

Nina McConigley

Poetry Reading

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>> IAN STANSEL: Hi everybody.

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi!

>> IAN STANSEL: Thank you all for coming out tonight for this semester's first of two Axton Readings.

I just want to mention a couple of things before getting started. I want to let you know that captioning is available for the reading. If you want, you can come up here and borrow a device for captioning.

And secondly, Nina's book is for sale back there. We have a fine representative from Carmichael's Books here selling the excellent, excellent collection you're going to be hearing a bit of tonight.

The Axton Reading Series was established in 1999 through the generosity of the late William Axton, former University of Louisville English professor, and his wife, the late Anne Axton.

The Series brings highly distinguished writers from across the country to the University of Louisville for two-day visits to read from their work, and to share their knowledge and expertise with the University and the Louisville community at large.

And the first wonderful thing about the Axton series is this, the reading.

The second wonderful thing about the series happens tomorrow when our distinguished author will lead a workshop with five very lucky U of L -- very lucky and very talented U of L student writers.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Yeah, I'm the lucky one.

>> IAN STANSEL: Yeah. As with the reading, the workshop is open to the public, and so if you are so inclined and you want to come to the workshop tomorrow at 10:00 in the Humanities

Building, Room 300, right? You can pick up the student writer's work, Jon over here has packets, if you want to pick those up, you can read through and come and participate in the workshop tomorrow. So please do, if that sounds like fun.

Now, more importantly for the moment, I'm very happy to be able to introduce Nina McConigley tonight.

Nina is the author of the story collection *Cowboys and East Indians*, which won the 2014 PEN Open Book Award and a High Plains Book Award. She was born in Singapore and grew up in Wyoming. She holds an MFA from the University of Houston and an MA from the University of Wyoming.

She was named by *Glamour Magazine*, pretty glamorous, as one of '50 Phenomenal Women Making a Difference!' And that was in 2014 and her book was named one of 2014's Best Prize Winning books by *O Magazine*, run by Oprah. She has been a fellow at Bread Loaf, the Bread Loaf Writing Conference, and held scholarships to Sewanee Writing Conference and has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes and the Best New American Voices Anthology. Her work has appeared in *The New York*

Times, Orion, Salon, Virginia Quarterly, American Short Fiction, The Asian American Literary Review, among many others.

She lives in Laramie, Wyoming, and teaches at the University of Wyoming and at the MFA program at Warren Wilson. And this semester she's teaching at UT Austin.

Of her stories, the Los Angeles Review of Books says that she "Writes about Wyoming with the same mythic nostalgia that many Southern writers write about the South."

And the judges for the PEN Open book award, that's a pretty big deal, write, "The inhabitants of this surprising, thrilling, and richly textured short story collection are unpredictable, both in their actions and identities."

Nina's stories linger in the complexities of identity and of place and often set up camp in the intersection of the two. But what I find so compelling about her stories is that they are just that, they are stories. They are unabashedly unapologetically stories. Sometimes long, sometimes demanding, always smart, they're

not stories for the lazy, but they are also funny and often sad.

And while they may move through your brain and some other of your parts, they often or they always end up at their final destination, that soft thumping mass behind your ribcage. When you get to the final page, and the final words of one of Nina's stories, you get the sense that you yourself have been through an experience. And guess what? You have. This is the beauty and magic of great fiction, and this is the gift of Nina's fiction.

Please help me welcome Nina
McConigley.

[Applause]

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Well, that's the nicest intro I've received. Like, thank you, Ian. So what Ian also maybe didn't say is that Ian and I were -- we both were published by the same press, so we're sort of book siblings, would that be the right -- I'm trying to think of the right word. But we were both published, so our books were taken at the same time, we went through the publishing process together and we kind of -- we

both were nominated for PEN together, and so we went to the PEN ceremony together, so like we really have like a bond of like we've been through a lot together, so I'm in love with his story collection so to come here and get to read and have him introduce me means a great deal.

So I'm really, really happy to be here. I've never been to Louisville. And this has been -- I've never been to Kentucky, actually. And this has been awesome. I was really excited just now, we were driving over, that that center is called the Yum Center; is that right?

[Laughter]

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: When he said that I thought he said the Young Center and I was like oh, that's not -- and then we drove by I saw the Yum, I was like, Oh my God! It was Yum. That sounded amazing. I liked that very much. And I just also last night I went and had a bourbon, and I got very turned around at the bar in the hotel, just the hotel bar, because they put together like this two-pages of bourbon, and I didn't know what to order, and then I ended up ordering something else because I couldn't choose what bourbon to

pick. So Louisville so far has been great.

So I published a story collection, it's called Cowboys and East Indians. I grew up in Wyoming my whole life, I moved to Wyoming when I was 10 months old from Singapore. My dad's a geologist, so when we were transferred, he's an oil and gas geologist, we were transferred to Wyoming. And so it's really all I've ever know, but as most of you probably know, Wyoming is not the most diverse place. It's 93% white -- 93.9% white, and pretty -- yeah, there was almost no Asian, I think it's like point 0 something Asian. And so growing up, everyone always thought I was the other type of Indian, so growing up everyone would always say what tribe are you? What tribe are you? And if you actually know the tribes in Wyoming, I don't even actually look Shoshone or Arapaho, but I think people just didn't know how to place me and so growing up I was always a little bit -- you know always a little bit out of it. And I think writers, probably a lot of you in here who are writers know this, like you're always a little on the outside and observing anyway, so that's kind of your personality, and I think even more so in Wyoming,

that became the sort of way I lived because I looked so different from everybody else. And so a lot of the stories come out of this sort of my feelings. I mean, basically this book is like therapy, because it's like -- it's just everything I put into this book is me sort of being a little bit -- I don't know, my observations about growing up and sort of having a little bit of an odd existence. But I love Wyoming, I still teach there and I live there, and I can't imagine leaving it, even though I say every year that I will, but I don't seem to do it.

So I'm going to read a story from my collection called Pomp and Circumstances. Start the stop watch to make sure I don't read too long. I don't think I'll get through the whole story, so if you want to know how it ends, you can maybe buy the book or I can just tell you the end, we can talk after the reading. I'm happy to do that, too. I'm just trying to think if this is one of the stories online. No, I think you'll have to buy the book or let me tell you tell ending. And I don't think you need to know any sort of preface or anything about the story before I read.

