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Web Update: Patience in Limbo

New Poetry and Prose at AGNI Online

[The American](#)

new fiction by [Lara Markstein](#)

The Vietnamese landscape and all it represents -- nationality, race, war wounds, shame, and gender -- provide the swirling backdrop for a painful and unresolved reflection on the human longing to find "purpose in life." Markstein's searing narrative explores the extent to which foreignness asserts itself even in assimilation, and asks if the stories we tell ever fully survive the "miracle of translation."



Read ["The American"](#) online

A Conversation with Lara Markstein

by Alison Lanier

Lara Markstein is a South African-born New Zealander who lives in Oakland, where she serves as program officer at the UC Berkeley Center for New Media. Her most recent stories have appeared in *The Greensboro Review*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *The Four Way Review*.

Alison Lanier: Despite your anonymous narrator, you chose to title the piece, "The American." "American" works as a kind of anti-identity in the story, a fixed identity that the narrator keeps rejecting.

Lara Markstein: To a greater or lesser extent, we all define ourselves in opposition. It's hard to be something without rejecting something else. But sometimes, no matter how hard we hope our actions tell a different tale, we are defined against our will -- by history, context, geography, etc. The character may be rejecting identities in this story, but I'm not convinced, as readers, that we should assume she isn't some of what she dismisses.

AL: I'm particularly interested in the idea of a narrative about waiting -- as you call it, "the art of waiting." Often a short story calls our attention to action and resolution, but in "The American," action and resolution give way to stagnation. Was aimlessness, or being in limbo, the center of this story from the beginning?

LM: The story percolated for a long time because I didn't know how to write it -- as you say: how can one write a short story about being in limbo? Then, in 2013, my husband and I drove across the country. We'd just left Las Cruces when I listened to the *New Yorker* podcast of Antonya Nelson reading Mavis Gallant's "When We Were Nearly Young." The story, so much about waiting to become, dealt elegantly with the same issues I was facing -- not by shying away from the topic, but embracing it until this waiting become a source of tension with a real sense of claustrophobia. I used that structure as a guide.

AL: Your descriptions of place are full of motion: the city "spun," "sprouted," and "swelled." It's a

fluid, almost organic setting that often feels like a character in the story -- at times a more active, purposeful one than the human characters.

LM: I grew up in South Africa and New Zealand before moving to the United States, and the landscapes of these countries had a big impact on the way I inhabit and experience the world. I generally think of place as character, and especially when there is a foreignness to your surroundings, the environment seems alive because you notice details more acutely. A building may always have existed at a corner, but as you try to take in everything, it can appear to have sprouted out of nowhere.

AL: The breaks in "The American" are sudden and startling. They remind me of your story "Little Wife," which leaps from moment to moment using similar, staccato prose.

LM: I like how the structure plays into the narrator's feelings of dislocation, but this really is a result of the way I wrote the story. I started with small scenes, which I built up and moved around. Often in my writing I get bored with all the "in-between," which just feels flabby. Using this structure is my way of almost cheating narrative -- taking readers to the interesting action quickly and only having to write what I'm most excited about. It also allows me to quickly move to different periods and places without having to justify and belabor the transitions. My hope is that it adds tension and that the disjointed pieces rub against each other in interesting ways.

AL: As you're delving into those small scenes and first building them into the story, do you already know their place in the whole?

LM: I knew the ending for this particular story from the beginning -- I was hit by a cab while on a motorcycle in Vietnam and was surprised by the reaction of the driver -- but not how the story would gain momentum or what it would mean. Building up these scenes allowed me to explore the very conflicted responses I'd had to what I'd seen among ex-pats, tourists, and vets.

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