



PUTTING THE FEAR BEHIND

ISSUE II CREATIVE NONFICTION

BY ANNIE LYALL SLAUGHTER



Disclaimer: Names have been changed to respect the privacy of the refugees included in the story.

Unable to communicate through a communal language and having only just met, I search for answers in their faces. Sharif's eyes are windows into his past, rivers of reflection that beam onto the subway's filthy, unforgiving floor with a tenderness that cannot be put into words. The newly appointed Housing Specialist at the International Rescue Committee, New York City's largest non-faith-based refugee resettlement agency, I am a Virginia native with no real estate experience tasked with finding apartments for displaced families new to New York. At 27, it is hard for me to imagine what Sharif and Ayesha have been through, how the weathered rawness of Sharif's wrinkles intensified during the five years they spent in Bangkok awaiting an American visa after leaving their Pakistani village behind.

The train hurdles onwards and the number of stops ahead of us seems to grow. Glancing overhead, the subway map shows twelve stations until Bay Ridge 95th Street. My sight blurs and my head falls back onto the dirty window behind me as I lose myself in thought. *How have I become so closely tied to these strangers? How will I, or they, find empathy in the ruthless, callous landlords of New York City? What if I can't persuade anyone to rent to them? What do they think of me—my white gangly legs, my navy blue striped dress, my inability to communicate?* With my head in the clouds, our collective weight shifts from right to left and then left to right again. I have no answers, only questions. And yet, I am inextricably bound to them. To them and their future.

Guiding Sharif and his wife, Ayesha, to a small, two-bedroom apartment available for immediate rental in Bayside, I have three weeks to find an apartment for the couple and their adult son before their Airbnb reservation ends. During the twenty-one days ahead, I must find an "affordable, sanitary, and safe" unit, process the down deposit, have the lease fully signed, source and deliver a long list of required furniture, and oversee the move, all before the ticking time clock.

With only a short few days of training under my belt to prepare me to become the resettlement agency's first full-time staff member dedicated to finding housing, it is safe to say the skills I gained while working for a high-end contemporary art gallery are not quite transferrable. The only benefit of my lack of professional experience readying me for this moment is a lesson I will come to teach myself: there are zero tricks to navigating the country's most competitive housing market while advocating for the country's least qualified tenants. In other words, build a well of hope and be damn sure it runs deep. Ready, set, go.

When the train reaches its last stop, the feeble couple follows closely behind me as we exit the car. Unable to read the English alphabet, they would not have been able to find their way on the train alone.

Making our way west on 95th Street, I am as unfamiliar with this South Brooklyn neighborhood as they are. As they hobble behind, I try to stay patient with each step. Narrowing my gaze on the sidewalk, I visualize Sharif being handed the keys to a shining, spacious apartment. I must act with optimism and good faith. Perhaps the testy Russian landlord with whom I spoke on the phone to confirm the apartment viewing will take a moment to pause and see the desperation spilling from my eyes.

Instead, we are met with hasty aggression one could even deem as disgust. At the entrance to a narrow townhouse with a minuscule porch stands a tall, burly man sporting a polished purple suit. Yelling in Russian to someone on the receiving end of his call, his bulbous nose scrunches and his thick brows crease as we approach. He sizes Ayesha, Sharif, and me up from head to toe.

"Who is the tenant!" he grunts, lips turned down into an aggravated frown.

Heart pounding, my well of hope looks like it might run dry.

The apartment is perfect. Three big windows, two modest but reasonable bedrooms, a newly renovated kitchen. Though a monthly rent of \$2,100 is likely six times what the family of three would pay in Pakistan, it is within budget for the first few months of rental assistance the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is able to provide. After that, they are on their own.

"It's great, so what's the next step?" I turn to the landlord with a painfully forced smile.

Glancing up from his phone, he looks at me with a confused laugh before spitting at my face and muttering with a throaty sputter, "No no no, they cannot even speak English. So forget it. I am looking for a young professional."

With his domineering glance and accusatory tone, I am suddenly ashamed, as if I should apologize for my professional and altruistic duty to help two individuals find a home. My smile is long lost. This blatant discrimination could easily be reported to the New York City Commission on Human Rights, but at what cost? Is this man worth any more of our time?

Certain he will be far from persuaded by any effort of mine to explain the details of the rental assistance or employment resources the IRC provides, I resign to writing the viewing off as a failed mission. Watching me turn away, he holds his head high, as if taking pride in his own prejudice. This "young professional" seeking landlord, an immigrant himself, is clearly better suited with "more qualified" tenants. So be it.

Itching to be in his presence no longer, I usher a confused Ayesha and Sharif down the narrow stairway, marking the first failed apartment viewing on an eighteen-month journey finding housing for refugees in New York City.