Okay. So this is called Pomp and

Circumstances.

The Shirley Basin seemed to be a big stretch of nothing that fell between Casper and Laramie. There was no cell phone coverage and not many houses except a few small ranches slipped between strips of cottonwood-lined creeks and the bases of rising hills?

The basin at one time had been a forest. Lush, tropical, a swamp. Now every summer and into fall, people combed the sagebrush and scrub for petrified wood, for a small piece of Eden preserved. The basin is so rich with uranium that ghost towns once filled with miners lap at the edges. Low prices and oversupply has all but cut short business.

In the early nineties, black-footed ferrets were released here. Once thought extinct, these little bandits thrive, feeding off prairie dogs and roaming the plains at night.

Rajah and Chitra Sen are heading across the basin to a graduation in Laramie. Their eight-year-old son Hari lies sleeping in the backseat. The graduation is for Rajah's coworker's son, Luke Larson. Richard Larson is

proud of his son, and has invited everyone in the office to attend the graduation. Rajah is the only one going. One, because he has never been to an American graduation and thinks it will be good for Hari, and two, because he finds Richard Larson hard to say no to.

For months, Richard Larson has insisted upon calling him "Senator." He has done this since he first saw Rajah's name on a thin wooden nameplate on his desk: Rajah Sen. Now all the other engineers in the office, and even Bobbi the secretary, call Rajah Senator. It is a nickname that sticks, that perseveres like a fossil. It is Chitra who states the obvious. "Senator? Didn't you tell them you are already a King?"

Rajah says nothing. He is the only Indian in the office. Hari is the only Indian in his school. Chitra is one of three Indians in their house. They are one of maybe six Indian families in Casper. She, perhaps, has it the easiest.

The drive is a little less than two and a half hours, and they have been silent for most of it. Rajah Sen thinks his wife has been rude to

the Larsons, as she had not wanted to come to the graduation. He thinks she is being difficult when it comes to making American friends. Rajah knows Chitra has been to the Larsons' house three times. One of those times, they went together. It was a holiday party. An event for which they were instructed to bring a "white elephant" gift. Chitra had selected a soapstone elephant from a shelf in their house. On its flanks there was an inlay of garnet-colored stones. But at the party, they realized they were not to bring elephants at all. They had gone home with a plastic reindeer. When you lifted its tail, small chocolates dropped out of its behind. Hari had screamed with pleasure.

Chitra had told Rajah that she had been invited for tea at the Larsons twice without him. With not just Richard Larson, but his wife Nancy. A thin, tanned woman who has a knack for matching outfits. She has deep set eyes and wears a great deal of eyeliner. Chitra also wears eyeliner. Kohl she brought from Kolkata. Chitra's eyes look sleepy, the kohl making her exotic. Nancy just looks startled. Both times the Larsons

had her over, Rajah was out of town. Richard Larson had planned that. They actually drank coffee and not tea. And the second time, Nancy Larson had baked. She had made a stack of lemon bars so thickly sprinkled with powdered sugar that Chitra looked as if talcum powder covered her sari.

Chitra has said little about the teas; except she does not want to go back to their house again. If there is an office function, she would rather stay home. Rajah is sure that Chitra has done something to offend them. At the Christmas party, Chitra, who was not used to wine, told outlandish stories of India. She told Richard and Nancy Larson that hijras had danced at her and Rajah's wedding. That they were good luck. Rajah Sen saw Richard's face as she explained them to him. Rajah is sure that at the last tea something must have been said, as Richard too has not mentioned Chitra.

As they drive, Chitra thinks the snow fences look like abandoned snakeskins in the grass. They curve and bend and then stop abruptly. These wooden skeletons hold more than the skin of winter snow. Along this stretch, some ranchers use the

fences to create large drifts in the basins. It gives them a ready supply of water in the spring.

It is still spring now, and the prairie is in a green-up. Magpies lunge along the roadside, the smell of sagebrush is sweet.

Plodding red Hereford and black Angus populate patches of the plains. They are loose stock, as this is open range. Up in the hills, and on Elk Mountain, which rises before them, snow still sits on the peaks. A bit like Nancy Larson's lemon bars. Except underneath the peaks are rock and preserved things. Nancy's lemon bars, due to high-altitude baking and dry air, only stay good for a day.

When Chitra was first invited to the Larsons for tea, she was surprised to find Richard at home. The invitation had come from Nancy alone. They live in a modest ranch house on the East side of Casper, and without all the holiday decorations, the house was spare.

The living room contained a cloud-like couch, the tables all have ornate legs like with curving columns. There are prints on the walls of Indian warriors wearing headdresses.

There are the heads of deer watching them. Richard is a good hunter, and every fall fills their freezer with antelope, deer, and sometimes elk. Nancy brings Chitra a steaming cup of coffee. On the table is cream in a pitcher shaped like a cow. The cream comes out of its mouth. There is a sugar bowl from a different era. A small urn with hand-painted flowers rimming the bowl.

“Do you like Casper?

Have you settled?”

Nancy asked. “Yes,” said Chitra.

And she meant it.

Before they lived in Casper, they lived in Toronto for almost a year. Before that, they were in India. Toronto exhausted her. It was full of other Bengalis, and every weekend they went to Indian party after Indian party. Parties where satellite TV blared cricket and Indian movies. Parties where all the wives would put on their best jewelry and saris. Chitra would spend hours preparing chachchari or other food. Parties where endless cups of tea were drunk. The talk would always be of India, or of the best schools to send their children.

Here in Casper, they know few other Indians, and in many ways it's a relief. She can wear jeans and cotton tops, and when they're invited to any function, she simply goes to the bakery of the grocery store and buys donuts by the dozens, cookies with frosting the color of gods.

Richard Larson does not join them at first. He comes in after their coffee has been drunk, when Chitra is admiring Nancy's quilts, which she has spread across an overstuffed pink chair in the living room. "So the Senator's in Riverton! I hope he's not gambling away your fortune!" Richard Larson laughs.

