between the telephone pole and the oak tree in front of the Fiello's house across the road. The moon is so bright that it eliminates depth and all the stars, smoothing the sky into a glossy navy blue. The house seems to take a deep breath. It isn't only protection that it offers, but a new sense of scale. No longer imposing, its smallness reminds us that we are small too, and that is as it should be. I'm in my room doing my homework. I can hear my parents talking in the kitchen. In her room at the end of the hall, my baby sister's sleep-breath is like a whisper. If I leave my room and pad barefoot along the gray hallway carpeting, I feel the smoothness of the bannister against my palm, the warp of the carpet between my toes. Through the window I catch more glimpses of the moon. Lamplight inside, moonlight outside. Love pours out of

my heart like the moon pouring light into the sky, love for my parents who built the house around us to make us feel safe.

Or it's the middle of the afternoon—2:45, 3:00, end of May perhaps, when school has just let out, or early June, before I go away to camp. I'm standing on the second floor landing in a place that only I know about—know about unconsciously, without actually knowing.

In front of the house I can see each young leaf on the little maple tree between the Calloway and Fiello houses, and I can hear the chesty exhaust-pipe growl of the few cars that bounce slowly along the unpaved road. My sister's room floats in the afternoon silence—hovering, dreamy. Into my parents' bedroom thick yellow sunlight streams, glancing off my mother's glass-topped boudoir table, the satin summer bedspreads, the graceful scrolled edges of the cherry wood headboards. I have nothing to do—no homework, no obligations, no chores. The house is breathing in a way that only I can hear. It isn't the nervous puffs of breath of my mother and her sisters, whose insecurities were great and constant. I imagine that I hear a voice that I never heard before or since. Maybe it isn't even a voice as much as an implicit promise of safety: *I am the future when things will get better. I am the gift that your parents could not give you but meant to. I am the right to be anything and everything, to belong in a world of slowly changing light and regular seasons with all the people you admire but do not believe will accept you. They will; you have the right to be among them. I know because I am the future.*

In his later years, my father was seized by a restlessness that propelled him across the country in search of new adventure. With hardly any warning my parents sold the house, packed their bags and headed west; they were in their late 60s. At first my sister and I were shocked. How could they abandon the house that they'd prized so much and still had a hold over all of us? By selling it, weren't they deserting us and their grandchildren, erasing our common past?

Except for the palm trees along the street, their new apartment could have been their starter apartment where I'd spent my earliest years: one bedroom, no dining room, a kitchen no bigger than a sailboat's galley. The furniture that they'd brought with them had stood for decades in the playroom, and they'd bought hardly anything new –just a few beds and some canvas director's chairs. But this little apartment was alive with activity: my mother flitted around in an apron cooking salmon croquettes, spooning into cups crystals of instant coffee, while my father sat on the edge of his chair, his shirt cuffs rolled into perfect armbands, waxing on eagerly about the real estate deals that he was involved in.

They looked like newlyweds! I realized that they were younger than I was: my father's face was as eager as that of a talented graduate student, my mother's gestures as demure as those of a young bride. Finally she was who she must have been at the beginning of their marriage: my father's partner, his helpmate, not the uncomfortable mistress of a too-big house.

Did they miss the house? I asked them.

They smiled politely and looked bewildered, as if they hadn't a clue to what house I was talking about.

It made sense. In a way the house had never really existed. We hadn't quite existed in it. We hadn't been able to truly enjoy it and trust it enough to fill it with our lives. It must have confused my parents: if they had bought Paradise, why weren't they happier? The anger and sense of persecution that they'd brought with them made it impossible for them to see that Paradise existed only in fairytales. In Bedford and Pound Ridge and Greenwich, the Christians were feeling and acting just like us, bickering and brooding, puffing the pillows and shining the doorknobs, envying too much and loving too little. Or maybe my parents sensed that there is a certain degree of hubris in trying to make an ideal house real. Dwellings in the real world are imperfect, provisional; to think anything else is a fantasy; and in that realization, conscious or not, my parents may have been liberated.

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- $20 fee for each entry. Limit 6 poems in poetry genre. Submit all poems in one document.
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Contest Judges

Ananda Lima: Poetry

Ananda Lima's work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review, Poets.org, Kenyon Review Online, Colorado Review, Rattle, Jubilat, The Common* and elsewhere. She has an MA in Linguistics from UCLA and an MFA in Creative Writing in Fiction from Rutgers University, Newark. She has served as the poetry judge for the AWP Kurt Brown Prize, as staff at the Sewanee Writers Conference and as a mentor in the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) Immigrant Artist Program. She has taught at UCLA, Montclair State University and Rutgers University. Her chapbook, *Translation* (Paper Nautilus, 2019), won the 2018 Vella Chapbook Contest.

Dorothy Rice: Nonfiction

Dorothy Rice is the author of two published memoirs, GRAY IS THE NEW BLACK (Otis Books, June 2019) and THE RELUCTANT ARTIST (Shanti Arts, 2015). Her personal essays and fiction have been published in dozens of journals and magazines, including *The Rumpus, Brain, Child Magazine, The Saturday Evening Post, Hippocampus* and the *Brevity* blog. An essay about her mother's descent into Alzheimer's was awarded second place in the 2018 Kalanithi Awards (honoring Paul Kalanithi, author of *When Breath Becomes Air*) and her work has been nominated for a Pushcart and Best of the Net. After raising five children and retiring from a career managing statewide environmental protection programs, Rice earned an MFA in Creative Writing from UC Riverside, Palm Desert, at 60. She is a certified Amherst Writers & Artists Method creative writing workshop facilitator and works for 916 Ink, a youth literacy nonprofit. You can find Dorothy at dorothyriceauthor.com, and on twitter at @dorothyrowena..

R. L. Maizes: Fiction

R.L. Maizes is the author of the short story collection WE LOVE ANDERSON COOPER (Celadon Books/ Macmillan). Her novel, OTHER PEOPLE'S PETS (Celadon Books), is forthcoming July 14, 2020. Her fiction has aired on National Public Radio and has appeared in *Electric Literature's Recommended Reading, Witness, Bellevue Literary Review*, and elsewhere. Her nonfiction has been published in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and has aired on NPR. Find her at RLMaizes.com and on Twitter @RL_Maizes. *Photo credit: Adrianne Mathiowetz*

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