Liminal Spaces
Migration and Women of the Guyanese Diaspora

EDITED BY
GRACE ANEIZA ALI

Liminal Spaces is an intimate exploration into the migration narratives of female women of Guyanese heritage. It spans diverse inter-generational perspectives – from those who leave Guyana, and those who are left – and seven seminal decades of Guyana's history – from the 1950s to the present day – bringing the voices of women to the fore. The volume is conceived of as a visual exhibition on the page; a four-part journey navigating the contributors' essays and artworks, allowing the reader to trace the migration path of Guyanese women from their moment of departure, to their arrival on diasporic soils, to their reunion with Guyana.

Eloquent and visually stunning, Liminal Spaces unpacks the global realities of migration, challenging and disrupting dominant narratives associated with Guyana, its colonial past, and its post-colonial present as a 'disappearing nation'. Multimodal in approach, the volume combines memoir, creative non-fiction, poetry, photography, art and curatorial essays to collectively examine the mutable notion of 'homeland', and grapple with ideas of place and accountability.

This volume is a welcome contribution to the scholarly field of international migration, transnationalism, and diaspora, both in its creative methodological approach, and in its subject area – as one of the only studies published on Guyanese diaspora. It is essential reading to those studying women and migration, and scholars and students of diaspora studies.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

Grace Aneiza Ali
is a Curator and an Assistant Professor and Provost Fellow in the Department of Art & Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Her curatorial research practice centers on socially engaged art practices, global contemporary art, and art of the Caribbean Diaspora, with a focus on her homeland Guyana.

4.
The Geography of Separation

Grace Aneiza Ali

Figure 4.1

© Grace Aneiza Ali. Courtesy of the artist. CC BY-NC-ND.

© Grace Aneiza Ali, CC BY 4.0

https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0218.06
The Things We Carry

On the eve of our 6:30 a.m. one-way flight bound for John F. Kennedy Airport, New York City, my mother called us into her bedroom for a family prayer. My little sister was only six years old at the time so she would remember nothing of the weightiness of that night. Because we were older, fourteen and fifteen, my brother and I understood the urgency of the moment. We sat on the bed, holding each other’s hands with our eyes closed—like we always did in this ritual—as my mother prayed. It would be our last family prayer in Guyana. When she was done praying for our safety on the journey, she told us, ‘When we get to America, nothing changes. We will still be who we are.’

By 10 p.m. our house had been gleaned of its remaining furniture, knick-knacks, linens, and kitchen wares—all the things we could not carry. The state of my mother’s bedroom—ground zero for where our family had been packing five large suitcases for the past month—was relatively calm, considering this was the eve of our departure from our homeland. My mother was thankful that it wasn’t one of the scheduled blackout nights in our part of Georgetown. At least there was electricity as she finished packing. The suitcases were zipped up and padlocked, except for hers. The jars of wiri wiri pepper sauce and mango achar, sealed in their thick masking tape, had already been weaved into the nooks between her clothing. My mom had one major problem left to solve. The large cast-iron karahi bulged under the layers of clothes she had carefully swaddled it in. There was no minimizing its presence in the suitcase. She knew with it the luggage would be over the weight limit. She also knew that to take the pot, she had to leave something behind.

A staple in every Guyanese kitchen, the karahi is a thick, circular, and deep cooking pot that originated in the Indian subcontinent. It was first introduced in Guyana by the Indian indentured servants who were brought by the British, beginning in 1838 and throughout the early 1900s, to work the sugar plantations and rice farms in then British Guiana. Our karahi—aged, scratched, chipped, nicked, scraped, and blackened—had hit its sweet spot. Over decades, it had absorbed into its pores the perfect medley of oils and spices, which it now infused into whatever meats, vegetables, and sauces were poured into it. My mother had grown up as a young girl watching her mother cook for her family in the same karahi. Daily, it produced curries or stews or an occasional chow mein or fried rice for my mother and her siblings. In her suitcase bound for America, there was no prized jewelry, no priceless antiques, no precious silk saris.
There was only the karahi—the sole possession she had after her mother died. It was not going to be left behind. It was coming to America with us.

