

THE FREEWHEELER

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FACULTY ADVISOR'S LETTER



The years do whiz past. It seems just yesterday *The Freewheeler* was conceived and we were scrambling to get the first issue out. The magazine is now in its ninth issue. In the process we have witnessed seismic changes in the Indian political scene, a pandemic and an ongoing war in Eastern Europe. Through it all *The Freewheeler* has remained consistent in its mission to showcase the creative work of SNU students. Thanks to it, several greenhorn creative writing students have made the journey from the classroom to publication, going through the arduous process of producing several drafts of their writing before arriving at the definitive draft that makes it to the pages of *The Freewheeler*. A number of editors and copyeditors have painstakingly worked on the stories in a bid to make them as good as they can possibly be. And each issue has been enhanced by the efforts of various illustrators and presented attractively on the page or the screen by dedicated designers. Each incarnation of *The Freewheeler* is the result of the collaborative efforts of a number of students, and the current issue is no

different.

This issue of *The Freewheeler* includes a wide-ranging collection of poetry and prose. Its eight poems are diverse in style and content. The same can be said for its seven prose pieces which include both short fiction and memoir and deal with issues as relatable as growing pains, reaching out to an elderly relative with Alzheimer's, coping with the death of a beloved relative, and navigating the intricacies of love and marriage. Furthermore, this year for the first time we have a comic that deals with the pressures of coping with academics and deadlines. The credit for making all this possible goes to the issue's editors, Smriti Verma and Nandini Dogra, and their team of dedicated student contributors, proofreaders and artists.

The Freewheeler began nine years ago as a platform for students to flex their creative muscle and, in the process, discover the creative within themselves. Since then, it has grown into a respected publication. None of that would have been possible without the support of several people. My colleagues at the Department of English, who have been behind this endeavour from the start, and the Director of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences without whose unstinting support this magazine would not be possible.

I thank you all.

Vikram Kapur

EDITORIAL NOTE

Every edition of *The Freewheeler* has been special in its own right. Some featured book reviews, some interviews, and some were assembled in the backdrop of the pandemic. This notable lineage was not easy to carry, but this edition we would argue is similarly unique: it has the first comic, is quite eclectic in its design, and came out of a series of hybrid meetings, as almost all of our past year has been. Tackling and looking for stolen time between online

classes, nap time, deadlines, nap time, anxiety, binge-watching, deadlines, and nap time, we transitioned from meeting on screens to C&D chai pe charcha and frequent library visits. The making of this edition also saw the pandemic going backwards and forwards, always receding but still quite there, marked by our return to the SNU campus with the pomp of Shahrukh Khan returning home in any and every Dharma production. And like every Dharma production, there were moments of melodrama: just a week ago our campus saw a Covid outbreak after the fest while masks were being removed in the rest of the country.

Suffice to say, the journey has been arduous, and involved, more often than not, cursing at the Canva website in frustration. But we would be lying if we say we are not incredibly pleased with the result. We would like to thank Professor



Vikram Kapur for his help, guidance and unceasing support, without whom this magazine would not be possible. We would also like to thank all our writers and poets for their words, and our proofreaders for all the effort they put into ensuring a flawless edition.

The pieces in this edition vary from gothic tales on mothers, children, and manipulative spouses to easy, comforting poems on kites, embroidered elephants and dusks. There are memoirs both painful and soothing, marked by memories of nostalgia, escape and acceptance. Ultimately, every piece in this edition dwells on how we as humans come to terms with our lives – with pain, loss, death, identity. There's much to think and ponder upon. Slow down your day with us, then. Rest a little and read before the anxiety of deadlines and nap time sets in.

Smriti & Nandini

THE YELLOW KITE

MRINALI BEHERA

whoosh!

to the left and now

back to the right again, the

yellow kite whirls and twirls and spins around

like corn waiting to pop and unleash its very being. i nudge
it to follow my lead, yet the flickering fellow has a mind of his own.

it dances and breaks away from me, finally – Fshhhhh!

off it flies. far away. far away. far away.

i cannot see it

a n y

m

o

r

e

THE SPEECH

PRERNA ATHREYA

The pleasant, unintelligible chatter echoes off the stone pillars of this grand hall. My hands tremble slightly as I fidget with the flashcards. The AC's full blast does little to control the sweat gathering at my temples; the nerves are really getting to me. Looking around at our managers, it registers again how much is riding on today. I know that the wedding announcement itself achieved a lot, but seeing this through till the end is crucial. I can feel the stress, but Ahalya is counting on me, and I can't let us down.

The clinking of the champagne glass breaks my reverie- that's my cue. I stand up to the rapturous applause and expectant eyes, the nerves spreading through my body like a tidal wave from the feet up. It is only when Ahalya gently squeezes my hand that I realise I have been holding my breath. It takes me a second, but I start to speak haltingly.

"Hello everyone. I'm Rishi, and Ahalya and I are so thrilled that you all could be here today.

Your presence means the world to us." I take the moment to look around at everyone, greeting the guests with a broad smile. Taking a deep breath, I continue.

"To be honest, as a director, I am much more comfortable being in charge of operations, like the conductor for an orchestra. I don't really enjoy being the centre of attention. We all know that in this duo, Ahalya is better built for the spotlight." There is scattered laughter, making me smile. "Still, I do want to give this an honest-to-God go. Who knows, maybe this semi-decent attempt will actually be tolerable."

"Most of our family and friends gathered here today know that Ahalya and I have not had the easiest journey. In fact, if you told me even two years ago that we would be gathered here today, I would have let out an almighty scoff. But call it what you want- fate or destiny, the universe- had other plans for us. It took us a long time to forgive and understand each other, and share our inner selves openly.

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Still, I'm certain that those hurdles cemented us as a team. A lot of our problems unfolded on the public stage. While we might have wished for privacy, there is something about thousands of fans pressuring you to 'get back to the love of your life' that you can't quite ignore."

There is laughter echoing around the hall, Ahalya joining in this time. The way I've worded it is actually quite minimising; the number of DMs I got daily was quite shocking.

"When we first started dating, Ahalya would always say that my poker face confused her; she could never quite figure out what I was thinking. Was I happy, sad, confused, angry, or just neutral? For a long time, I didn't have an answer for her. It was writing this toast that helped me out. The truth is, when I look at her, my head simply empties of any thought. Emotions overwhelm me, and I feel adoration, admiration, respect, and above all, love."

I hear the 'awws' around the hall and steal a glance at Ahalya in panic,

wondering if that was somehow inappropriate. It is now her turn to give me a blank expression. But her mask is back on before I can blink, a shocked look that I think means she hadn't expected this response. Her eyes start to well up, and I form a small smile, looking back at my cue cards.

"Since Ahalya is the writer, I suppose it is only fitting that I share an extract from the book she told me was about us." When I say this, if possible, the crowd leans in closer. I can almost read their thoughts. Is this it; is this the confirmation that *Our Serendipity* was an apology to him? I don't need to answer- Ahalya's words will do that for me.

"I don't quite know how to explain it, but I looked at him the way I look at the moon. He is made of elegance, wonder and beauty; not everyone knows how to love someone like him, sometimes not even me. He never asked me questions, and he never demanded answers; he was never a challenge. I never had to prove myself to him. He was always near me, beside me; breathing, glowing,

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listening; in a way that no one else, sometimes including myself, could understand. He was like the moon, my own personal moon, lighting up the way during my darkest nights, and now, without him, I am but a lost star in an endless abyss of darkness, wondering where he disappeared off to, and the worst part is: I know that it was my madness and rage that drove him away.’ ”

I look up for a second; there is not a dry eye in the room. During this dramatic reading, Ahalya reached for a nearby tissue box and is now desperately trying not to ruin her makeup. For a second, I begin to have doubts about her affections for me. What is the real truth- what she told me this morning, or what she wrote in her book? I drift away for a second, but when she returns her gaze to me, I wake up as though doused with a splash of cold water. Her chin is still trembling, but her eyes are steely, instantly letting me know that her vulnerable moment is over. My doubts disappear, and I smile lightly, irony piercing through my heart as I continue.

“I cannot tell you how shocked I was. I couldn't believe this is what she thought of me, and us. When we



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broke up, I assumed that my priority would be undertaking the search to replace our professional relationship. I had no idea about the extent to which my private life would be rocked by my decision to end things between Ahalya and me. It was this paragraph in particular that made me swallow my pride. I knew that my happiness lay in the arms of the only woman who has ever loved me. And so, when she accepted my proposal, I knew I had to set the record straight. Unafraid of the consequences, she told the world what she sees when she looks at me. And so, I will tell you all what I see when I see her. Please understand that I am in no way as articulate and eloquent, but I will try my best.”

“I look at her the way I look at the sun. She frustrates me, confuses me, energises me, and gives me life. I bask in her warmth and complain when she is gone but have to force my eyes away from the harsh rays that emanate from her.

On the days when she is muted by clouds or winds, I complain, and on

the days that she is at her full strength, I have to hide from her, lest I get burnt.

I cannot look at her when she is at her brightest. But during sunrise and sunset, when the light is blurry around the edges, and the sky aglow with a brilliant technicolour, I find myself gazing at her in amazement and admiration. Wondering how I have never truly seen her before. I will never be able to see all of her, because she is beyond anything human. She is the sun, and I am but the moon, doomed for eternity to reflect her light as my own.”

I look down at Ahalya, who is gazing at me with unmistakably genuine shock. If I had to guess, she didn't expect me to be able to express myself so well. I mean, everyone in this room knows how much my career suffered with writers hired in her stead. I look around the room, trying to interpret people's wonderstruck look. I can see their amazement at this couple that has somehow redefined emotions as old as time. I chuckle dryly at the direction of my thoughts; if only they knew the painful

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journey of arriving at new definitions.

Seeing that people are starting to gather their wits, I pick up my cards and prepare to continue into the last portion of my toast, waiting for this to end.