Chitra does not know of the casino there, but she laughs along. Richard Larson takes a hard look at Chitra's sari. She had worn it because it felt polite. Because she was going visiting. It's a simple one. Blue rayon with a series of dancing birds on the border. "I like your costume, your dress," he says. "I like the one you wore to the Christmas party." She's not sure if Richard Larson is flirting or stating a fact. She had worn one of her wedding saris to the Christmas party. It was purple silk, ornate with

heavy gold work. It had been so stiffly packed for months and so starched she felt she couldn't walk properly.

"Thank you." There was a quiet at the table. It was just past lunchtime. A clock in the kitchen ticked a little beat. "These fabrics are very pretty," Chitra said. She pointed to the calicos and the patterns of the quilts. "Yes, Nancy has an eye for color." And then Richard Larson asks her for something she could never tell Rajah. He asks if he can try on a sari. Sorry let me drink some water.

By the time they hit Medicine Bow, Hari is awake and asking to stop. They bypass the Virginian Hotel, which means nothing to them, and instead go to a small gas station. The inside smells of smoke. They buy sweet coffee and chocolate, and then get on the road again. Rajah takes in the wind turbines outside Medicine Bow. The town is almost bordered by them, and driving into the place, they look like cartwheeling crosses marking some sort of sacred space.

He thinks he's clever to state this, and begins to tell Chitra his observation, but

instead tells Hari. "Do you see those crosses?" Hari scans out the window of their Honda and says blankly, "They're wind turbines." His class has been learning about green energy at school, and turbines are the newest point of contention in Wyoming. Some say coal-bed methane brings salty water and that wind turbines ruin the view so many flocking to Wyoming crave.

"They look like crosses, no?" There is a church near their home in Casper that has three large crosses like sentries posted outside their building. When they first drove by it, Rajah and Chitra had thought they were drying clothes on them, as purple cloth was draped on the arms like shawls. Chitra squints out the window. She sees a pump jack. "And that fellow then looks like he is bowing to Allah!" Prayers abound on the prairie for them. They continue on their drive. The pump jack pulls up more oil.

When Richard Larson asks if he can wear a sari, Nancy Larson leaves the room with a handful of quilts in her arms like a shield. "You want to see a sari?" Chitra is not sure what to make of his request. Richard Larson laughs

nervously. "I'd like to try one on... If that's okay." He has lost the bluster she has seen in the office. He looks at his cowboy boots, which are ostrich and stippled like a pimply face.

"You mean Nancy wants to try one on?"

Chitra is still confused, and wondering if this is a kind of trick. She wonders if this has something to do with Rajah at work. Richard Larson is embarrassed. But then he gains back the same bravado she has heard when he calls their house looking for the Senator. "It's like those people you talked about in India at the Christmas party?" Chitra thinks back to the holiday party. She remembers the white elephant, drinking glasses of wine the color of rose water, but she doesn't catch his drift. And then she remembers her talk about hijras, and how she found them happy, when Rajah found them a nuisance.

"Chitra, I'm going to show you something." He pronounces her name Chee-tra. She follows him into the basement, past a pool table and more deer watching them in a solemn line. He takes her into a room with wood-paneled walls. The floor is concrete. In the room are several large

safes—or what Chitra thinks are safes. “This is where I keep my guns,” he says, pointing to a safe. “Kids. I told the Senator if he takes up hunting, he needs to get something like this. You don’t want Harry there getting into guns.”

Nancy and Richard have one other child besides Luke. A girl named Gretchen Larson. She is in the army and stationed in Germany. There is a narrow door with a lone padlock on it in the room. Richard Larson takes a ring of keys from his pocket and opens the lock. It is a small room, meant at one time as a kind of pantry. And inside is a little vanity with an oval mirror. A bench is tucked neatly in the middle. On the surface of the table is a wide array of makeup. Compacts, eye shadows that look like an artist’s palette, brushes of all sizes, lipsticks lined up like bullets. There is a full-length mirror next to the vanity. It is also oval, and swivels on its wooden base. A stained-glass floor lamp stands in the corner. And Next to it is another plush chair.

But unlike the cloud chairs from the living room, this one has a Victorian feel. It's an elegant chair. Light mauve with a kind of

paisley pattern. It's not a Nancy Larson chair. There are framed paintings on the wall—and again they are different. They are of flowers, English cottages with thatched roofs. But the one thing that delights her the most is a metal bookcase. Lined up are mannequin heads, all in a row. And on each of the heads sits a blonde wig in various hairstyles: A straight bob, a curly bob, long Rapunzel-like hair, and a cut with layers framing the face. The mannequins line up and look like the deer heads that they saw when they passed -- that they passed on the way into the room. Watching and taking it all in. Chitra does not say anything, because she is genuinely unsure of what to say. This is a condition she felt a lot in Toronto. But since being in Wyoming, she has lost this to some degree.

She appreciates not having anyone ask her why Hari is losing his Bengali, why she now cooked burgers, and didn't she know that Japanese cars were the way to go?

Richard Larson walks back into the room with the safes and turns the dial of one. Chitra half expects he is going to show her his guns

as if they are similar to the display of makeup. But when Richard Larson opens the heavy door of the gun safe. It is like he has opened a closet. Inside is a rack of dresses. They are beautiful. They are the kind of dresses she has seen on TV. The kind of dresses as a little girl in India she thought American women wore. Her biggest disappointment since arriving in Wyoming is seeing how sloppy women are. In the grocery store she marvels at the loose sweatpants and stained winter coats most women wear.

She has to give it to Nancy Larson—she is matchy, but she dresses well. There are dresses with sequins that look like silver fishes. There are taffeta dresses in which the fabric whorls in discreet patterns. There is a suit with Native American beadwork in the shape of flowers. There are slips like valentines hanging on padded hangers.

Richard Larson, who has for the most part been quiet, says this: "I am not gay and I love my wife." Chitra nods. "Nancy has known about this since before we got married. That's twenty-four years now. And she's okay with it. You have to

know I am not gay. I just like to put these things on. It's not like your country. People don't consider it lucky." Chitra touches a pink satin dress. It is strapless and has a large bow on the waist. Along the hem is lace. She wants to explain the complexities of hijras, their place. But instead she strokes the dress. "Okay," she answers. Richard Larson sees her face. "Would you like to try it on?"