On 8 April 1995, my mother departed Guyana and took her entire family with her. A singular document transformed my family from citizens in one land to aliens in another. Yet, it had taken ten years for our visas to be approved. My mother had spent a decade of her life in limbo between present and future, between living in one land and making plans for an uncertain one. As she prepared for that early April morning flight, a decade of waiting, of not knowing when we would leave, had come to an end.

At thirty-nine years old, my mother started over in a foreign land. She was leaving a homeland where the tragedies often eclipsed the joys. She was leaving a country she saw violently transition from a colonized territory to an independent republic. She was leaving a place where her father, haunted by the demons of alcoholism, took his life, adding to the statistics of Guyana’s high suicide rates among Indian men. She was leaving a country where, just a few years after her father’s death, her mother too would pass away at the young age of forty-eight after an aneurism gripped her brain. With her father’s suicide and her mother’s death, my mother was orphaned by nineteen years old. She was leaving a country on whose soil she buried her mother while still in mourning for her father. It was then her fear began: she too would not live past the age of fifty, as none of her parents did. The loss of her mother and father ushered in a series of constant departures. Beginning in the 1970s, her six siblings joined the exodus of Guyanese leaving Guyana. They moved on to Barbados, Canada, and the United States, without her.

My mother was leaving a country where, despite the constant companions of death and departure, she forged a family of her own. She was leaving a country that had seen her evolve from an orphaned daughter, to a wife, to a young mother. She was leaving a country where, like her mother and father, she too struggled to keep her children from the deep abyss of poverty. She was leaving a country where she had no infant formula for her babies because the government had banned foreign imports. ‘Let them eat cornmeal,’ they said. It was then that she began to understand the demons that plagued her father were not only of his own making. The failure to take care of his family ate away at him too. She was leaving Guyana with no desire to return.

Despite all of these things, or perhaps because of them, it was non-negotiable for my mother that the karahi come with us to America. It carried within its pores her memories of her mother. Twenty-five years later, it is the object that bridges my mother’s past with her present, her homeland with her new land. After all these years, it survives. It is now over sixty years old. Oceans and lands apart from its origin, the karahi continues to nourish my family. My mother still cooks her curries and stews in that karahi in her American home. She is among the many daughters who carry our mother’s things across borders.
Indra

Indra sat cross-legged on the linoleum floor with her plate and cup centered neatly between her knees. She didn't have a spoon or fork. She ate with her hands. No kind of pleading, begging, hand gesturing, or angry faces I made to show my disapproval, would get her to move from the floor to the chair to eat at the table with me. Often, in an act of resistance to her act of defiance, I would take my plate and cup and sit on the floor with her. I would eat the rice and dahl with my hands, too. She would first laugh, then yell at me in Telugu, ‘Pāgala’!

This was her way of cussing at me affectionately, calling me ‘the crazy girl.’ Indra didn’t speak my English and I didn’t speak her Telugu, the regional language of the state of Andhra Pradesh. We managed to meet in the middle in Hindi, the national language of India, because of our mutual attraction to Bollywood films. Indra was addicted to the love stories and the ballads. I used them as a Hindi language immersion course. Or so I pretended. Indra knew I was just as enthralled by the plots of forbidden love that always led to predictable happy endings. Life, and love for that matter, as depicted by Bollywood, was blissfully simple.

Indra spoke more languages than I did. In fact, while she spoke three Indian tongues—Telugu, Urdu, Hindi—my Telugu was non-existent, and my Hindi was severely limited. I couldn’t utter a complete sentence or express a full thought in Hindi. What I knew were single words and could string together elementary phrases to offer to the city’s rickshaw drivers to get me from point A to B on the Hyderabad streets. When I first arrived in Hyderabad, I tried taking Hindi lessons. The school taught Hindi by way of Telugu. In other words, you had to first know Telugu to learn Hindi. I lasted one week, never making it past ‘Mera nam Grace.’ It was pure magic that Indra and I were able to communicate at all.