“Ahalya dubbed me her moon, and I must say, the moon and I do have a few things in common. The most important similarity, though, is that we each shine brighter in the light of our sun. Well, you, my dear”- I say, holding her hand as I gaze into her eyes- “my glorious sun, we will always be strongest together. Who, or what, would I be without you? Thank you for choosing me to share your light with, and I promise to light up your darkest nights for evermore.”

I stand still for a moment and then sit back down to the shocked silence that is momentarily overtaken with loud applause. I pick up Ahalya’s hand that I’m still holding and bring it to my lips, kissing gently as she continues to sniffle. I lean in close and whisper, “Good luck following that,” to

which she gives me a proud smile. I’m sure her speech will be much better, but I’m still quite surprised at how well my writing was received. I guess I’m a better writer than I thought. Who knows, Ahalya might suggest we write a book together someday.

...

I snap out of my reverie seeing a beige paper being shaken in front of my face. “What’s this?” I say, unfolding it, registering the barely-there smirk as she replies.

“Oh, nothing. Notes on your speech today. Tips for your next one.”

Saying so, she stalks off into the washroom to remove her makeup, which she will then meticulously reapply before we leave for the airport, the honeymoon. I look at her familiar scrawl, willing myself to set aside my anger; it never gets me anywhere. The saying Ahalya is always going on about - ‘The ends justify the means’ - suddenly comes to mind. Well, I suppose forever stroking her ego is what I will have to do to finally get where I want to be.

ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

SUKRITI LAKHTAKIA

One summer day when the curtains fell,
there were elephants in our room.

Embroidered on the bedsheet that we hung up,
the grey mammals danced in pink.

The dust was bathed in eager sunlight
which licked the walls bare –

the room put on a pair of rose-coloured glasses.

Curtains crumpled on the floor,
replaced by a flimsy façade.

For a moment in time,
everyday letters to Calamity
had paused mid-air.

Secretly, that summer day,
my sister and I
basked in the warm glow of consolation.

THE JHELUM CAFÉ

TAAMEEN SHABIR

The café is empty. Sehr sits at the table across the window to avoid looking at Aijaz who is seated to her left. She doesn't remember when he arrived. Was he already seated there? She can't tell. The café hasn't changed in the five years of its existence. She was there when Aijaz and his friends thought of the idea of a café. Winter of 2014, they all sat huddled up under thick blankets in the small TV room. It was movie night at their house and both Umar and Aasim- Aijaz's childhood friends- had come over to stay the night. She watched in amusement as her baby brother tried to convince the other two about how good of an idea this was. He used big words like budgeting, investment, location, target customers, interiors and the list went on.

Sitting at the table now she doesn't have to look around to know what the café looks like. The memories of her past are much clearer than the present. She remembers the first time she walked in. The bell at the entrance signified her entry, the long counter to her right decorated with

mugs and jars filled with coffee beans, the brown walls decorated with paintings done by local artists. Their view of the city. In front of her was the sitting area, with six tables, each with a dark blue tablecloth. Shelves that ran along the walls were filled with books; she could make out the ones taken from her precious collection. The window was straight ahead with a table right in front of it. The only difference now is all the dust gathered, a marker of the passage of time.

The calligraphy painted at the entrance was her favorite. It was the Urdu word *Junoon*, meaning Passion. It encapsulated everything Aijaz stood for. But for Aijaz it was the window. He loved looking at the Jhelum. The café was situated at the end of Budshah Bridge facing the traffic. Sehr never understood his obsession with the window. The Jhelum was barely visible. It was a backdrop to the noisy street. All she ever saw was the military truck that was stationed on the bridge and everything else was just noise.

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She doesn't look at Aijaz. The wall adjacent to the window is also the same. Aijaz would say that the wall is the past and the window the present. He filled the wall with old pictures of Kashmir. History had always been his favorite subject. The frames are old and dusty now, some are crooked. She looks at the people in the pictures, the women laughing, while separating rice from husk, Boulevard Road before it became a road, and her favorite picture of Fateh Kadal when it was still being constructed.

Unlike Aijaz who saw beauty in people and their everyday lives, Sehr saw the beauty in nature. She hated the unnecessary restrictions that were forced on her, especially in this city where everyone knew everyone. For her, Kashmiris were all rotten. They were always gossiping and interfering. She preferred the mountains and the lakes, the bridges, and the forts. But most of all she loved watching the sun set over the Jhelum.

She remembers sitting at this same table, Aijaz sitting on her left as they spoke about the city. It had been two

years since the opening of the café, and she had dropped in to surprise him. It was the first time she saw how much this city meant to him. He was twenty and she was twenty-three.

She asked him, "Why would you like looking outside this window? The army truck blocks out the Jhelum and all that's visible is the market and the noisy cars."

"That's exactly why I look at it. So I don't forget. To never forget what our people are going through. I must remember because it's easy to forget."

She laughed bitterly, "Our people? You grew up in Delhi, Aijaz. An outsider is all you'll ever be to them."

"You don't have to be a Kashmiri to recognize their pain. You can be an outsider and still stand with them."

Thinking about it now, Sehr realizes that her brother wasn't an immature 20-year-old. At twenty, he knew more about the ways of the world than she would ever know. She finally looks at him. He hasn't said a word. He was

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waiting for her to ease into this room. Ease into her past and her present.

“How’s Mumma?” He asks.

He looks the same as he did all those years ago. The scar on his forehead, the one she gave him when she pushed him off the swing as a kid. She didn’t like the new kid that was now sharing her space in the house. When Mumma came running, he lied, saying he fell on his own. He had always adored her. She’s trying to memorize his face. His warm eyes that look just like Baba’s, his smile that shows his crooked teeth. He was supposed to get braces but she’s glad he didn’t. He was right about them being an important part of him. She looks at him and his big round glasses. She remembers Mumma saying he looked just like Nanu with those glasses. Mumma would sometimes look at him and be reminded of her father.

“Mumma was right. It’s as if Daddy Ji is sitting next to me and talking to me.”

He laughs. “Not this again. You do realize that’s basically calling me old and I’m the youngest in the house!”

She had missed his laugh.

“I missed you. Mumma misses you. We all miss you.”

He looks outside the window.

“You remember that conversation we had at this table?”

“Which one?” She asks, knowing very well what he’s talking about.

“Do you still feel like an outsider? Do you still think the people here are rotten?”

She winces. He goes straight for the kill.

“I don’t know how I feel anymore. I couldn’t live here anymore. Couldn’t walk and eat and breathe in a city that took so much from me.”

“Were you able to breathe in Delhi?”

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“Yes, I realize how ironic that sounds, but the pollution has gone down a lot since you last visited.”

He knows what I’m doing. We were supposed to have an open conversation but here I am deflecting every and anything he brings up. But what more can you say to the dead?

“I was waiting for you. You knew I’d be here. You always knew.”

She did. She knew it right from the start. That he would be here sitting at this table. Waiting for her to come back. Waiting for her to accept it. To let go.

“You remember the time we went to Harwan and some boys thought we were a couple and started harassing us?” She asks him.

“Yes, they were accusing us of doing inappropriate things in the mountains when all we were doing was getting high. What about it?”

“I don’t know, I keep thinking about these moments. How were you so



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calm? How did it not bother you that a bunch of boys were asking you to prove your relationship to your own sister? Why were you not angry?”

“Sehr, why does that matter now?”

“Because I want to know. I want to know why you did what you did. I don’t understand you. I need to understand.”

“So, what you’re trying to ask is why I loved my people even after being treated like an outsider and struggling to fit in?”

She looks at the army truck. In the three years since his death, there have been a few changes. The flowerpots on the bridge that were newly installed have now lost their color. The plants are dead, yet the pots are not removed. They hang there as people pass them by. There are new shops that have opened but a few old ones remain. The truck looks the same as it did when she first stepped into the café. It’s hard to tell vehicles apart, especially army vehicles.

“She looks at the army men around the truck. One seated at the top with his gun always ready, another in the driver’s seat, two more standing outside, and the remaining standing guard in their respective positions on the street. They look the same. Their guns hanging from their arms, their green uniforms, and their empty faces. She had seen their violent and angry faces in pictures and videos but never in person. Whenever she passed them by on a street, their faces were always blank. On a few occasions, she had seen them laughing with each other or with the locals. It was easy for her to villainize her people. The ones who had hurt her with their words and their glares. She can still feel their looks of disapproval every time she walked around wearing jeans or let her hair open.

“I hated them as well.”

“Who? The army men? Yes, Aijaz, of course you hated them.”

“No. Kashmiris.”

She turns to look at him. He’s looking

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at the wall of the past. She looks at the women and the children of Kashmir. "You hated them? What lies! You wouldn't have died if you hated them!"

"I did hate them. I hated how they would talk about women, I hated when they asked me if I had 'fun' with my sister in the mountains, I hated that whenever I called you by your name someone was always there to remind me that I shouldn't call my older sister by her name, how they would talk about Mumma and what a poor job she had done at raising her kids, how they would keep talking and judging, I hated it all. I know you think that if you were in my place, you'd never do it. You think that I was too nice. But Sehr that's not what happened. It's not because I didn't hate them."

"Then why? Why did you do it? You knew what was going to happen, didn't you? Why shield them with your own body? Why stand up for them? You knew what happened if you got involved with the army. Why?"

"She can feel the tears, the lump at the back of her throat. She mustn't cry. Not now. Not after holding out so well. Not after all these years. She looks at him. At her little brother. He doesn't look at her but waits in silence listening to her sobs as her body rocks back and forth unable to contain her grief. It is like a captive screaming to be let out of its cage. They sit in silence.

He is now looking at the window.

"Remember that conversation we had here? When you asked me about the window and why I liked watching the traffic?"

She takes a deep breath to calm herself.

"Yes, you said it was to never forget their suffering."

She is exhausted. A part of her wants to just curl up and shut the world out. To forget.

