

THE FREEWHEELER

Issue 11 2023-24



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
SHIV NADAR INSTITUTION OF EMINENCE



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Faculty Advisor's Note

Dr. Chinmay Sharma

Going through the selected works published in this beautifully designed edition of *The Freewheeler*, what stands out to me as a common theme is the sense of keen observation and strong voice in the pieces we received. The diverse array of remarkable literary works in these pages range from engaging short stories to poignant memoirs and evocative poems. As faculty advisor, I have had the privilege of witnessing the growth and development of our students' perspectives, their unique viewpoints honed through critical observation and introspection. From insightful analyses to impassioned narratives, this edition showcases the depth of talent and diversity of thought thriving within our university community as we opened for entries from students in undergraduate programs as well as taught and research postgraduate programs. While most of our entries were from the English department, we were also happy to see entries from students in Physics, Engineering, Economics, and International Relations programs, many of whom have been published in this edition. We hope that the university community will continue to contribute to our magazine in the future!

This year, we are also publishing the three prize winners of the inaugural Crooked Lines Short Story Writing Competition. Crooked Lines 2023 received around 1400 registrations and 320 entries from students across the country, including from Wardha, Thrissur, Silchar, Patna, Panaji, Shillong, Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi NCR, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Chennai. The winners were chosen by our expert jury which included our very own Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS), Prof. Rajat Kathuria, along with Trisha De Niyogi, COO and Director, Niyogi Books, and Shivani Mutneja, Associate



Fiction editor at *The Bombay Literary Magazine*. After a rigorous selection process, where the jury members read multiple excellent entries, the first prize went to Sumaiya Khan from Panaji, Goa, while the second and third positions went to Triparna Dasgupta from Kolkata and Aarohi Singh from Kashipur, Uttarakhand, respectively. We now look forward to the second edition of Crooked Lines. This time around on the jury panel we are privileged to have Sam North, novelist, scriptwriter, and Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Exeter; award-winning novelist, poet and translator, Jerry Pinto; and Rashmi Menon, Executive Editor at HarperCollins India.

The credit for organizing, collating, and spearheading this edition goes to the Chief Editors, Ranbir Negi and Vaishali Batra, and their team of volunteer readers and editors, who worked steadily through the year to put this edition together. They have also launched *The Freewheeler* Instagram page (@thefreewheeler.snu), to showcase literary works from the magazine, past and present, to a wider audience.

It has been eleven years since *The Freewheeler* was first published, and since then it has become a regular fixture in the literary calendar of the University. I would like to thank Prof. Vikram Kapur for shepherding the magazine as the Faculty Advisor, and from whom I have taken over this year. Previous issues of the magazine can be found at <https://snu.edu.in/departments/department-of-english/freewheeler/>

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues in the Department of English for their support for the endeavour. I would also like to thank the heads of the department, Professors Sambudha Sen and Vikram Kapur, and Dean SHSS, Professor Rajat Kathuria, for their unstinting support for the magazine.

Happy Reading!

Editors' Note

Ranbir Negi and Vaishali Batra

What began as a small magazine of writers from the Department of English has—for the first time—grown to feature creations of emerging writers across Shiv Nadar University. Behind these pages lies a story of awe-inspiring dedication and artistic imagination that have led this magazine to achieve the status it deserves and has thankfully secured. While this edition, too, stems from the Department of English, this year, we have narratives from students of various departments of the university. With *The Freewheeler* now showcasing works of students University-wide, we hope to foster a more inclusive and diverse literary community.

We want to thank everyone who worked to make this year's edition of *The Freewheeler* possible. First, we owe so much of the magazine's visibility and reach to the editors and contributors from the last eleven years, who have continued to keep the tradition of the magazine alive; we are also thankful to them for placing faith in us and passing the baton. Second, we'd like to extend our sincere gratitude to Dr Chinmay Sharma for his invaluable guidance and support in motivating us to think not only about compiling a literary magazine but carrying out the task in a way that enabled us to make it our own and of all those who have been indispensable to this literary venture. Lastly, we must send our profuse thanks to our tireless team of editors and proofreaders buoyed by whose energy and hard work, it has been possible to make this enterprise a success.

We stand in awe of the collective effort that has brought this edition to fruition. We'd also like to acknowledge their excitement, as this is the largest *The Freewheeler* has ever been.

We are also thrilled to introduce a new section dedicated to memoirs, which we hope finds more recognition as part of the literary culture, encouraging introspection and storytelling that will resonate with the reader on newer levels.

For the first time in the last eleven years, as the University's annual literary magazine, we paved the way for two major milestones. That said, the sky is the limit, no?

So, dear reader, you are hereby invited to immerse yourself in the pages of *The Freewheeler*—to dwell, reflect, and let your thoughts run freely in a world where words embody the potential to transform and elevate us all.

Poetry

OnsradΛ

Anindya Singh

Eden

Yuvraj Singh

They Killed Us Just The
Same

Rijul Chauhan

The Lover's Fallacy

Gautam Kavali

Feminine Animals List -
Kindergarten B

Kritika Misra (aka Ahalya)

Streetwalking Sylph

Ramyani Kundu

exile

Ananya Shashidhar

Riverside Reverie

Jatan Kalra

Only Twenty

Naisha Khan

Porphyria's (a) lover

Meg Merrilies

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Sumantika Bhandari

Influence

Venkat KB

A couple in a bookstore

Vanya Nautiyal

bicycle

Kavyaa Kannan

Brush of Words

Jatan Kalra

The Garden of Wild

Mosaics

Rijul Chauhan

Veiled Sentiments

Shashwat Sharma

Nanu

Sumantika Bhandari

Your fate is written on
your spine

Anindya Singh

Onsrada

Maybe to love you one last time is like modern poetry
Straddled at the door of tainted nostalgia.
Hitting concrete walls on a five-and-a-half-inch screen,
Bleeding lithium for blood.

Maybe to love you one last time is like opening a cabinet
Filled with things that rope you back.
Like a cassette deck that played ABBA every Sunday evening,
With bent reels and a busted rewind button.

Maybe to love you one last time is like being scared of
drifting too far from the shore
Looking for the shoreline every five minutes.
I can't remember the last time I unwound my tangled heartstrings,
And stitched myself a pair of buoyant trousers to leave the house.

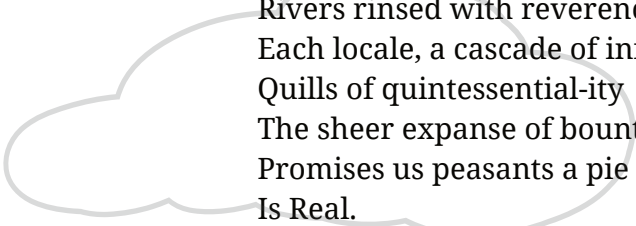
Maybe to love you one last time is like having dyschronometria.
How long have I been here? I can't tell.
Has the ink dried up?
But how long does that take?

Maybe to love you one last time is like writing in free verse,
I never know where it's going to usher me.
Like puzzle pieces that don't make sense inside the box,
Unless you spill them on the table or maybe the floor
before you start putting them together.

Or maybe, to love you one last time is just that—
To love you one last time,
And it's just me stalling the impending bellyache
Because I am too afraid to bury you.

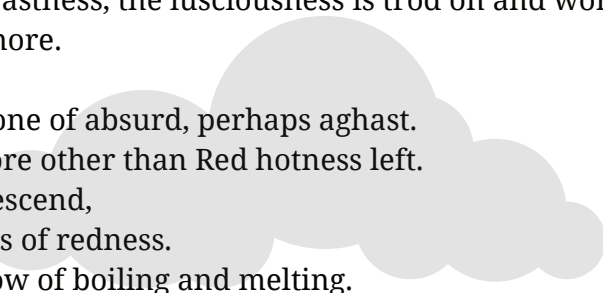
Onsrada; A word that means to love one last time

Eden



With its luscious trees,
Sprawling, springing, slithering Solanaceae
Promise of Eternal Life in a drop,
Rivers rinsed with reverence of Raphael,
Each locale, a cascade of infinitude,
Quills of quintessential-ity
The sheer expanse of bounteousness, ethereality is inane.
Promises us peasants a pie in the sky,
Is Real.

With each release,
Every tang on the slippery redness,
God Itself dawns up on him and takes him to Eden.
Then, the peasants conjure up Eden on their melancholy parched land.
And when the vastness, the lusciousness is trod on and worn out,
They demand more.



But this God is one of absurd, perhaps aghast.
Has nothing more other than Red hotness left.
The peasants descend,
Now enjoy miles of redness.
Their taste is now of boiling and melting.
All this, and then they remember Eden and ascend
again and again.



They Killed Us Just The Same

"Don't kill the poets," they said,
"And don't kill the bards—
For who will write our stories
If the poets are dead,
And who will sing of our glory
If the bards live no more?"
So we wrote of their battles,
And we sang of their strength;
We wrote till our fingers bled,
And we sang till our throats were dry;
Yet their glory never ended—
Their story never stopped.

"Don't kill the poets," they said,
"And don't kill the bards—
For who will write our histories
If the poets do not live,
And who will sing of our victories
If the bards are dead?"
And so, another ballad began,
Another stanza written,
As the warriors fought and killed and conquered;
But the only souls left untouched
Were those of the poets and the bards.

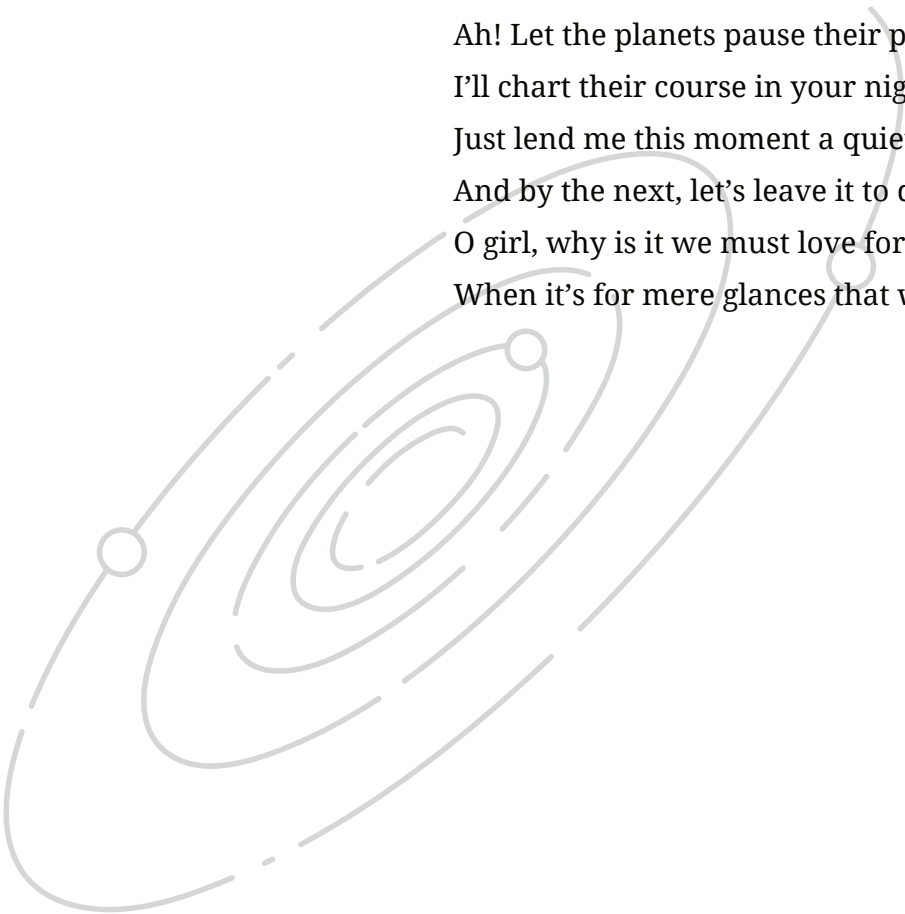
"Don't kill the poets," they said,
"And don't kill the bards."
But they never noticed how we slowly perished—
Poem after poem, song after song;
When the only ones who would read our poems
Were haunted ghosts,
And the only ones who would hear our songs—
Did not Possess a heart.
Why would they not kill us too,`
With our husbands and wives and children?
Why would they leave us alive
With no spark for our souls?

"Don't kill the poets," they said,
"And don't kill the bards."
But they killed us all inside, just the same.



The Lover's Fallacy

Love me not for the lover's fallacy;
Speak not the mortal words of love immortal.
But love me as the sun loves the sea,
When they kiss but twice a day on God's own mural.
Love me for this songbird's cooing of my name;
For this smile that blooms on my stubble-cropped face.
And I for these leaves that sway as your hair untamed,
Under this after-rain sky, like a woman freshly bathed.
Ah! Let the planets pause their perennial prance,
I'll chart their course in your night-sky eyes.
Just lend me this moment a quiet romance,
And by the next, let's leave it to die;
O girl, why is it we must love for lifetimes,
When it's for mere glances that we sigh?



Feminine Animals List - Kindergarten B

Mare is the female of horse,
As in, what a nightmare to work with,
How bossy and unpredictable.

Vixen is the female of fox,
As in, sinner, Jezebel,
And cunning besides.

But actually, cattle, not cows, is the female of bulls,
As in, just a womb, plenteous,
Stubborn and bulging.

And bitch is the female of woman.
How easily it rolls off the tongue - it is meant to -
This is one of those filler words that makes you sound like a native
speaker. Please have this list memorised for next week's quiz.

(Important note to parents: Will count toward final grade)

Streetwalking Sylph

Ever wondered what those empty hands begged for?
Rousing you from your vivacious sleep
You pine for her risqué ardor
Yet, never wonder why those glazing eyes weep...

Wanton flower of the damned street
Haunted by paramour bees of prosperity
diving into her honey...Oh, so sweet!
Yet, ever wonder why those rosy lips never tasted summers past twenty?

Sprawling across night's stained sheets
Curtainless doors of pleasure creaking with pulsating breathe
Entangled hair in half-forgotten pleats
Do you dare weave them a victorious wreath?