It was September, the height of monsoon season. I was deflated by daily trips throughout known and obscure parts of the city, dodging the heavy rains, looking at apartments, and negotiating the rental price with landlords, only to have them turn me down in the end. I had thought that my American dollars, and the fact that I could offer three months’ rent in advance, would be enough. I was wrong. Landlords didn’t want to rent to me—a single woman, in her twenties, with no family attachments in sight. ‘You’re suspicious to them,’ I was told one night by well-meaning Indians at a dinner welcoming me and other Fulbright Fellows to India. ‘You’re a young Indian woman, you have no husband, no father, no male relative with you, and you’re asking
to rent an apartment for yourself. Women just don’t do that here. Women don’t live alone here.’

I finally did find a flat, in a noisy and dusty residential enclave in downtown Hyderabad known as Begumpet, not far from the city’s airport. The two-bedroom, third floor flat had been previously occupied by a fellow American Fulbright Fellow—as luck would have it, his Fulbright year was up, and I, thankfully, could move in and take his place. This was how I met Indra.

He shared that there was a woman who came to the flat every day at noon—she cleaned the apartment, washed the clothes, did the dishes, bought the groceries, and cooked lunch. He asked me to keep her employed. I knew that a culture of servitude, of having women, sometimes very young girls, working as servants, was a norm for many homes in India. I didn’t want to be part of this. So, I initially refused, not just because of my feelings about the ethics of this practice but also because I was convinced I would be fine creating a life in Hyderabad on my own.

I would be wrong. I had never lived by myself before. I was piloting being on my own for the first time at twenty-two years old in a foreign land where I knew no one and barely spoke just one of the country’s multiple languages. And so, I reconsidered, I needed Indra more than Indra needed me.

Indra worked from eight o’clock in the morning to twelve noon in the apartment on the ninth floor of the building, and from twelve to three o’clock in my flat. I learned later that there was a third family she worked for from late afternoon into the evening. This was Indra’s day—cleaning, washing, and cooking for three households from eight o’clock in the morning to eight o’clock at night—before she made it back to her own home to make dinner for her husband and two children.

Indra might have been younger, but she looked like she was in her fifties. A life of toil and labor had ungracefully aged her. Later, she would share with me that she wasn’t sure how old she was. She had no birth certificate. No official documents marked her coming into this world. No papers claimed her as a citizen of India. Her mother and father passed away when she was a little girl. All she knew was that, from the time she was born, she had spent all her days in Hyderabad.

With Indra’s daily presence in the flat my Hindi expanded—mostly with the language of food. Every week, she shopped for groceries and ran through a list of what she would get:

- baṅgana—eggplant
- kaddū—pumpkin
- ālū—potato
- göbhī—cabbage
- phūlagöbhī—cauliflower
- bhiṅḍī—okra
Indra curried everything she cooked. She treated garlic and ginger like they were pepper, with an overzealous dash of each. Every meal came with the trifecta of rice, dahl, and chappatis. She was a master of Indian cuisine. Although I might have been having a semblance of the same meal every day, I was given a feast.

I never gave Indra any requests about what to do around the flat. I wouldn't have been able to communicate instructions anyway. Also, I didn't take well to being Indra's boss, in fact, I was quite resistant to it. I had grown up hearing the stories my grandmother, my father's mother, told as she too cared for other women's homes. She took great pride in the excellence of her work. But it pained her to labor over making another woman's home beautiful every day, when she couldn't do the same for her own. Granny Doris never had a home of her own. She spent most of her life as a squatter, living in a makeshift shack on someone's else's property in Georgetown that, any day, could have been razed. Eventually it was. She left her home each morning knowing that when she returned at night it might not be there. To protect herself from losing the thing that was the deepest desire of her heart—a home of her own—she lived in total detachment of the shack. For Granny Doris, her home was a place to lay her head at night. But she poured all her might, muscle, and creativity into making other women's homes sparkle.

Because of my grandmother, I was sensitive to Indra's role. I was no mistress of the house. I left that title exclusively to Indra. I had given her a set of keys and she decided how, when, and what things needed to be done. She dictated what to cook, what groceries to buy, and how many rupees were needed for it all. For the year I lived there, the flat was as much Indra's as it was mine. Often, when I would leave town to attend some academic conference, Indra and her children chose to stay in the flat. I would return a week or so later and find the bed untouched. The straw mats Indra brought from her home were rolled up and set aside in a corner of the living room. While I was gone, she and her children slept on the floor.

