

RACHEL E. HICKS

The Exile Speaks of Mountains

Enoch Pratt Poetry Contest Second Runner-up

In the Himalayan foothills during monsoon
the electricity once stayed off
for fifteen days. Every morning there was chai

with sugar cubes and buffalo milk, delivered
to our kitchen door in tin carafes
strapped with thick ropes to a mule.

We kept warm by feeding the stove
log after log and entertained by watching
our spit sizzle on its tin top.

My brother held my hand on the trail
to and from school, scanning for leopard scat
or for thieving langur monkeys in the trees.

I write this from my brick colonial in Baltimore,
decades removed, drinking black tea
with thick cream and sugar—

the heat of exile churning in my blood.
I drive an SUV, shop at Target, and fight tears
at random moments, like when I open

the door and enter the Punjab store
down on 33rd, suddenly and viscerally at home
among the turmeric and cardamom,

the Neem soaps and steaming samosas
under foil on the counter, while the kind owner

offers a mango juice box to my daughter.

Only if I embrace this life as a perpetual pilgrim
do I find solace in remembering
the terraced cemetery in the Himalayan pines

where the mute woman and her donkey
guard the graves, the distant beat of tabla drums,
the bounce of our flashlights on the trail

walking home at night, thrill of leopards
in the dark, the high peak of Bandarpunch
to the north, glowing in moonlight.