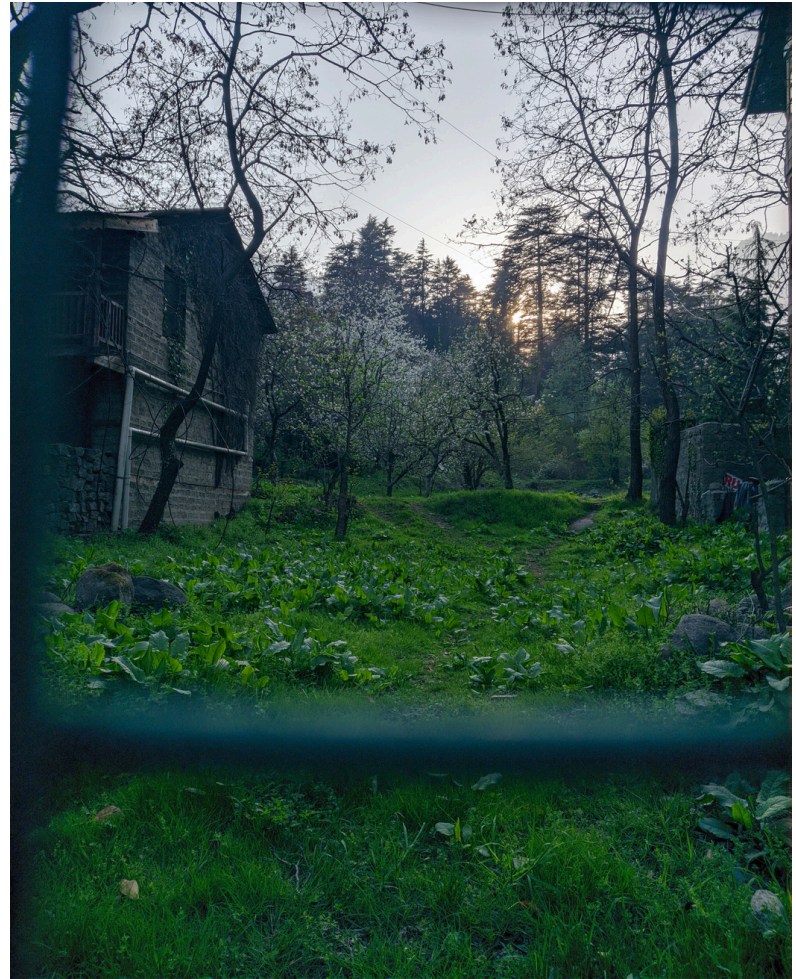
"No, that's not what I was talking about. It was to remind myself that

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they're all humans. The pictures of them laughing were to remind me of what was. And the everyday view of them walking on the road, sometimes fighting, sometimes laughing, shopkeepers talking, kids playing and cars passing by, all of it was to remind me what they had become. And the cause was right in front of us."

She looks at the truck and then back at him.

"Yeah, it was my way of staying human. I wanted to remember that it wasn't their fault that they had become so involved with each other's lives. It was the violence they had seen and suffered, it was the curfews and the communication shutdowns. They were always shut off from the rest of the world. Nobody ever supported them, nobody ever tried saving them. All they have is themselves and their people. Nobody else understood their pain. I know it looks like I'm justifying their sexist mindset and their narrow thinking, but it was easy to hate them, Sehr. It was very easy to hate them. And I didn't want to do that to them. It felt too cruel."



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“Aijaz, when did you grow up? You were supposed to be a kid.” She can’t stop the tears anymore. She thinks to herself, “How can I ever forget you?”

She wants to hug him one last time.

“Look at them, Sehr. They have all lost loved ones to this war. There’s not a house here that hasn’t lost a son, or a daughter. Old mothers still look for their sons in the faces of strangers. You think they don’t understand your pain, but they do. Many don’t even get the bodies back. Mothers here wish their sons are dead rather than being arrested or stuck at a torture house. They know how it feels to lose a family. But most of all they know how it feels to be helpless. To see everything you built destroyed, to watch little boys blinded, to see the streets filled with blood. And still have to laugh and smile out of helplessness, because you know you can’t win this fight.’

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to live anymore.” She cannot stop crying. Three years of pain and sorrow. Why did she wait this long to come

back?

“I don’t have an answer for that. I’m sorry Sehr. I really am. I have missed you Di. I’m glad I can see you one last time.”

“Just answer one question.”

She wants to ask him if he regretted it, but she doesn’t.

“Did it hurt?”

He looks at her and smiles a sad smile, “No, it was quick and painless.”

She wonders if ghosts get sad and cry just like humans do.

She doesn’t say anything else. There was no going back. She had lost him forever.

There is a knock on the door, an army man enters. “Miss, it’s getting late and there is a curfew from 6 pm. It would be best if you could hurry up.”

Sehr looks at Aijaz, her baby brother who will always remain twenty. She

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“reaches out to touch his cheek but stops midway. She cannot see through the tears. The army man is waiting outside the door.

This was the last time she would see him. The government had decided to redevelop the area into an army quarter. The shopkeepers had all sold their shops. This was the only one left. Aijaz’s friends had decided to sell the café as well. She looks at Aijaz. He’s looking outside the window. She was supposed to pack all the frames and bring them home, but she decided not to. She doesn’t want to take anything away from him.

“I’ll always remember you,” she whispers to him trying to smile at him, her lips trembling. A knock on the door. She must leave.

She is now standing on the bridge, gazing at the river. She takes a final glimpse at the café sign in the distance *The Jhelum Café* and then towards the river. She smiles, with tears in her eyes, and says to the river “May you never perish as he did.”

SPICE-STAINED HANDS

DIVISHA CHAUDHRY

At home our empty egg cartons
hold red chillies and lemons.

We use everything twice
and keep what fits this box the best-

these tangy and sour fragrances
extract the pungent, yolky smell that makes us queasy;
Mother prefers this exchange and so do I-
At least this way we don't think about a life
killed in this dead tray by our spice-stained hands

LIGHT

DIVISHA CHAUDHRY



Dusk settles in, sha/
dows mourn and come out to see,
light driving away

UNLIVED MEMORIES

NANDINI DOGRA

Can it still be called a memory if you haven't lived through it? A manifestation reaching out of your unconscious, a call from your psyche, a daydream tailored by yourself for a certain selfhood far ahead in the future, though left unfulfilled, since your life never led up to it. Almost like providing your destiny with multiple possibilities to choose from. My mind bursts with such unlived memories when Papa talks about renting out our current house to take up a newer, bigger, impressionable one in a nearby locality.

Papa's attraction for the garden's view from the second floor fell flat when the four flights of stairs felt too hard for his 'rocking' knees. "*Upar chadhate chadhate bilkul upar hi na pahunch jau,*" Papa grumbles, forgetting that his knees still function majorly because of this free exercise session. The absence of a guest room gets more pronounced as the will to lay mattresses down in the living room for sleeping together fades. The absence of a chimney and a modular kitchen pricks Maa more as she forgets to focus on the constant flow of sunshine. "*Arey, US vale rishtedaaro*

ko neeche baithke khaana thodi na khilaoge!" Dadi feels embarrassed about not having a dining table even if our Himachali traditions call for sitting cross-legged on the floor while eating. Bhaiya campaigns for the need of an additional toilet as his hour-long scrolling sessions get interrupted by nature calling everyone at the same time. Who is to blame for the body remembering the old communal days of relieving oneself by going to the designated field at sharp 5am every morning?

Our family shifted from Himachal almost twenty-five years ago. Leaving the lush green ancestral home behind, they looked for a lucrative, even if tightly spaced, opportunity here in Delhi. We go back during vacations. Maa and Papa want me and Bhaiya to be closer to our roots, just like other kids born and brought up back home. We pick up broken pieces of the dialect spoken there and create our own form of Pahari. Trying to match the pace of life there, we stay for a month or two. Despite it being a way to acculturate us to their definition of home, it doesn't function

UNLIVED MEMORIES

as more than a retreat for us. A place to explore, where people who share our bloodline live. It's home, technically, yet it feels foreign. I was born and brought up in Delhi and it is my definition of home. I may ramble about my dislike for the noise, traffic and rowdiness of the citizens, yet it feels more natural than the polite calmness received back at Maa and Papa's definition of home. My body reflexively knows this 2BHK MIG, as DDA calls it, as my haven. The first home I saw and felt after I came out of Maa's womb.

As a child, when Bhaiya was too busy to play with me (our seven and a half-years of age gap made him too proud to indulge in my 'childish' fancies sometimes), I would close my eyes and try to walk around the house. The game was to reach the opposite end of the house without bumping into any walls or furniture. Humans, however, fickle creatures bound to ruin the game, were exempted from this rule. After a few initial bruises, I mastered the game, knowing my way around our home even with my eyes closed. Identifying curves in the corridors with the change in the floor

footing or recognizing my position from a bed or a cupboard, feeling the warmth of light on my closed lids.

The house would feel like such a big and mysterious place to my six-year-old eyes. Yet the same space felt restrictive and predictable, when the twenty-one-year-old me tried to reenact the game. I wished for wider spaces. I wished for fresh bruises. Yet when Papa talked about shifting, an indistinguishable heaviness settled on my chest at the realization of the possible loss of the stability that this home beheld. I had taken the constancy for granted, assuming this entity as immutable, I never gave a thought to its loss.