I never saw Indra write anything down. Never saw her put pen to paper. I suspected that she could not read or write. But I never asked as I was worried the question would invade her privacy. She would light up, however, when I brought home brown paper bags filled with notebooks and pencils for Manju, her little girl. Manju and I shared a similar love—the sacred act of opening up a new notebook and writing on its first crisp page. She greeted every new notebook with delicacy. She opened it slowly, ran her palm across the first page, and pulled it to her nose to take in the scent of its newness. And she thought carefully about what would grace the first page. Precocious Manju talked circles around both her mother and me. At ten years old, she was learning Hindi, Telugu, and English in school. She filled up a lot of notebooks.

My relationship with Indra evolved without any direction or intent that it ought to do so. Soon, I couldn't imagine India without Indra. When, toward the end of the monsoon season, I fell dangerously ill with a tropical flu, it was she who stripped my
fevered body, sponged me down with warm water as if bathing a child, and fashioned a homemade poultice for my chest. Two weeks later and mending, I still couldn’t hold any real food down and had lost nearly ten pounds. Indra would bring from her own kitchen tiffins steaming with broth. ‘Kana Kana!’ she would urge. ‘Eat, eat,’ her tone at once soothing, at once worried, and as usual, bossy. In my weeks of illness, she was not to be questioned. In her formidability I saw why she was named for the Hindu god of thunder.

Soon, I was back to my routine again, spending mornings and early afternoons on the campus at the University of Hyderabad. Professionally, as a Fulbright Fellow, I was researching how Indian women’s literature impacted the movement for women’s equal rights. Privately, I went to India to find a connection to the women whose Indian names I did not carry. I am part of a lineage of women—my grandmothers Doris and Inez, my mother Ingrid, my sister Candace—with names far removed from India, our motherland and from Hindi, our mother tongue. Yet, when you look at us, we are clearly India’s women; our roots tangled up in India’s soil. Months into my research, I was feeling more and more lost, overwhelmed by the complexities and contradictions in the notion of equality for women and girls in a country that everyday continued to baffle me. And I was riddled with self-doubt, confronted with insecurities. Why did I think I was qualified to take on this kind of work? How could I, with all my privilege, possibly understand the lives of the women here?

The days I came back to the flat, and Indra had some extra time before she left for her third job, were the times we ate a late lunch together and where I fuss ed about her eating on the floor. She would arrange two robust plates with the different vegetables she had curried for the day and a nice helping of rice and dahl, warm the chappatis on the tawa on the kerosene stove, and make a fresh batch of cold nimboo pani—the juice from freshly squeezed limes shaken with water, cayenne pepper, and a little bit of sugar. I relished the ceremonious way Indra treated the act of preparing and plating a meal. She embraced food as sacred. She, in turn, would fuss at me if I brought a book to the meal. She scolded me: when you eat, you must only eat. For Indra, mealtime was a gift. It deserved one’s full presence.

With her plate and cup filled, she would stoop to the linoleum floor, balancing them with precision as she descended. Indra sat on the floor, because as a Dalit, a woman of India’s untouchable caste, she wasn’t permitted to sit at the table with me. Considered tainted and impure, she was forbidden to share in the meal she lovingly labored over for us. Indra ate from the same steel tiffin plate and cup every time. She wouldn’t share the same plates, cups, forks or spoons that I used. She would wash her plate and cup and leave it to dry in its own segregated corner of the dish rack where it did not touch the other kitchen wares. Despite my gestures, my urging of ‘nahi, nahi’ in Hindi each time she descended to the floor, Indra always refused. For her, the matter was bigger than sitting on the floor. She was a woman who abided by
the values of her culture, privately and publicly. She did so without question, without temptation. Her resistance to me was her submission—to what she believed in, to what was instilled in her.