The last stroke, the finishing touch, there she lies barebacked
like a raven's caw on a moonless night—maroon-ed.



exile

the land you grow on
it reeks of the same anger that lives in your bones
maroon engulfs the dirt in your lungs,

nicotine sharp on your tongue
it mirrors the sting on the inside of my cheek
it tastes like fear,

sweet, sticky cherry wine
drips down my chest
the image of my clenched jaw thrives in your pupils,

my laughter haunts you
your pulsating rage
bites into my eardrum,

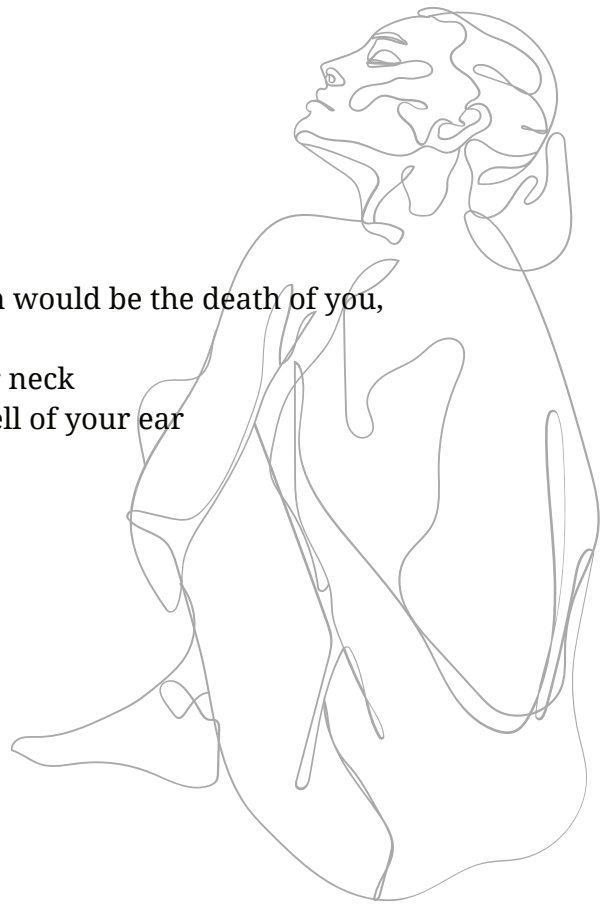
bristles on your arm
they prick my palm
barefoot, the moss soft, i run,

i run
salt fills my mouth
i pound on the wall you built, bruises start to bloom,

you stare
salt fills your mouth
the confusion burns your throat,

your breath smells of rotting promises
our dreamscape whittles away
your mother always said your cynicism would be the death of you,

crescents still fresh on the back of your neck
the warmth of thighs serenades the shell of your ear
you remember
once, twice, you remember,
before you bury the memory of me
my citrus skin is exiled.



Riverside Reverie



Beneath the weeping willow's boughs, I stand
Where shadows linger, cast by a heavy hand
The dreary river ebbs and flows, a mirror of my soul,
Its currents speak in whispers, a story left untold.

Somedays it touches my feet, a gentle, cool caress,
A fleeting touch of solace, a momentary tenderness
Yet in its depths, a sorrow lingers, an ache I cannot bear,
A melancholy undertow, a burden hard to wear.

The water's surface shimmers, reflecting a somber sky,
A canvas of muted colors, where hope and despair lie
The willow weeps in silent symphony, its branches long and low,
As if mourning for the dreams that never had a chance to grow.

I trace the ripples with trembling fingers, seeking reprieve in its flow,
Yearning for a release from the ache that dwells below
Someday it might pull me under, claim my soul,
And in its cold embrace, find a refuge from the toll.

For in this river's song, I hear my own refrain—
A melancholy melody, a dirge for dreams in vain
Yet still, I stand upon its banks, letting sorrow come and go,
Finding solace in the rhythm, in the ebb and flow.



Only Twenty

Sometimes, I feel like a sweater that fits,
But not really:
Too tight at the chest to breathe,
Too loose at the shoulders and sleeves,
Too uncomfortable, too itchy.
I fit in, but not really.

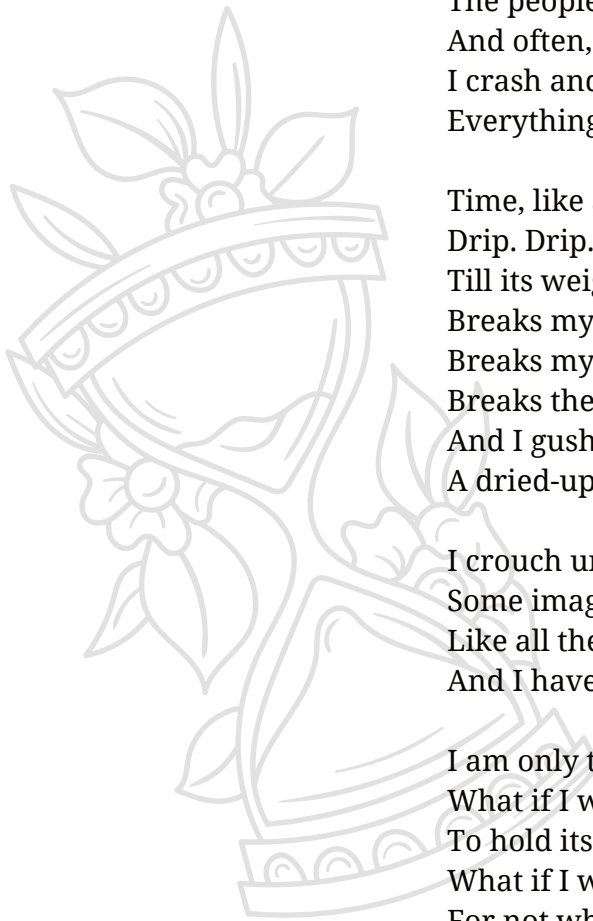
Other times, I feel like the waves of the sea.
I ebb and flow: reach out to, then pull away from
The people who come sit by my beach.
And often, like a tsunami,
I crash and drown and swallow up
Everything and everyone and every memory.

Time, like a leaky tap, goes
Drip. Drip. Drip.
Till its weight on my chest
Breaks my ribs.
Breaks my heart.
Breaks the dam.
And I gush and flow till I am
A dried-up well, an empty tank.

I crouch under my own shadow and avoid
Some imaginary spotlight,
Like all the world's a stage
And I have forgotten my lines.

I am only twenty, but
What if I want the hourglass
To hold its breath for a while?
What if I want to hide and yet be seen,
For not what I feel
But what I am,
And what I could've been?

I am only twenty yet
I sit at the grave of yesterday,
Mourn the death of tomorrow,
As I slowly strangle my today.



Porphyria's (a) lover

The rain was content, at last, tonight,
The wind was soon, vexed,
It kissed past all the elms aside,
And kicked start the icy lake:

Porphyria, by the rusted window panes,
When her lover, all moist, broke in,
He shut all the cold and storm outside
And felt her aroma within—
He scurried to the fireplace, took a note
More coals to burn, the room blazed
He freed his hat, parted with his coat
Rubbing his moist neck, gave her a gaze!

He called Porphyria, pulled her close,
She stayed quiet, her emerald eyes and cheeks like Rose,
He grabbed her waist, let her yellow hair reach
His busy, cold fingers tangled like a leech—
She wouldn't move if he didn't, her neck, blue
Like the sea, when it meets the sky, with a purple hue.

She lay dead, in his sinful arms,
If only God would respond quickly,
To declare him a sinner and maybe a lover
And play the amorous trick.

When in a birth next, Porphyria rose
From a slimy starry sky, to a wish,
That was made that night, she was strangled in her locks,
And her lover was carved in a niche.
For another Porphyria will revert tonight,
With another of her lovers, in vain—
She will make a shrill cry, the door will be closed
Alas! There will still be no God in pain.

Broken Yellow Duckie

My mother hugs me so tight
then winds me all the way up
Makes me run for her, run without stirrup

She yanks me back
I pull, I stretch, I yield
and my string rolls in with a smack

My mother has me wrapped in her hold
My colours on her hand are sweating out
The batteries are tired, though
she loves me, there's no doubt

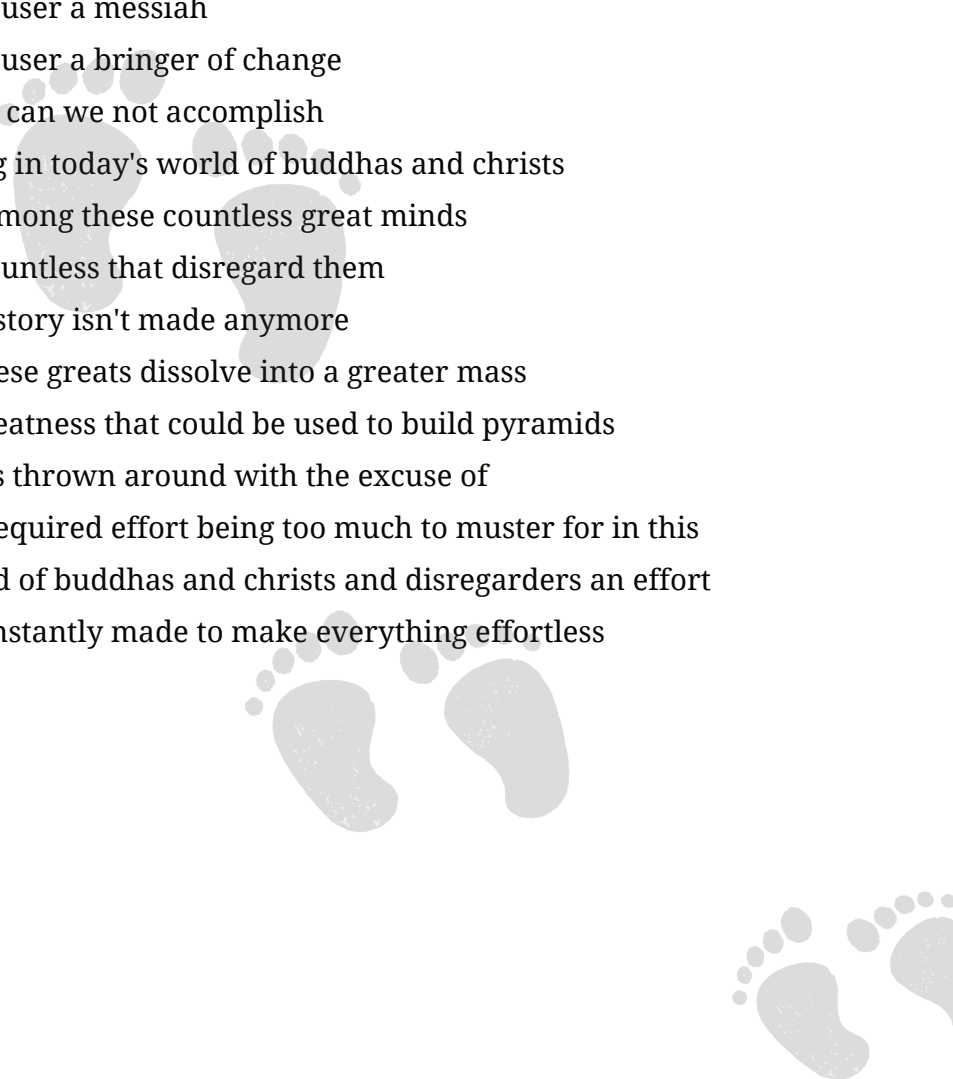
She pulls the string, but it breaks!
She screams in the wind, "Shove it back, wind it up again",
My toy goes yammering

It's dented, but she loves it
And when she winds me again, the sound is contorted

I'm screeching as I labour forward
The string pulls
I yield, and I am back for her
But how much longer will we play
And how much will remain unchanged?

Influence

a message for my followers
said every great man that history remembered
a message for my followers
now a power every instagram user holds
each user a messiah
each user a bringer of change
what can we not accomplish
living in today's world of buddhas and christs
yet among these countless great minds
lie countless that disregard them
so history isn't made anymore
so these greats dissolve into a greater mass
of greatness that could be used to build pyramids
but is thrown around with the excuse of
the required effort being too much to muster for in this
world of buddhas and christs and disregards an effort
is constantly made to make everything effortless



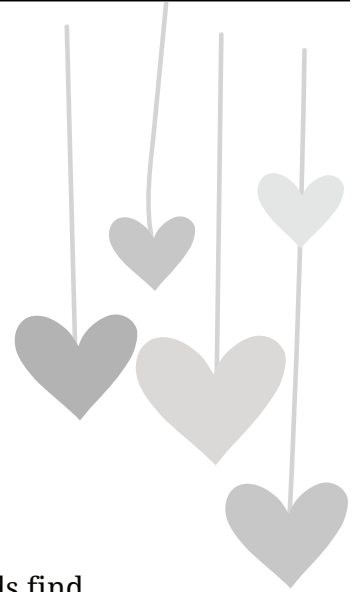
A couple in a bookstore

Loitering around the poetry section
Giggling over endearments too risqué to mention
Ignoring the shopkeeper's earnest requests
To give their lovesick yammering a rest

After a cursory perusal of the shelves, their shy hands find
Comfort in each others' warmth, by an accident well-timed
Even as other customers, who first wished them protection from plight,
Find themselves increasingly wishing that they would take it outside.

Ah, but such is young love, a romantic onlooker might say,
When they find someone's words so enchanting, everything else fades away.
Even the most embittered heart at the sight of such innocence must bleed,
And it would have, if not stuck behind their painfully slow feet.

Maybe we recoil from the tenderness in their gaze
Not because in hatred, hypocrisy, and petty jealousy we blaze
But because in some distant yet too recent point in time,
Those were our bumbling steps, your damp hand in mine.
We all know the bittersweet fruits of love, or will know before long,
So revel in the joy of its blossoming, young strangers, and carry on!



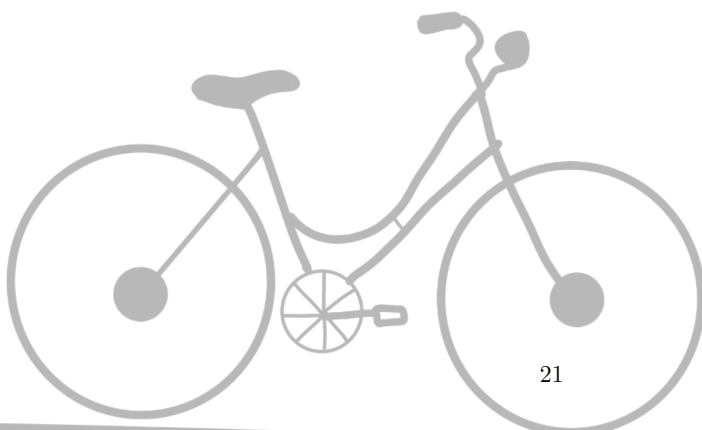
bicycle

the wobbly handlebars, the tiny seat
pedals much larger than my little feet
was riding my first bicycle such an impossible feat?

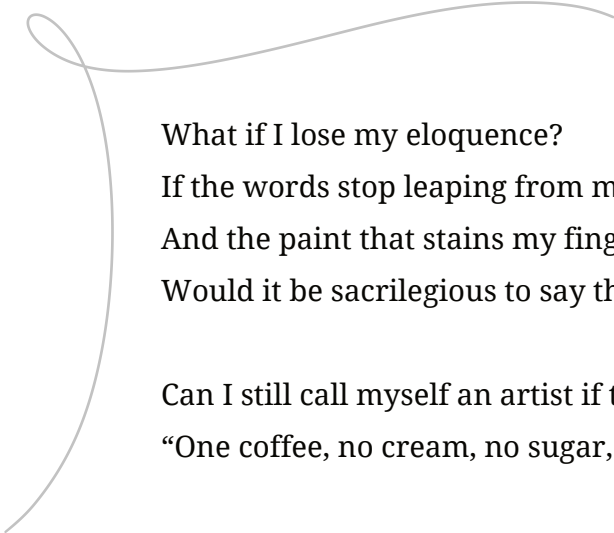
slow and steady, the wheels roll on
winding ahead, the road is long
the grip of my father's hand strong

for a breath of air, a brief sigh
he lets go, and along with the wind i fly
and for now, all I see is a vast blue sky

but the joy of being able to speed by
your parents after they've let go of your back
is euphoric in the sense you may not ever feel again



Brush of Words



What if I lose my eloquence?
If the words stop leaping from my lips,
And the paint that stains my fingers rubs off in the rain,
Would it be sacrilegious to say that I'm a painter of words?