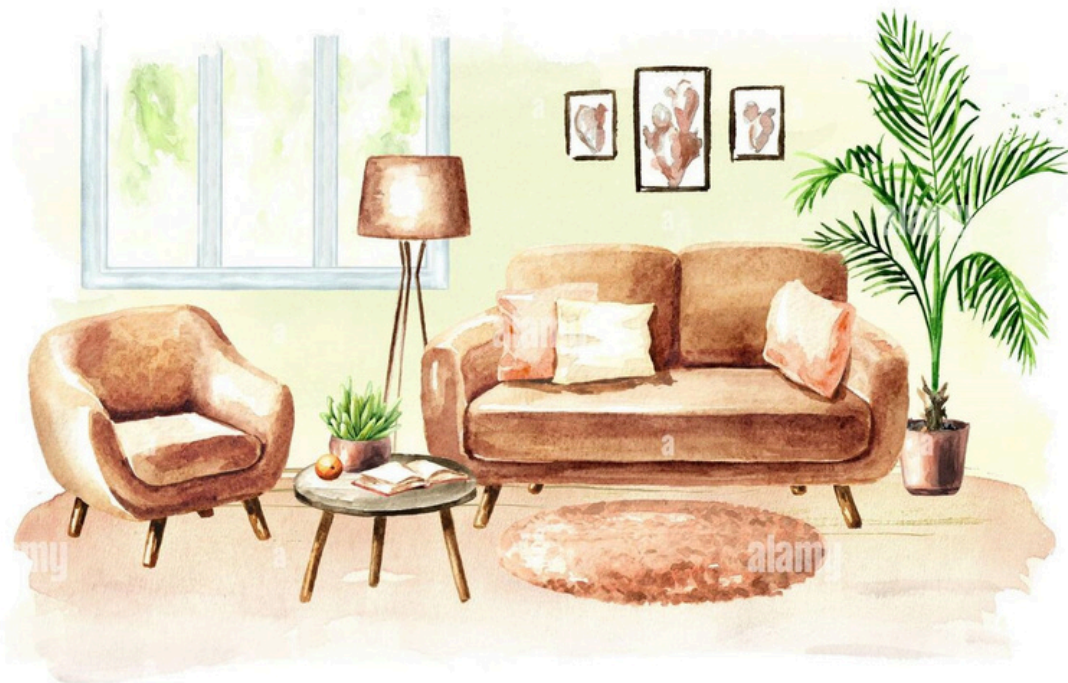
Like a fellow human companion, this home had etched its spot in my heart. My feelings intermingled with my memories, shaping all the spaces into places, heavy-laden with a certain emotional baggage, made parting a harder project. The kitchen, which often saw me fascinated or intrigued by Maa or Dadi's skills in the morning, also witnessed breakdowns and hushed virtual arguments in the dead

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of the night. Frustrations manifested in banging kitchen utensils on the counter top and found themselves metamorphosed into muffled sobs at 3am, breakdowns engulfing me while I huddled up in a corner under the slab. Counting backwards from one thousand, to keep some sense of sanity intact, the fridge beeped in sync with my sulky attempts at singing random hymns to calm myself. As the nights and seasons changed, from leaving this cocoon at 5am, I found myself coming in around then. Sharing a cup of coffee with the sun as it energized its bleak rays with

the strength of my caffeine, we grew together.

The living room sofa, a victim to constant abuse at my end. I spent more time napping and laying on it than sitting. Winters found me snuggled on it with a blanket and a book, time became jelly as I traversed through fictional universes in my wooly warmth. Come the exam season, books scattered everywhere, the sofa assisted me to take the knowledge in through osmosis as I slept on these papery pillows, mouth slightly ajar. Until Maa would notice



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and exclaim, “*Dekho toh, ye fir sogayi,*” while pushing me to the bathroom to freshen up for another sleep session. Grumbling, I would take a shower, only to panic when I realized the elapsed time and donkey loads of syllabus left.

I never understand why everyone romanticizes breakdowns in the shower. What is even the point if your face can't warm up properly under the cold water? One won't be crying freely, nor would they be taking a shower properly - it would just be a waste of resources, both material and emotional. I always preferred breakdowns while taking an evening stroll on the balcony in the shady and ill-lit backside of our house. Walking with fast-paced, long strides, my body heating up while going into a state of confusion, as the low serotonin caused by the anxiety got attacked by a sudden burst of endorphins from the cardio. My face, a blazing tomato, cooling down as the tears started pouring. Winning the best of both worlds, I would release my tensions and get some exercise too. I'm sure the pigeons nestled on the corner

frame of the balcony thought me unhinged.

The house had officially designated spaces for making rangolis, hanging lanterns and lighting up diyas and candles every Diwali, or particular spots where you would be allowed to sit after coming back drenched in colours on Holi. That corner in the kitchen where you could stand, hidden from view, and gobble down the snacks to be served to the guests. The exact number of steps you needed to stand away from the wash basin, lest Bhaiya sprayed your face with icy cold water in the winters. I think my mind has a blueprint of the house, filled only with these subtle yet important details. Maa's *Noli Me Tangere* sitting in the front balcony taught me consent, while the potted Morning Glory espoused impermanence. Yet now in the face of it, I find indifference hard to practice. The unlived memories pierce through my psyche. Is it disappointment or just a sense of loss for something that wasn't even promised to begin with?

Fantasies of bringing a lover home, to show them where I came from, what

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shaped me, what made me the 'me' that they love. Giving them the opportunity to scrape the paint off the walls. Layer after layer, painted and repainted over the years, to find the heartfelt doodles of a chubby toddler at the end. Not coherent enough, yet all she asks for is a stable, secure love, scraped off walls, even if repainted and tiled. Maybe to show them the cupboard of books under the window in Dadi's room. It had overflowed with these bundles of love, when Papa asked me to choose and pack some up in a cardboard box, to be locked

up in the overhead loft lest they come under some kind of harm or decay. Down to the bare necessities, the cupboard of books felt airy and empty, like the window above it with reflective glass. My heart, to be found in that overhead loft with its three cartons and 576 books, caged. While to stand in front of the mirror, where I stood, to make myself up before hurrying to meet them. Showing them the adrenaline rush-induced electric butterflies I got, changing dresses till the last minute trying to match outfits with them. Only to end up late enough to neither have the

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time to buy them flowers, nor to show them a sneak peak of the butterflies before they fly away.

Wild trains of thoughts imagine a homecoming after years in some educational exile. Acting like I've forgotten which cabinet housed sugar and tea leaves, or which switch turned the light or fan on. Comparing all the changes adopted in the time I was away, talking of things past with a sophisticated nostalgia, just like Papa does while talking about Himachal. While taking a perfunctory walk around the house, only to focus on the details associated with my old possessions. Chat with Maa, standing beside her flowers in the balcony, asking if the Morning Glory has newer blooms. To fall asleep, snuggled up, on the sofa again. Only to wake up and rant about back pain and how I have, indeed, outgrown it. Yet finding my way back to it at night.

My mind traverses way beyond, thinking of a younger extension of me, running around these same spaces, drawing newer doodles. As this pigmentation of my imagination retraces my steps around the house,

with eyes kept closed, I hold her back from a possible bump. The fickle creature that I am, a human, am exempted from the rules.

Papa angrily rants about the absence of a designated parking space again, only to finalize his decision to move and rent this place out. My reverie of unlived memories is broken. I think of farther possibilities. While leaving our bundles of impressions behind, it would be an opportunity to embrace and create newer ones. The new place, like a blank canvas, to be smudged and painted. Yet intriguing, for the novelty of its crispness and texture. To create newer spaces within the place and transform it into a home, a haven.

Maa says we won't keep the old furniture but redo the interior. I fought for the cause of our much-abused sofas, while Papa saved his favorite chair. Bhaiya tells me about a huge wall with a significant potential to become a sturdy bookshelf. I think it's time to uncage my heart along with the three cartons and 576 books. The balconies are well-lit and airy on all

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sides. Does that mean I'm not allowed any more semi-public breakdowns or is it just time to embrace the illogical shower ones? The pleasures of a bigger and sunny balcony suggests the possibility of newer blossoms and Maa plans on adding daffodils to our little sanctuary.

As I sort through my belongings, packing some, doing away with the others and the possibilities they behold, I think of physics and conservation of energy. These possessions might be disposed of at my end but would initiate a fresh chain of events for someone else. As they go out wearing my lucky dress, too short for me now, they too might find fortune siding with them. Using my night lamp to study, they too might land an admission in their aspired course. Walking while wearing my pair of sneakers, their feet might lead them to someone they end up marrying eventually. The energy may get converted but would essentially remain the same.

Going by that logic, do my unlived memories possess certain potential too, which might get converted? The

electricity running through my neurons, as I think and create newer probabilities in my mind, would essentially still exist and would just be converted and passed on, if not actually lived through. Would then, this home, beholding its set of multitudinous odds, then recycle and offer those wills, desires and affections to someone else as well? I think, only after we move out, would any such course of action begin.

THE EXPRESSWAY

PEEYUSH PATIL

There are six lanes,
On the expressway from G. Noida to Noida,
I drive in the middle,
Not too fast, not too slow.
They say,
It's for those who play safe.

At times I shift to the right,
The fast lane,
To overtake,

But I quickly switch back to the middle

At times I also shift to the left,
The slow lane,
Just to adjust myself.

Rarely I shift to extreme left,
Seldom I shift to extreme right,

Mostly I stay in the middle.
I cover the expressway in 45 minutes,
My friend covers it in 30.

LEAVE ME FOREVER

KALRAV VASHISHTHA

“Something that is loved is never lost.”

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

Autos sped past Sarla and Rani as they made their way to the Pushpanjali residential society. Rani's plastic watch showed it had just struck twelve, and the Jaipur sun was at its peak. Rani was busy mopping sweat from her face with the *pallu* of her mother's saree. On the other hand, Sarla did not mind the temperature, she actually thought it was quite pleasant that day. However the drops of sweat on her temples showed otherwise. They entered the society gates and were welcomed by a cool breeze thanks to the generous plantation on the society avenue. The first cut on the right led them to their destination, a grand *haveli* made of red sandstone. There was a massive nameplate on its outer wall which proclaimed 'The Mehras'.

A wave of excitement coursed through Sarla's mind as she searched for the keys in her purse. Unlocking the door, Rani and she rushed to the master bedroom upstairs. She switched on the lights, guffawed, and said, “My darling boy, how I have

missed you!” She held the baby up in her arms and fed him. Some minutes later, she sighed and left him in Rani's care. She went into the storeroom and brought out a broom in one hand and a mop in the other. She lamented, “*Kaash mai iss haveli ki naukrani na hoti, maalkin hoti.*”

After a long hour of dusting and mopping through the many hallways, Sarla returned to the children. Rani was dancing with her brother. “Go play, Rani, I'll take care of Bhaiya now.” Rani felt upset by this, but soon found entertainment in the miniature showpieces displayed at the other end of the hall. All of Sarla's fatigue faded as she held her son. He was a special child, her first son. She looked back at how he had distressed her before he was even born. There had been many complications. She had vomited so much in those days, any sort of smell would make her retch. And then there was her apathetic husband, Suraj, who had declared that he was not going to raise another girl. He had said, “*Peetal ki factory me kaam karun hoon, raja thodi na hoon jo tu chhori pe chhori jan rahi hai.*”

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Her mother-in-law, Dhoopa, had intuited that it would be a boy this time. She had said she could tell by the shape of the bump. It was indeed a boy, an answer to all their prayers. But he had come out premature. The doctor had to operate because of this contingency. It had been painful, but looking at that wrinkled face afterwards had made everything feel worthwhile to Sarla. Suraj had beamed as he finally cuddled his heir.

