



2021

hold fire

Tejaswini Sudhakar
University of Kentucky

Notes:

Tejaswini Sudhakar won the first place in the Humanities: Creative category. She is enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences and in the Lewis Honors College. Her majors are Psychology and Gender & Women's Studies, and she is a Creative Writing minor.

Rebecca Gayle Howell was the faculty mentor.

[Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/oswald>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

[Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Sudhakar, Tejaswini, "hold fire" (2021). *Oswald Research and Creativity Competition*. 36.
<https://uknowledge.uky.edu/oswald/36>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oswald Research and Creativity Competition by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.



hold fire

teja sudhakar

*For women, then, poetry is not a luxury.
It is a vital necessity of our existence.*
-Audre Lorde

Contents

1. breathing is noise, too
2. putana
3. natalie, handing out valentines
4. there, in the fitting room mirror
5. worship
6. night lights
7. on shelter
8. this is me trying to explode
9. circles
10. only i get to decide if i am reborn

Acknowledgments

breathing is noise, too

all week i've been trying
to relearn how to breathe.
he asked me why i sigh
so much, i said it's
the only way i know how.
i tell him i'm scared
i leaned too far over in my chair
or smiled a moment too long.
i'm scared of how i
might spurt out next,
so much i cross
my limbs all
over each other,
fold my stomach in.
i sigh because it's
the only loud thing i do.

after he left, i crimped
a pie crust so perfectly
even i couldn't believe it.
when i pulled them
out of the oven,
the juice didn't drip
over the sides.
ruby syrup glistened
through the lattice,
bubbled between
sugar crystals.
i stowed them carefully
onto the racks,
with no one
to show them to.
amy winehouse
pulled her drawl
through the speakers,
and i imagined her yelling
in a big empty house.

putana

By offering her milk, Putana performed the supreme act of motherly devotion.

--Wikipedia

she holds krishna in her lap,
watches his eyes roll shut.

when my mother says she's glad
that baby never lived,
i know she means it.
sometimes i think of
lying down beside him
beneath the cold hard earth.
sometimes i think
she'd be glad for that, too.

the milk pours out and the
blue boy pulls and pulls and
pulls. his snake limbs going limp
in her hands. i always wondered
if she'd draw his ash
across her forehead afterwards,
call it prayer.

natalie, handing out valentines

the first crinkle cut heart
beat beneath the dripping sun,
when we dragged your golden hounds
across the parched fields, watched
dry mud streak their hides.
we loaded them onto your truck,
smelling of sweat and old rain.

another got caught in the snow fall,
when the wind swiped at our knuckles like papercuts.
listen to my hallmark movie, you said,
your gloved hand curling into mine.
i looked at you then,
your snow-flecked blonde hair
tucked into a beanie.
a pink smile stretched across your face,
like it was just that easy.

there, in the fitting room mirror

we accept the bones
of our bodies.
with satin splitting
over our bare backs
like open lipped flowers
we list out all the organs
we have. stomach liver
spleen intestine kidneys
we turn to each other
saying *aren't you glad?*
aren't you glad?

worship

ten faces grin down at me.
one of them is an elephant head,
another gleams copper as a penny.
we are coming back
from the quaker meeting– there too,

a face shaped like an empty room.
that night a face in a boy's mouth
curved around me in the dark,
religion how he held me afterwards,
fast like a bait hook.
religion is a curved hook plunging
into a woman's shoulder blade,
worship is a body
anchored into the sea,
lying down beside
sunken clay eyes.

a boy once asked me
why would you worship a destroyer?
a face then in the bus window,
where i looked past his searching eyes,
looked for an answer.
faces upon faces
in the gladed cliff-sides,
carved out by a water
that cut deep,
a water which knew
to destroy just enough.

night lights

i think of lying down in the street,
where the passing headlights can illuminate my face.

i'll gaze up at the dorm buildings,
watch the lights flicker on one by one,
a hundred small splinters.

the green clad men will grab me by my limbs.

they'll lay me over the stretcher like a dead zebra,
one that has forgotten its lines.

wash my blood with gasoline,
light a fire to lick it up
in neat,
broad strokes.