Can I still call myself an artist if the only composition I spit out is,
"One coffee, no cream, no sugar, please."

What if the scraps from the words I've managed to string together start to fall apart,
And melt at the barest brush of my fingertips?

Oh god, what if I lose my muse?
If the flush in his cheeks vanishes as our gazes cross paths,
And if he asks to take back the letters he strung together for me to hang on my wall?

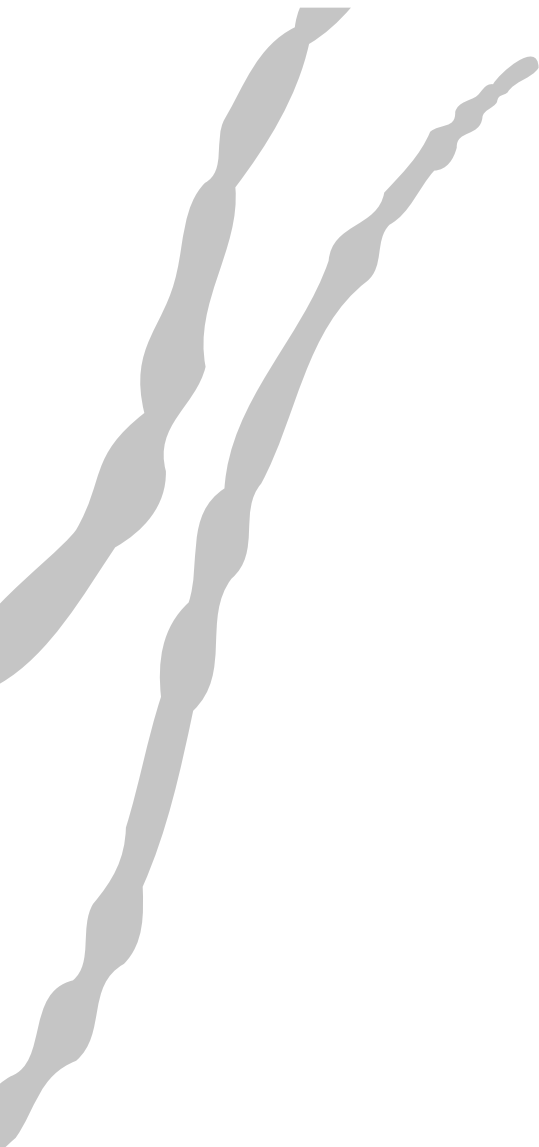
Can I still call myself a painter if the only colors I paint are
The soft, melancholy hues of fading twilight,
Or the muted grays of a world stripped of its vibrant life?

What if my canvas remains blank, devoid of words that tell a story,
And my hands tremble, unable to translate the chaos within?

Can I be an artist if my palette holds but one shade,
The somber blue of unspoken thoughts and faded dreams?

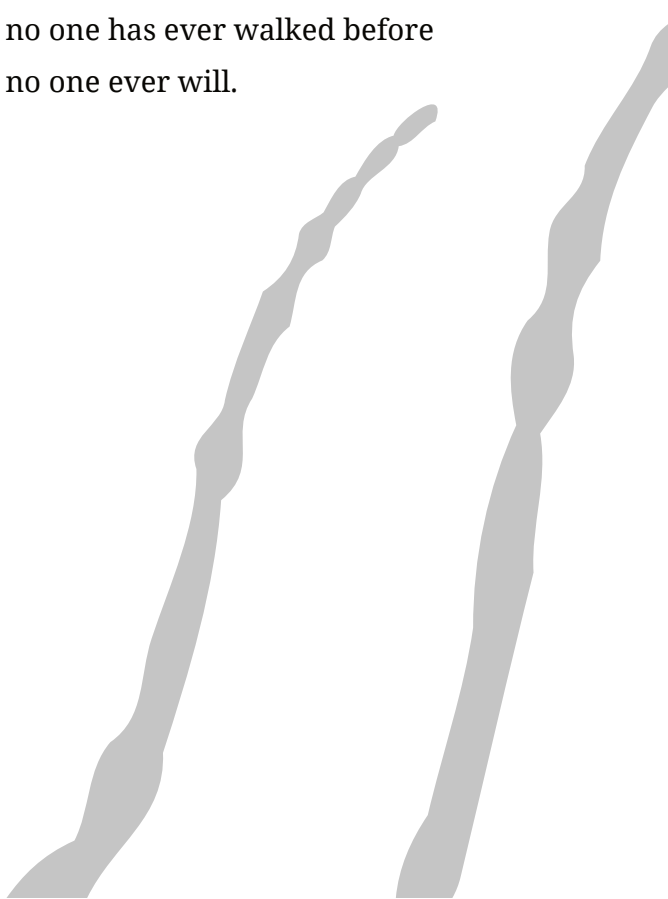


The Garden of Wild Mosaics



If you come looking, you'll find me
Sitting in the garden of ink and blood,
Painting with dreams yearning to come true,
To let magic work its magic
And breathe life into all my whimsical daydreams;
You'll find me mixing reds and golds, blues and greens
In a heady cocktail of dragon fire,
Burning away all my fear with a splash of desire,
Waiting for the fantastical moment
When the mosaic of me is complete;
You'll find me lying amongst wolves and crows,
While their wild hearts beat in sync with mine
And their fur and feathers dress me in delight
I glimpse the future in their prophetic eyes
And protection in their dangerous embrace;

You'll find me where no one has ever walked before
You'll find me where no one ever will.



Veiled Sentiments

In whispered thoughts, my heart takes flight,
A secret love I hold so tight,
For there's a girl, so kind and true,
Whose beauty blooms in morning's dew.

Her smile, a sunbeam's gentle glow,
Her laughter, like a babbling flow,
Her eyes, two stars that brightly gleam,
A vision fair, a sweet daydream.

I yearn to speak, to let her know,
The feelings in my heart that grow,
But fear holds fast the words inside,
And love's confession I must hide.

Through endless days and starlit nights,
I yearn to hold her, to take flight,
To share dreams and secrets unseen,
Yet, in the shadows, I remain concealed.

She walks with grace, a gentle charm,
My soul entranced by her warmth,
Her presence shines, a beacon bright,
Guiding me through the darkest night.

But love's desire remains a tether,
Leaving me to wonder whether,
Her heart, like mine, might surely yearn,
For love's embrace, my heart does burn.

Though I may never speak the truth,
And seal my heart within this booth,
I'll cherish her from afar, my dear,
For in my heart, she'll always be near.

And so, in silence, I'll admire,
Her radiance, her inner fire,
A love unspoken, yet so pure,
A bond unbroken, forever secure.

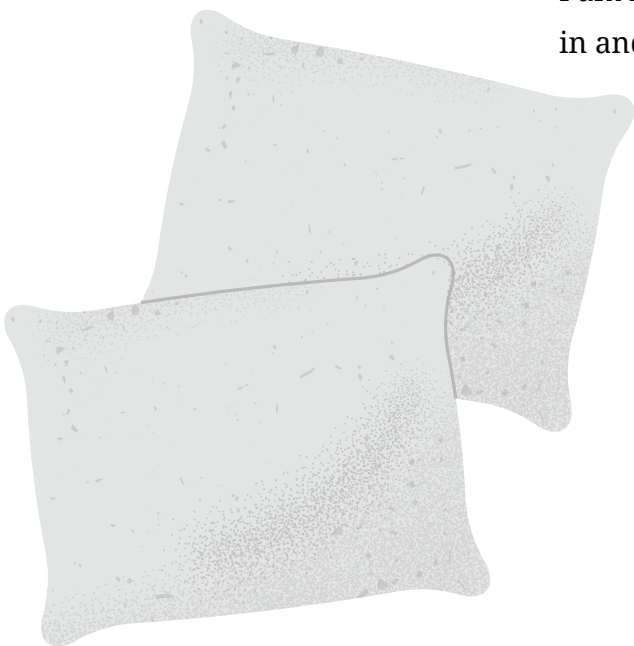
Nanu

The day I lost you
The planets suspended in time
A mammoth pause as I realise,
that was my final goodbye

I swallow this news
Grief seeps into my bones
settles in my blood like glue
Calcified, a stench that only grows

Pain, they say, heals with time
Dead and to be dusted tomorrow
Your forgotten hair on the pillow
intertwines delicately with mine

It has been a month
and the globe has resumed its journey
I am learning to breathe again,
in and out; as I smile ruefully



Your fate is written on your spine

Your fate is written on your spine, even more than it is
contrived on your palms.

Because every time
you lift what isn't destined for you,
more than your hands, your spine will ache.

My country is outlined with kohl,
and every netizen on its physical
map is a teardrop.

Every time we attempt crossing
its border, we roll down on its palevioletred cheeks,
swimming through the sewage, across its nape-like
marine fugitives. The children of our republic haven't
grown up listening to the folklore of tooth fairies. Rather,
we were narrated the legends of tongue wizards. And so
we cut our tongues every night

to wake up the next morning to Azaadi
under our pillow covers. However, if we were to wake up
with azaadi under our pillow covers, we must
sleep the night first. We cannot rewrite
our destiny, we can only edit it. I am too young to
understand God's scramble,

he gave the butterfly wings without winds. He is
clever enough to pickpocket
g and d, and so every time he "wins"

Every autumn in my courtyard is an enjambment,
and my summers in exile are a living album of the
apple tree in our verandah, and skinny dipping in
Ganga. Perhaps winters never end, they have
managed to escape into our nostrils, everything
around us smells cold.

Revolts measure the degree of massacres. Stop building juveniles, because the one
who would

commit a crime, must have lost his childhood long ago.

All the letters a pigeon fails to deliver on the right threshold,
leaves a scar around his ankle.

Alas, for the pigeons of my town.

Short Story

Art for Art's Sake. . .

Vanya Nautiyal

The Light of Tehran

Naisha Khan

How to Spell Home

Subhash Bhambhu

A Childhood Memoir by
the Sea

Aarohi Singh

Meet me at the corner
store at 3AM

Sanskriti Sharma

Madessa's Lament

Kritika Misra

Little Boy

Triparna Dasgupta

That Footprint on Ice

Jayasuchita Jayakumar

A Little Time Out

Sumaiya Khan

Art for Art's Sake

VANYA NAUTIYAL

Welcome to my little exhibition, young guest. I've been watching you all evening, since you seem so engrossed in this particular work of mine. Fascinating, isn't it? Despite being my breakthrough piece, it doesn't get the attention it deserves anymore. Sure, most just look at my name on the little plaque beside it and heap grotesque, undeserving praise upon it, pretending to understand its brilliance. Not you, though. You are a cut above from the usual crowd, I can see that. While the other patrons pass their empty eyes over each work, you're the only one actually taking your time. Savouring every brushstroke, every colour. It's been a long time since I have met somebody like me. Somebody who actually deserves to have art in their life.

Oh? You want to know what compelled me to create something this intense? Well, that's quite a long and complicated story. Hm... luckily for you, I have a little free time today. No, don't worry about the rest of my engagements, I can put them off for a while. They can wait. They have to. Should we start from the beginning of it all, then? As you know, I was born and raised in a filthy little port town on the outskirts of the city. From the food in the rundown grocery store to the archaic education system, everything there was rotten from the inside. Difficult to see how a jewel like me came from a dump like that. I always imagined my existence there as the ultimate evidence that God was real, and he was a cruel bitch.

From the 10th grade onwards, my school used to have mandatory art classes for everybody in our grade. Tuesday, 3:30 PM, was always a dreaded time for many of my classmates, who bitched and moaned about losing out on hangouts and dates with people from other schools because of the wretched timing of the lecture. They grudgingly packed their bags and shuffled to the designated classroom, dragging their feet and gossiping about the new professor's possible love affairs.

Some people just don't have the class to appreciate the good things in life, you know? I was different. I used to reach the classroom the earliest, and I was the last to leave. I'm sure my classmates talked shit about me behind my back, and many a time, I had come back to the classroom to the sound of barely disguised giggles, only to discover mocking caricatures of me and my art professor on the blackboard. It should have sickened me, I'm sure. It should have made me excuse myself to go to the bathroom and cry or something. That's what my classmates wanted anyway, based on the rudimentary bullying techniques that they definitely picked up from whatever shitty TV show they were watching that week. But it really didn't matter to me. In fact, I almost pitied them. They reminded me of the rats that roamed the docks. Ravenous, lethargic things that only lived to fill their belly and then died after a week. Empty space.

Their shit attempts to bring me to tears never

worked anyway, because the minute I was seated in front of the canvas, everything else faded. The only conversation that ever meant anything to me was the one between my hands and the colours on my palette. In the two hours of that extra class, every single word I had not said and every thought that I had kept to myself exhibited itself in violent explosions of colour. Since I was the only student who actually focused on my paintings, my art was the first thing everybody saw when they entered the classroom, wondering why my classmates hated me. What else could they do when they face such real genius that they know, no matter what, they cannot reach?

I'm not excusing their shitty behaviour, mind. Maybe I would have been kinder if they had at least respected the role of art in their lives. It is not just a static thing on a canvas or a glossy photo in a magazine. It is all around us, in every blade of grass, in each square pixel of the evening sky. All we had to do was will it into being. At least, that's what my art professor used to say. He was... different. I don't remember much about him. I try not to. I want to say he'd be proud of what I have accomplished so far, but... I don't know. He, too, was caught up in preconceived notions like the rest. Just because they were closer to the truth doesn't mean he was right. I, too, only saw the light after making this work. Sometimes, we can only reach the heights of our craft after plunging ourselves into hell, or as close as we can get to it.

A man like him? The only way he was getting near hell was by coming to that town. He stood out like a sore thumb in the desperate air that permeated our school. No matter how early I entered the classroom, he was always there before me. Setting up the easels or unpacking supplies, always wearing a threadbare paint-stained apron. He greeted everybody who entered in a soft voice, even the ones who entered half an hour late. That's why everybody else mocked him. He had too much light in his eyes, that's the thing. But all said and done, he was a good man. He was the type that wanted to make a 'difference' in the lives of his students. He was a little foolish, for sure, but he treated us like actual human beings. Even the rough students who never

attended classes except when the headmaster caught them and forced them to come, even the catty kids who snickered every time he tried to teach us something new. Even me.

