

cover feature

# BRIDGING



# THE LOWLAND

## The Work of Jhumpa Lahiri

By Christopher Busa

All vital truth contains the memory of all that for which  
it is not true. — *D. H. Lawrence*

**I**N THE SPRING of 1997, Jhumpa Lahiri, accompanied by a friend, drove from Boston to Provincetown to explore the Fine Arts Work Center, which had just offered her a seven-month residency beginning in October. She was apprehensive, reluctant, with questions about what sort of place simply trusted the inner compass of the Fellows to produce creative work. Lahiri had written creatively in elementary and junior high school, but the bulk of her developing writing had been scholarly, examining the writing of distinguished authors. She earned three master's degrees from Boston University, one in English, one in Comparative Literature, a third in Creative Writing. Her mentor in the writing program was the novelist Leslie Epstein, who encouraged her to write fiction while in graduate school. "Whenever we ran into each other," Jhumpa explained, "he'd say, 'Don't forget that you are a writer.'" Her ambition became emboldened despite the respected caution of her immigrant parents, who nudged her toward the stability of an academic career.

She was greeted on her first visit by Roger Skillings, chairman of the Writing Committee, and he took her around the grounds, showing her the Stanley Kunitz Common Room, where public events take place. This former storage space for coal would now be dedicated, Kunitz had once declared, to a higher form of energy—the imagination. Surrounding the Common Room were studio spaces for visual Fellows, a print shop with presses once used by Robert Motherwell and Michael Mazur, a photo lab, a computer room, a periodical room, a library, and administrative offices. The Fellows would live in the Pearl Street compound, the original working buildings of a former lumberyard and railroad stop. Lahiri had grown up in the "Ocean State" of Rhode Island and knew well the rhythms of a seashore town, especially its solitude in winter, when many homes are shuttered as owners return to their real lives in cities. Scattered on either side of the Common Room were residential cottages, allowing visual artists to have quarters separate from their studios. Writers stayed in their work spaces, and Lahiri would live on the top floor of what is called the Barn.

She followed Roger Skillings up the stairs into the open loft, where there was space for cooking, sleeping, eating, bathing, and writing in a more-or-less shared area. She told me she felt a bounce in her chest at that moment. She was no longer a student; it was time to make the transition from scholar to writer.

She said to Roger, “Can I live here?”



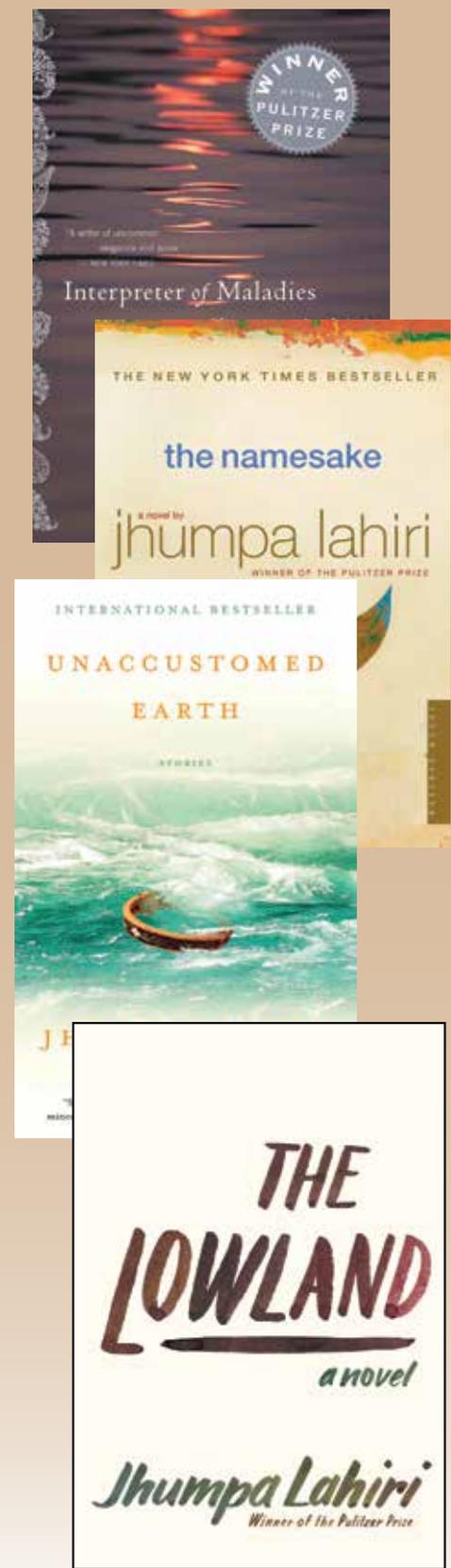
The founders of the Work Center were artists and writers and like-minded people who knew that having a career was different from earning a degree and that surviving as an artist was a decades-long endeavor, like a second maturity. Stanley Kunitz, who did so much to foster the growth of the Work Center, defined this psychological transformation for generations of those who were eager to live as artists: “The first duty of the poet is to create the person who will write the poems.”