Back on the street, Ayesha and Sharif look deflated and slightly alarmed. Gesturing emphatically while speaking over each other in Urdu, they process the oddity of what just happened in the apartment. Perhaps they detected the tone of the landlord's combative remarks.

My head spins. I want to explain that we have been discriminated against by an unjust, unforgiving, and unkind man. That he is hardened. Unloving. That he will never be able to see the truth in someone's eyes. That he will never give or receive goodness, never take care to notice the way the dyes on Ayesha's scarf overlap at its corners to converge into dark brown.

Fumbling through paperwork in my bag, I try to find the phone number for the 24/7 interpretation service I scribbled down on my first day. To no avail, I turn to Google Translate in a desperate effort to turn my words into Urdu script. Taking a deep breath to collect myself, I restrain an urge to share more than I know I should. Resolving to keep my language simple and straightforward, I write into my phone, *It's too expensive for your budget*. With the click of a button, Google instantly converts the words into Urdu. I hold the translation to their puzzled faces as they strain their eyes to read.

First shaking their heads and then speaking to each other again more softly, the two seem to share a moment of mutual understanding. I select the dictation function on the app and encourage Sharif to speak directly into the phone to reply. As he does, English words appear on the screen, one after the next. Compelled to read aloud, I mumble at first, my voice trailing off with every syllable that rolls off my tongue.

"Put the fear behind," I read through heavy breaths. "He is lost to us."

Pausing, I take a moment to let the words settle. I look from Ayesha to Sharif and then back at my phone. They watch me, waiting. *Put the fear behind.*

Returning to meet their gaze, their eyes speak volumes as they stare boldly, proudly, into mine. *He is lost to us*. I thought I had hidden the truth and yet they had so clearly been able to read every nuance of the exchange. Who was I to think they couldn't see the apprehension and disappointment in my young and fearful face?

Cautiously placing a ring covered hand to my shoulder, bangles clanking against my forearm, Ayesha gives me a soft smile and leans her head into my side. The heaviness in my chest subsides as every ounce of frustration slips away. Awakened to the truth in Google's mangled translation, I understand why the afternoon unfolded the way it did. The landlord's fear is indeed not worth our collective time or worry. Onwards we must go, Sharif wanted me to understand, towards a brighter, more redeeming future.

On the train ride back to their Airbnb, Ayesha's block printed fabrics spill over her arm and onto my lap. I sit sandwiched in between her and Sharif, no longer fazed by our proximity on the crowded train. Swaying back and forth, our shoulders and knees in one line, the jerky force of the Manhattan bound R train rattles its commuter cars, pulling the three of us even closer together.

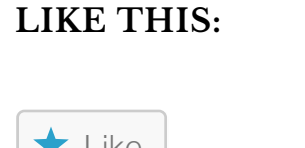
Annie Lyall Slaughter is a writer based in Manhattan. From September 2019 to March 2021, she secured twenty-one apartment units for refugee families while working for the International Rescue Committee in New York City. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in Cultural Reporting and Criticism at NYU.