When they arrive at the graduation, they are late. They are unsure where to park, and end up walking in circles around the university campus. Chitra is wearing an orange sari and slip-on heels, so she struggles to keep up with Hari and Rajah who are both in sports coats, pressed pants, and ties. "Do you want to go to school here?" She yells up to Hari. Hari turns around and gives her a pained look. "Baba says I'll go to school in India. To IIT. Why would I go here?" Chitra has no answer. She knows that school, Hari's schooling, should be her singular focus. That is why she has held off on having other children. Rajah wants more.

She thinks of the IUD she had put in

in Toronto. Her secret. Her own broken cartwheeling cross inside her uterus. It gives her a kind of power, a kind of energy. When they find the stadium, they do not sit with the Larsons. Luke Larson is graduating in engineering. He will come back to Casper at the end of the summer and begin work at the same firm as Rajah and Richard.

The Sens sit in hardback seats and hold a program embossed with the logo of the university. Inside is row upon row of names. Hari plays a pocket video game. If the ceremony is having an influence on his future academic career, it doesn't show.

Chitra and Rajah watch as speeches are given, a woman sings, and the graduates file out onto the stadium floor, just like a movie. As they walk out, the graduates walk two by two. And in their black gowns and tasseled hats, they look like walking lamps. Their faces beam. They look fresh-faced and ready for the future. Chitra finds she's strangely happy and excited for these young people, for their accomplishments, for the future that lies before them. She follows their names in the program; she takes pictures of graduates she

does not know.

Chitra decides that day in the basement not to try on the dress. Instead, Richard Larson takes her back to the little room and shows her albums of himself in various outfits. When he wears his dresses -- when he wears dresses, he likes to be called Clara. Clara, from what Chitra can tell, is demure. Everything Richard Larson is not. She imagines that Nancy Larson has taken these photos, as most of them have been taken in the wood-paneled safe room. There are pictures of Clara in suits, in dresses, even in a velour track suit. The only sari Chitra has is the one she is wearing. And so until she can next come over, she gives Richard Larson a taste of what wearing a sari is like. When they go back upstairs, she picks up one of Nancy Larson's quilts. It is a Log Cabin quilt, all in shades of blues and greens. It is thick and awkward. But Chitra drapes the quilt around him in a faux sari. "It will look like this," she laughs. And Richard laughs with her, as the weight and the bulk of the quilt are nothing like a sari. She feels amazingly light for knowing this about Richard Larson. The secret moves

inside her. Nancy Larson does not appear again on that visit. Richard Larson shows Chitra out, and she promises to bring back the purple sari for him to try on. Richard Larson does not ask her not to tell Rajah about this request, but she knows not to. It is unspoken between them. This kind of thing can get you killed in Wyoming.

The ceremony is long, and when it's over, they meet at Luke Larson's apartment. It is near the university. The apartment is filled with other Larsons and with Nancy's family, who are Boyds. The Sens are one of the first to arrive and since they have never been to a graduation party, they sit quietly in the corner until Richard and Nancy Larson arrive. "Senator! Chee-tra! Harry!" Richard Larson exclaims their names when he arrives.

He is wearing a kind of suit with the same cowboy -- sorry -- he is wearing a kind of suit with the same cowboy boots he wears most days. Around his throat is a bolo tie with a turquoise stone. He has a large elk tooth ring on his finger. Nancy Larson is wearing a flowered dress. She smiles a thin smile at the Sens. It is Rajah who

speaks for them. "You must be do proud of Luke! Such a lot of graduates! What a sight!" He is genuinely happy for Luke Larson and wishes his wife would also show more spirit.

"Yes, yes, you must get some food now," says Richard. He doesn't look at Chitra, which disappoints her. She had picked the orange sari because she knew Richard Larson will appreciate it. Western women just seem to notice a sari's color, but Richard Larson notices the intricacies of a sari: The weave, the fabric, the zari work. In fact, Richard Larson is the only person who has asked her anything beyond, "Are they hard to wear?"

When Chitra goes back to the Larsons', she brings a suitcase of saris. She has the purple one from the Christmas party, but she also packs a variety of saris. For fun, she puts in a salwaar kameez and a box of jewelry, which she had removed from the small safe they keep in a cupboard in their bedroom. It also holds their passports and visas. Nancy Larson lets her in, and again, they have coffee alone. They eat lemon bars. Chitra finds herself driving the

conversation. They do not mention the purpose of her visit. "So you must be missing Gretchen? So far away?" She asks.

"Yes. But we email." The clock's ticking punctuates her sentences. Nancy Larson is not a talker. Richard appears as they are finishing their coffee. This time, Rajah is in Cheyenne, but will be back later that night. "How do you like this weather?" he asks. It had been snowing on and off for a few days, and now the streets are a slushy mess. Chitra is still new at driving, and Richard Larson knows this. "I have to get a big broom to clean the car. And wear boots!" Chitra lifts up her sari to reveal a new pair of brown leather boots.

She had put on a sari especially for the visit, but had spent the week in sweats and jeans—she suddenly understood the women at the grocery store. Chitra motions to the suitcase. "I've brought many choices." She walks over and opens the suitcase, and begins to spread the saris out on the same chair where Nancy showed her the quilts. She unfolds the saris to show the pallus, which are rich in decoration. She has a

Kanchipuram silk sari, a handloom sari, a blocked printed sari—saris with fake crystals affixed in patterns like stars. She likes showing someone her clothes.

In Toronto she worried her saris weren't fancy enough, but here, spread out across the upholstery, they look sumptuous, like wealth. Richard Larson takes them all in, and he runs his hands over the silks, the cottons, even the rayons. He is quiet. It is Nancy Larson who breaks the silence. "I could make a nice quilt with these," she says. The party is a tedious one. The first wave of family has been replaced by a second wave of Luke's friends. They are polite and well-dressed and dig into the food with glee. Nancy Larson has bought trays of cut-up vegetables and cheese from Walmart. She has made plates of lemon bars and cookies. She has a slow-cooker filled with little sausages. Next to the cooker is a small crystal glass brimming with toothpicks.

Rajah and Chitra fill their plates with crackers and carrots. No one from the party talks to them, except for the occasional person en route to the buffet. "What a pretty costume dress

outfit thing you have on! And what a color! Is it hard to wear?"