The first time I saw him, I thought he wouldn't last a month. You can discover whose belly is too soft not to be sliced open in a place like this, with people with eyes like sharpened knives. But it had been six months since, and he was still there. He didn't interfere with my work, so we were on relatively good terms. He usually stood behind me and watched me paint, sometimes offering a few tips and techniques that I still don't remember, but I still pretended to listen to him respectfully. I think he could see that I'm a cut above everybody else, even with his 'anybody can make art!' attitude. My paintings got hung up the most in the class, and he even mentioned sending my work to a competition coming up. I didn't really do fancy competitions at the time. I had learned to shrink away from the spotlight. But the prize money was tempting for sure. Saving up to go to a fine art school was not going well, so the reward would have taken the edge off. It was something to dream of, at least. So the next day, holding a forged permission slip in my hand, I went to the art room earlier than usual to set up my easel ahead of time and to talk to Sir as soon as possible. I bunked the last class of the day, enjoying the adrenaline rush that came with the insignificant act of rebellion. Don't be too surprised at my perfect honour student image, young one. The tendencies of insubordination, natural to every true artist, came much later to me.

Hope was a new drug to me. It made my heart and step much lighter. For once, the art I was creating in my head did not feature the signature explosion and splashes of colours. I found myself dreaming of painting evening skies, spring meadows, and eastern seas. So, instead of knocking and waiting for an answer, I rushed through the ajar door, eager to bring my vision into being. That's why I found him first. Head resting on his desk, his body frozen in an unnatural stillness that was all too familiar to every child in this town. I dialled emergency services on my cheap mobile phone with numb fingers. The minute the medics entered the scene, they wrapped

me in a warm blanket and put something hot to drink in my hands, telling me to take my time and tell them everything I remember. I told them the basic facts, the unnatural way he was sitting slumped on his chair, his clothes soaked in a crimson I had never mixed before, the purple and blue bruises on his face and hands. The only thing I didn't tell them about was the form he had left on his desk, already filled in with the details required for participation, and the expensive new set of oil paints lying next to it with my name on them. I stuffed both of those things in my backpack before calling for help.

The next day, the police came to our school again. Looking almost as bored as the rest of my classmates, they asked us about our thoughts on the matter and who might have had a motive to harm him. I stayed quiet, but nobody else did. They kept on shooting one silly and grotesque rumour after another. The most vile fictional anecdotes got the most applause and appreciative hoots. Even the police officers started to smile along, probably reminiscing about their time in the same school, spent pushing weaker children to the walls and giving their victims scars that would never heal. A child like you would be familiar with this grotesquery. I know I was.

But I wasn't as calm and collected that day, despite being used to it. Their voices were way too loud, too grating on the ears. Every shriek of laughter sent a new wave of rage in me. As I took deep, shaky breaths and tried to look at something else, be anywhere else, my gaze fell upon them. The group of our grade's signature delinquents sat in the back of the class. They weren't joining in with the raucous laughter or cracking their horrible jokes like they would have any other day. All of them just kept on smirking, as if armoured by a secret nobody else could possibly have known. And nobody could have known. None of the few cameras grudgingly set up by the admin were in the corridor that the art room faced. And while their rage and work were sloppy, their cleanup was not. But I'd recognize the purple of the bruises on their knuckles anywhere. There was nothing I could have done. Everybody other than me was relieved of the inconvenience caused by the extra class and

left school chattering amongst themselves. The school principal pretended to care for me for about a month and then pleaded a heavy workload to my parents to cut off my sessions with him. The police found another dead body to not give a fuck about. My days continued like before, except I started leaving school about an hour earlier. There was nothing for me to do, except continue hiding my paints under floorboards like before and painting in stolen snatches of time, when nobody could wake up and see them. Just like before he came to this town. And at the time, I believed, just like I deserved.

But then, one day, I opened my oil paint set to discover that the crimson shade had oxidized into a muddy brown. And maybe it was my name written on the box, or just the fact that the competition he mentioned was accepting submissions only till tomorrow. I could have, of course, grabbed a couple of cheap red paints from the nearby shops. But this work was special. It deserved only the best material I could get my hands on. So I did what I had to do. Didn't take long to lure those assholes to the art room with a simple blackmail threat sent to their cellphones. Of course, the thought of danger never crossed their mind. Why would it? They were the strongest, meanest, most brain-dead of the sorry lot. Cruelty came easy to them. But it came much more easily to me. And I dare say I did a much better job than them. Cleaner, faster, less showy, and almost no trace left behind. They weren't smirking by the end of it. So once again, I took what I needed without restraint. Fastidiousness doesn't get any artist far, I assure you. I did keep in mind the one thing that they also knew when they shattered the bones in his legs to pieces: in this town, the only thing more common than weeds in our gardens are corpses dumped in the sea.

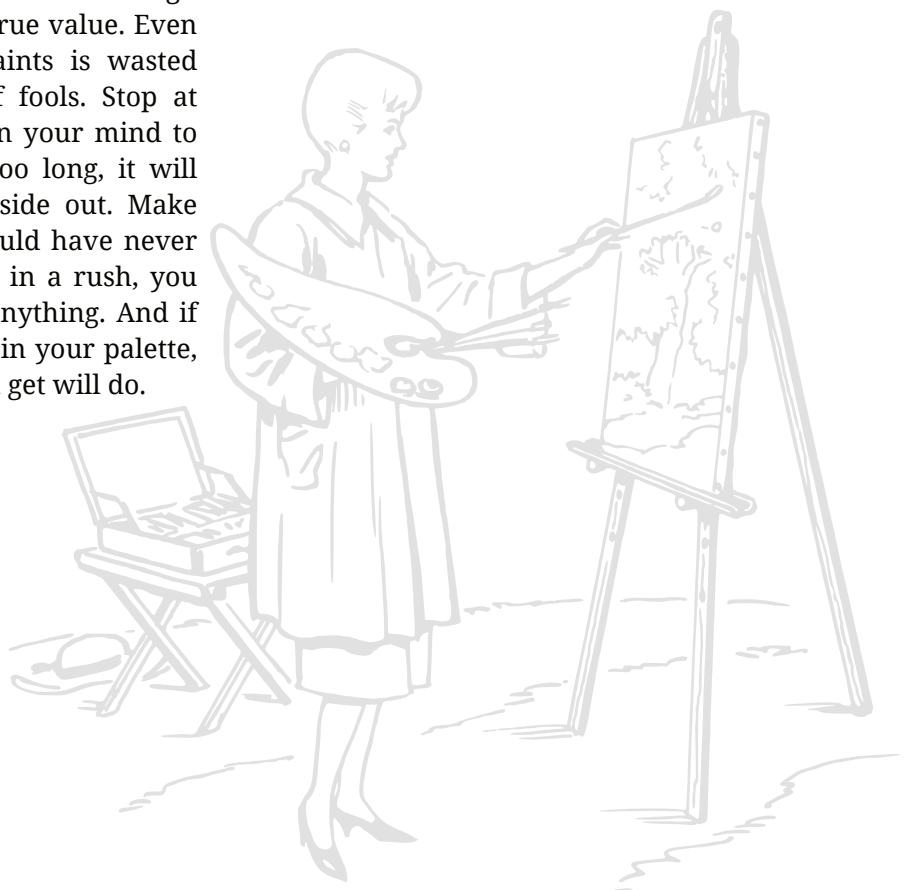
So, there you have it! The beautiful story behind this work of mine. There's no surprise that it engrossed you. It should. This shade is not that easily found anymore. I mean, sure, I could substitute it for some animal replacement, but it just won't be the same, you know? Sinners just have a thicker, vibrant hue flowing in their veins. But it's fine. It's a one-of-a-kind piece, that I'm sure that even their

scummy eyes could see the true value of.

Guilty? Me? You sure do ask some funny questions, kid! Clearly, you can see that I did them a favour. For all their wasted youth, they finally got to be a part of something real. Something that actually fucking mattered. If their grieving families knew the part their children played in the creation of my masterpiece, they'd fall at my feet and weep their gratitude. It's my hands that made their worthless sons a part of something that will live on forever in the minds of those who have had the honour of seeing it. Only an artist as divinely blessed as me could make such waste unforgettable.

Ah, memories. A fearfully addictive poison for old people like me. I might not have the same drive as before, but I can see the same passion in your eyes as I had before. Youth sure has a way of burning everything in its way to get what it wants. But my many engagements call me, so let me leave you with a bit of advice, Sonny.

Over time, I've realized that our art professor was a bit soft in the head. Art is only created in the hands of the worthy, those smart enough and blessed enough to see its true value. Even the most expensive set of paints is wasted when placed in the hands of fools. Stop at nothing to bring that beauty in your mind to being. If left suppressed for too long, it will warp your brain from the inside out. Make you see and do things you would have never dreamt of doing. But if you're in a rush, you can definitely make art with anything. And if you run out of the right shade in your palette, the closest to blood red you can get will do.



The Light of Tehran

NAISHA KHAN

The bag of spices slipped from Noor's hand as she stumbled and fell, spraying sumac across the cobblestones in a trail of deep red. "*Cheshme bad dur*. This is a bad omen," she grumbled as she picked herself and her shopping bags off the ground. She looked up to a pair of large, hostile eyes. An imposing figure with a bushy moustache, clad in a dark green uniform, was looming over her like a dark storm cloud. Instinctively fixing her hijab to cover every strand of her hair, every inch of her neck, Noor scurried away before he could say anything. This was the safest thing for a woman to do when faced with the formidable *Gasht-e-Irshad*, Iran's morality police.

Named after 'light', *Maman* and *Baba's* precious daughter Noor had spent the seventeen years of her existence comfortably in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood of Tehran. When she got home, she sprawled like a pampered housecat on the perfectly symmetrical floral design of the drawing-room rug. She enthusiastically narrated the day's adventure to her parents as they sipped their evening tea. "Times are getting more dangerous for girls. I worry for you," *Baba* expressed his concern as usual. Being a professor of history, he had always been a "liberal", an "unIslamic" threat to the government. Yet Noor's *Baba* was a devout Muslim. Not only did he pray all five times daily, fast during Ramadan, and pay his *zakat* regularly, but he also shunned imposed religiosity and was a believer in strengthening

one's faith or *imaan* by studying the Qur'an. *Maman* was the same. An English teacher at the only international school for girls in the city, she believed in letting her girls decide their fate for themselves.

She wore a hijab along with a loose abaya in public but never forced her daughters to emulate her, except out of worry—for sin and shame were shadows that never left the Iranian woman.

Maman was right, for *Zahra*, Noor's older sister, when she got married at twenty-three, found herself living a reality that she had fortunately never lived at home. Despite the tender, purplish-blue marks all over her body, despite her undergraduate degree collecting dust, despite being forced to replace her entire wardrobe, she said that she was happily married. After all, that's what "good women" are supposed to do, especially when they had chosen their own husbands out of love. But this subservience, this unquestioned acceptance of her sister, unleashed in Noor a bitter, blinding rage; as she grew up, so intensely she felt about losing her agency, she turned from *light* into fire.

Apart from being brilliant at school, Noor's horizons stretched far and wide, and with an insatiable intellectual curiosity, she read and read. She read all kinds of books, but most of all, she read magazines. An enigmatic yet kind woman had once discreetly pressed into her

hands a wrapped vintage edition of Vogue while she was shopping. That's when Noor found her passion. Spending hours poring over her stacks of Vogues and Harper's Bazaars, she thoroughly studied pre-revolution fashion in her country and across the oceans. Frivolous as they may seem, the magazines were a portal to something bigger for her. Her sketchbooks were filled with vibrant designs of her own. Recognising the almost prodigal talent of their young daughter, Noor's parents got her a sewing machine for her seventeenth birthday.

Two days after the incident, Noor called over her five closest friends after her afternoon namaz. Quietly, without letting her parents know, she led the group down into the *sardab*, the underground cellar that helped cool the house during the harsh, dry Persian summers. Gathering around the small octagonal pool in the middle of the high-walled room, Noor commenced the meeting, "Today we begin our resistance. *Bismillah*". The five other girls echoed after her, "*Bismillah*".

For the next six months, the hushed but dedicated gatherings took place every other day. Soon, the bare *sardab* walls were covered with original colourful fashion designs. On hanger after hanger, a new design, a new silhouette slowly materialised—on soft, machalite green cotton, dusty pink satin, the very Iranian lapis blue velvet, brick red brocade, and smooth, sunny orange silk. Amid laughter, banter and typical teenage jokes, the girls put on catwalks and fashion shows and staged celebrity interviews. They created a world within a world for themselves: a safe space far from the men, the patriarchy, the state, and the Gasht-e-Irshad. Noor, posing giddily in a breezy, psychedelic paisley dress, looked almost ethereal. Her hazel eyes, olive skin, and dark, wild hair contrasted with the dizzying blue-green peacock swirls of the fabric. Always somewhere between slim and stout, with her short height and bushy eyebrows, she was never the centre of attention. Instead, she was seen as the smart, studious, quiet, but opinionated girl who was often lost in her thoughts. But as she wore something taht reflected her soul, something

that was *her*, the embers of her rage seemed to dampen slightly.

Noor's friend group's style was as diverse as her nation itself. Sarah wanted to dress modestly but more stylishly. So for her, the girls tailored *chadors*, burqas, and hijabs in vibrant organza, pastel chiffon, and embellished georgette. For Farah's tastes, Western-style outfits were perfect. An assortment of skirts, tops, pants and dresses in innovative cuts and prints inspired by Gucci, Prada, and Chanel was thus brought to life. Since they wanted the best of both worlds, everything ranging from flamboyant experiments to more local, traditional art forms was incorporated into Amina, Doha, and Leila's clothes. Noor herself wanted to try on everything. The creativity of the lot was mind-boggling. Eventually, month after month, under the guise of attending a religious study group, new trusted recruits joined the club: young women who wanted a creative outlet and feminists who wanted to bring a change, however small.

The work was not easy, however. Sneaking out and sourcing fabrics and materials from other underground stores without being caught was the trickiest. But that was the part where the thrill was at its highest. Jamila Bibi, a seventy-year-old woman who used to be a fashion designer and photographer before the Iranian Revolution in 1978 and '79, the person who had first given the Vogue to Noor, became the link between the *sardab* and the world. Visible even through her government-mandated black veil was a subdued elegance and grace. She used to emerge with a bag full of weaves and fabrics from the backroom of her tiny, dimly lit cubicle tucked in a shadowy corner of the market. Noor, in turn, gave Bibi their latest designs, which she would then sell secretly through her old connections. Handing the bag to Noor, Jamila always smiled at her warmly and knowingly. "Noor, what you are doing is revolutionary. Here, keep are my pearl earrings- the ones I wore on the last day of my job. Cherish them with your heart, and let them be a reminder of your courage. See you again next month. Till then, keep challenging Khomeini and his aides however you can. *Khodahafez*".

Nearly a year after the underground fashion movement began, many young women across Tehran had been inspired by Noor and had started their own *sardab* boutiques. The risk of the morality police finding out was immense, but code words like “prayer meetings” and “hadith-circles” kept the movement going without bumps for a while. Noor had never felt this fulfilled in life. Only one last step was left to complete what they had started. One final step that would either extinguish her fire or swallow her into the inferno.