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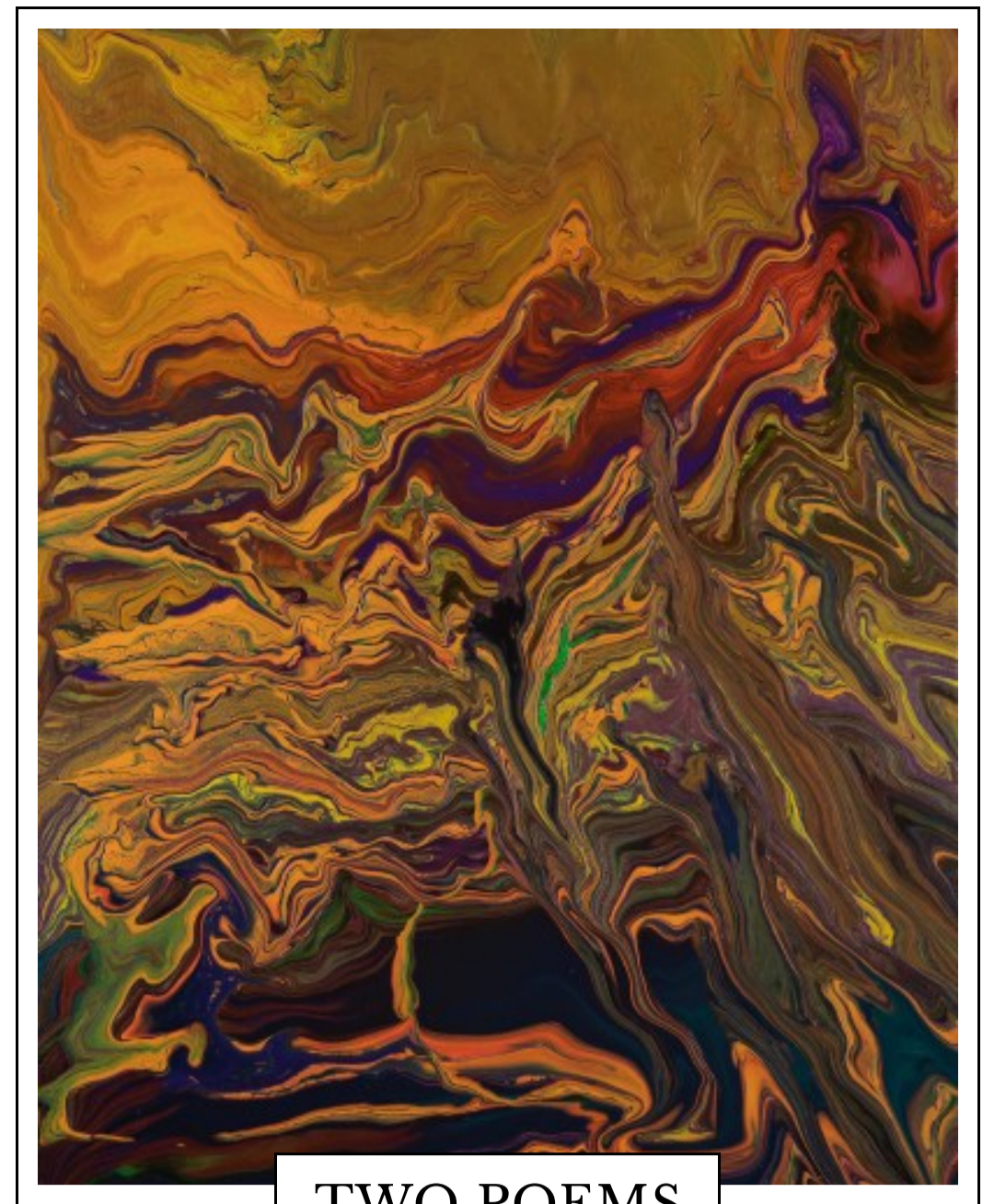
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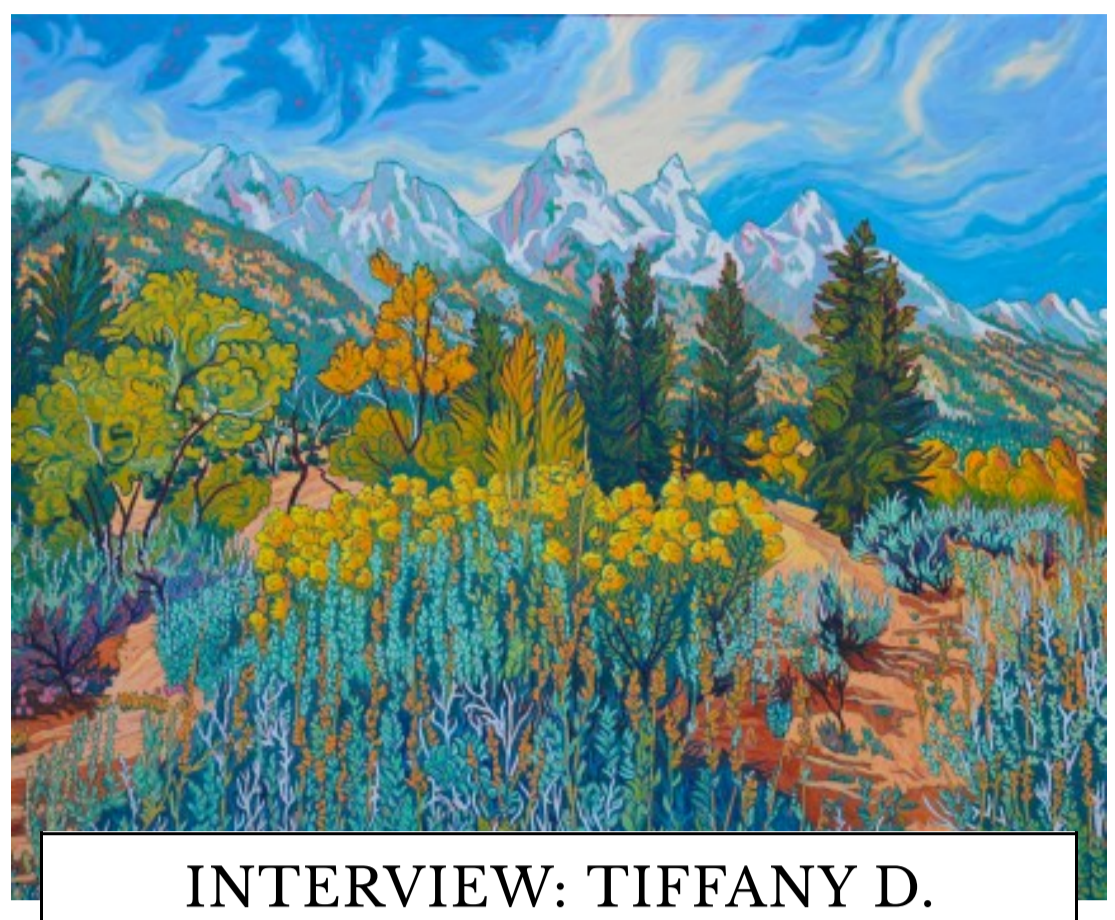