Growing up as an Indian-American, Lahiri lived in a kind of border zone, a lowland between cultures where language and tradition, East and West, were sometimes in conflict, sometimes harmonious. The word *identity* might signify Jhumpa Lahiri’s middle name—in fact, she has two of them. In the Indian tradition, children are given a “pet name,” or nickname, and a “good name,” which is used as their official name. Like Gogol in her novel *The Namesake*, Jhumpa became identified by her pet name. She discussed this dilemma in a 2003 *New York Times* interview:

My name, Jhumpa, which is my only name now, was supposed to be my pet name. My parents tried to enroll me in school under my good name, but the teacher asked if they had anything shorter. Even now, people in India ask why I’m publishing under my pet name instead of a real name. . . . I actually have two good names, Nilanjana and Sudeshna. My mother couldn’t decide. All three are on the birth certificate. I never knew how to write my name.

While Lahiri’s identity may remain obscured to readers, she is plainly known and acclaimed through her short stories and novels. She enralls her readers with her deft storytelling and vivid evocations of intimate, close-up scenes, in which the most ordinary of details become devastating. The slow accumulation of concrete facts—voices, thoughts, actions—builds a world studded with salient moments and revelation. I am reminded of Gogol, her protagonist in *The Namesake*, who is powerfully affected as a young man after a visit to the Taj Mahal, “the marble mausoleum that glows gray and yellow and pink and orange depending on the light.” He decides to become an architect, savoring the details of buildings he encounters in America and India. In joining character to character and people to place with a seamless synthesis of language, she creates an articulate universe.

In the summer of 1997, while defending her dissertation, she worked as an intern at *Boston* magazine. She was eager to start publishing the stories she had been refining for years, almost



secretly. The first story that “worked,” she said, was “A Real Durwan,” which she wrote in 1992, when she was twenty-five, a student in the Boston University writing program. She sent her stories to various literary magazines, but received mostly rejections. An exercise, she said, that “toughened my resolve to write better.”

Her dissertation, “Accursed Palace: The Italian Palazzo on the Jacobean Stage (1603–1625),” focused on the role of the palazzo as the architectural setting for the revenge tragedies of three playwrights in Jacobean England. Like

Shakespeare, Middleton, Marston, and Webster, the playwrights she examined, tended to set their work in foreign countries. Even at this point in her examination of other writers, Lahiri was exploring the “architecture” of a story, how a sense of country and place inspired and motivated the emotional development and behavior of characters.

In October of 1997, she began her Fellowship with nine other writing Fellows—poets or fiction writers—and ten visual artists, who were painters, photographers, or sculptors. Lahiri had been living in Boston since 1989 and believed she had made the right decision, to pursue her writing; she was determined to make it work. She did not know at the time that the stories she was writing would win the Pulitzer Prize when collected in 1999 as *Interpreter of Maladies*. “A Temporary Matter” was the first story she wrote in the Barn, the first piece of writing she did in Provincetown, and the first published in the *New Yorker*. In an e-mail, she noted, “It was a very intense writing experience, very rare, still very vivid.”

“A Temporary Matter” presents us with Shoba and Shukumar, a young, professional couple, who have lived on a “quiet tree-lined street” in the Boston area for three years at the opening of the story. Shukumar, thirty-five years old, is in graduate school, and Shoba, thirty-three, is an editor and proofreader, working in an office “where she searched for typographical errors in textbooks and marked them, in a code she had once explained to him, with an assortment of colored pencils. She would do the same for his dissertation, she promised, when it was ready. He envied her the specificity of her task, so unlike the elusive nature of his. He was a mediocre student who had a facility for absorbing details without curiosity.”

And yet it is the small, elusive details that intrude into their lives in a transformative way when the couple receives notice that their electricity will be shut off at eight p.m. each evening for one hour for the next five days, and they adapt to having dinner by candlelight, and speaking intimately, as if for the first time truly meeting each other. Six months earlier, pregnant with their first child, Shoba had gone into labor three weeks before her due date and the baby was born dead. Shukumar, who had been away at an academic conference, arrived at the hospital in time to hold the stillborn baby in his arms, the doctor suggesting he do so to help in the grieving process. Before an ultrasound, Shoba had told the doctor they didn’t want to know the sex of the infant, but Shukumar knows from holding him. On the last night of their séance-like evenings, Shoba announces she has found a new apartment. It had taken her all five nights to tell her husband that she was leaving him. Shukumar, in turn, reveals to Shoba that the baby was a boy. Lahiri concludes, “They wept together, for the things they now knew.”