Chitra answers politely and for a moment longs for the Indian parties of Toronto. Chitra is annoyed and cannot bear Rajah's stubbornness. She had told him that it was just tea with Nancy, that Richard came in hardly at all. That they didn't drink any alcohol but she suspects Rajah thinks they did. But she knows that Richard Larson has become nervous. He cannot gauge her ability to keep a secret, and she so stupidly has been quiet and awkward at work. Poor Rajah! He cannot imagine what his wife might have said. He worries that he may never get a promotion.

The difficulty with Richard Larson wanting to wear a sari is that all of Chitra's choli blouses are too small for him. So instead she tells him to wear a T-shirt underneath the sari. But all of Richard Larson's T-shirts are walking advertisements— for races run, political candidates, for places they have traveled. And although his shirt advertising Sombrero Mike's in Cancun is a similar purple to her sari, it will not do. Chitra hands him the slip worn underneath a

sari and tells Richard Larson to tie it tight. "Tight, tight, almost like you can't breathe!" she instructs. And a few minutes later, he comes into the safe room in her cotton slip and a white undershirt.

It is as if he is naked, and for the first time, he seems embarrassed. Chitra cannot remember ever being told or shown how to wear a sari. Perhaps she watched her mother and grandmother so many times it imprinted into her very being. But Richard Larson does not just want to wear a sari; he wants to learn how to put one on. And so Chitra shows him. "First you make a knot like this, and tuck it in," she says, while tucking the end of the silk into his waistband. It is the first time beyond a handshake that she has touched Richard Larson. And somehow feeling the soft give of his belly and seeing the paleness of his arms, she feels protective of him. She senses his vulnerability. She turns him around and adjusts the pallu over his shoulder. She pleats the fabric. Richard Larson, as an engineer, is meticulous, and carefully folds the pleats into even amounts. "It isn't heavy at all," he says. "No,

but walk carefully." Chitra takes out two large pins and discreetly pins the sari at the shoulder and at the pleats. "Even I do this sometimes," she lies.

When she is done, she takes a long look at Richard Larson. It is as if he is no longer Richard Larson, but Clara. He stands very still, almost as if he is taking something in. "I think I'll just go do my makeup," he says to Chitra, and she nods. Richard Larson takes small steps to the little door, to his secret room, and then stops as he crosses his doorway.

He turns around and looks at Chitra. "Do you think Rajah would think this looks nice?" It is the first time Chitra has ever heard him call her husband anything but the Senator. "I think he would think you wear it very well," she says and means it.

It's when a series of toasts have begun that Chitra leans to Rajah. Hari, who has spent the entire party either eating cookies or playing his video game, sits quietly in a corner lost in his own world. "They like me. I wasn't rude. Look, all is well!" She says. Rajah says

nothing, but pretends to laugh at the toasts.

"Stop this. I'm telling you. It was just tea. Why can't you understand?" Chitra feels shrill and wonders if the one glass of champagne she drank at the insistence of Mr. Boyd has gone to her head. She thinks she shouldn't drink, but it is hard not to with his coworkers. "Fine," says Rajah. "Then promise you'll go again if they invite you—that you'll invite them over!" He seems like he is going to say more, but then Nancy Larson comes over to them and asks Rajah if he will take some group photos of the family.

Rajah hates it that his wife doesn't have to work so hard to fit in, and takes it all so lightly. When Richard Larson emerges from his little room, he has put on a full face of makeup and is wearing the long blonde wig. He doesn't look Indian—but he also does not look like himself. Chitra also thinks he is better looking than most hijras she has ever seen. When he is Richard Larson in his big boots, his aggressive nature is more like a hijra then. As Clara, he seems turned down in volume. "You're looking very nice. Now just a few more things." Chitra digs through her

suitcase and pulls out a flat box. Inside is part of her wedding set. Gold-dipped and not twenty-four carat. The earrings have thick posts and so they are out. But Chitra affixes a heavy gold chain around Clara's neck. Her bangles are all for her small wrists, so instead she wraps another necklace around his wrist. "And now, for the perfect end," Chitra says. She lifts the folded paper in which a row of colored bindis are attached to a clear piece of plastic. She chooses a purple bindi with a small diamond in the middle. "There, you're done."

Clara looks at herself in the mirror through the open door. And then begins to yell. "Nancy! Nancy! Get down here, bring the camera!" He bellows up the basement stairs.

Rajah takes a series of photos of Luke Larson. Poor Luke poses with the Larsons, various relatives, and then his friends. Rajah directs Nancy, Richard, Luke, and Gretchen Larson into a series of poses. One is next to his graduation cake, another outside the apartment, by a late-flowering crab apple tree. Richard Larson jokes, "It's not every day you have a Senator taking

your picture! Don't tax us for the photos!"

Rajah says little. And when the photo shoot is done, he hands Nancy Larson back her camera. "Don't you want to see what you've taken?" She asks and hands the camera back to him. "Just press this to review the photos," she says, pointing to the small silver button. And Rajah takes the camera.

When Nancy Larson appears downstairs, she is holding a camera. She walks past Chitra and goes straight for Clara. She takes his hand and strokes his hair, she fingers the bindi on his forehead, and she runs her hand over the purple silk. She then turns to Chitra. "Thank you. He looks, I mean Clara, looks beautiful." Chitra feels like she's once again in a world she doesn't know. And while Nancy Larson begins to take pictures, to talk to Clara in a low voice, Chitra excuses herself to the bathroom. When she comes back, she sees that Nancy is looking through her saris. She is holding a simple handloom that is also purple. "Would you like to try it on?" Chitra rummages around for a choli and slip. Nancy who looks like she's going to say no, now looks at Clara, who now is sitting in her chair in the little

room. She looks again to the sari. "Yes," she says. "I would like that very much."

Once Nancy Larson is in her sari, it is Chitra who takes photos of the two of them against the pine wall. She instructs them to fold their hands in Namaste, which they do. They pose with their arms around each other, and Chitra is glad she has pinned them to their saris. It is when the photo session is over that Clara/Richard Larson turns to his gun safe and spins out the combination. He pulls out the pink dress that Chitra had held on her last visit. "You have to try this on," he says. Without pausing, Chitra takes the hanger with the pink satin dress, and she takes a short blonde wig. She heads into the little room. The temptation is too great. And when she comes out, she feels like she is part of something for the first time. She poses with Clara, and then with Nancy, and then they use the timer to take a shot of them all.