On 5th May 2023, Noor’s eighteenth birthday, as the sun glimmered over the indigo cobalt mosaics on domes, minarets, and arches, she wore a ribbed white top and a long pink, flowy skirt with a delicate white floral print. Carefully curling her hair, dabbing pink blush on her cheeks and using her mother’s lipstick for the first time, she felt a distinct strength surging in her veins. Eighteen meant a lot to her. Although she had become an adult in Iran at thirteen, now was different. She was an adult in most places- places she had only read and dreamt about. Completing her look with Jamila Bibi’s pearl earrings, she sprayed *attar* and loosely draped her favourite dusty pink hijab before leaving to meet her friends at a café. “Maman and Baba, just for today, let me wear what I want. I want to taste freedom, just for a day.” Reluctantly, they agreed. “I will be back soon, *Insha’Allah*.” For a long minute, the air felt uncomfortable, ominous. But the moment ended with beaming smiles, warm hugs and her parents’ “*tavallod mobarek*, my Noor.”

Noor’s sweet rose and vanilla fragrance mingled with the buttery, herby aroma of fresh bread and the earthy, warm smell of spices as she skipped merrily through the market. At a stone’s throw from the café where she was to meet her friends, she tripped. “The damned uneven paths. My skirt is all dusty now, ugh.” Brushing the dust off with her hands, she got up. The tall, dark green uniform in front of her was all too familiar. An anticipatory silence filled the two-foot distance between the two. A bead of sweat rolled down her temples. A click. She opened her mouth to say something in protest. He took a heavy step forward. She looked him

straight in the eye and smiled. Another step forward. She instinctively yanked her hijab off. Her earring fell with a clink. A bang.

Bonfires of scarves now grow in every street, reminding the regime of the collective contempt that had been simmering for way too long. They keep silencing the chants, keep tearing banners. But the light remains, as do the cobblestones sprayed with a trail of deep, deep red.

How to Spell Home

SUBHASH BHAMBHU



An acquaintance informed me that there was a requirement for an English teacher in a village school. Knowing the decent amount of payment, I immediately accepted the proposal and joined the school. It was my first day in the school. I entered class ten. I scanned the class vaguely but could not escape noticing a shy girl sitting alone in the rightmost corner of the class in the girls' segment. That day, I interacted with the students and taught the class about parts of speech.

It took me several more days to remember the names of some of the students. After three or four days, I came to know that the shy girl sitting in the corner was Rumi. She used to be silent throughout the class, or at least in my class. Her handwriting was very ugly. She was not good at studying. Hence, she was treated by her classmates like other backbenchers. She used to sit alone in the last row since there were seven girls, and the first two rows were occupied by six girls, three in each row.

One day, I asked Rumi a question related to the topic. She was completely mute, bending her head hesitantly downward. It took me another three days to get the first reply from her, which was, 'I don't know.' I advised her to sit in the first row from that day onwards. Every day, I had to tell her to sit in the first row. After a little hesitation, she used to come and sit in the first line. The moment class was over, she would rush to her original permanent seat.

After the class, I was having a conversation with other teachers about students. One of our fellow teachers, Poonam Chand, was an alumnus of that school, and after completing the twelfth standard, he started helping his uncle, who was the owner of the school, manage schoolwork. We were talking about students who were good at studying and those of backbenchers. I told them about Rumi—the shy girl. Laughingly, they told me that one could not make her study and that she was not at all shy. She fights with junior standard kids on the school bus while going home.

That evening, I thought about Rumi, an innocent, shy girl. I could relate myself to her. During my schooling, I used to sit at the back of the class, scared. Like her, I used to smile when someone had asked me anything, a purposeless smile, a smileless smile. The behavior of my classmates towards me was the same as with Rumi. Still, it was hard for me to believe she was not shy and used to fight with juniors. I compared myself with her and found many commonalities.

The next day, when I went into the class, everything was as usual. I told Rumi to sit in the front line. By then, she started to feel comfortable in my class and started to show her presence. A glimpse of my own past nature in her compelled me to be compassionate towards her. Within a week, I started to notice that she was not as innocent or sincere as I thought. Outside of the class-

room, she would scold fellow classmates. Whenever someone looked at her with bold eyes, she would say something sarcastic in local slang.

After a while, it has become almost a regular routine that I, along with Poonam and other teachers, meet after dinner on the school grounds and talk about students. While talking about Rumi, I used to be the only one in her favor, while the others were opposed to her. Poonam especially did not like her. He told me, "Rumi got zero marks in almost every exam. One day, when she got one out of ten marks, a fellow classmate commented that they were surprised she could even score that much"

She furiously replied in local slang, "Do you really think I am a moron?"

We laughed after listening to the story. Later on, I imagined her saying those words in her natural accent. I found the visualization much more humorous.

The time had come when Poonam was parting for his university admission. We had a farewell party after school and talked a lot about ourselves and about the students. That night, I came to know that some of the girls from the school had a crush on Poonam. When he was in his last year of schooling, those girls were only two to three years his junior.

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Now, Rumi was no longer 'abnormal' in my class. Sometimes, she would come to me and talk about something in class, which was unusual but pleasant for me. One day, I instructed all the students to write fifty examples of various tenses. Surprisingly, most of the students completed the exercise, including Rumi. I was happy and wrote 'very good' with my signature in her notebook. Little by little, she started to show progress in English grammar. Still, she maintained complete possession over the last rank in the class.

That evening, Poonam called me and said someone from the school had called him. Initially, I thought I might have scolded any

student, and their possessive parents called for grievances. But I was astonished after listening to the whole episode.

Last night, Rumi called him to ask about the spelling of the word 'home.' He spelled the word for her, but then she said, "Can you repeat the spelling slowly so that I can write it?" and she hung up the phone.

After telling the story, Poonam laughed for a while and thanked me, saying that due to my sincere efforts, students like Rumi started to study seriously.

Later that night, I was thinking about Rumi, about Poonam, about other students, and the school. Suddenly, an absurd idea struck my mind that Rumi had a crush on Poonam; that it took Rumi almost three years to call Poonam to talk to him, to ask him the spelling of a simple and ordinary word like 'home' which she could easily have checked in a dictionary. And that too when he had already left for the university.

The next day, it was a beautiful morning. I entered the school premises and saw Rumi smiling near the water pot.

A Childhood Memoir by the Sea

AAROH SINGH

Monochrome is evoking — Mridula used to wake up to a picture of her mother and father posing in the streets of Hyderabad just after their marriage. It was a black and white photograph but her mother would always tell her how bright that *Saree* was. Her mother used to sleep in the cot with her, with her brother in a cradle next to them. He was nearly a year old, so the crying didn't keep Mridula up at night. Her mother used to wake up before the sun had risen. She had to wake up to fetch drinking water in the morning; the duty was divided between Mridula and her mother. Mridula would be woken up by her aunt asking her to get up and collect flowers. Her aunt started to live with her sister once her husband had left her. She used to sleep with Mridula's grandmother, and her father didn't mind because she provided for herself by selling flowers in the market. "Suki, let's go, it is already late". It was the same line Mridula used to hear every day before leaving. Suki was the name given to her by her grandmother. Mridula did not like it, it was a Tamil name, and she told everyone it sounded funny. Her grandmother used to say that it meant 'beloved', and Mridula didn't find herself to be the most adorned one in the family since she got a brother. She much preferred Mridu and asked everyone in the school to refer to Mridu as well. But the name Suki stuck.

It was a busy life for Suki on the coasts just south of Vishakapatnam. Despite being only

nine, she had to work her way through every day. After collecting flowers with her aunt, she had to help her dad with his fishing nets and make sure everything was set up properly for him. She would think about little tasks like making sure that the water pot was filled after she returned from school. She knew she had to go to school even though she did not enjoy most of it. She used to study so that she could find a suitor akin to herself and who would enjoy the smell of *mogra* in the monsoon when the sun was obscured by clouds, just like the buyers her aunt used to sell the flowers to. It would also be good for her aunt's business, she thought.

Suki would pick up the pencil and play tic tac with Ammu, who was older than her and had failed to reach middle school twice. Even though she was much older, she liked her because she was the only one who called her Mridu. Their fingers were already scraped by kite threads and fishing nets. Ammu taught Suki how to hold the pencil in a way that wouldn't hurt. But even in school, all Suki thought about was her dad out fishing in the boat, where she would much rather be. Her thoughts made her wonder what it would be like to fish with a fishing rod but she would soon realize it was a rich man's sport, much removed from her own reality. However, it never stopped her from imagining herself catching one single fish at a time. The fishes she knew how to catch were for sale to the local processing plant, which would then later

sell those fish to highest highest-bidding restaurateurs. The seashore was divided in two, with the south side being for the tourists to enjoy. There was a kink on the shoreline that ensured that the trash would never wash up on the southern side, so the childhood castles made by Suki were that of dirty sand and bits of plastic as she waited for her father to come back.

But before long, Suki grew bored of building sand castles, even though she was pretty good at it; the heat of the sun isn't so pleasing when that is all you've known all your life. The trees near her house were also cut; the last three years had changed a lot in her life. She had developed a new hobby, one of collecting photographs that were left behind on the beach by the tourists. Her skin was toned, even though she generally stayed in while the sun was at its glory doing household chores. "You won't get married if you are all burned from the sun", her mother used to say despite the fact that she was completely tanned from picking tobacco in the sun and she was married. Though marriage wasn't the first thing on Suki's mind, it would be nice to get married just to be done with school. Sometimes, she would visit the tourist side of the beach regularly to look for some photographs that might make their way to her storage box.

Suki still managed to steal some time between her study hours and helping her aunt with house chores to spend time with Ammu. She would stop at the nearby shop to watch a bit of television. Her family didn't have a television, even though it was becoming more commonplace in the neighbourhood. Her father was too busy and much too tired after each day to leave some time for entertainment. Her mother still had an attachment to the radio she got after her marriage, that she used to listen to songs.

Suki would accompany Ammu on her evening excursions to the nearby salt marsh. She remembered that she went to swim there with her mother when she was little, it was filled with water and almost seemed like the levee of a river. Now it was just the salt marsh where plastic waste would wash up. Ammu

would collect the plastic bottles to sell them to the recycling factory. Suki failed to understand why Ammu failed twice. She had a poetic way of speaking. Every time they collected bottles together, she would say that all that would be left of green would be in plastic bottles. Once, Suki showed Ammu a photograph of a girl wearing a pearl bracelet. Ammu looked at it and said, "We are orphans disowned by both fate and destiny, washed up on this shore of society. Being walked on like sand when we are sea shells," then turned to Suki and said, "Maybe even pearls".

While turning through some old storage boxes, Suki found a photo of her mother and father in the streets of Vishakapatnam, her mother's hair adorned by the very *mogras* she now picks, wearing a more normal salwar kameez. Her dad wearing a white Hyderabad-style kurta pyjama. This picture was rusty and wasn't as well photographed as the one in her bedroom. But that didn't capture her eyes as much as the blurred background of people passing by. They all looked so lost even though everyone was working. Something moving in the bustling streets, something still in a smile. The absence of emotion is that inherent chaos of movement signified the entropy of survival. She always

thought that the black and white photographs were more precious, more antique, and left more for her to imagine.

She thought about taking the picture to her aunt but changed her mind and kept it back in the box. She thought that her aunt would be busy. Her aunt was named Kumundini (lotus), almost as if the flowers she sold were written in her fate. She would take the wilted flowers that were returned to her by her customers and pretend it was given to her by her husband. She would keep the leftover mogras in her room for their smell. It was a gentle reminder of her marriage now forgotten. The friction between the two became the course of human action that destroyed their relationship. What was the point of marriage itself when she was surviving on her own, she thought. Suki's grandmother seemed okay after her grandfather passed away, and they were married for 30 years.

Her father carried the stench of the sea when he returned home at night, and all he had time for was a bath and a bidi. He would generally have dinner alone, as he would come home later. Even though his boat didn't have the lights of the city boats, he would stay in the sea till there was total darkness. He would never be home later than ten at night. In the nine years since Suki was born, he had earned enough to make sure she could attend a local college. He hoped to do the same for his son.

The next day was the last Saturday. Suki's father used to take her to the city once a month. It would have been much more often if she had been a boy, she thought. He referred to the local fishermen of the city as the demons that were taking away the good catch from them. He used to say they were "cherry-picked monstrosities of Deyyam (devil)". These lights were now even seen from the shore near her house at night. Suki enjoyed the one treat she was allowed but preferred seeing her father sell the fish off. But even more than visiting Vishakapatnam, she liked the last Sunday. It was the day her mother didn't have to work the fields, and dad had just sold his biggest catch. It generally was a family day where her mother would cook some good fish. The news on the radio slowly faded into songs, and the songs into the background while her mother served them.

Her father would also celebrate with a drink with his friends. On being questioned by Suki whether he was drunk, he'd ask her to go to the beach and watch the leaves. The leaves didn't need a drink to sway; all they needed was a breeze. Suki did like to go outside; it would be peaceful if her parents decided to argue at night. Her warm feet got covered in the sand, still warm from the bright sun before they met the cool ocean water, and it gave her enough time to just enjoy the sand without the sounds of fishing boats. She was glad that only the lights of big boats were seen and she couldn't hear them. It gave her a sense of peace, although she was becoming accustomed to the rustling of the city. This afternoon, Suki found a photo of herself on the beach – it was a quiet beach photograph in which she occupied the frame as she was bending down to collect another photograph

She was more excited as it was a black-and-white photo. Suki was excited to show the picture to her father and was waiting patiently on the beach.

It was eleven, and her father hadn't come home. The day was different: the tides were higher, and Suki's mother was worried. Suki was at the beach, looking at the photo as the waves hit her, and there was nothing but darkness in front of her. She was thinking about the photograph in her hand, with the sound of waves crashing onto the shore. Captured in a photo, she saw herself for the first time as a subject. Capturing the stationary subject now became an act of reduction. Capturing movements becomes capturing oneself stationary. For now, she could make it where the photographer was. This captured image is indebted to the movement, to the very act of Suki collecting photographs. And the debt oscillates on the dichotomy between a moment and its stationarity in the image. Suki, now the viewer, is left to find emotions, for it is her foundation that monochrome is evoking. She was soon disturbed by a bright light in the front. It was her father's boat, arriving late because it finally got the night lights.

Meet me at the corner store at 3AM

SANSKRITI SHARMA

Run. Everything in her wanted her to run. This wasn't real. It wasn't right. She needed to run. As far as possible and as fast as possible.

It so happened that someone Aisha had mentored at the dance studio last summer was good friends with Minnie, which landed her in this exact situation. She isn't surprised when the skittishness takes over her once again as they shake hands. Minnie's hand is warm, and her grip is firm. Or maybe Aisha's hands are cold, and she doesn't want to let go.

"I've heard so much about you. I never thought we'd get a chance to talk." Minnie's smile is easy. Her voice is sweet. Too sweet. It should've been huskier and rough, but also soft around the edges. The sweetness almost makes her wince.