Another story Lahiri worked on at the Work Center, “Sexy,” was later published in the *New Yorker*, and included in *Interpreter*. Miranda, a young woman working in the fund-raising department of a public radio station in Boston,

There's a pivotal scene in the novel *The Namesake* in which the Ganguli family drives to Cape Cod and then Gogol and his father, Ashoke, walk along a breakwater until they reach land's end. They don't have a camera, so Ashoke tells Gogol:

**"Try to remember it always. Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go."**

This scene also appears in filmmaker Mira Nair's adaptation of *The Namesake*, which was released in 2006. Family connections are woven throughout this production, on-screen and off-screen. Lahiri and her parents, Amar and Tia, appear on-screen in small roles. The actors who play Ashima and Ashoke, Tabu and Irrfan Khan, spent time with Amar and Tia to prepare for their roles. (Khan also plays an Indian immigrant in several episodes of the HBO series *In Treatment*, titled "Sunil," which includes an episode cowritten by Lahiri, who also served as story consultant for the entire storyline.)



FROM THE FILM *THE NAMESAKE* COURTESY OF MIRABAI FILMS

begins an affair with an exotic-looking gentleman of Indian descent, Dev, whom she meets at the perfume counter of Filene's. On an excursion, they visit the Mapparium, located at the Christian Science Center. Built in 1935, it is a glass globe depicting oceans in shades of blue that indicate depth, and countries in colors that show their colonial affiliations of the period. While the oceans have remained intact in their underwater topography, the countries have now vastly changed affiliations. On the glass bridge of the Mapparium, Dev points out the location of India, where he is from, and the young woman looks for London, where her coworker's cousin's husband is presently having an affair with a woman he met on an airplane. Geographic distances are brought close up, visible at a glance. This simulated "world" is no longer merely a symbol of human habitation and history; it has become a literal setting, a place that embodies action and personal experience.

Another feature of the Mapparium is its unusual acoustics, the curving glass bouncing voices with strange distortions. Across the thirty-foot span of the bridge, Dev tests the anomaly by whispering faintly to Miranda, "You're sexy." No one has ever called her sexy before, and the word lingers in her thoughts, taking on larger meaning, compelling her to go shopping for the kind of clothes she thinks a mistress should wear.

The story resonates as well in the contrast between the first-hand experience of the young woman and the second-hand experience of her coworker's cousin whose husband is having an affair. Miranda doesn't actually wear her new clothes until she is babysitting the son of her coworker's betrayed cousin. Each scenario informs the other in elucidating the meaning of "sexy" as "loving someone you don't know," the

definition uttered by the precocious seven-year-old, who persuades Miranda to put on the sexy dress she bought for her mistress role, but never wore. A word, a name, can identify and bewilder. Lahiri seems to isolate an epiphany that D. H. Lawrence called "vital truth," in which all that is true is accompanied by the memory of when it was not, illuminating one's momentary certainty as only one aspect of a far more complex drama.

**"My grandfather always says that's what books are for, to travel without moving an inch."**

— Ashoke, in *The Namesake*

The sharing of secrets, the revelation of self to others, and self to self, constitutes the essential drama of Lahiri's tale-telling. Sometimes essential truths may be shouted in public, and be ignored, as Lahiri suggests in the very early story "A Real Durwan," in which sixty-four-year-old Boori Ma, twice-a-day "sweeper of the stairwell" in an apartment building in Calcutta, mutters to the tenants—or to no one in particular—about the luxury of her life before Partition in 1947, which divided India from Pakistan and caused massive relocations, leaving her stranded from "a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood *almari*, and a number of coffer boxes. . . ."

A new water basin for shared use is installed in her building, an improvement that increases the

pride of the tenants and gives them a new awareness of "elegance." But the basin is stolen while Boori Ma is absent from her duty—she has left her post beneath the letter boxes at the entrance of the building, driven away by the increased number of workers coming in and out of the building to make further improvements. She is cast out by the upscale tenants, who want a "real" doorkeeper, a real *durwan*. In sweeping away this displaced soul, the apartment dwellers sweep away reminders of the past, political and social, and in doing so lose an element of their own humanity.

These issues of social class show in embryo the range and depth of Lahiri's exploration of political passion, so fully realized in her latest novel, *The Lowland*, forthcoming this September, in which class struggle lives alongside personal upheaval in the divergent life choices of two brothers from the southern section of Calcutta called Tollygunge. In the opening pages, Subhash is thirteen, his brother, Udayan, fifteen months younger. Lahiri conjures a neighborhood of mostly middle-class families, with a mosque and markets nearby. Within the enclave of homes, there are two oblong ponds with a lowland between them: as the ponds fill with water during the monsoon season, the lowland itself eventually becomes flooded with water and cannot be seen. Lahiri writes of this lowland:

The flooded plain was thick with water hyacinth. The floating weed grew aggressively. Its leaves caused the surface to appear solid. Green in contrast to the blue of the sky.