Sarla had lost track of time as she sat lost in these reflections with her son in her lap. Her sanctum was penetrated by the security guard, who shouted from the door, "Are you sleeping in there? It is 2 o'clock, what is taking you so long?" She had to take leave of her sleeping son, whom she tucked into the bed. "How cruel is fate, a mother can't hold her child for more than an hour a day!" she murmured on their way back to the shantytown.

Her locality stood in stark opposition to the Pushpanjali residential society. In place of avenues, there were alleys so narrow that bicycles could hardly

enter them. In place of trees, there were *mitti chulhas* creating thick foliages of spicy smoke. In the place of *havelis*, there were mud walls capped with tin sheds functioning as houses. The little ground that showed from between these shacks was traversed by directionless rivers of sewage. A naked child with a running nose sat at the doorstep of a house and enriched one such river with his tears. His howls brought out his mother who took him in her arms and made him quiet.

Sarla was looking at this performance wishfully when Rani and she were greeted by an angry Dhoopa. "*Kahanti ab tak?* Am I to make rotis for your husband daily? Now that you only work at one house, I will not do any chores here." "Amma, after the baby, I can't work as quickly now." "Oh ho, I used to carry *bharotas* of jowar a week after delivery, and I was in my 30s. You are 22, and it's been two months, start working now. I'm going to fetch water, you make lunch. I want to eat *baingan ka bharta* today."

Dhoopa had not been so exacting

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earlier. She was mean, but she understood the situation that Sarla was in, for she herself had not produced a male heir till late in her marriage. Dhoopa had mothered four daughters, and each time her husband would beat her for it. Then finally she gave birth to Suraj, and everybody was delighted. Her mother-in-law gifted her a red saree and a pair of meenakari *chudas*. So, she knew the pressure Sarla was under. But after the incident, she had never been the same. As Sarla picked two brinjals, a tomato and an onion from the basket to chop for the *bharta*, she remembered how Dhoopa had slapped her repeatedly that morning. She had said, "*Chudail, tu kha gayi mere vansh ko.*"

"Mummy, mummy, would you make my braids?" Rani stood there looking at her earnestly. Sarla filled up with affection for her daughter. Rani was a sweet and caring child with a maturity way beyond her meagre seven years. She looked after Sarla as she knew nobody else did. Sarla felt guilty for letting go of her daughter's care ever since the incident. She had felt a numbness that stopped her

from noticing anyone, let alone caring for them. As she oiled Rani's hair, she thought of her other daughters. There had been two. Two souls that were never allowed to enter this world. Suraj would take her to the clinic nearby, a grimy establishment where the lifeblood of her offsprings was sucked out. They would be five and three years old now, jumping around in their frocks with massive smiles on their faces. But perhaps it was better that they were killed. What happiness could she afford them? Amma would burden them with work, Suraj would beat them at the slightest inconvenience. They would not be educated, for money would have to be saved for their weddings. She concluded that wherever they were, it was a better place than this.

As she finished braiding Rani's hair, Rani went out to play with her friends. Sarla was left alone in the house. It was a hot day, and the congestion of the shantytown offered little respite. The shack was just one room that had everything crammed into it. It was lined with a small shrine, a grain tank, a vegetable basket and their beddings

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folded and kept in a corner. With Suraj's bicycle kept in at night, there was hardly any space left for them to sleep in. She suddenly felt suffocated in the house, so she went outside. She was checking for holes in the brinjals when she was taken back in time to the night before the incident. Amma had cooked *baingan ki sabzi* as that was Sarla's favorite dish. Amma had been happily looking after her for the past few days because she had finally produced a male heir. The entire family had dinner together that night. Sarla was overjoyed as she had never felt respected and loved like that in this family. She ate to her heart's content as this was her first proper meal after childbirth. As a result, she had a good night's sleep. The nightmare began when she woke up.

She heard the shrieks of Amma and then felt a push as she woke up to full consciousness. "Hey bhagwan! Hey bhagwan! Mera baccha!" Amma was howling. It took Sarla a minute to realise what had happened. The baby had died. Suraj, who had just woken up due to the commotion, asked what the matter was. Amma cried, "She was sleeping on the baby! She

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crushed her own child! Oh god, what have you done!" "But he was fine during the night. I fed him at around 2," Sarla protested confusedly. Suraj picked up the baby, but the body was limp. The child was asphyxiated to death.

This happened on the third night after his birth. Sarla went into a state of shock and did not talk to anybody for five days. Suraj beat and cursed her for devouring her own child. As for Amma, she cried and cried for days on end. Rani tried to talk to her mother, but she wouldn't respond. After two weeks, Suraj asked Sarla to resume her work as a maid. She started going to The Mehra's, a vacant *haveli* whose owners lived in the US. Soon after, she began to have dreams of her baby. She would feed him in those dreams. Then one day as she was mopping the ground floor of the *haveli*, she heard the cries of a baby. As she searched for the source of the sound, she knew it was her own child's voice. She found him in the master bedroom. "Oh god, oh! My child!" she exclaimed, showering kisses on him. "Never leave me again, oh, my sweet boy!" This

became a ritual for Sarla. She would go to the *haveli*, and feed and play with her son, letting go of her work. She knew that this was just an apparition. But she could not end it; she could not kill her son again. She did not talk about it to anyone, as she knew they would stop her and call it madness. But then, she could not keep it from Rani and took her along one day. Rani was delighted to meet her brother again.

* * *

That evening, Dhoopa, Rani and Sarla sat in the house, waiting for Suraj to return from his work. Rani had been making a toy cart out of clay. She blurted out, "Mummy, I will give this cart to Bhaiya tomorrow when we go to the *haveli*." Sarla stopped breathing, as Dhoopa asked, "What did you say?" "Nothing, Amma." "Don't you lie to me! I can tell when a kid lies. Tell me now or I'll give you a good beating." Rani sobbed, "Mummy and I meet Bhaiya at the *haveli* every day." Dhoopa ordered her to go and play outside. Then she thundered, "Sarla, what is she talking about?" "It's not my fault, Amma! First, I started seeing him in my dreams. Then I found him

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at the *haveli*.” “Oh god! What have you brought upon this family! You have given shelter to a *kaccha kalwa*.” Sarla was clueless. “The spirit of a child who dies unnaturally roams unfulfilled. It becomes a *kaccha kalwa* and attaches itself to someone he thinks would give him shelter. Now tell me, quickly, what do you do with him?” “I just feed him and play with him.” “Sarla, it’s not your child, but his evil spirit, and he’s sucking your lifeforce.”

Of all emotions that Sarla could feel, she felt an intense fear. A fear that her son would be snatched away from her. “I don’t care. What is there to live for, anyway?” “What nonsense! You have your husband, your daughter to live for.” “Amma, please don’t tell this to Suraj, he’ll take away my son.” “I would have, but I will not, I don’t want that *kaccha kalwa* to devour my son. But you need to get rid of that spirit.” “How does one even do that?” “You feed him the juice of an unripe lemon and tell him to leave you forever.” “But I don’t want him to leave, Amma,” Sarla started crying. “After he has drained you, he’ll come for your daughter, then your husband, then

me. Do you want all of us to die for somebody who is already dead?”

Sarla stood outside the *haveli* gates the next morning. She had a bottle of lemon juice in one hand, and Rani’s hand in the other. She reached the master bedroom and found her son – or whatever it was – on the bed as usual. She hugged him and started crying. “I’m sorry, my son, I genuinely am! It looks like we are forced to part ways again. I was not a good mother to you, but I want to be one to your sister. You died by my hand, and I have to live with that fact. Not even your spirit can fill the void that you left behind.” She started feeding him the lemon juice and sobbed, “Go, my son, be at peace. And leave me forever.” She got up, took Rani’s hand, and left the *haveli* for good.

COLOURS

RUCHIKA AGGARWAL

The walls of my house have been painted over thrice
Since we moved in, the old colors mint and lilac lurk
Under the layers- a distant memory,
Revived through pictures captured on my phone;
Most of the time, I don't stop to wonder about it.

Twelve years have taken wings and flown by
Since I had a pet, since I felt my rabbits
Digging their sharp nails into my thighs
As they climbed up to eat the carrots I was holding;
Some days, I forget they existed in my life.

The faces of those people who never truly left,
The absence of their words and warmth constantly felt,
I drift through the river flooding my heart-
It often flows out my eyes in visible waves of pain;
Every day, I try to erase their names, then try again.

COLORS

My days are gone, turning from lilac to peach,
Skies of unimaginable colors that only last few moments,
The sun keeps edging towards the horizon,
I keep up with the changes, I question the endings;
I reach for the things that stay the same, and find none.

A SEASON CALLED LOVE

RIDDHI DEY

“The mic stand goes to the left of the stage please, we have to make room for the chairs as well,” shouted Matilda.

It was an open-mic night conducted by the new book store round the corner, that had been inaugurated 2 months ago. It was February and Shillong at that time got fiercely chilly. The theme for the night stood ‘All for Love’ and there was a list of participants who had already signed-up for it. Matilda worked in the store as a part-time employee while also pursuing her Master’s in CSE. She casually called out the name of participants who were to rehearse.

“L. Ronny, D. Ethan, Shultz and H.L. Russel, please line up for the rehearsal before lunch.”