"I hope you've heard good things," Aisha's social skills take over, drilled in with years of practice. She sees their mutual acquaintance smile and carry the conversation. Her mind runs on autopilot, not letting the mask slip.

Back before she had taken evening slots at the studio to channel her insomnia into more productive avenues, Aisha would come to the convenience store two buildings down from her apartment. The bored-looking cashier at the store had seen her enough by the third week to give her a tired smile as she left with a

small pile of groceries each time.

On one such nightly expedition, Aisha had turned to the produce aisle, shoulders hunched, hands stuffed in pockets. That's when she saw her first. Florescent light from the frozen foods lit up a soft pout and wide brown eyes. Blue nails against a white carton of milk

Aisha's body feels heavy. She is in no mood to stop by the store today. She catches her reflection in one of the shop's windows. Her hair still pulled back from work, the dark circles even more prominent in the neon light of the store sign. A constant reminder of the toll that performance season took on her. Crashing onto her bed sounds more and more tempting each second. If only she can manage to get to her room.

She almost doesn't notice the hunched figure outside the store as she passes. When she raises her hand in greeting, Minnie's eyes meet hers.

It isn't fair that tears are so clear in the harsh white light of the store.

When she reaches out a hand. Aisha sees her fingers tremble just a little. She wouldn't have caught the chipped blue of her nails if it wasn't for the lights.

Aisha pulls her aside and sits her down. If she's falling apart, it might as well be next to a warm bowl of convenience store noodles.

"Chocolate is clearly the superior milkshake" Minnie repeats. Yellow nails tapping against the bottle in her hand.

They both stare at the rows of beverages in the giant fridge at the back of the store.

"I'm not saying you're wrong. I just prefer strawberry." Aisha shrugs, sipping said milkshake.

Minnie looks at her. "That's just weird," then leans closer and dabs one sleeve of her flannel shirt at the corner of Aisha's mouth.

Aisha can only stare straight ahead, acutely aware that Minnie is just a bit taller than her. She catches the tiny pink patterns in Minnie's nails. Maybe she's staring too long.

"I can hear you thinking," Minnie nudges her lightly.

"I want to buy apples." Aisha pulls her along towards the produce section. Her cheeks the same shade as her favourite fruit.

Minnie listened intently whenever Aisha talked about work, what choreography she was practising or what music she was thinking of using for the next project. So, she thought it was only fair that she listened to Minnie talk about her work too. Besides, nothing that came from her could ever bore Aisha.

Minnie worked on PR for a fashion label. She and Aisha had spent several hours one night discussing why dancers preferred the kind of clothes they did when Minnie had commented on the layering of Aisha's outfit that day.

Today Aisha had opened a certain floodgate of opinions.

The two are seated on the little tables outside

the store, a pack of biscuits and one of chips open between them.

"The sweater had a 'recycled materials' tag, but was it really? Most of the tags are PR moves to appear sustainable, aren't they?" Aisha says, munching on a biscuit, her eyes fixed on the racks inside the store.

Those words are enough. Aisha sits there for an hour as Minnie goes on about Greenwashing (and subsequently Pinkwashing), describing in intricate detail how PR campaigns build goodwill for brands.

When Aisha throws away their empty snack packets on her way home, she comes to a concerning realisation. She hadn't retained more than 10 words of what Minnie had said. But she could probably pick out the exact shade of lip tint Minnie had been [wearing](#) that evening even if she was asked in her sleep.

Aisha hated that even after knowing Minnie for a while now, her heart still dipped each time they saw each other. Minnie is waiting for her at a table right outside the convenience store. The sky is pretty shades of pink and purple behind her. The store sign flickers on just as Aisha takes a seat beside her, bathing them both in dull gold light. Minnie looks up from her phone and smiles, and Aisha wishes the ground would just swallow her.

She can't do this. There is no possible way she can follow through. This was a stupid idea. She should leave right now, and Minnie should just forget Aisha ever existed. There is no possible way this would work out and –

"Hey," Minnie's perfect brows are furrowed as she leans closer, snapping her fingers in front of Aisha's eyes. "I can hear you thinking".

Aisha feels her face burn. She ducks her head, pulling out her phone from the pale pink tote bag. "Sorry, it's been a long week."

"I know," A covered bowl of instant ramen is pushed towards her, along with a tiny packet

of strawberry gummies. Minnie's nails are the same dark pink as the gummies. It makes Aisha smile just a little.

"Thank you," Aisha hopes Minnie knows it's for much more than just the food. She then passes her phone to Minnie, a song now open on it. "I thought we could listen to it together." She's surprised by how even her own voice sounds.

Minnie pulls out her wired earphones, passing one purple bud to Aisha.

Aisha waits for the familiar tune to start playing. She hums along, hands folded tightly together in her lap. She watches Minnie put down her chopsticks and cover her half-eaten noodles as the song builds to its chorus.

A full smile lights up Minnie's face as the second verse begins. Her brows furrow towards the bridge, focusing on the lyrics. The singer's voice is soothing as the song fades into the ending refrain.

*Know we just met
I gotta confess*

Aisha lets every other thought leave her mind as the song continues. She only watches.

*With you I don't see an end
'Cause you'll be the death of me*

My greatest enemy

But for now

There's nothing else that's important in this moment.

It's you and I

Just Minnie and her.

It's you and I

And the store's pale lights. And the pink sky.

I see my life

In your eyes

Minnie meets her gaze as the last lines play. And Aisha can see every possibility of how this night might end in them. But she can't look away because Minnie's eyes are warm and so so brown. Like chocolate, like her favourite birds, like all the things that make her happy. And even if this ends badly, she wants to never stop looking at Minnie, no matter how much eye contact scares her.

Sometime between their little listening session Minnie had put her hand on Aisha's over the table, beside her bottle of strawberry milkshake. She holds it now and laces their fingers together. Aisha shivers. She should've brought a jacket.

Minnie leans forward, smiling. "It's a good song".

Aisha swallows "I know".

"The lyrics are cute".

"I guess they are".

"You're adorable," Minnie breathes out. "And so dramatic." Her breath smells like litchi gummies.

Aisha closes her eyes.

"I want you to look at me when I say what I say next."

Aisha peeks through one eye. Slowly opens the other. She can see the faint glitter of Minnie's foundation now and the light dab of blush on her nose. Her lip tint is the same light pink she's been wearing for the past two weeks. Aisha can finally place her perfume. It smells like vanilla and a hint of something stronger.

"I think you're really pretty, even in the shitty store lighting," Minnie whispers. "And I've been thinking that since the first time you gave me ramen when you saw me right here, snotty and teary-eyed."

Aisha thinks she'll shatter from the inside out if she has to feel Minnie's laugh this close again.

“Just give me an answer,” Aisha’s surprised by the steadiness of her own voice.

“I thought I already did,” Minnie says, kissing her cheek, and lets herself lean against Aisha’s side.

“I don’t know about taking responsibility for your fortunes and life. But let me try? Let me take you out? Boba?”

“Boba sounds nice.”

Aisha rests her cheek on top of Minnie’s head.

“Not from this convenience store, though.”

Minnie laughs into her neck, her arm snaking around Aisha’s waist.

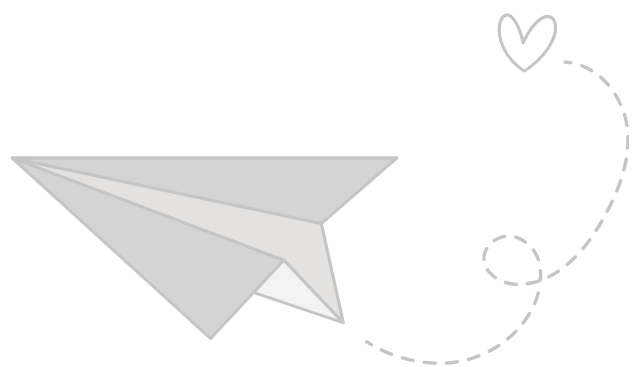
“No, I don’t think so. I think I’d like to see you outside a convenience store for once.”

“And in daylight”

“Just to make sure you’re real.”

“Not a convenience store dream”

Aisha feels Minnie’s breath graze her skin as she laughs. There was no way she could have made that up. When Minnie leans in, Aisha likes how she tastes of litchi and mint.



Madessa's Lament

KRITIKA MISRA

Two bony, brown hands tighten around the pale, dusty branch of the orphanage's schoolyard tree. Their sure grip makes the veins running down its owner's arms tense, and syrupy laughter floats up to the sun.

"Told you I could hang the longest!" says Madessa, face flushing with the triumph of beating twenty other classmates at recess. Landing on her feet and beginning to sprint, she orders another competition, "*Race you to the lake!*" and like a flock of startled sheep, they follow.

It is the last day of ninth form. Today, students are allowed to run wild during school hours. Their instructors observe without making it obvious that they are sorting children by temperament. Grades are already in, physical prowess has also been tested — today is about seeing each child for who they *really* are, when left to their own devices. There are twice the number of adults on the grounds today — recruiters, behavioural specialists, gift-finders, academics, the like — and Madessa's report has begun to read something like 'Agile. Outdoorsy. Strong. Innate leader...'

Those writing her report are preparing grand plans for her future, and it does not escape the mage Zena's eye that when Madessa articulates, "*Stop!*" people around her grind to a halt, or when she calls out, "*Hey!*" people turn, eager to answer.

There seems to be a gift in this girl, and perhaps it may be strengthened.

Two weeks later, Madessa is pulled out of conventional schooling. She does not understand exactly why this is, but from this day forth, and she does not know till when, she must learn the art of warcraft under the care of two hulking, mysterious, unfamiliar adults.

One of them has fingers that are always dancing, they tangle in and out of each other, their tips charred. This, she learns, is Zena, a doctor of some kind, judging by the variety of potions she seems eager to minister to Madessa. The other does not speak, he simply brings her along to practise whichever weapon he sees fit for the day, clubs, swords, knives, bare hands. Every few days, he tosses her books on the art of the fight, the hunt, the war. On the first page, Madessa notices, always written in tiny, neat cursive, is perhaps a name. *Aths*. It must be his.

Since *Aths* never speaks, she asks Zena every day, "Why is no one else studying with me?" and "Why do I need to learn weapons? *Tell me,*" but Zena only shakes her head, unpersuaded, "Not today," and feeds her another bubbling liquid. At least they dull the pain of the myriad bruises that bloom across her body daily. Fighting is difficult, tiring.

Still, Madessa knows, this pain is nothing like that of a severed arm, a broken leg, a spear to the chest, sights she is met with hourly; it is inevitable, living this close to the camps.

When Aths is not teaching her, he is tending to his men, planning attack strategies, often donning his armour and entering the battlefield himself.

The days are long and there is no one to talk to, Zena forbids it, but Madessa can gaze silently at the troops readying for the unending campaigns the kingdom wages. Not for a decade has the land known peace, the king challenging one nation after another in his mad dash for power.

As Madessa trains, thousands of weary men pray to live through just another day, and even as she knows this, she cannot help but notice how different a warrior's body has to be, how much larger in stature, how much wider in gait.

If it is war she is training for, perhaps she ought to look like them too, but then again, sparring doesn't seem to come to her naturally ... and maybe ... maybe regardless of war she might ...

Madessa asks Zena one day, hesitant, "Could you ... make me a man?" Zena arches an eyebrow, and she rushes to clarify, "Only so I can fight like them too," words stumbling over each other.

Zena looks her over a long moment, then finally replies, "No, child, I will make of you something much better than a man. History will remember you and I."

It is a year after this, when muscle has begun to ripple across Madessa's shoulders and arms, and her strength comes to be marked not just by enthusiasm but with the liveness and surety of a young warrior, that what Zena has been hoping for comes true.

Late at night, daggers glinting as they catch moonshine, Madessa landing as many cuts on

Aths as she is taking, she growls in frustration, "*Stop moving*," a rumbling command. He freezes, stays frozen, never moves again, body solidifying to stone. Horrified, she drops her weapon, alternating between clawing at her throat and shaking Aths by the elbows, failing at both. Something is very, very wrong. What has she done? Tears blurring her eyesight, she looks to where Zena stands, Zena always is at these practice sessions, and cries, "*Help him, please, I'm so so sorry!*"

If she could see clearly, she'd learn that a smile is unfurling on Zena's lips — Zena is very pleased, calculations having borne fruit. Who needs an Aths when they've got a Madessa? The potions and the training have worked, with a simple magnification charm, Madessa should be able to stop entire battalions by herself, and indebted to the kingdom for her education and wages, she will have no choice but to obey. A few tears would never get in the way of the creation of the kingdom's most valuable weapon, Zena would make sure of it.

But Zena's potions have begun to work a little too well. Day by day, Madessa grows more desperate. As her purpose becomes clearer to her, all that rings through her head is, "*Stop! Enough! No more!*" and eventually, she need not even speak, a look is enough for the thought to take effect, and in blind, frenzied panic she freezes armies of men in their tracks, men who will never return home, and none of this is a crime; in the name of king and country, most anything is forgiven.

Zena is rewarded handsomely of course, her job is done, she is allowed to prey on the next innocent child, and Madessa is kept in a fortress manned by women, brought out first in ropes and then in chains to make decisive victories of prolonged battles. But why does this girl so stubbornly refuse to comply?

In the water bath in her nearly empty room, Madessa spends long hours gazing at herself, looking at the lines that have begun to crease her forehead, furrow her brow, set her lips in a grim, hard line. "This is the face of a murderer," she thinks in her more lucid

moments, “should I just give in and learn to love to kill?” and then retches again into the metal pail in the corner. Every waking moment is nauseating; she often turns up there several times in a day.

For longer and longer, Madessa sits and stares at the reflection in the stagnant water, rippling when the stray tear finds its way in. Lately, Madessa’s skin has started to flake, hard, stony scabs parting from the skin and crumbling to chalk, a gentler version, she imagines, of what happens to the men she murders.

She should have been born a man, then this never would have happened, or no, she always wanted to be one, just did, and shouldn’t that be enough, but maybe she should be punished for her crimes, and turned to stone herself, and who is Madessa, really? The women don’t know what to do about it, darkness lines Madessa’s eyes, her cheeks have grown gaunt, her muscles have started to waste away, and her skin has begun to flake with increasing urgency. Madessa walks like grief in rotting flesh, hair matting into dreadlocked tendrils that rip at the roots, saying nothing at all; this is not what the land’s most decorated weapon is supposed to look like.

Madessa doesn’t feel like the girl who once dreamt of acing school and running around till exhaustion in the summer heat anymore. She is a creature, an animal, barely a person, and no one knows what to say to it now, no one knows what the thing says to itself. What does someone in this position say?

Locked away in a concrete cell, no one to set eyes upon the hideous greening form, sometimes its raspy voice croaks in a whisper, “*No more,*” but long having been identified as a threat to itself, the creature is not allowed even to die. More and more objects are removed from its grasp, the sparse room is now just a holding, a hole in the wall, a cave to keep the decaying beast. The pail is long gone, there is not enough left within to vomit, the water bath is the only thing that remains, besides Madessa. Bread comes in once a week, if the brute wants to atrophy, let it then.