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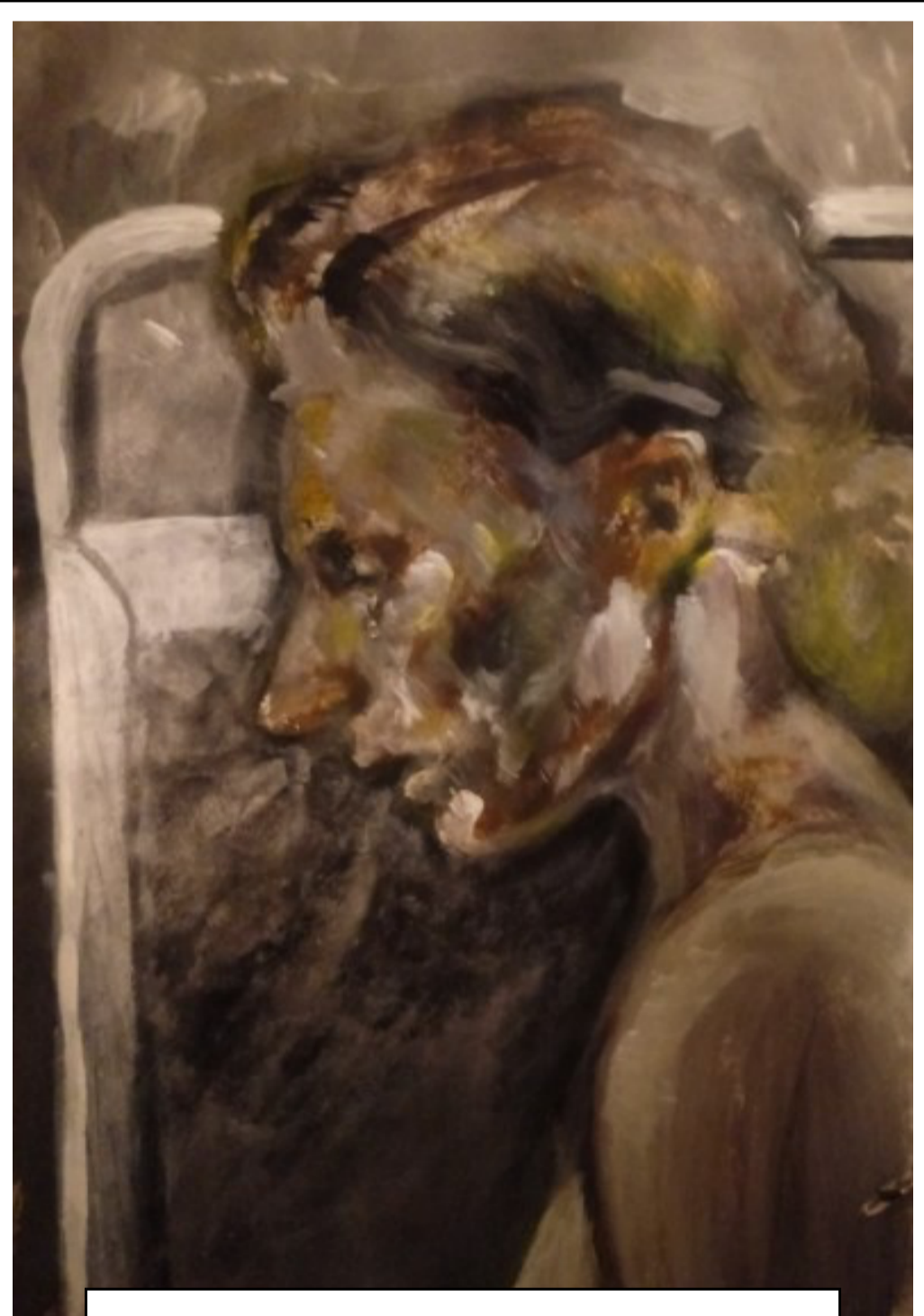
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