Water becomes walkable, refusing to reflect the sky. Remarkable circumstances allow for the expressing of extraordinary feelings. Eventually, the two brothers share parallel and disparate lives: Udayan stays in India, where he becomes



JHUMPA LAHIRI PHOTO BY ELENA SEIBERT

attracted to the tenets of the Naxalite uprising; Subhash moves to America, where he finds his own calling in the study of oceanography in Rhode Island. In the first scene, Udayan and Subhash are mere teenagers, their only adventure trespassing on the grounds of the tony Tolly Club, walled off from the neighborhood, a hundred-acre oasis for the aristocratic entertainments introduced by British colonization, such as golf, tennis, swimming, riding, dining, dancing, and music. At dusk, they clamber over one low section of the wall and find themselves in an alternative world. It is a fateful event, a note of discord that reverberates for the life of the book.

Subhash had never seen such grass, as uniform as a carpet, unfurled over sloping contours of earth. Undulating like dunes in a desert, or gentle dips and swells in a sea. It was shorn so finely on the putting green that it felt like moss when he pressed against it. The ground below was as smooth as a scalp, the grass appearing a shade lighter there.

Such vivid transformations of everyday experience animate the world Lahiri takes us through, like a guide, giving instruction lightly about important factual information and history. Yet the tour grows as an organic tale, taut with fibers of fascinating detail, from the knotted weeds of the lowland to a beach in Rhode Island where “Seaweed was strewn everywhere, rockweed with air bladders like textured orange grapes, lonely scraps of sea lettuce, tangled nests of rusty kelp caught in the waves.” The characters’ lives, their dreams and losses, are reflected in the land itself, imbedded in the author’s intimate language of place. When I remarked to Lahiri that I was especially struck by her profound

fairness to her characters, she said, “I hope there are redeeming qualities in everyone.” The social matrix of her characters, however foreign the location, offers all of us a support system, a familiar and certain truth refracted from alternative points of view.



I spoke on the phone with Lahiri this spring on a Sunday—noon my time in Provincetown, six in the evening for her in Rome, where she lives with her husband, Alberto, and her two young children, Noor and Octavio. During our conversation, her children were sometimes audible in the background, a pleasant reminder of the enduring importance of family in her stories. She has been learning Italian for years and told me she loves speaking the language and is beginning to write in it. She can banter in the Bengali of her girlhood, but can’t understand formal speech on Indian television. Her husband, a journalist and editor of Greek-Guatemalan origin, born in Mexico, is an American citizen. I wondered what languages they speak in the house. English, Spanish, Italian, Greek, Bengali? Lahiri’s international perspective informs her work, refining her focus on the Indian diaspora, sharpening our own understanding of international and social relations, from the golf courses of Calcutta to the lawns of suburban Rhode Island.

I asked Lahiri where the idea for her latest novel came from. “*The Lowland* is a book I’ve been trying to write since I was a Fellow at the Work Center,” she explained. “I first told the idea to one of my former Fellows that year. I said, ‘I’ve got this crazy idea for a book and I’m terrified if I can make it work.’ She said, ‘You’ve got to make it work.’ She was the one. I dedicated the book to her.”

Lahiri has dedicated the novel to her husband and to Carin Clevidence, her friend in the program that year of conception. Recently, Clevidence wrote her own novel, *The House on Salt Hay Road* (Macmillan, 2011). I asked Lahiri about the “idea” she divulged to Clevidence, and she offered some background.

“I should back up and say that I had a question about something that happened in Calcutta, in the neighborhood where my father was raised, which I knew a little about from visiting,” she told me. “I heard about this incident that had taken place, a very violent incident. I heard relatives talking about it. Not in great detail, but enough to intrigue me. So that year I was a

Fellow, my father came up to the Work Center for a week in November.”

This visit not only inspired her work on *The Lowland* but provided inspiration for another story as well:

“One night we had dinner with Jeff Eugenides and his wife, Karen Yama, who lived below me. I think it was Jeff who asked my father, What brought you to America? And my father, in his way of rendering this anecdote many times in the past, talked about the experience of moving to Cambridge in 1969 and living with this woman who was 103 years old, and that the moon shot had just happened. And it was that telling, the particular way my father told the story, which I had heard many times in the past. But for some reason, him saying it in the Barn in Provincetown at the Work Center that evening, that was the moment I felt, Oh God, I’ve got to write this story.”

This became “The Third and Final Continent,” the concluding story of *Interpreter of Maladies*. The fictional father has traversed India, England, and America and has been a good father; his child has achieved modest success. He describes his introduction to America as a young man, when he stayed in a rooming house owned by a 103-year-old woman, whose odd habits and old-fashioned manners are both bizarre and endearing. At the end of the story, he has been on this continent for thirty years. Through some refraction of wisdom, inspired by relocation, the lived life has attained an aura, a glow giving off an expression of inner life.

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement

# Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's Work



BY INDIRA GANESAN

To read Jhumpa Lahiri is to recognize the quiet, serious, and highly intelligent voice that is uniquely her own, a voice that is built on American and South Asian sense and sensibilities. The effect is, for me, less about story, though the plot is important, and more about something ineluctable. Rereading *Unaccustomed Earth* on a bus recently, removing myself from the din of the voices around me, I noticed the kinship that builds slowly between reader and writer.

