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Apa's Painting

By Mehnaz Turner

1.

I ask my mother about Apa's painting
in English, she answers in Urdu, then it's
my turn to speak, but there at the crosswalk
between Lahore and Los Angeles, I pledge
allegiance to nothing though sometimes
I mix the two languages, even throw in a little
high school French, or the Arabic I learned
reading the Quran, my nine-year old head draped
in a scarf pulled from my mother's dresser.
I peer up at the canvas: ocean waves thrash
an archipelago of rocks. My mother tells me
Apa painted it before I knew how to say
fish or *pani* or Pakistan, before I became
this chest of torn up maps. In my body the Pacific
edges into Islamabad, Hollywood's lodged
in the throat of the Punjab. My grandmother's
painting lives in this garage in Woodland Hills,
propped up against a box of fashion magazines.
The image speaks in twelve shades of blue,
like a storm of languages without a tongue.
The sight engulfs me, unpledged.
The coastline shadowed—no words, no light.

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