

The Last Page

Bhopal

Narayan told me about the city in India where he once studied, a literary centre known for festivals and lively debates, crowds gathering to hear the poetry readings which, he bragged, *went on forever*. But when he spoke the name, my face must have shifted. *Yes*, he said, *you've heard about the gas leak*. In December, clouds covered the city and its lakes. Warnings sounded and he walked uphill to find a place above the clouds, passing many who didn't know better than to take deep breaths, because the toxins left them short of breath, drawing in the yellow poison. I didn't ask who he lost among the dead. He kept apologizing, embarrassed, repeating a story I'd heard before. All he wanted to tell me, he said, was that wherever you went today it seemed like no one read anymore.

Keith Ekiss