As the year lingered on, I continued to spend my days immersed in my research on Indian women’s history through dramatic titles such as *The Legally Dispossessed*, *Enslaved Daughters*, and *Death by Fire*. And in the afternoons, I came home to Indra, to our lunch ceremony, to our quiet dance between the table and the floor. There with Indra was where I learned about the women of India. There with Indra was where I found my education.
The Girl with the Notebook

There were no paved roads directly to Chaffee Jenetta. Telephone lines and electric wires were rare in those parts. Women were immersed in their day—fetching water, gathering wood and sticks to stoke fires, and cooking for their families. In this small Muslim coffee farming community nestled in the remote terrains of Eastern Ethiopia, I found comfort in the company of lush mountains and endless blue sky.

The journey to Chaffee Jenetta had started over a year ago in Harlem, New York where I called home. I was invited to travel with the board members of an NGO that works with coffee planters in Ethiopia’s rural villages, helping them to grow better coffee and earn higher incomes. I had been supporting their fundraising and outreach efforts through their Harlem office and was drawn to the organization’s model of enlisting the support of these farmers to improve social services in Chaffee Jenetta like clinics, schools, and access to clean water.

It was my first time in Ethiopia and my first trip to Africa. I learned from a previous year of traveling throughout India that there was no preparing for the rural countryside. You simply showed up and let the land lead. I embraced Ethiopia with the same deference. While our group assessed the farming conditions and needs of the village, I spent most of the time with the school children. I had learned that as early as nine years old, Chaffee Jenetta’s children began working on the coffee farms to help support their families. A girl, about nine or ten years old, caught my attention. I asked for her name, but she was too shy to tell me. I pointed to the books she clutched under her arm and asked if I could look at them. Her notes, written in Oromo, the local language of Chaffee Jenetta, filled up every usable blank space. Her handwriting was in the margins, on the inside and outside of the covers, written horizontally and vertically.

I recalled my own primary school days growing up in Guyana when notebooks and paper were a luxury. We used them sparingly and only for important schoolwork. Instead, we had hand-held chalkboards and little bits of chalk. It was cheaper, but it meant everything that was written had to be erased. I wanted to be a writer. I would gather sheets of paper wherever I could find them and glue or sew them together to make books. It was within those pages that I could invent the life I wanted.

When my grandmother and aunts noticed this little hobby of mine, I quickly became their official reader and writer. Letters arrived from relatives living in the United States, Canada, or England, and I was asked to read them aloud and help write
the response. That many of the women in my family struggled to read was normal to me. It never struck me as unusual that they relied on me to transcribe intimate details about their lives. Perhaps, this is why I wrote so guardedly in my own notebooks—I knew privacy was a privilege.

Like that little girl in Chaffee Jenetta, I left no free space unmarked in my handmade books. I too wrote in the margins, within the covers, and sideways. I wondered if this was where the stories of Chaffee Jenetta were being kept. Were they scribbled within the margins? Were they tucked in between the covers?

One of the Ethiopian guides that accompanied our group remarked, ‘These are the forgotten people.’ He had never been this deep into the mountains of the Deder District either and was visibly moved by the agrarian way of life in Chaffee Jenetta. Perhaps what he was witnessing made him feel as a foreigner in his own land.

But as I stood there looking through this little girl’s notebooks, nothing about her seemed forgotten to me. There was a boldness about her. There was a joyfulness about her. What I saw was a young girl thriving amidst her circumstances. I’ve found this to be universal—people thriving amidst contradictions, thriving in the messiness of life, thriving in the tragedies, thriving in the challenges, the hurts and the disappointments.

Notebooks may seem trivial when compared to the serious needs in Chaffee Jenetta like clean water, clinics, and paved roads. But they represent the freedom to dream, to create, and to imagine a future for oneself. For that little girl, her future begins within the pages of her notebook—just as my dreams began for me. It was clear by the way she clung to her books, its pale blue covers tattered and torn, that what was written in them was of value. They were sacred to her.

The more I thought about our Ethiopian guide’s words that these were ‘forgotten people’ the more it unsettled me. Far too often the narratives about women and girls in rural communities whether they be in Asia, or Africa, or South America, or the Caribbean, are centered on an urgent call to look past the proverbial courtyard, to aim for a life beyond the confines of the village, to shed the veil. And we tell them that not doing so would render them invisible, marginalized, or trapped. We’re wrong. Chaffee Jenetta is not another nameless village in another ubiquitous story of poverty in Africa. It is a unique place, a challenging place, a wealthy place—albeit not material wealth. It is not a place to flee from, but one to be nourished and supported.