That Friday, on the bus home, I became absorbed in “A Choice of Accommodations,” a short story from the collection that is, on the surface, about a married heterosexual couple attending a wedding at a prep school where the husband studied. Amit was left at the school to continue his studies while his parents left for India, a move that still stuns him in its unexpectedness and in the resultant homesickness and loneliness. Amit marries Megan, has children, and hopes to rekindle some of the romance in their marriage by taking accommodations in a hotel away from the campus dorms that the wedding couple uses as guest rooms. It is the first in a series of disappointments for Amit revealed in this story.

The wedding he comes to celebrate is that of a woman who captured the hearts of many of the boys at the school, including Amit; she is a breezy patrician daughter in a family who used to invite to their house the boys who had no place to spend holidays.

For Amit, Thanksgiving at the prep school was served with a mixture of genuine interest and patronizing duty on the part of the hosts. The notion of guest and host, those who have and those who do not, is pervasive in immigrant stories. Similar thoughts crowd in a jumble for Amit, together with his sense of an uncertain marriage, to the point that he unintentionally leaves his wife behind at the party to head to their hotel. He walks away from the situation, as he once walked away from his medical studies, a long,

exhilarating exercise, copying the movement perhaps made by his parents long ago.

The notion of abandonment, and forming new alliances, of coupledness, is a subject Ms. Lahiri investigates with precision. One gasps at her skill, her knowledge, and her artistry.

The immigrant's walk is the walk away from home, the impulse to leave what is both familiar and understood behind. The immigrant's knowledge of home is intrinsic, psychic, below the surface, possibly rising when the concept of *not-home* is met. The immigrant moves toward the unknown. The walk becomes akin to the gambler's hope for another chance. It is the notion that physical distance will create a transformation, a way not only to escape but also to construct a new persona, as well as more possibilities. It is as if one wants to cut off one's shadow when one moves, but shadows always follow.

The remedy, however momentary, is love. Here, the story ends with the disturbing, Chekhovian image of Megan's palm receiving Amit's heartbeats, “plainly striking.” For me, the use of the word “striking” is a choice that suggests frustration, but also knocking, as if at a door, the unspoken despair of a man who feels, perhaps always, inadequate to be loved and held, not abandoned, and the despair of a woman who has held on, who is abandoned, and who now faces, forcefully, the needs of such a man. It is the sound of love, one heartbeat that strikes into another's skin.

A good writer, a great writer, unleashes the thinking mind as well as the heart in her work. In Jhumpa Lahiri, I found myself forced out of my day-to-day bourgeois acceptance of the status quo, and began to think again.

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(ABOVE) LAHIRI'S DESK IN ROME; (BELOW) HER DESK IN JIM LECHAY'S WELLFLEET STUDIO WITH SECTIONS OF *THE LOWLAND* SPREAD OUT

is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination.



Available on YouTube is a video of Lahiri's father, Amar, demonstrating in a genial and witty way how to prepare and cook a festive South Asian rice dish called *pulao*. A love of family, of food and tradition, is a common thread throughout Lahiri's work, another layer of detail, like accumulating grains of rice. The cooking and serving of meals are rituals that unite families in all facets of life and tradition, from the most precious of celebrations to times of challenge and grief. In the video, Amar combines a number of ingredients, including basmati rice, cashews, raisins, cardamom pods, cinnamon sticks, cloves, bay leaves, and various other spices. He demonstrates every detail: stirring, timing, sequence, a delight in the interstices of the dish cooking on its own. At the end, he remarks, "Watch closely, this is not written down."

Lahiri spoke to me with warmth about the week her father spent with her in Provincetown during her Fellowship. She would work in the morning, he would mostly read. After lunch, they might go for a long walk through the town, sometimes out along the flat-topped granite boulders of the breakwater in Provincetown harbor, stretching from the first landing site of the Pilgrims to the protective arm of the sheltering Cape tip, where the land curves back upon itself. A scene on such a breakwater appears in the film based on Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, in which Gogol as a boy walks hand in hand with his father. The breakwater, like the lowland, presents a vivid image of separation, but the water is also a healing presence: there is always, in the end, in the way of tides and time, a coming together and healing. Later in the novel, Gogol will learn how he was named for the

Russian author of a story called "The Overcoat," which his father was reading during a train wreck that he survived. After hearing the story of his namesake, Gogol asks his father if he reminds him of that awful night, and the father says, "Not at all. You remind me of everything that followed."

On one walk with her father, Lahiri asked him to tell her about the violent event that happened in Calcutta in 1971. Though her family lived in America at the time, they heard through relatives in India, as well as Bengali friends in the United States, about the complicated political and social situation surrounding the Naxalite movement, which is the political context for *The Lowland*. As her father told her the story, she felt profoundly aware of the complexity of this situation and had doubts about her ability to make it live in its full potential in her writing. But the more she resisted, the more her friend Carin insisted: "Write the book." Instead, Lahiri wrote two other books, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, before summoning the concentration to write the novel conceived at the beginning of her career. It was now or never: she had to write *The Lowland*.