It is a triumphant day for the kingdom, the many nations it has been at war with have no more soldiers to throw at it., Maybe they, too, should have invested in a Madessa, then they wouldn’t have lost their millions of men. Anyhow, even frozen men serve a purpose, the kingdom carries them off to use as decoration in their museums and palaces and promenade grounds.

The air today is festive, it is a celebration of the land’s might. Esteemed warriors shall receive their medallions, and Madessa has been brought out for viewing, a spectacle animal no stronger than a goat, hands and shoulders bound only with fraying rope, the struggling stopped years ago.

Standing at the beautiful raised, wooden pavilion, its spires reaching up into the brilliant blue summer sky, among warriors gilded in glittering ornaments, stands Madessa, the docile, hollowed-out pride of the country, black blindfold resting against pale, flaking skin.

One warrior after another is led up to stand in front of a giant, concave mirror, their image magnified for all to see as they flex their supple, hulking muscles, beaming in victorious delight. And then comes the beast, pulled along by a gruff hand, mute, weak, stumbling over its own two feet.

But Madessa is still more human than beast – the intelligence that used to dance behind once-lively eyes still remains, the creature knows better than anyone else the potency of its power, the reality of its condition.

Long ago, Madessa used to be the spectator in these celebrations, gazing up at the warriors, the mirror, the spectacle in wonder. The memory wafts in slowly, aching. The time to do something, anything, is now. Wrenching free of the hand tugging at the rope, scrambling to undo the blindfold, Madessa turns to look into the mirror, praying, “*Enough, turn to stone.*”

Maybe the creature has suffered enough, because the prayer is heard, its power amplifying a hundredfold and concentrating

on Madessa alone, turning the ragged form into a statue, eyes widened in relief. *Finally.*

At first, there is silence, but soon enough, the kingdom is in a frenzy, no one knows what to do, the war is won, sure, but what about the other wars they plan to wage, the costs to the kingdom, did Madessa never think about that, the selfish brat? Not even eighteen and still so willful and stubborn, we thought we'd beaten that out of the child.

The statue refuses to budge, not even elephants can tug it off the scaffolding, the celebration is finally abandoned. The pavilion, decorations, and the statue of Madessa are left alone to do with themselves what they will in the dead of the night.

It is moonshine that thaws the white marble of Madessa's skin. The knots of unkempt hair are the first to fall away, then the ropes and the frayed clothing come undone, and if you were to stand in the grounds now, you would see the large, floating image of a frail, ghostly, naked man opening and closing his fingers into fists, caressing the Adam's apple in his throat, testing out his voice, gazing at himself in the mirror in wonder.

"No more war," his deep, raspy voice says, "and no more turning people to stone." A new sense takes the place of the coiling power that used to writhe in the young girl's stomach, a sense of freedom, of unbearable lightness, of finally being what he is meant to be. This is what Madessa is meant to be.

Madessa, the naïve girl-child. Madessa, the monster, flaking away. Madessa, the statue in the magnifying mirror. Madessa in the body, as he would like to be. Two bony, pale hands, trace the knuckles in their fists, admiring the nails at the fingertips, their owner deciding, for the first time, where it is he wants to go.



Little Boy

TRIPARNA DASGUPTA

He ran, his laughter ringing through the summer air, towards the cairn of rocks he had conjured amidst the tall maple trees—his all-time favourite hideout. Today, he was running to win a challenging game of hide-and-seek with his best friend Prai. He was sure that this time, he would be the winner, and Prai wouldn't find this place.

Crunching the dry autumn leaves under his feet, he made his way across the crowd of trees, and plopped down beneath the huge canopy of heart-shaped leaves. Here, he was well hidden from the world by the thicket of maple trunks. Stretching his back on the ground, he turned his face towards the heavens.

A soft smile lit up his ruby features. The clouds were his favourite shape today. Cotton candy.

He always imagined how wonderful it would be, to be trapped inside the fluffy cotton, watching Hiroshima through the cottony curtain from above. Flying right alongside the birds and butterflies, steering the wheel in all different directions, he was so jealous of the raindrops inside the clouds. He had heard clouds even travel overseas!

Crunch.

The little boy looked up.

Crunch. Crunch. Snap.

Someone was inside his cairn. He stood up quickly and was about to advance on the intruder, ready to pelt them with twigs, when he heard a giggle.

“Found you, Arro!” the voice exclaimed, running off.

He followed her, determined to win the pelting game at least, now having lost the hide and seek.

The clouds still hadn't changed their shape when he sat filling in their colours. That month, they had mostly been gray; this was the first white cotton candy that embezzled his pages in a long time. He flipped the blue and black pages back to his birth date. It was the darkest cloud, although the day hadn't been depressing at all for little Arro; he had spent all day playing rain games with Prai and getting prodded by distant relatives.

“So Ar, what do you wanna be when you grow up? What's your dream?” His Uncle, who sported large yellow specs atop his crooked nose, asked.

“Cloud studier,” Arro had said, puffing his chest out, very proud of the profession he had chosen.

“What's that?” His puzzled Aunt had asked, her fingers carefully wrapping the teacup handle, pinky sticking out.

“Wait, I’ll show you!”

After which he proceeded to produce the sketchbook he had named

夢の雲

(Yume ne komo)

to the crowd in the living room, which was then covetously passed from one hand to another until everyone had concluded the child had an artist hidden inside him.

But the day we’re looking at was somehow completely different from the other days--- the weather was pleasant, but an unspoken loudness hung around Hiroshima. The atmosphere had seemed strange since dawn, although no one would admit it; a strange tension was in the air.

However, a few minutes before 8, saw Arro rushing out to his clearing, excited to paint the clouds on this interesting day, just as usual. As he was sprinting over the leaves, he noticed a disturbance in the neighbourhood--a few ladies running around, crying, from the sound of it. Arro did not pay much attention as he had just caught sight of the sky far west. It was such a pretty rose gold, and this early in the morning! It would be so fun to capture it in his sketchbook.

He reached the clearing, impatient to start on his painting. He flipped open to a fresh page and dated it neatly:

6-8-1945

Picking up a pink crayon, he had just started on the pretty pink lining of the sky, when he heard his mother calling out to him, “Arro! Are you okay, Arro? Where are you? ARRO!!”

The distress in his mother’s voice scared him. Dropping his supplies, he got up quickly and ran through the brambles “I’m here, Mom! Are you okay?”

His mom never came calling for him, neither did she ever worry like this. What could have happened?

“Arro!”

He spotted his mom running towards him, her hands flailing in the air, tears streaking her face.

“Mom! I’m here! I’m okay!” He ran towards her.

“We need to get out of here, honey, let’s-let’s go ...Quick, they’re coming!” She picked Arro up and ran out of the woods, towards the neighbourhood, all the while crying and shaking.

Arro, sensing that some emergency had occurred, kept quiet but was burning to know what was so urgent that he couldn’t even go back to pick up his cloud paint book.

“I’ll take it tomorrow, the animals are good, they don’t destroy anything.” He thought

“They’re almost here, they’re almost here ...no, no ... just a few minutes,” she whispered, pleading, looking up at the sky, which was now deep pink with patches of black, like a cloudy evening sky, but not as calming. Arro, too, looked up, uneasily, and was instantly distracted by a giant low-hanging cloud, that almost touched the treetops!

“Mom, look!”, he said, pointing to the mystery cloud.

His mom looked anxiously in that direction, and gasped, making Arro jump in her arms.

Arro did not seem to understand why his mother was so scared of the pink sky and black cloud. It seemed like a beautiful scenery for him to paint with his crayons.

As they reached the city police station, they saw that almost the entire city had gathered in the little garden. What was happening? His mom let him down from her arms, and, clutching at her locket, nervously glanced around, muttering a silent prayer.

He suddenly thought of Prai, his father and his siblings. Where were they?

“Quick, they sent the methods. Please, ma’am, take shelter in the base.” An officer said, ushering Arro and his mom into the yellowing marble building of the city council. Through a narrow passage, they were led into a huge dingy hall, where Arro saw his father and his siblings, huddled near a window.

“DAI!” Arro’s mom shouted, running towards their father, where she fell into his arms, weeping, while Arro turned towards his older sister, who he noticed, was cradling Prai, who looked just as scared as his mom. Prai and Arro’s family were huddled together, as though trying to find some warmth and comfort in the cold situation.

“Arro, do you know what’s happening?”, she asked, shaking with fright.

“No! Do you know, Chi?”, he asked, turning towards his sister.

She gulped, and glanced nervously outside the window, “Not exactly, but they are attacking... they’re... they’re not going to leave us anymore...the white-skinned are so cruel!” she cried out, and started fiddling with her brown wristwatch. Arro noticed it was 8:14, and yet, the sky looked like it was a very cloudy dusk. He thought about his notebook lying in the woods. It was his paint book which calmed him down everytime they had a scare like this, which had been so often in the last few years. He would surely get it back first thing when they got out of this place.

Through the window, they could see what was happening outside: the policemen were running about, and families were being ushered inside the building. In the distance, Arro heard a strange announcement “Little Boy, Little Boy incoming, Little Boy incoming, over the horizon”. He looked around for any signs of a little boy, becoming even more confused when none appeared., That’s when he spotted it.

Just for a nanosecond.

The beautiful mushroom-shaped cloud.

Followed by the loudest of all silences.

Far away in the woodland clearing, his notebook turned to dust, to be mixed in the next second with the dust storm that was now the entire population of Hiroshima.

Animals did not destroy his dreams, but humans surely did.



That Footprint on Ice

JAYASUCHITA JAYAKUMAR

It had been a wonderful winter day, with a warm blanket of snow ready to be sled on. You were trudging up the highest mound in the park, huffing and puffing, fighting against unseen shoves that could set you tumbling all the way back down. It was hard, dodging others and their sleighs while dragging your own uphill. You wished you could tuck away the stray hairs tickling your lashes, but pulling your sleigh was a two-hand business. You clenched your mittened fingers against the cold, but you felt sweltering every place else. You didn't realize you had been glaring at the green jacket of the girl shuffling ahead until your eyes sort of hurt.

If only your idiot cousin had helped you instead of doing whatever she was actually doing....

One second of another thought, a distraction was all it took for everything to go wrong. Just a step more, and you would have reached the top. But you bumped into Miss Green Jacket on cue, lost your footing, lost to gravity, and started your rolling descent with flapping arms. Evidently, your bad luck never failed you, and the dozens of hands grabbing for you missed. With panicked resignation, you hoped the frozen lake landing wouldn't break bones, and gripped the reins of the sleigh yanking you tighter.

The clink of the sleigh against ice was your only warning before you slid belly down onto the ice. You almost frowned at how

anti-climactic that was, at how bad it wasn't after all. Everything still felt intact, and there seemed to be no more pain than soreness.

Your eyes were still closed, now of embarrassment. A numb second too late, you realized that your face wasn't supposed to be contacting ice. But you had let it rest there anyway, too rumpled to even care.

Two warm hands cupped your face away from the rattling ice. You stubbornly refused to open your eyes, something that makes you cringe now when you recall.

"There once was a king who fell off his horse. And because he didn't open his eyes, even after all was fine, he soon couldn't open his eyes. That could mean he was either dead or blind."

"You're truly shameless..." you muttered with a laugh, unbidden, of course.

Your cousin was sprawled opposite you, hands cradling your face. Your dumb cousin who spoke in stories not because she could, but because she wanted to. You hadn't understood it then.

From the top of the hill, anyone would have seen two kids spread out on the lake of ice. One entirely on the ice, the other half on the ice and half on the snow. One whose footprints would be on ice, the other whose footprints would be on snow.

Now, though, you realize. You liked sledding. But she? She loved the snow.

.....

At the worst of times, you wondered why you wrote at all. Would it make a difference? Your words... would they matter when you know of their transience, their invisibility in a world full of them?

Your childhood tales with your cousin feel too far away now—like a dusty book unpicked for so long you think the book was made of fine dust too, waiting to crumble. A fragility that should never be touched ever again.

Most of those memories were set in the backyard, but not really. Those memories were set in worlds of dinosaurs, pirates, magical cults, and sleuths. Stories of places that time couldn't dare touch. These memories always strike you in swathes, reminiscences of long sweeps of worlds laying on—laying on each other until their vibrancy is because of their variety too, and not vividness alone.

You can make a story anywhere, was what you had discovered so young with your cousin—was what you had somehow forgotten when you became an adult.

Both of you were storytellers. And one of you still believed in the magic of stories.

.....

In your teens, you wrote with the hope that the novel you were working on would turn out to be a best-seller. Everything you wrote was inevitably meant for other eyes. Your work had more to do with others reading it than with you writing it.

Thinking back, you remember how your cousin always left behind a trail of word marks wherever she went. Walls, tables, napkins, post-its, tree stumps... she took the liberty of scrawling anywhere she wished. They were mostly tidbits, unfinished stories, words that she wanted to write out just so she could see how wonderfully they fit together.

"And then what happened?" you would ask.

"Nothing much. I just liked the way that

happened," sometimes she would say.

"I don't know. There are too many possibilities. I would like to know too," she would say other times. Or, "It's a secret," and that was that.

You suspected there was more to it, that all these little snippets, so beautifully crafted and written, were meant to be a part of something greater. Something that the world could marvel at. You were certain that your cousin's journal was where all these thoughts would come together as a final piece of writing, meant to be read. You were convinced your cousin was hiding this grand, grand story from you.

Because why else write, if it was not ever going to be read? Why leave those words lying around, never discovered, to be forgotten?

But those random writings remained largely unread, invisible.

Your cousin's journal was too safely guarded for you to find her mysterious masterpiece. If your cousin had finished her stories, you would never know.

Some days, though, you feel it too. The want to write a story down so bad that nothing else matters. The need for validation doesn't register, doesn't cross your mind. You write, and you write, and you love that feeling and the words and the stories. Nothing else matters. Those days you write for yourself.

Then you go hunting for those long-lost snippets around the house. Underneath overwhelming sorrow for a loss that the world is entirely unaware of, there is awe for being in the presence of such raw passion.

.....

Wake me up, and I'll tell you a secret.

Three days after goodbye, yet you refuse to believe it. How can you, when you still hear her giggling, when you still see her typing away furiously? You can't sleep without her stories in your ear, you can't bear to live in a house where she is no longer scribbling on the walls.

The horror of time has finally caught up to you.

Her secrets would disappear with her, her smiling face would fade in your memory to the warmth and comfort of an indistinct but familiar figure, and soon you'll forget the way her voice sounds.

You almost scratch out that ridiculous inscription. Stories, secrets... your cousin had a weakness for anything that sounded remotely magical. Had she even lived in the same world as you had?

It took valor to love an art so innocently. With so much passion, the possibility of the world not knowing of your work, not recognizing it, didn't crush your chest with doubt and desolation. Your cousin wrote like a child riding a bike, playing in mud puddles, chasing a dragonfly. Your cousin had been in a loving and joyous relationship you couldn't fathom.