The little girl I met could turn out to be a powerful voice for Ethiopia—her Ethiopia, no one else’s. She might one day become a writer herself, sharing with the world its multiple stories. And to do so, perhaps she will find herself returning to those very notebooks. She could light the world.
The Geography of Separation
8 August 2014
Georgetown, Guyana

The Ones Who Leave . . . the Ones Who Are Left

 Twenty years after I left Guyana, I returned for the first time in 2014. I reunited with V, my first best friend. My last best friend. It was a 100-degrees or so it felt. Georgetown was having a Roman August. I was thankful for the desolation that left the city feeling like it belonged only to me and V. We were at a café on Main Street. That amused me because when I was growing up there in the 1980s and 90s, my family never stepped foot in cafés. We never once ate in restaurants. We couldn’t afford the extravagance. We ate all of our meals at home. Everyone I knew did, too.

V told me that I hadn’t changed a bit. I fibbed as well and returned the compliment. We looked at each other and giggled—we were still defending each other like best friends do. We both sat on the same side of the table, tucked close, shoulder-to-shoulder, thigh-to-thigh. We had put aside our grown-women selves for the moment and were back to being the fourteen-year-old girls we were when we’d last seen each other. Like me, V bounced around in dresses always bright and floral and flowing. The Pentecostal church on Middle Road where our families attended, where our friendship began and flourished, was strict about what girls had to wear—skirts and dresses at least one inch below the knees. No pants, no jeans, no shorts, no tights, ever. Pants were for boys and men. No makeup nor jewelry. The slightest hint of color on your lips and you were branded Jezebel. Although my adult brain now knew those definitions of piety and chaste were extreme, they still kept a strong hold. It’s why it took me until I was thirty-two years old and a whole continent between me and the Pentecostal church, to pierce my ears.

Though I never told her, I was always a little jealous of V. Of all the little brown-skin Indian girls in the church, I thought she was the prettiest. The church boys agreed, too. While I remained delicate and thin, V embraced the changes in the contours of her body with grace and confidence. She was brilliant. She was a master multi-tasker. I was singular in my vision: church and school. V had what my skinny, bookish, timid self didn’t—presence and personality. She was beautiful, and she was popular. None of which I was. I kept my envy in check and clung to her with the hopes that some of her boldness and popularity would rub off on me for my own good.

I spent a lot of time in her bottom house flat. For our Saturday afternoon ritual, I made the ten-minute walk from the end of Middle Road where I lived, passing by the church, to the top of the road, where V lived. My whole life existed on Middle Road—my house, my church, my best friend—and that’s all I needed. In my fourteen
years of living in Guyana, we moved four times, and yet we never left Middle Road. V’s house was always immaculately clean. Everything in it had its proper place. More like its proper alignment—it had to be angled just a certain way. Her mother was Feng Shui-ing in Guyana before it was a global trend. It’s easy to be a minimalist when you don’t have much to begin with. V’s tiny two-room house was an oasis compared to my equally tiny but crowded and messy bottom house flat. My mother readily admitted that organization was not her thing.

V was always loyal to me with her secrets. There were many Saturday nights when we huddled near the glow of the kerosene lamp at her kitchen table under the darkness of the city’s blackout where we were supposed to do homework or memorize another New Testament book for Sunday school the next morning. Instead, we gossiped, shared our crushes on the boys in church, planned our weddings. This sharing of our interior world sealed our friendship.

V’s house felt safe and warm. I often wished I had V’s family. Her father, a kind, soft-spoken man, never walked out on her mother. I had too many memories of begging my daddy to stay.

When I left Guyana and I left V, we both made promises. We would write each other every month. We would send pictures. I would come back to Guyana once a year. I never wrote and I never went back. As I sat next to her in the café twenty years later, I found myself staring at her face as if she was some long-lost lover and I was trying to determine if the loving feeling was still there. I wondered if she forgave me for leaving her.