They all laugh as the Larsons' saris fall off their shoulder, as they pool to the ground like a swirl of cream.

I think I'm going end there. So if

you want to know what happens in the end of the story, you can -- you can read it.

[Applause]

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Thank you. So I should say I just always like to say this about this story really quickly, I went to school with Matt Shepard, which some of you probably know. We actually accoladed together at church for years when I was a kid. And if you don't know who Matt Shepard was, he was the -- if you've seen the play the Laramie Project or know that, know that play, he was the student in 1998 that was brutally beaten and tied to a fence because he was gay in Wyoming. And I had always known that, again, we were like childhood friends, so we weren't like great friends, we more accoladed together and we were in youth group together. But after he died, I always wanted to write a story about like sort of masculinity in Wyoming, because I think places like Wyoming are so intense with like this cowboy, like you've got to be really intensely, intensely masculine and in really weird ways that I don't think always works.

And Annie Proulx did it much better

than I did with Brokeback Mountain, that story is a perfect story, but I just wanted to try to write a story that was -- that sort of talked about that weird masculinity because I feel like the myth of the cowboy is like pretty intense where we live, so I don't know, that was sort of my reasoning behind this story. So I always like to say that. Anyway, so I don't know if anyone has any questions about anything. About the story? I'll drink some water. Um-hmm.

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Did you ever get a chance to go back to Singapore to just see where you came from?

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: A little bit. You know it's funny when I go to Asia, because I like love it in theory, and I have gone back a little -- just a few times, just traveling with my parents. But yeah, it's a place that a feel like no affinity -- I mean, I know I was born there, but I have no affinity for it. I like it, it's beautiful. The food's really good. Have you been?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: No, the furthest I've ever been out of the country is the

Dominican Republic.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Nice, that's pretty far. No, I love -- I mean I like Singapore, but I don't feel -- I've been to India many times now and I've lived in India, but I don't -- it's always weird for me to like -- I'm actually very Wyoming. So when I go Asia, I'm like completely flustered by the amount of people and Singapore is such a tiny island, it feels very populated there to me. Yeah?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: So I'm not fishing around for the end of the story, but I'll go ahead and ask anyway. A couple references to Chitra's interior, to the IUD in her uterus, and then her thought after she first realizes he likes to put women's clothes on, I think the line was his secret moves within her, and I wanted to know if those together had anything to do with where you're moving in the story in terms of things moving within her that are from him and associated with birth/birth control, blah, blah, blah?

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: I mean, the story ends on the day of the party, and he doesn't actually find -- spoiler alert, he doesn't find it,

but Nancy gives him the camera and like there's this idea that he's going to flip back, but he doesn't actually flip back that far. And I had a version of the story where he did find out, and I didn't really think it -- I kind of wanted her to keep the secret, I wanted her to have something because I think maybe growing up I've met so many families that come to Wyoming where a lot of them come for the husband's job and I feel like the wives are a little bit at loose ends. Because at least the husband can go off and work all day, but they're sort of sitting at home, there's just no -- there's no community for them, there's just nothing for them. And especially a lot of them who don't drive, even worse. And I just sort of -- I liked the idea of her having her own life and her own sort of secret life that didn't really involve her husband, and to sort of have -- yeah, multiple secrets from him. I mean, maybe that's not very nice, but I liked that she kind of had her own world. Because I think growing up, I saw so many -- we know a lot of Wyoming people that own motels, I think that's the biggest thing is a lot of -- like all the Super 8s in Wyoming are run by -- most of them by

Indians.

And I just felt like a lot of them -- like a lot of them had arranged marriages and a lot of them thought they were coming out of America and they were all the sudden in the middle of nowhere and like a motel of all places and living in a motel, and I just thought God, that would be the worse -- well, I mean, maybe it wouldn't be that bad, I don't know, but I don't know if I was coming from India, I would not want to be in Rawlins, Wyoming, like in a motel. So I wanted her to like have something that was her own, I guess. I don't know if that answers your question.

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was kind of going in the direction of are you --

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: No, she never gets -- no, she doesn't. In my head I feel like she never has another baby, but that's -- I don't know why I feel that way but --

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thanks.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Um-hmm. Other questions? Yeah?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: There's some moments in the story that seem to dip into Rajah's

consciousness, and it so easily could have just stayed with her, right, but you have these moments that very briefly get little bits of his inner life, his thoughts and his inner experiences. I'm wondering how that happened? Did the story start just with her and do you remember how that developed, because it's very subtle, but it's very intriguing.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Because I think the original draft of the story, the story went through several drafts and it's funny, because I actually don't typically write a ton of drafts for stories, so -- but I think the early drafts did have -- like the graduation was more Rajah and the past was her, and it was much more switching perspectives, but then I just didn't -- I wanted the silence -- I don't know why I wanted to silence him. He's not a bad guy or anything. I just didn't want him to be -- I don't know, I just felt like he has such a different relationship with his coworker, I felt it was just getting -- it just felt -- it didn't feel as good, so then I sort of toned him down quite a bit and then made it more her, but there are moments I think that are still -- he's a little

lingering in there.

This is the last story I wrote in the book, so it was one of the only stories that wasn't workshopped because I was out of graduate school, so it was like one of those first stories where I was starting to feel like okay, you have an MFA now, like you should be able to make these decisions, which doesn't always feel -- like we don't actually feel that, so I felt really -- I just wasn't sure I went -- I think that's probably why it had so many drifts, because I didn't have it workshopped.

Yeah, but I just didn't -- I felt like he -- yeah, I just didn't want -- I wanted it to be her story and not his at all.

>> IAN STANSEL: It's one of those things that if it had been in workshop, somebody probably would have been like you can't just switch this perspective, right? I would say that to my students.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: I know, I know. I know. I would probably say it too to my students. I would also say that, like you're slipping up here a little bit. Yeah, I know. I would say the exact same thing. Yeah. There's a couple stories in

there I'm like well, if this was workshopped today, I would probably be skewered in a workshop. I feel that way about my novel right now, like if this was a workshop it really would be in trouble. Yeah?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: How do you handle like social issues? How did you -- do you rely on the I guess advice from other people or did you just kind of follow your own conscious with your characters?