(afterwards, all the children
will pull their blinds shut
to dull the flame.)

little hummingbirds,
they'll tuck away,
fall asleep on their stomachs.

on shelter

*the beds have walls
between them, she says,
so we're keeping safe.
the government has been kind—
we rotate out 2, 3 residents a day.
i've never entered a lottery
to fall asleep at night,
but i believe her about the kindness,
about how we take whatever
we can get. she tells me
how the local restaurants
have pitched in, or how the
whole city seems to be
holding its breath. my
mother wakes me with
home baked bread, or
comes into my room with
hot chocolate cradled
in her hands. i'm so afraid
of her voice, how it can
split open or pool up
against the windows. but
she's made the milk all frothy,
just the way i like, and
it's nice to drink it
against the rain, which
pounds against the rooftops
and makes my cat skitter
into the shoe closet. this
rain, which makes the sky
heavy but splits open
the buds of my dogwood tree
to bear flowers like pearls.
blooming, i think, is
a kinder word to call it.*

this is me trying to explode

on march 2nd, i will sit on a sofa in a cement block of a room, across some graduate student with her own set of tired eyes.

maybe i will begin like this:

someone once told me there's a movie of what a city would look like without me in it. i haven't seen it, but i think a lot of people would have stayed strangers. who am i to play god anyway? a thousand cranes unfold and they just become paper. when the sun lifts, my pill bottle will lie on its side, open mouthed. and the tulips will still bloom.

do you think in miracles?

no, he said, i think of god.

i live in a building with hundreds of people but always come home to silence. i play music of women screaming, imagine how they tear their hair out. the shower goes cold every day now, and i let it.

i think you're like a poem—

there's more to you

between the lines, i say.

i'm begging for someone

to look into my eyes.

i think soon enough the smell of death will roll off me like a used cigarette. somebody will open my bedroom door to find me on a boat, sailing into a big nothing. my ashes already spread miles below me, swallowed by the sea.

this is how a woman screams:

always, always underwater.

circles

*when you reach the end
of a dream, do you know?*

*i'm only as alive
as i am right now, my friend
says. my fists are furled
in my pockets, two eyes
begging for sleep.*

all i know how to do
is hand out songs
like fragile birds, hope
they find somewhere to nest.
in italy, people sing on balconies
until the rivers turn clear.

it's hard not to circle my arms
around her when she
cries. her tears build a
six foot bridge between us—
this too, is government sanctioned.

beyond the corner, car engines
groan their last loud breaths
forgetting the road
is just one big circle.

and here, we learn to speak
around the end of the world,
like we haven't already lived it.

only i get to decide if i am reborn

I. sita looks at me through a bus window.

her face is flecked with the dust scattering the old glass, but her dark eyes know to hold steady, pull close. her kurta is stained, wrinkled with the tug of children's hands. she's wrapped her aged limbs around the handles of a checkered plastic bag, spilling over with cilantro leaves, spotted vegetables holding each other like family, under all that sun, until she takes them home and runs them each beneath cool water and looks at them too long, half alive but wholly hers, tucks them away like babies at night.

my therapist tells me now is the time to soothe the small child in me. so i go back to where i left her on that playground, piling sand on top of more sand on top of more sand. the same grains graze the top of the hill, only to inch back down a moment later. even back then, she knew what it looked like to pick yourself up, over and over again. to build a big nothing.

an auto speeds past, its engine buzzing along like a swarm of hornets. the bus breathes out, sending puffs of black air from between its wheels as it prepares to take leave. sita looks away now, her eyes disappearing behind their lids. in this city, the bus knows to travel in a circle, a line drawn in the sand.

II. this morning the new york times told me to find movement in small things, so i am. i'll make music from the droplets sliding down my water bottle. this year, i'll watch my dogwood tree bloom bit by bit, instead of all at once. then i'll learn how the same songs can sound different each day, how a violin's strings wilt in the night.

i am afraid to hold fire for too long, so i pass the candle to my mother. the only way i know to pray is quietly, in that place between closing your eyes and falling asleep.

every day i take a walk, i realize how fervently the little purple buds push through the grazed blades of bluegrass surrounding them. anything with that much color lives only if it learns to shout.

i *want* to make fire, so it can be the only loud thing about me. and when i do, i'll light the ground around me in a circle, lie down in it. i'll turn to see sita lying right beside me, like she waited all this time.

III. sita hands me a warm gun.

i don't know what else to do but take it.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the support and guidance of Rebecca Gayle Howell, without whom this chapbook would not have been possible. Her unending patience and faith in me helped me learn so much not only about what it means to be a poet, but what it means to be a woman.

I would also like to thank my friends and my family, for the moments they inspire me without even trying to.

Finally, I thank Sita. For walking through the fire. For coming out unscathed.