I had no knowledge of what had happened in her life since I climbed the stairs to my Guyana Airways one-way flight bound for JFK. I’ve since been on many planes and gone through a few passports filled up with multiple immigration stamps. V has never left Guyana. She has no passport with its pages marked with official stamps of the places she’s been. A passport, or the absence of one, becomes a symbol of how two lives that begin together, diverge.

When the waitress at the café came over and asked for our lunch order, I predictably chose the chicken and potato curry with rice, and sliced cucumbers and pepper sauce on the side. V ordered a Coca-Cola in the can. I asked if she wasn’t hungry. She told me she still doesn’t eat restaurant food.

In a silly attempt to be funny, I said to her, ‘Tell me everything that’s happened in the last twenty years and start from the beginning.’ This turned out to be a serious request for V. It wasn’t funny to her. She left me in girlhood and shifted to womanhood. She began with facts and chronology. She told me she married early. She was the mother of two children and had left the physically violent and abusive marriage. She and her two babies were now living back in the house on Middle Road with her father. She told me she had no money and no job.
I was in awe of how she could summarize twenty years into Polaroid snapshots. Throughout V’s retelling, I felt my presence at the table slowly fading. This was not the homecoming nor reunion I imagined. I didn’t know what to do with the things I was being told, other than it seemed necessary to V that I know them, that I hear her. V was unwavering and stoic in her reporting. She would make a fine journalist. I could picture her giving a briefing from the belly of a ravaged, war-torn land. She would be unflinching in her delivery of the facts—the body counts, the wreckage.

As V continued her story, I realized it was me who remained in girlhood. It was me for whom time stopped. When she reached the part of her story of the physical abuse she’d endured for years, it was the part that broke me and brought on my tears. I visualized those scenes, and in them I didn’t see the thirty-three-year-old woman sitting next to me, I saw my fourteen-year-old best friend. And yet, V was not distracted by my tears. She was not moved. She did not partake in my outrage or in my devastation or in my sadness over what had transpired in her life since we last saw each other as girls. She knew that my tears were not about her.

My tears were about my own guilt: Is this what happens to the ones who are left? To the girls who can’t leave? My tears were about my own gratitude. This is what could have happened to me. Sitting next to me was my best friend, telling me about the life I too should have had. There it was, the two agonies of guilt and gratitude, tucked close, hand in hand.

When V finished her Coca-Cola and her story, she told me she couldn’t stay much longer because she had to get back to her babies. A neighbor was watching them. From my bag, I reached for the small envelope I had prepared for her before coming to the café. In it were American dollars and a copy of an old photograph—the image of me as a girl when she last saw me. It is one of the handful of photographs my family brought to the United States with us that I keep preserved—with the other relics of the self I left behind in another country—in a large rustic blue-linen box in my Manhattan apartment. I didn’t have a single photograph of the two of us together. I wanted to give this copy to V because it marked the moment when nothing had yet changed in our lives. We didn’t know those were our last days together. We were yet to be defined by the categories of the girl who leaves and the girl who is left. Behind the photograph, I had written her a note. One of the lines said, ‘Whenever I think of Guyana, I always think of you.’

After V’s story, those lines were now burdened with a new sordid meaning that they didn’t have when I penned them. I was cringing at how they seemed so trite, so naïve, so unworthy of the moment. Worse, so self-indulgent. They were all the wrong words. I didn’t know what the right ones ought to be. I slipped the photograph out of the envelope, leaving only the money, and handed it to V. She peeked at the fifty-dollar bills, and without saying anything, quickly put it in her purse. Neither I nor V suggested that we take a photograph of the two of us reunited after twenty years.
Neither of us felt compelled to memorialize the moment. V never asked about my life in the past twenty years. She didn’t request that I too start from the beginning of our moment of departure. She knew that in two days, I would get on another plane, I would have another stamp in the pages in my American passport. I would leave, again.

Author’s Note

The essay’s title, ‘The Geography of Separation,’ is inspired by a line from the poem ‘From the Book of Mothers,’ by Jamaican-American poet Shara McCallum, in which she asks, ‘What is separation’s geography?’ (Shara McCallum, This Strange Land (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2011), p. 60). The essay is a work of creative nonfiction. Where I deemed it necessary, I have changed names, details, and determining characteristics of certain people, places, or events to avoid compromising anyone’s privacy.