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Like to talk about things like race and things?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: I think because of my normal life I don't ever talk about race stuff, because I live in Wyoming and mostly all my friends are white, and like I feel like -- I think this is the way it is with most people, like I always feel like when things -- like when racist things happen to me, they're usually really like -- they're really small -- like they're not -- they're from people that are not trying -- I know them, like they're nice people. Like they're saying a really stupid thing, but like I just got hired to be tenured track at my university, and one of my

colleagues who I love, like we went out for a beer to celebrate, and he was like must be good to be a minority hire. And I was like wait, what? But I was like -- and he's like a lovely person, I was like so why would you say that? And then I started to be like was I a minority hire? And then I was like no, you were hired because your book did well, like, and then I got really like nervous and I spun out a little bit. But in the moment, I didn't know what to say, because I really like him and he's much older than me so I just went like oh, hmm.

And then like later I went home and like wrote like a million pages about it, right, like so I think like part of my book is just I'm not very -- and also I live in Wyoming, so it's like I don't have a huge platform to be hugely -- I feel like I don't have a platform to be hugely active in a lot of things, so I always feel like my art is my activism, so I always feel like by writing about things that really bother me, that's the way I can like -- I don't know, it feels better than like a Facebook post that's crazy ranty like that no one is going to read, and they're going to be like why did she write this, but it's nice as a writer you

get to -- I don't know, do you feel that way about your work? Yeah? What do you write about?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: More like fantasy sort of things, but I try to put like social issues in there.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Yeah, because it's -- I mean, it's -- I feel like -- I mean, I have to say like I don't really like war stuff and like I never -- I don't -- would never like -- I don't read a lot of articles about like war, but like the first time I ever read Tim O'Brien's the things they carried, I was like well, shit, this is -- I understand war now, like this is -- I understand like what -- I mean, I don't understand war completely, but I understood like the way it felt to be fighting in a war in a way, and I just think -- I mean, maybe it's really Pollyanna of me, but I don't care, like I think fiction does -- I think literature does that, not just fiction, but I think you all of a sudden have empathy for things that you never could.

So I mean, I don't think most -- it's been amazing to me since my book came out how many of my -- how many people I know when I give -- like

do a book club or something in Wyoming, they're like we've never thought about race here, and I'm like because you never have to. Like of course you don't, you're white, like you don't think about it. So hopefully people will think about it a little more in a way, so I like that.

But I've also had some really awkward book clubs when people are like why do you write about that? And I'm like I don't know. I do. I don't know what to say. So yeah?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: You prefaced a little bit before you started reading about where you draw inspiration from and where you get some of your ideas from, but I'm always curious as to distinguished writers like yourself, where do you find yourself -- who do you find yourself reading and where do you draw inspiration from in terms of writers?

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: You know, I read so widely, I have to admit so I also read a lot like of mystery novels, like that's my huge -- I like read a lot of genre fiction, which I know people don't like to admit to. I read a lot of romance novels, which really people don't like to

admit to. I literally have a Kindle of shame that I literally call it the Kindle of shame. Like I left it once at a friend's house when I was traveling, and I was like I didn't want to admit that was my Kindle, because it's like full of like pretty cheesy books.

That being said, I teach a lot of postcolonial Indian literature, so a lot of -- to be honest, like those are the writers I really am drawn to. I'm even drawn to pretty traditional Indian writers like Rushdie and Arundhati Roy and R. K. Narayan and people -- I really love reading Indian writers, I have to say, even though I don't consider myself -- I'm biracial, my dad's white, so I also feel like I'm in a weird space where I can be -- I don't 100% feel Indian and I have a lot of anxiety about that, so those writers. I love the South African writer Coetzee, he's one of my most favorite. I love Richard Yates, I like Claire Messud, who writes now, I love her stuff. But I read a lot. I don't know, I actually read a lot of -- KiKi -- I read a lot of poetry. I actually find since I've been working on this novel, I've been struggling through a novel for the last little

while, and it's really up and down how it feels, and so I've pretty much only been reading poetry the last year. And I find poetry to me feels a lot better for writing. I feel like I've lost the ability to read a novel and enjoy it. Like I just -- all I'm doing is deconstructing it, how they have it written, and I think that's kind of a bummer, so I've been just reading a ton of poetry.

>> KIKI: Yay!

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Yeah. No, which I kind of find it much better for my writing. I don't know what it is. Maybe because they can just do stuff with language that seems more bold and not as scared and I feel like so -- with this novel, it's felt so much more like I'm self editing and correcting, and I seem so scared of what I'm writing, so I look at poets and I'm like damn, they're brave. They just do it. They just write. So yeah, I just have actually mostly bought poetry this last year.

I'm trying to think of the last novel I actually bought. That's terrible. Except for my Kindle of shame. I have stuff on that. Any other questions? Yeah?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: You said that you -- quite often you feel like you're sort of confronting these icons of American masculinity out in Laramie, and I'm guessing you probably have some of them in your courses.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Yeah.

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: And I'm wondering how successful you feel like you can address those kinds of issues with such individuals?

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: With like students who are --

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yeah, that are -- like hypermasculine or that exhibit like Laramie masculine, or however you want to put it.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: You know, I haven't really had that be a problem. I mean, the thing that's been interesting this past fall is teaching in like a postcolonial -- so I teach lit at the University of Wyoming, I don't teach creative writing. I should say that, so I don't -- I teach open lit classes. But mostly all of the classes I teach are nonwhite literature. So people who are already in my class are probably

taking it for a diversity requirement, so a lot of them are already annoyed to be in the class, to be honest.

And always on the first day there's a bunch of students who are like wait, this is not Native American lit? And I'm like no, that would not be filling your global requirement. So they're already like confused as to why they're in my class. But I will say like most of them have been -- I've -- not most, all of my students have been really receptive because I think sometimes they've never had a nonwhite professor or if they have it's been in sciences which is a little difference because most of the other Indian professors or Asian professors are in sciences.