In her early childhood in Rhode Island, Lahiri experienced some isolation and segregation due to her Indian-American identity. She spent her formative years in a leafy university town in one of the country's smallest states, speaking Bengali at home and English outside the home. There were no Indian restaurants in Rhode Island at the time. Her American friends never heard her speak Bengali. She bridged two realities: the Bengali traditions of her family's home and her parents' deep ties to India, and the reality she experienced when she went to school and interacted with her peers and teachers. She had grown up as an only child—her one sister was not born until Lahiri was seven and a half years old—and felt a responsibility toward her parents, as children of immigrants often do, in some ways the child becoming the parent.



Lahiri reflected on the challenges her family faced: “English is their second language. From a very young age, my English was better than my parents’. I knew it and they knew it. I felt guilty about it, felt something was wrong. I should not be more authoritative than my parents.”

She spent long summers in Calcutta with her extended family, wrestling with contradictions and wondering who she was. I was curious about her expressions of self-doubt, given her brilliant academic successes. But it was not until she formed an identity as a writer that she developed a sense of confidence. She asked herself a question as we were speaking, shortly after her eleven-year-old son, Octavio, occasionally coughing in the background, was told to put a tablet under his tongue.

“What put me on this path to writing?” she mused. “I didn’t feel fully like a person taking up space until I got to the Work Center. Apart from better wanting to understand my parents, I think there is a more basic or existential element. Something about being in that Barn, having that desk to work at. Being believed in made me feel 100 percent alive, present instead of an insubstantial presence.”

In a *New Yorker* article, “Trading Stories: Notes from an Apprenticeship,” she frankly describes this transition: “Being a writer means taking the leap from listening to saying, ‘Listen to me.’” Writing became a part of her identity, perhaps serving as a bridge between the two cultures, the two countries she did not feel a full claim to:

When I became a writer my desk became home; there was no need for another. Every story is a foreign territory, which, in the process of writing, is occupied and then abandoned. I belong to my work, to my characters, and in order to create new ones I leave the old ones behind. My parents’ refusal to let go or to belong fully to either place is at the heart of what I, in a less literal way, try to accomplish in writing. Born of my inability to belong, it is my refusal to let go.

The growing belief in her ability as a creative writer was a slow process for Jhumpa Lahiri, but her transformation into a successful writer was rather sudden, triggered during her time at the Work Center when an agent found her. The *New Yorker* began publishing her stories, and many accolades accompanied her award of the Pulitzer Prize, so surprising for a first book of short stories by a relatively unknown author.

Lahiri’s natural modesty may have delayed the full development of a writer’s “stone fort” of a strong ego. She told me that one element of the making of art was distinctly selfish, putting the artist at the center as the creator. Even when she was working on fiction with Leslie Epstein at Boston University, she felt that this dimension of writing was a side thing, a flirtation with being an artist. Equally, she told me, when she was accepted into his class, meeting and befriending fellow students Ha Jin and Peter Ho Davies, she felt it was like an invitation to the White House. Her work was taken seriously.

Lahiri’s parents didn’t initially encourage her pursuit of an artist’s life. As immigrants forging a

new life in a new country, her parents encouraged her to become an academic with credentials to teach at a university. While they did not pressure her to become a doctor or a lawyer, they did want her to do something practical with her passion for literature, and it was a shock to them when she decided to sequester herself in Provincetown and write with a purpose of her own.

“It taught me how to think of myself as an artist,” she explained. “I have only been able to spit out those words in the last five years or so, telling someone I am a writer. I thought people would laugh. In college I knew people who had extraordinary belief in themselves, and I admired them—interesting people you meet when you are young, who have this fire. I was drawn to these people, but I felt I was not one of them. I had an antagonistic relationship with who I was that would not let me accept what I wanted to do. I didn’t want to express what I didn’t like, what embarrassed me.

“Now I realize those things that torment us growing up can give us enormous tools eventually—certainly for artists. Caring about other people, creating and caring, all that trial-by-fire of my childhood, now fulfills me because it has led me to do the work I do.”

In a widely discussed article, “My Life’s Sentences,” commissioned by the *New York Times* for a series called Draft on how writers do their writing, Lahiri shared a key dynamic in her process, the making of vital sentences:

In college, I used to underline sentences that struck me, that made me look up from the page. They were not necessarily the same sentences the professors pointed out, which would turn up for further explication on an exam. I noted them for their clarity, their rhythm, their beauty and their enchantment. For surely it is a magical thing for a handful of words, artfully arranged, to stop time. To conjure a place, a person, a situation, in all its