There was Ronny singing “It’s Always Been You” in the forefront with his group harmonizing behind him. They had some issues in coordination, but it eventually came through. The next two participants presented solo love songs, finally to end with a recitation of Pablo Neruda’s “If You Forget Me” by the last participant. With her sleek

body running across the stage hurriedly and hair like silken strands scrawled over her face, Matilda tried her best to arrange the stage, position the participants and look after the other nitty-gritties, before her volunteering shift got over at lunchtime.

Resting her bag over her shoulders, and with her lunch in hand, she sat down on the bench outside by the pavement, alongside the middle-aged man who had just recited the Neruda poem. She munched on her favorite BLT Burger and recognizing the participant, turned to him and asked, “Don’t you think love is over-hyped by poets and singers?”

The man, who was resting his hands on his thighs, eyes fixed at his shoes, looked up at her with his eyebrows raised, “Do I sense annoyance or rage? Well, of-course I do believe in this passionate love that poets and writers talk about. I happen to write myself, occasionally though.”

Matilda rolled her eyes, looked at the burger in her hand and said, “Love ends, and you realize that you have

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been living a lie all the while.”

“That’s a heavy statement. What makes you say that?”

“Because I loved someone truly...he left for his job to the next city, we communicated less, and one day he told me he had found someone else. There.” Her voice gave away her dejection, but she tucked it in with a half-smile, one which didn't reach her eyes, and then continued. “Of course, he apologized heavily, there was no show of disrespect and he insists on being friends, but what does it matter now? I had been living a lie – a lie called love.”

The man stared fixedly at the ground. A few moments of silence transpired between them before the man broke it. “How was your relationship, if I may?” he asked gently, looking her in the eye.

“We’d been together for 8 years. You know, we began in high-school and stuck strong to each other for the years to come.” Finally her smile reached her eyes and she said, “He was the smartest guy I had come

across, and being his friend, I realized that unlike most guys, he believed in proper communication. There wasn’t a dull moment with him - he always had things to say. He told me that the highest mountain in the solar system is Olympus Mons on Mars, the most volcanic place is Io, Jupiter’s moon and he made me think why our numbering system only has 10 digits. I still don’t know the answer to this though,” she chuckled. The man was attentive but did not say anything, as though allowing her to continue. His warm gaze and compelling aura furnished her with a confidence to share her story, and she went on. “But most of all, he made me feel accepted. When I could not accept myself, thought myself too ugly because of my freckles and crooked teeth and was running low on confidence, basically never speaking up or participating in anything, he came and loved me, and was just so patient with me. He helped me inculcate that courage to be me and face everything head-on. Through these years we were together, I never once felt weak. He was my pillar. Well, until those last few months when things took a downward turn and

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finally ended. Am I boring you?"

"No, no never!" he said with an incredulous look. "I think what you had was really beautiful, really meaningful." This was the first time she heard something like this after the break-up and his deep voice and magnanimous look, as if touched by years of wisdom, gave this statement a verity; for everyone else would say he's not worth reminiscing about.

"I think it's a waste of time to even reminisce about those good times. Doesn't mean anything now; maybe it never meant anything. It was all a facade it seems. I wish it never happened, it's just more painful to think that you've been living a bluff. Shouldn't have ever given in to this dreamy high-school love, I guess. But thank you for listening to me. I haven't spoken about this to anyone recently. When I did earlier, I was told that our togetherness wasn't love. If it was, it wouldn't have ended. Hearing that repeatedly hurt, so I eventually stopped talking about this."

"So you believed what they said - the thing that if it ended, it wasn't real?"



"I didn't wanna believe. Of course I didn't. But maybe my friends and the elders were right. Why else would he leave if our love was true?"

The man smiled at her reassuringly and continued. "You know you remind me of a famous poem. Do you wanna hear it? I think it'll really resonate with you."

"Oh no please, keep your poems for your stupid Open-Mic night. And I'm

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definitely not attending it, especially with the theme as such!”

“Oh c’mon, hear it out at least. Please...”

“Okay fine!” she laughs.

He coughed and began to recite slowly:

“I have sat under your cherry tree,
Which in our Spring, blossomed over me –
What a supple shower, a soft scent!
But then when the floral bliss withdrew,
We knew our Autumn had arrived:
Spring was there and isn’t anymore;
But I had felt the supple shower, the soft scent!
So things true and real too are spent.”

Matilda said nothing; she only looked straight at the big tree right in front of her with her lips pursed, her pupils unmoving, as if trying to assimilate what had just been said.

A few moments had already spanned before the man finally said, “I think your Spring came, you felt the

blossoms and then it left. But this shouldn’t for a moment make you doubt that it wasn’t true. When you recounted your relationship, I heard the jolly lilt in your voice as you went on to describe him – and in all of your description, I only heard how your Spring blossomed over you. Why then should you believe that this love was a lie? I’d say it was very true, and it was beautiful. Only maybe this love had run its course. Don’t let anyone tell that only because it ended, it wasn’t there or wasn’t true. Forever isn’t a necessary condition for everything true and real. If you look back, you will realize how love sat beside you all the while, but after her work was done, it was time that she stood up and left.”

She listened to him with rapt attention. She recalled all the instances when he was there for her, how he always cheered for her, always told her when her face was dirty, always lent a shoulder to cry, had never been impatient with her and how he wouldn’t allow anyone to make jokes on her. *What were those? These actions must have come from a place of deep love and care. He*

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wouldn't have pretended for 8 years. Most of the time, he put my needs before his, like when he came to Shillong just because I was so adamant on continuing my studies in the famous St. Joseph's College. I know he wanted to join St. Anthony's in Sikkim for his UG studies. But he came with me, so that he could be by my side.

This was a huge leap from where she stood emotionally at that point in her life, a huge quiver to her beliefs. Few seconds later, after a deep sigh, she finally spoke up. "Well, I guess maybe

"things true and real too are spent then," she said looking directly at the man, a mellow look coming over her face, as if a little bit of her pain, her resentment, her dismay, all of them had been sucked out and a new vigor and faith slowly began sprouting in her life. To know and understand that she had been loved all those years, and loved truly at that, lent a peace to her heart, which reflected a renewed glow on her face. *Maybe it was not a waste after all, maybe our love had just run its course. But... as long as it was there, it enriched me wholly, and I hope I enriched him too.*



A SEASON CALLED LOVE



“So, what did you say the name of the poet was?” she added.

“I didn’t. But his name is Henry Lenard.”

She squinted her eyes as if trying to remember something, but then immediately aimed her crushed burger-wrapper at the adjacent trash

bin, succeeded and then rummaged through her bag for her napkin with which she wiped the corners of her mouth. She then put her ID inside, tied up her hair and seemed to be prepared to leave.

“Where are you off to young lady?” the man inquired as he watched her.

“Well if I have to attend your performance at the Open Mic, I’d better go get ready. Surely I cannot come in with my volunteering uniform?” she said with a smirk.

“See you then, Miss,” he nodded.

“See you, Henry Lenard Russell.”

WHERE DID THEY GO?

KRITIKA MISRA



The day

The week

The year

The years

[The years. The years. The years.]

WHILE YOUR INK DRIES

KRITIKA MISRA



Your ink writes me, through me you will live on

I will survive long after you are gone

You pour yourself into me, and you hope

Creating me gives you a way to cope

Your ink writes me, but I will have to end

The words dry out, I bid farewell, my friend

THE BIG PICTURE

MRINALI BEHERA

The Greeks once mused that the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. It was only when the different pieces of the puzzle came together that you could decipher the hidden power that each piece held within. The underlying meaning went far beyond the individual pieces of the visceral puzzle itself. It was all about “the big picture” as *Nani Bai*, my grandmother would say. Of course, when the Greeks debated on the subject, their main focus was rooted in Metaphysics as opposed to *Nani Bai* who took a more philosophical approach to everything in sight.

.....

I flick a strand of hair away from my face and hold it back with a silver brooch. I glance at myself in the mirror in the room and replay whatever happened in the morning again and again in my head.

When my parents had sat me down today, nothing could have prepared me for what was coming next. *Your grandmother has Alzheimer's*. My mother's words continue to ring in my ears even though it has been hours

since she broke the news to me. Never even in my wildest dreams had I imagined that my poor grandmother would grow old and give in to the complexities of old age. But she was always the surprisingly agile and healthy Nani to me. I had never even mulled over her growing age.

I had left my home here in Delhi five years ago to pursue higher studies in Australia. The last time I saw my grandmother, she was the jolly old woman I'd known my whole life. In the last five years, other than the odd letter, I had minimal contact with her. Needless to say, my excitement of finally meeting her after all these years came to a halt when I found out that she couldn't talk let alone recognise me. Unbeknownst to us, Alzheimer's had started to tug at her mind years earlier. It just didn't come to the surface until a few months ago.

Growing up, she was the first person to greet me in the morning and the person to see me off to bed. Standing at just five feet with a rather frail build owing to her old age, she looked as graceful as ever. For years, she bore the heaviest responsibilities of our

THE BIG PICTURE

household. While my parents were away, toiling hard at a big bank to fuel our dreams, she took on the role of father and mother for my brothers and me. Each day, she would go the extra mile to ensure that her grandchildren were fed, loved and taken care of - all while running the household smoothly. I owe who I am to her upbringing.

As I continue to reminisce, a loud voice interrupts my thoughts. "Dinner's ready, Meera. Come, join us downstairs. The whole family is waiting for you," my mother announces from downstairs, breaking the spell of bittersweet nostalgia. I attempt to pacify the overwhelming emotions building inside of me and head downstairs with a frozen smile.

As I reach the dining hall, I am greeted by a sea of familiar faces. My dad and mum remain seated at the two ends of the table, while my brothers sit at the left side leaving Nani Bai next to me.

As I settle onto my seat, I gaze over at her and back to the centrepiece. I see a figurine of a stork and that of a crab.

Like that her wise words come rushing back to me, "You are capable of achieving anything you desire, *baccha*. Have faith in yourself." Old memories of *Nani Bai* flood my thoughts right now and take me back to my childhood.

