
STUDIO ART | FALL 2021

Desecrated-Resanctify: On Rape and Disability

By Shivani Bhatia



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The first time a stranger entered my body, I had the gift of anaesthesia, morphine for a lucid dream of building metal scaffolding around faltering bones. The last time a stranger entered my body, the only anaesthetic was dissociation, a disappearance out of myself to float by the ceiling in a bedroom that had once been mine, separated from a body that had once been mine.

An invasion—a surgery, a rape —it rearranges reality just as deftly as it rearranges time, space, organs, memory. Bones rearranged into titanium and ceramic broke open my world to an expansive one, of aspen-covered mountains and the promise of years on the other side of chronic pain's hazy veil. The rape, though, it shattered, desecrated, made a mockery of language I thought I knew.

Healing—the practice of nourishing a body and a spirit—has been a resanctification. Growing bone into metal, lengthening muscles long unused, soothing panic and channeling rage, anointing scars with Vitamin E and *mebendi*, learning the sharp edges and nestling into the soft pockets. It is an ongoing restoration project, taking place on exam tables teaching and learning trauma-informed care, in the basement of a Unitarian church repurposed as a therapist's office, under hands that minister a quietly fierce safety, in a community that has held every part and made it mine, again.



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Shivani Mehta Bhatia is a public health professional whose work centers on healing and nourishment. She previously led health equity efforts for Colorado’s COVID-19 pandemic response, and her maternal mortality prevention work was nationally recognized for addressing the structural and social determinants of health. Bhatia has been a crisis counselor for sexual violence survivors, a full-spectrum birth and abortion doula, a hatha yoga teacher, a sex educator, and a cognitive neuroscience researcher studying the effects of music education on brain plasticity. Bhatia holds an MPH in Population and Family Health from Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health and an AB in Neuroscience and Music from Dartmouth College. She is a queer disabled desi woman, and she loves rose gardens, cardamom iced coffee and late summer rainstorms. shivani.co

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