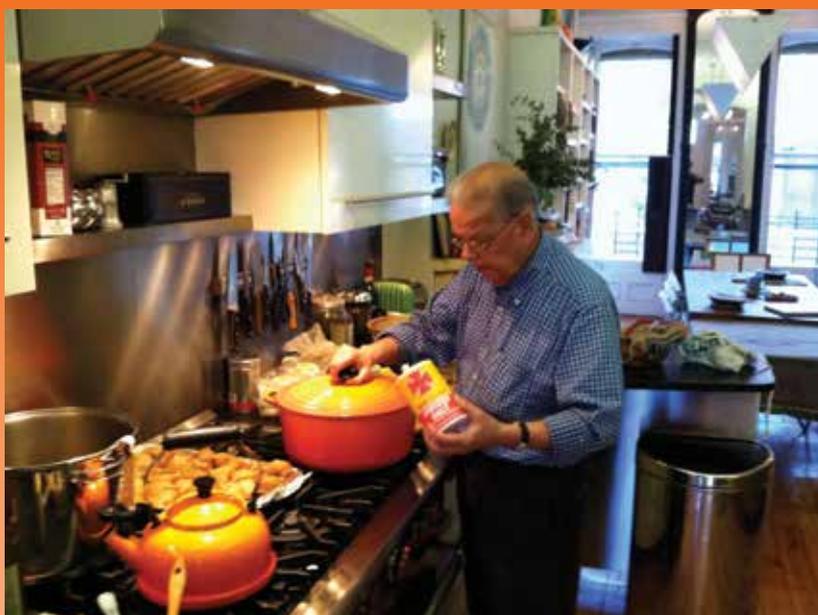


PHOTO BY ALBERTO VOURVOULIUS-BUSH

*In the kitchen, too, he walks a deliberate line, counting out the raisins that go into his oatmeal (fifteen) and never boiling even a drop more water than required for tea. It is my father who knows how many cups of rice are necessary to feed four, or forty, or a hundred and forty people. He has a reputation for andaj—the Bengali word for “estimate”—accurately gauging quantities that tend to baffle other cooks. An oracle of rice, if you will. . . .*

*In 1968, when I was seven months old, my father made pulao for the first time. . . . The occasion was my annaprasan, a rite of passage in which Bengali children are given solid food for the first time; it is known colloquially as a bhat, which happens to be the Bengali word for “cooked rice.” . . . Since then, he has made pulao for the annaprasans of his friends’ children, for birthday parties and anniversaries, for bridal and baby showers, for wedding receptions, and for my sister’s Ph.D. party. . . . He could probably rig up a system to make pulao out of a hot-dog cart, were someone to ask.*

— from “Rice,” *The New Yorker*, 2009

# Jhumpa Lahiri at 9 Columbus Square



BY WILLIAM CORBETT

Jhumpa Lahiri entered my family's life as a friend of our daughter Marni. Tamara McKenna, Marni's childhood friend and Jhumpa's Barnard College roommate, introduced them. When Jhumpa first came to our home at 9 Columbus Square in Boston, we all remarked on her beauty. The years having given her a gravity and stately grace, Jhumpa is more beautiful, strikingly so, today. At that time, she worked with Marni at Wordsworth Bookstore in Cambridge. When I dropped in to see them, I often found them stacking the less-browsed shelves, cracking each other up over the antics of one of the store's many personalities. Soon Jhumpa began coming to the house for dinner. Before I knew her as a writer, I knew her as a family friend.

I do not remember the year, but Jhumpa was in BU's writing program when she showed me a few stories. Her feel for language was obvious, but the stories were a little conventional for my taste. It was easy to encourage her, but I'm sure I wasn't much help.

She spent one summer house-sitting at 9 Columbus Square, and that experience would, albeit unknown to me and the family at the time, have greater consequence for her than any advice or comfort I gave her fledgling writing attempts. Jhumpa wrote about that summer in an essay that appeared in a 2011 *New Yorker*. It was then that I learned of the powerful impact our home had on her, the Philip Guston drawings and Seamus Heaney broadsides on our walls, and the books, especially a run of the *Paris Review*, on our shelves.

Jhumpa breathed in whatever was in the air of this working writer's house, and during that quiet summer she began to write what would become the stories in her extraordinary debut, *Interpreter of Maladies*. The Gustons and Heaneys, the books, Beverly's kitchen, where so many writers and artists had dined, the presence of so much art lived with in a casual way, taken for granted like breathing, gave her confidence that whatever she wanted of that world could be hers.

What moved me about her essay is that as a boy I had had the luck of being accepted into the home of novelist Donald Braider and his wife, Carol. There were books, pictures, music, and food that I was avid for without knowing where these appetites would lead. In that house I began to become a poet, clueless as to what that might mean.

After Jhumpa left Boston for Brooklyn, where both our daughters and Tamara McKenna live, I saw her either at my daughter Marni's table or her own or at the readings she gave in Cambridge when a new book appeared. I loved introducing her at her Harvard Book Store readings, and later at the MIT readings I helped arrange for her, because, as she grew older and more celebrated, a natural shyness overtook her. I loved making her feel at home and loved too the lineup of her mother's posse of dressed-to-the-nines Indian ladies in fabulous saris. They were splendidly arrayed in the front row.