Ever since I was a young girl of four, she would send me off to bed, recounting tales from *Panchatantra*: the legend of the monkey and the crocodile, of the stork and the crab, and so on. They remain etched in my memory. After each fable, she would impart the moral lesson to me. Once, she narrated the tale of the stork and the crab during bedtime: a ravenous stork deceives a school of fishes, luring them in with false promises. However, the cunning bird fails in his mission when a sharp-witted crab emerges to save the day. "Learn to be quick-witted. You have no one but yourself to fall on at the end of the day," she would tell me afterwards, hoping that I carry the life lesson with me. I still do. Each day, the tales would feature a different cohort of bubbling animals, and likewise different life lessons. But there was a common running theme: I could be anything I wish to be. She

THE BIG PICTURE

would assure me of my boundless potential, reminding me of the things I could be, “I see so much potential in you, *Schatzi*.” *Schatzi* – that was what she called me when she demanded my attention. The love and power these two syllables held could not be explained so easily. I cannot recall how the nickname emerged or what it even meant, for that matter. The endearing nickname was a testament to our close-knit bond. Something that was just between the two of us, skipping a generation.

“Isn’t that right, Meera? It’s been

what...five years, since all of us got together as a family,” my Dad calls out to me, immediately putting an end to my attempt at reminiscing about my glorious childhood.

I ignore the nostalgia washing over me and go back to the present. “That’s right, Dad. It has been a long time,” I respond immediately, hoping he doesn’t badger me further. But it is almost as if he can sense my thoughts because the next thing I know, he continues with his meddlesome questions “Is something the matter, Meera? You’ve been awfully quiet



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during the entire dinner.”

Glancing at Nani Bai, I manage to form a weak excuse, “Nothing’s the matter. It’s just I am coming to terms with whatever has been going on. I do not want to talk about it further.” I did not wish to bring up the elephant in the room. The real reason all of us are here together after five years: Nani’s descent into Alzheimer’s.

I still haven’t accepted the fact that my beloved grandmother is not the same anymore. The person sitting right next to me is no longer the ebullient grandmother who would belt out to her favourite songs of Kishore Kumar out of the blue and constantly insist on feeding me more. Even physically, she seems different. Wrinkled, grey and lifeless. Not to mention completely clueless. I cannot stand to see her like this. How can I mourn someone who is sitting right in front of me? She has not looked me in the eye once. She seems afraid of everyone. My brothers. Me. Even Dad. Only my mother can appease her spirit at times.

“I know all of this is pretty heavy to

take, Meera. But stick around. Soak in all the moments you can get while they last. Why don’t you play the piano for us? That always puts you in a merry mood,” Dad suggested, hoping to lift my spirits.

Getting up from my seat, I head over to the piano and stare at the keys for a moment. I attempt to weave a melody out of the strings of sadness tugging at my heart right now. When nothing springs to my mind immediately, I decide to honour *Nani Bai* and play one of her favourite songs of Kishore Kumar, *Pal Pal Dil Ke Paas*. As my hands dance away to the piano chords: Plink-a-plink-a-plink-a-plink..... I am taken into a whole new world of memories. Memories of my childhood. A childhood full of possibilities and joy. A childhood filled with delicious sweets, bedtime stories, words of wisdom and of course, my *Nani Bai*.

Sweet melodies of my past fill the room with warmth and wonder. I glance over at the dinner table, looking at Dad, Mum, my brothers and *Nani Bai*. Everyone is spellbound by the melodious intervention. As

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ripples of joy reverberate around the room, I see smiles on everyone's faces. Soon after, waves of applause take over from my rendition of Kishore Kumar. I look over at my family sitting at the table, my eyes turning to *Nani Bai*. She is smiling right now. I cannot believe it. "Schatzi!" she mumbles for a moment in a frail voice. She recognises me. My heart does a somersault and detonates, exploding with an overwhelming force of delight and relief. I cannot contain myself as I mull over her words again. *Schatzi!* She recognised me although just for a second. Reality soon hits me when I see her descending back into a clueless state. But I'll take it.

She was right. It really is all about the big picture. The little moments in our life that define who we are and what we live life for. This present moment when our whole family came together to reminisce about the days long gone and memories faded away into the clouds of cluelessness. All it takes for me to realise the true meaning of her words, is this shared moment between us. She is greater than the sum of her parts. She may not be the same anymore but her true spirit lives

on. Her life lessons. Her Panchatantra tales. Her family heirlooms. Recipes. All of it. Because she is greater than the sum of her parts.

SOOTHING STAR

SNEHASRI RAVISHANKAR

My legs give out
and I sink
into the grassy blanket,
whose thorns feel like velvet
against parched skin.

I close my eyes and
d
r
i
f
t
away..
from this cruel confinement
where fleeting time waits for none.

I start awake.
It's that feeling all over again.
It allays my ears,
casting away the shrieks and screams

SOOTHING STAR

that haunt them.

This is the muse the world needs.

Melodies and lyrics are stars

to its a

b

y

s

s.

The music bewitches,

I tiptoe on notes

dancing in octaves.

I call the tune ~ I shall stay here

until the music dies.

For in the mansion beside my run-down hut,

they begin

to blow the trumpet.

THE DUALITY OF SELF

SRISHTY MAHESH

There was a major period in my life when I started questioning what the significance of my existence is. This dark monster can take form in a person's psyche in many ways, whether it is a question of their existence or the purpose of their life, or what their essence stands for. Just like certain forces of nature, this period of uncertainty is almost inevitable. Usually, people define it as a phase that they eventually overcome but what happens when your life revolves around these uncertainties and you keep searching for the answer, never to find them?

Identity plays a very important role in a person's life that affirms their existence. The name that is often associated with you, becomes a major marker of your identity that follows you throughout your life. Similarly, my name was given to me by my sister, even before my existence was planned by my parents. Imagine a young 3-4-year-old little girl stomping into the room and demanding, "I want a sister and I want to name her Srishty." It is not the image that a little girl demanding a sibling from her parents that is whimsical but the fact

that her parents, who happen to be fully grown adults, listened to the little girl. In the end, the innocent words of the child were used to assign a major marker of identity to a person. I'm glad I wasn't born as a boy to disappoint my sister.

Growing up, I split my identity into different parts to suit the environment I was in, like a Horcrux, which often left me confused. Growing up in Rajasthan and belonging to a South Indian family, I grew up speaking both Hindi and Tamil. This stark difference in culture was not initially felt by me until I started going to school. For the people in Rajasthan, I would never be Rajasthani enough and to people back in Chennai I could never be Tamilian enough. This often made me wonder, why do all these region-specific identity markers matter? Why does it have to be singular? How do I make my own form of identity?

Initially, when I started going to school, I didn't notice a big difference as I was treated like an alien. This might be due to the fact that two of my closest friends were South Indians as well. We would have conversations

THE DUALITY OF SELF

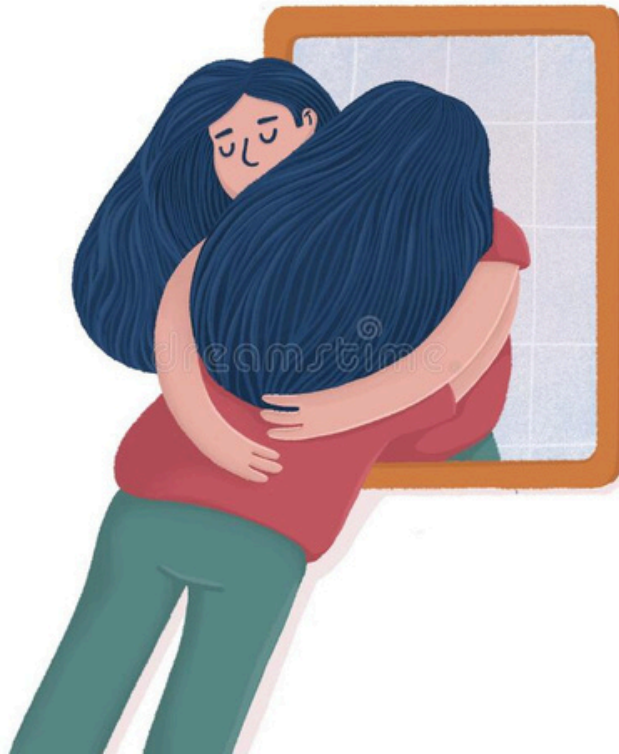
mixing Tamil, Hindi, and Telugu, which didn't feel wrong. Although we did find it amusing that other people around us did not understand much of what we said. We somehow had a fair comprehension of the linguistic differences. I distinctly remember being a 3-year-old in kindergarten and pointing at a South Indian snack that one of my classmates brought and asking what they call it in Hindi. "Dosa," she replied. I nodded and repeated the word after her to add it to my vocabulary. She soon hit me with the question "Haven't you had it before?" in Hindi. I remember replying "No, I have. I just wanted to know what you people call it in Hindi. In my house we say *Dosai*." That is one of the very few memories I have etched in my mind that helped me comprehend the liminal space I dwelled in.

While I was learning to adapt to the language spoken "outside my house" in order to communicate with my classmates, more efficiently, the language spoken "inside my house" had a different approach. When it came to Hindi, my mother taught me the *Varnamala* along with the

alphabets of English around the age of two. When it came to Tamil, I picked it up from my family and television prominently. Unlike my sister, I was never taught to read or write Tamil by my family. Most of the words and phrases I picked up were pronounced from what I heard phonetically. This often served as a mode of entertainment to my family as they would ask me to enunciate different words and laugh at the way I pronounced them. My relatives from Chennai often remarked in a condescending way how my accent is very North Indian and my sentence structures were wrong as they sounded as if I directly translated them from Hindi. This game continues to this day and I try to avoid it as much as possible.

It was easier during the pre-school years to come to terms with different identities and setbacks one had. It is during this period that social conditioning starts to set in the young minds of the smaller humans. The prejudices and preconceived notions that their adults embodied starts to manifest through the actions of the children around them. This often

THE DUALITY OF SELF



threatened me and my other two friends. I still remember being in second grade and the teacher mentioning South Indian bananas in one of the classes. The class quickly turned into a disaster when most people in the class started mocking the stereotypical south Indian accent that is often projected in Bollywood movies and discussing how disgusting South Indians were.