And it's like there are things -- especially like things that kind of hit close to home like this past Halloween, we were having a long discussion about cultural appropriation with Native Americans, wearing Native American stuff as Halloween costumes. And we're from Wyoming, so a lot of us grew up playing Indian and, you know, wearing headdresses and whatnot didn't seem offensive.

And I think all of a sudden like it's really interesting for them to hear from a person of color on something like that. And they just all of a sudden have never had to have that confronted to them. And I think they -- I literally have had students who have been like I really didn't get that until now. And I think that's -- because I can frame it as like here's the way I feel when someone wears like -- you know, in pop videos, when women are wearing bindis, and dancing around in like saris. I mean, I'm totally fine with people wearing saris. Am I fine with pop stars going to folk concerts wearing them? Well, maybe less so. I don't know.

But so I feel like the conversations are actually pretty great that we get to have in my classroom. And I sort of feel like I'm lucky that I'm brown, because I can have that conversation and they don't feel attacked in a way that -- I don't know and also I know these kids. This is what I grew up with. I grew up with -- I grew up in Wyoming. Like I know what it's like to say an ignorant comment. And like honestly, like, they don't understand that it's an ignorant

comment.

I mean, I have this -- I have a story -- it's in another story in this book, but I have a friend whose a rancher who -- she's not a rancher, she married a rancher. She's actually a very city girl. And we -- her ranch is about 20 miles out from town. And so when I go to visit her, I often park in town because I don't like to drive her ranch road, because it's such a bad road. And she had a cousin of hers pick me up once. And her cousin was driving me and her cousin was telling me she's a barber, which I was like oh, that's really great, that's interesting to be a barber.

And I've never met a woman barber, and she runs the barber shop at the Occidental Hotel, which is in Buffalo, Wyoming. And she's telling me what it's like to be a barber, and I was like where do you train to get to be a barber. And she was telling me this long story. And then she said, you know, to train we had to learn to cut black hair. And I was like oh, that's interesting. Because she trained in Denver, which was the big city.

And then she said yeah, and I was

really good at it. And this father one day, I had cut his son's hair, and he asked if I had cut -- he said you did a really good job, you must have cut a lot of black hair. And she said no, but I've sheared a lot of sheep. And that was her answer to him. And she said he was very offended by that. And she said do you think that's offensive? And I was like well, yes. And I was like you just compared her son to livestock. But she genuinely did not -- this had happened years ago, and she was genuinely like confused, like she clearly was still thinking about it, but in her mind, it was -- she thought of it like she was a ranch person, she thought it was like a totally fine thing to say. And she was so baffled that he was offended.

And I just thought like -- and I don't know, so the rest of the drive I said here's why I think that was offensive. And she -- I still don't know that she totally got it by the time we got back to town, but I still was just like that's what most racism in Wyoming is like where someone is just like what? That's racist? Yeah, it is. But she -- you know, she didn't -- she thought she was -- I don't know.

So I guess -- I guess when I have students in my class like that that are pretty rural or like just don't -- they just -- I mean, I was saying at dinner a lot of my students think Laramie is really diverse. And I know Mary Sheridan is here. Yeah, you know that, right? Like you taught at UW, like they think Laramie is diverse. Like we taught together in Wyoming like and Laramie ain't diverse. It is not a diverse campus. But I guess if you're from a tiny town in Wyoming, that's probably the first people of color you've seen, the first people you've seen that are out, it's kind of fascinating to watch my students even like come out from -- after being in tiny towns in Wyoming. They feel safe in Laramie. And I'm like well, that's amazing, because Matt Shepard's legacy is still pretty -- I mean, Laramie -- I wouldn't say it's the most diverse place. But I don't know that's why feel extra much that I must live there because Wyoming, I will bring diversity to you all.

But no, I don't know. Not that I am that much. But any other questions. Yeah?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: It seems that

the story has a lot to do with identity and secrets. Kind of identity, what's expected or what's disclosed, what's not disclosed. I was just wondering if that was a conscious effort to kind of create that kind of confrontation?

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: You know, I think every story in the book is obsessed with identity, I think because I'm biracial, I also don't really fit in being Indian, and I think my last name is McConigley, so people are always like woo-woo. I'm -- I think I'm always a little bit thinking about it, like I'm Indian, my dad's Irish, so definitely we came to America, he's Irish, and I have an Irish passport but do I feel Irish? No, not at all. But I grew up going to Ireland way more than India. And I think I'm just always struggling myself.

And I don't know if -- and I don't think the book -- I mean, the book helped to feel better about like -- but it just -- yeah, I think -- it's not -- it's funny when you write a story collection, because I think probably a lot of you here are writing them, writing stories too. Like you don't even know you have weird tics until you

put the book -- the stories together and then you're like oh, whoa, weird.

So what -- I wrote these stories over so many years, and it wasn't until I put it together into a book, and then I was like wow, clearly I'm obsessed with -- maybe I didn't -- I thought it was just a Wyoming book. I was like you're obsessed with Wyoming. And then you start reading it and you're like no, you're actually obsessed with identity. So it was kind of interesting to read.

And I did a presentation at a university two years ago where these two girls presented on my book, and they gave a presentation where I literally was like wait, is that my book, because I -- they talked about how in every story I have clothing, and like I'm really obsessed with clothing. And that story is obviously a good example. But I didn't know that, and I'm like of course clothing is the quickest way you make your identity, like you dress and that's how people know kind of something about you.

But it was interesting like listening to them talk this whole presentation about clothing in my book that I just thought I've

never once thought about clothing as like a form of identity, never. I hated to burst their bubble. I just -- I mean, at one point, I started takes notes on what they were saying, I was like this is really intelligent sounding, I'm going to use this for a talk down the road because they were so smart. But I -- clearly it was somewhere in there, but I didn't know it.

I think we're almost out of time, but maybe --

>> IAN STANSEL: Yeah, why don't we go ahead.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Yeah and end?

>> IAN STANSEL: Yeah, wrap up.

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Okay, thank you. Thank you so much. See you tomorrow.

>> IAN STANSEL: Once again, Nina's book is for sale back there. Thank you to Carmichael's Books for being there. And I'm sure she's happy to sign. Yes?

>> NINA MCCONIGLEY: Yeah, yeah.

>> IAN STANSEL: And thank you all for coming out tonight.