I cannot read her work critically and am not interested in having an opinion. I enjoy that she opened for me, as for so many others, a door into a world we might not otherwise have known. She breathed fresh life into the foundational American myth, the American immigrant's story. Jhumpa is a natural short-story writer, but my favorite of her books is her novel *The Namesake*. Its affecting plainness of style artfully communicates the strangeness of the life of a young man, Gogol, whose Indian upbringing meets American realities. I like to talk about books with her because her passions for, say, Mavis Gallant and James Salter are so powerful that the surprise of their work is still with her. Most of all I admire the way she has withdrawn a little from her great success. She seems to know what it is worth and knows, too, how to avoid the excesses Americans demand of their celebrities.

Beverly and I spent most of the years 2011 and 2012 moving from Columbus Square. At some point I realized there was no room for a lifetime's library in our new Brooklyn home, but had no idea what to do with the books. One day it occurred to me that I could look at them as gifts to friends and walk the shelves deciding who ought to get what. For Jhumpa, I boxed up two shelves worth of Paris Reviews, the magazine in which she had gone to school in its famous interviews with writers. She put them in her Brooklyn study, where they might be read or at least looked into again, but it's really where they came from that matters. A reminder of the summer she began to follow her imagination into the vivid world she has created.

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RAY ELMAN, *ROCK IN THE WIND*, 2012, OIL AND DIGITAL COLLAGE ON CANVAS, 40 BY 60 INCHES  
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION; GIFT OF THE ARTIST

specificity and dimensions. To affect us and alter us, as profoundly as real people and things do.

For an example of an exemplary sentence, she chose one from the beginning of a story, “Araby,” in James Joyce’s *Dubliners*: “The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed.” The action brings a pulse to the sentence, a single sentence pacing a story and jolting the reader into a zone of reflection. In our phone conversation, I asked Lahiri for hints on how she almost mathematically balances her characters, situations, and variety of voices in such a way that a mystery becomes manifest in crystal clarity.

“I don’t know how to explain it. I’m not thinking about it in terms of my structure, or anything conscious,” she said. “All I know is that I’m working in this fog for a long time and in the end I want to make it clear. I want the sentences to be alive—like that Joyce sentence, which, as you say, is not a particularly profound sentence. It’s just that when I read it, I looked up to savor it, alive and breathing.”

Lahiri told me that for several years she has been reading the novels of Thomas Hardy, whose gloom is so saturated with the fertility of the nineteenth-century English countryside that it somehow becomes radiant in remembrance and recollection. She reread several of his novels a number of times while she was working on *The Lowland*. She is not sure if anything of Hardy shows through in the way her settings blend with her characters, yet she feels a deep debt to the way Hardy portrays the world.

In the summer of 2009, she took the pages of *The Lowland*, which she had been working on for about a year, to a house her family had rented in Wellfleet, the former house and studio of the artist James Lechay. (In 1997, the year Lahiri first came to Provincetown, *Provincetown Arts* published a profile of Lechay discussing how the artist tends to use a

small chip of blue or green or red in a neutral field of gray, with the small chip casting a tint on the larger field, much like a vivid detail in Lahiri’s writing.) Speaking on the phone as if we were chatting in the same room, she confided: “I can tell you a fascinating story having to do with the Lechay house and the Fine Arts Work Center. The real visionary work of this book was done sitting in his studio. Though I never knew him, I feel a connection to him. Powerful. After I left the Work Center, I remained on the mailing list—this was before e-mail—and they sent me notice of a show at the Hudson Walker Gallery. I hung on to it. Didn’t look at who painted it. Drawn to the painting, I put it up in the room I was working in at my Brooklyn apartment.

“After a few years, I had my son, I had my daughter, and it became increasingly difficult to work at home. I rented studio space elsewhere in Brooklyn, taking all the little things that

were over my desk, including the postcard, a gray painting. That was 2004. Then, in 2005, we bought a brownstone in Brooklyn and there was space for me to work. This time I did not put up that particular postcard. Time for new things. I put it in my shoe box, visual images I select and make collages from. A crazy thing I have in common with Michael Cunningham, who says, when we don’t write, we make collages.”

When Lahiri and her family arrived in Wellfleet in June that year, they were greeted with solid rain, obliging them to stay inside and explore the house, with its wide outdoor decks, and Lechay’s studio, ideal for inspiring a writer with the felt presence of her predecessors. She set herself up in the studio to work. Toward the end of their stay, she woke in her bedroom, opening her eyes to a painting she had been looking at for two weeks, and thought, *I know this artist, he’s the man who painted the painting on the postcard that has been with me for ten years*. “I cannot tell you how I felt,” she told me. “I knew this was the wildest sign of some beautiful destiny.” ❖

CHRISTOPHER BUSA is editor of Provincetown Arts.



JHUMPA LAHIRI WITH HER HUSBAND, ALBERTO VOURVOULIAS-BUSH, IN ROME PHOTO BY SARA ANTONELLI