As a child, you would expect the teacher to maintain certain discipline in a class and discourage the students from engaging in such conversations.

That's where I was wrong, to my absolute resentment, the teacher also participated and shared anecdotes for the class to laugh at. My best friend at that time, who was from Andhra Pradesh, held my hand tightly being absolutely mortified. That incident was quite dreadful for both of us and constantly being called "Madrasi" horrified us. I remember her crying after that class and me trying to pick a fight with the people who were involved, only to be bullied by the entire class, again. This time it was more targeted as they knew that we both could fit into the preconceptions

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and stereotypical notions that they were in possession of.

After third grade, both of us changed our school. This was an all-girls private school, which started from 4th grade. Considering it was an expensive all-girls school where most of the kids who studied there belonged to privileged backgrounds, we hoped things would be better for us. Considering the bullying we faced in our previous school we both decided not to tell anyone that we were South-Indians as we were genuinely scared. Whenever somebody asked too much about our family or background, we would discuss with each other if we should tell the person what language we spoke at home. We tried to “North-Indianize” ourselves to escape the bullying.

I found it quite funny as nobody would be able to tell that I am Tamil until I proved it to them. The stereotyping worked in different ways. I was often asked why I was light-skinned and didn't have an accent. Whenever I got a tan from the Rajasthan sun or wore bindi or *Vibhudi* to school, I would be the butt

of all derogatory South Indian jokes to the extent that I was asked not to wear a bindi to school. My reluctance to participate in the culture constantly angered my father and my alienation frustrated me. The teachers expected me to get the best grades in Mathematics and Science because it was “natural” for South Indian students to get better grades, especially considering my parents are professors. Despite all the negative preconceptions, people often let go of their xenophobia when it came to food and it was the only thing that helped me gain validation.

As I grew a little older, it terribly confused me as to where my identity lay. Was I to be considered a Rajasthani or was I a Tamilian? Like a pendulum, I oscillated between these two markers of identity depending on the environment. I always longed for a place where I wouldn't be treated as an outsider, a place that I could call my own. I had created a fantasy in my mind about what living in Chennai would be like. These fantasies were often proven wrong, as none of my relatives saw me as a native. These oscillations often projected

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themselves in many ways. I grew up having South Indian food for lunch and North Indian Food for dinner. The duality also manifested in the field of art in the form of Kathak and Bharatanatyam or Carnatic and Hindustani music.

I must accept that I found a wonderful group of friends outside my school during my teenage years, belonging from drastically different places in India with varied identities. That was where I felt most at home. My childish fantasies were worn away by this time and I was content with it.

When it came to my college education, my mother wished that I pursue my degree in Chennai. I was absolutely terrified when I first started the classes. I was sure that I would get bullied again for being an outsider and tried to be very cautious of my surroundings. Luckily, in college people were more accepting and kinder to me compared to school. I found a wonderful group of friends who had shared a similar journey. I started learning to read and write Tamil in college and was guided by two wonderful professors. It took me

little time to realize that despite being nice to me, many people did not consider me as their own. I was still an outsider, even in a place that I claimed to be my homeland.

“Northie”, often used with a derogatory connotation, was a term that I heard thrown at me often. When I tried to explain to people that I was also Tamil, I was often told, “You don’t sound like one.” Being exposed to only one kind of Tamil, I didn’t realize that the Tamil I spoke was very community-specific and frowned upon. I remember trying to get accustomed to speaking Tamil regularly to communicate in class but stopped trying after being laughed at by the entire class during a Linguistics class. People also found it offensive when I threw around certain Hindi words or phrases to fill in certain gaps in a conversation. I remember one of my friends snapping at me “Do not try to enforce your Northie culture here!” which made me doubt every aspect of my existence. According to people in Chennai, one cannot be considered a Tamilian unless they grew up there or were literate in the language. I honestly no longer knew what I was.

THE DUALITY OF SELF

Swaying around in these liminal spaces of two languages, made me find a surrogate space, which would not offend either of them. English provided me with a space where I could be isolated from the linguistic preferences of people and the identity associated with them. During my stay in Chennai, I adopted English as my primary mode of communication whether it was at home, with my friends, or in class. This made me realize that my identity wouldn't be scrutinized if I used a "third" language. It is ironic how people are more accepting of a colonizer's language over the usage of a native tongue by an outsider.

Identity is a constant quest that changes frequently. My quest for identity has remained an unsolved mystery. Whenever somebody asks me where I am from, I often stammer through the words "I'm from Chennai but I grew up in Rajasthan," leaving me more confused than the person who asked the question. Both the languages and the markers of identity associated with me can get complicated. Why does a person need only one identity? Why can't a person

adopt multiple identities, especially when it comes to culture? I am a product of identity crises and as my name suggests, I am a creation of this universe and I belong here.

LIKE GLASS

ANIKET MISHRA

To a pane you're bound
In the scorching heat
You melt, you trickle down
Thinner at the top, thicker beneath
Everyday the suffering repeats
Yet onwards you go without defeat

With time scratched, scuffed, and stained
Filling yourself up with disdain
A stress that remains,
Testing your wits over again
For how long can you have it contained?

Giving in, you fall,
Even after giving it your all...
Have you ever shattered?
Broken into a billion pieces, scattered
Pieces that aren't you anymore

LIKE GLASS

Collecting the shards up off the floor

Arranging them like a puzzle board

Remembering what you were before

Holding on makes the hurt last

Evoking memories of the past

With sharp edges that cut too deep

Stab others whom you mean to keep,

The trauma might make you numb

But you know you shall not succumb,

It is okay to look back and cry some

But remember that your journey isn't done

For those pieces that are gone

Look ahead, there awaits another dawn

CONTRIBUTORS



ANIKET MISHRA

I like to delve into complex abstract concepts and forge connections of them with existence itself.

"What, you egg? [*He stabs him*]" -Shakespeare

Divisha Chaudhry is a third year BA English (research) major. She likes writing absurd poems and advocates for Intersectional Environmentalism.



DIVISHA CHAUDHRY



KALRAV VASHISHTHA

Kalrav is a MA candidate at the department. He likes to immerse his joys and sorrows in literature and cinema. If that's not possible, he overthinks.

CONTRIBUTORS



KRITIKA MISRA

Puts up a fight. Sometimes wins them.

21, wild and free. on a relentless pursuit to weave the world through my unique eyes.



MRINALI BEHERA



NANDINI DOGRA

"Any last words?"
"Godot can come find me."

CONTRIBUTORS



PEEYUSH PATIL

Pursuing his major in English, Peeyush likes to engage with literary discourses critically. Apart from that, he loves to lie down on his sofa and write poems and short stories.

Prerna is a third-year English major pursuing her minor in Sociology. She is passionate about issues surrounding diversity and inclusion and uses her interest in film and literature to speak for better representation of minorities in media.



PRERNA ATHREYA



RIDDHI DEY

Most people know me by my hair. Having shifted from science to follow my passion in English, I hope I can open up other avenues of recognition.

CONTRIBUTORS



RUCHIKA AGGARWAL

Striving to come out stronger and kinder at the end of each day.

Growing up, I was surrounded by writing and painting and it gives me immense pleasure and confidence that I have been able to use them in the form of comics for this year's issue.



SHRUTI SHUKLA



SNEHASRI RAVISHANKAR

"Whole worlds pivot on acts of imagination." -
Doctor Who
Writer and sportsperson. Only not yet. You know. Time is wibbly-wobbly.

CONTRIBUTORS



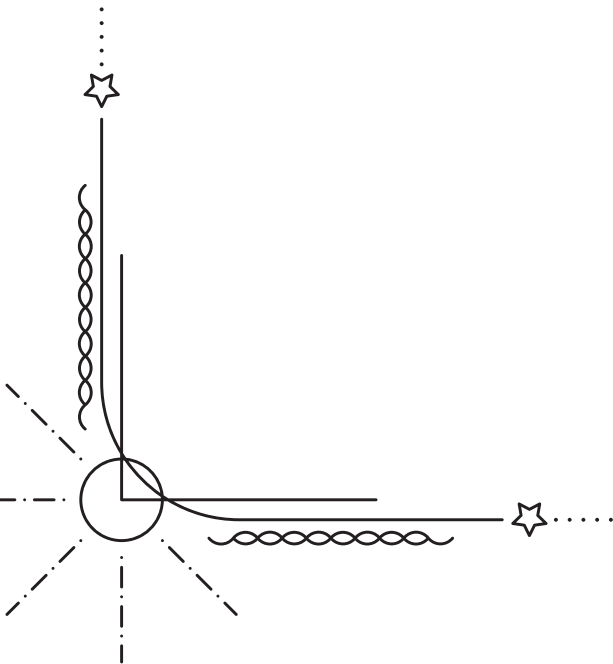
SUKRITI LAKHTAKIA

Lately preoccupied with birds and other little things that give me joy, like the blue elephant on my green-tea mug. Sometimes a writer, mostly a reader.

I'm not a writer. I've always picked the wrong words. But I guess this time I managed to pick the right ones.



TAAMEEN SHABIR



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MRINALI BEHERA

PRERNA ATHREYA





"IN SHORT, CULTURAL STRUGGLES ARE LONG, FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS, AND WHILE THEY ARE HAPPENING IT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY WHAT IS USEFUL AND WHAT ISN'T. I PREFER TO THINK OF MYSELF AS BEING INSIDE A TANGLED KNOT; TANGLED KNOTS FASCINATE ME. IT'S NECESSARY TO RECOUNT THE TANGLE OF EXISTENCE, BOTH AS IT CONCERNS INDIVIDUAL LIVES AND THE LIFE OF GENERATIONS. SEARCHING TO UNRAVEL THINGS IS USEFUL, BUT LITERATURE IS MADE OUT OF TANGLES."

- ELENA FERRANTE, INTERVIEW WITH *VANITY FAIR*, 2015

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