A memory comes to you, soft and delicate. The two of you were huddled under your blanket, you looking at her while she doodled on your shoulder. It frustrated you, how easy she had it. She loved writing, so she wrote. Adult life hadn't rattled her, nothing ever seemed to. It was her and writing against the world.

You envied the intimate, fond relationship she had with words.

"Isn't it wonderful how many people we meet?" wasn't what you wanted to say.

Doesn't it scare you, how people could possibly be just numbers?

You loved your cousin, but you were a coward too.

"Yeah," she had remarked, too busy doodling.

"I swear on your words, if you doodle a story I can't understand onto my hand, I will..."

You were interrupted by her giggle. "Oops, too late."

"I like it," she had said with a smile, the words sounding as whispers in your memory, "It's

my secret. Only I know what it means."

In that memory, you were caught between admiring the absoluteness of her passion and hoping you were a better writer than her. Now you absently rub that spot on your shoulder, smiling despite the lurch in your throat.

You wish that memory was more than a memory, more than a reminiscence.

There are words that are desperate to be written, so you write them out. Unsurprisingly, the words sound like your cousin's voice, and you hear them.

"It doesn't scare me, dear friend. That footprint on ice? You'll know it's yours. You'll know, and it'll be your secret. You'll know."

A Little Time Out

SUMAIYA KHAN

Time usually stood still on crisp December mornings when we visited Mrs. Braganza's Soups and Savour to escape from the reality of the ominous nearness of the approaching New Year's.

It was one of the only sloping houses left on the street, and its shingled roof often gave sanctuary to pigeons desiring some privacy. Inside, the picture of Mrs. Braganza's late husband looked over the customers with his curled moustache and harsh lips.

Mrs. Braganza had once had a Japanese lover. Long, long before she met the snapping moustaches of her late husband. When she opened her shop, she decided to give in to the past and make it a place where Time did not have its way. So, she planted cherry blossoms and Japanese roses outside, and lanterns hung at intervals, giving everything the tired, yellow-red hues of the Orient.

When I went there the first time, on my seventh birthday, my mother chose a table at the far end of the row. On my side, the wood was carved with two names encircled by a biologically incorrect heart. It had been a year since my mother had left her husband. Just like so many women whom time and tide had left behind to drown, my mother sought the sanctuary of Mrs. Braganza's magic roof where one ceased to be merely a product of situation, choice and timing. Amidst the musty aromas of tomato soup with lentils and corn, and corn soup with mushrooms and peas, and

pea soup with potatoes and carrots, and carrot soup with only carrots, one became only and only a divine taster of timeless soups and savour.

Since that day, every time we went to Mrs. Braganza's for our celebrations or sorrows, we always sat at the same heart-engraved table. On such days, my mother always underwent a significant change. Her back would become straighter, her hair would become playful again, her laugh would cover an extra mile till it almost reached her eyes. Almost. She became a little like the person she would be if she weren't who she was supposed to be. And then, after finishing bowls and clattering spoons, we were out the doors again, amidst a world where buses running on time meant that someone would get left behind, and where bells tolled, signifying the ends of moments which could never be gotten back, where no one waited for anyone, and the ones who waited were only the ones in Love, but Time didn't like Love all that much so it often made it a point to disrupt its course from time to time by ticking and ticking on, pulling people by its ticks, back into reality.

Things will move faster now that we have left the protective shade of the cherry blossoms. While my mother worked in a business firm for a boss who sucked the blood dry from her veins, I went to school in my neighbourhood, and it was tough making friends in a world where everybody moved forward. Still, there was Andy, who always saved a seat for me

because he hated sitting with the guys. He told me once that he greatly desires going to space because that was one way to be immortal. I proceeded to tell him about Mrs. Braganza's. That was another way to be immortal.

A good story requires a plot, a setting, and conflict. But true stories can never do justice to the first two. Where a plot is as insignificant as a piece of land and setting is just one moment in memory which may or may not be true.

But conflict. Yes, that comes.

I was in the eighth grade when the river I watched all my life from my bedroom window got so upset that it flooded our town, and some houses broke, some people too, but it took a long time to calm her down. By the end of it, the entire town had to be evacuated. My mother held on to me all through the little apocalypse as we waded across knee-deep waters with snakes and furniture floating around us. If I listed all the things my mother said to me then, I would have written a holy book for a new religion.

When the authorities first blared the red sirens, she said, "Floods cannot drown those who have seen the bottom of oceans."

As we packed our little luggage and I realised that we would have to leave our entire book collection behind, which my mother and I had carefully curated by choosing second and third-hand shops, which gave us the opportunity to splurge a little when her three-month salary came in, she whispered then, "It's okay, it's okay. Books are just words on paper bound by lots of cello tape. I'll write you one after all this is over."

We waded across the flowing water, and as we rounded the corner of Mrs. Braganza's flooded Soups and Savour, tears streamed down my face and I could not stop. My mother pushed me on and on till we reached the little hilltop safe zone centre. "One day, everything will end. And when it does, everything will begin again."

My mother soon got a job in a faraway city

with bustling crowds living under the dictatorial regime of Time. The wheel of time had spun again. Years blended into one and soon, I had completed high school.

Destiny is also a funny thing. Some things happen because they are meant to be. And you are often just a twig in a storm, waiting and waiting for things to subside. So it happened that, keeping in tradition with Mrs. Braganza's lover, I got a scholarship to a university in Japan.

I accepted because I wanted to learn the art of stopping Time in his tracks and making him pay for all the crimes he commits. So, I left my home behind, to learn the secrets of a Japanese lover.

There, in one of the poverty-struck alleyways, I followed a trail of red-yellow lanterns, into the heart of misery to reach a little door with a horseshoe on it next to the words, "a little time out". I had found my time-warping destination.

As I entered, I was transported back to when I was seven, holding my mother's tired hands and entering a place with no time and no plotlines. A place only and only with beaten people, looking for a little rest.

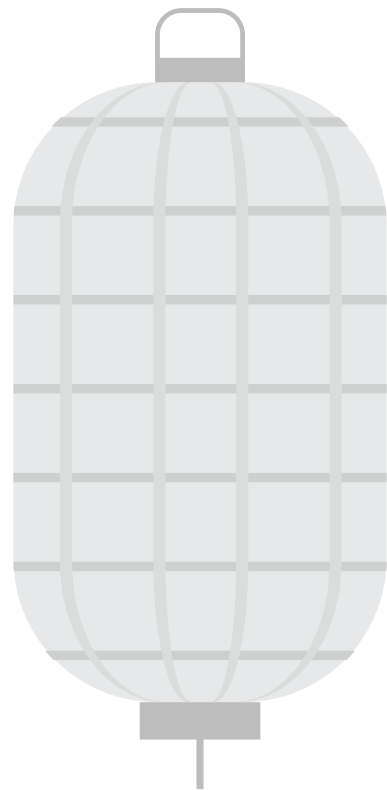
The inside of this little shop was not as artful as Mrs. Braganza's. LED lights shone fiercely onto green walls, and there was a crackling sound of flies getting electrocuted on the bug zapper. But I knew I had entered the right place because I saw the people. On the far left, a man with a solitary liquor bottle scribbling something on a piece of paper. On the table opposite, a woman sat with her infant, making little gurgling sounds that made the baby laugh. A little in front of them sat an old woman who seemed to be knitting or crocheting.

Because History repeats itself, I wasn't much surprised with what followed later. Like most scholarship students alone in a foreign country, I met someone. A Japanese someone whom I took to a Japanese joint where time had no value. Where we ordered tomato soup and left our initials engraved on a wooden table. Time passed. I lost him and got married

to another man, whom Time liked more than my Japanese lover. Many years down the lane, when my husband died and left me without any insurance or grief to live upon, I decided to work in that little Japanese shop. The owner, a small, fragile man of uncertain age, soon decided to leave for his village where he could die in peace. He was tired of the immortality offered by his little shop. He left it in my willing hands and I made it into Mrs. Braganza's Soups and Savour. Complete with the lanterns and cherry blossoms, with the engravings and the photo of my late husband there on the wall.

So, you see, plots and settings have merged into one, and time has passed as if it always intended to revisit the same place. Now, I give sanctuary to the world-beaten refugees of Time, who sometimes ask me the secret of my glowing skin and undiminishing age. Not many people would believe my little theory of relativity, where Time sometimes stopped till someone had finished a bowl of soup. So I did not mention it to them.

Anyway, my little break is over. I have customers to look after. Just now, a mother has entered, holding the hand of her little girl. Like another mother before her. As you can see, time makes us run in circles, and all we desire from time to time, is a little time out. But, my break is over.



Memoir

Finding Home

Roshan Johri

The In-Between

Haritima Sharma

I Have An Exam

Tomorrow

Riya Lohia

Finding Home

ROSHAN JOHRI

It was around the autumn of 2017, my first year of college was halfway through, and my friends and I decided to explore North Kolkata. We were a group of three. Unlike me, Aastha and Tanvi were new to the city and perhaps much more eager to explore than I had ever been. It was not only where my college, Scottish Church, was located but also one place I had detested since the day I had first traveled there earlier that year. I had visited Shyam Bazaar and saw the streets strewn with filth and potholes carving the road with craters. The lanes were inundated with murky water, and heaps of mud blocked the sparse manholes. After a spell of monsoon showers, the buildings looked decrepit, like haunted houses. The architecture was alien; there were no residential apartments for the longest stretches but only standalone houses painted in shades of fading colors. The pavements curved without sharp edges, often disappearing as the lanes grew narrower. The air smelled of damp earth, and the dingy streets reeked of isolation. I had grown up in the city and was faithful to the urban aesthetic. I remember the first day of college, sighing on my way in the metro, rueful of the comfort I was leaving behind.

But this time, I decided to explore the place with a fresh perspective. We started from our college and boarded the hourly tram that passed by Hedua Park at the end of the lane.

When we stepped in, Aastha noted inquisitively, "It feels so strange to have tram

tram lines in the middle of the street."

Tanvi nodded, "I agree," adding almost instinctively, "Do trams wait at traffic signals too?"

Aastha, now facing me, "What if a car breaks down on the tracks?"

I responded with a clueless shrug, settling in the seat by the window.

An otherwise impatient traveler, I found myself reposed by the sauntering pace of the locomotive. To our surprise, we were able to secure seats. Although the bogie had few people, it appeared filled, whole like a sphere, replete with density. Unlike the urban metros, the tram didn't have empty spaces. It didn't have hanging handlebars that let passengers lug their bodies to its jerky motions. The tram had wooden seats with ample spacing and giant fans that towered over you, spinning with a relaxed pace akin to the journeying vehicle. There were no automatic doors, just a wide entryway with a pole separating it into two lanes. The tram only had two bogies; perhaps it was never meant to be a vehicle of utilitarian purpose. A conductor stood near the entrance, dressed in a pale khaki uniform with a sling bag dangling across his body, clinking of abundant loose change. His fingers held a makeshift bundle of rectangular paper strips that served as journey tickets.

We felt like misfits traveling with passengers

dressed in ethnic outfits. Their earthy skin glistened with the sweat of the sultry day, unsettled by the steamy graze of the hot, humid air. I put on my earphones, deciding to shut out the chatter with a pop song, looking out at the passers-by. People on the streets walked with typical candor, unbothered by the ticking of the hour. Groups of men and women crowded the tea stalls set up by the pavement. Mothers grouped around a nearby school's mouth, their round cheeks lighting up at the sight of their returning children, the large round bindi on their forehead matching the color of their saree. This was rather unusual in the schools of South Kolkata, where busy working mothers barely got time to receive their returning children. Several cycle carriages drove side by side, carrying heaps of books to College Street. A succession of fish shops was set up in the road ahead of us, the starting lane of a bazaar, with Rui, Papda, and Katla ready to be bought and cooked for lunch. You'd never find such outdoor fish shops on a South Kolkata road, the localities were too posh, and the people had their prejudices for Gariahat and Lake Market.

As soon as the song ended, I picked up on a conversation that made me pay attention to the world that traveled inside the tram. With a laughing poignancy, an older woman had the entire bogey raptured with a bittersweet story.

"Pintu is an engineer. It's God's blessing that he is doing so good in life, but he lives in London."

"Why don't you video call him? Today's technology doesn't let distance impede communication."

"I do, probably more than he likes, but a video call cannot suffice my desire to feed him. I always lie when I cook his favorite mustard fish, or Golbari mutton curry, or when I prepare payesh (rice kheer) for prasad."

Something resonated in me that made me not turn away from the ensuing conversation. I had always felt smothered by the soul of the city. The afternoon naps, the charm of staying home on weekends, and the candor of lobbying around tea stalls during vacant

evenings had never appealed to me. For the longest time, I had wished to move out, perhaps to Delhi, or Bangalore, or Mumbai. In one of those cities where men didn't have round faces and pot bellies, where people ventured out for better prospects, where the world was prized over the home. Yet hearing the old woman ignited in me a lovesick nostalgia that didn't move me immediately but filled me with an indeterminate blithe feeling, the kind that leaves one smiling without realizing it. It made me think about all the people I'd be leaving behind if and when I left, about all the lives I made a difference in, about myself, and the many places I called a second home.

Soon we reached the edge of the Bagbazar Ghat. The expanse of the view that lay ahead of us seemed incomprehensible. Hooghly galloped, lashing against the sloping edges of Kolkata and Howrah, flowing in a hurried rush foreign to the tram. She was like the current of urbanization, never stationary, all-consuming, majestic. Hooghly had become the color of clay. Her luscious locks appeared fringed in the torment of the high tide. Her grace was now rage, her luster an opaque mirror. Small row boats adorned Hooghly's neck like a garland, scattered in their leisurely lounging. They were accompanied by the more giant commuter ferries that sounded of heritage motors and jaded journeys. People bathed by the edges of the ghat, undoing their sins and bodily dirt. Trees arched into the river body, shivering from the titillating current of the stream. It seemed as if Hooghly was burdened with the decadence of the modern world.

We rushed to hop onto the almost departing ferry. It wasn't so that we would have to wait a lot if we had missed it, but we were city kids; we liked things happening fast, and we never paused to look around. But today was different. The ferry moved slowly, defying the mandate of the river. While leaves, bottles, wrappers, and fishing nets overtook us, we leaned against the rusted railing, looking out into the distance and observing the moving city. Autos looked like miniature toys, wound to the farthest spring, rushing past traffic and disappearing behind buildings. Cycles and

rickshaws appeared sporadically, often with families of three mounted on them. People walked carelessly to their destinations, treading on the road instead of the pavement. They were joined by the street dogs, who occasionally received a stranger's kindness, wagging their tales until their territories ended.

"Isn't that Howrah Bridge?" asked Tanvi as the ferry sailed from underneath it.

I replied, "Yes, and there's a second one. It looks a lot like that famous bridge you have in Mumbai."

Tanvi asked, "The Bandra-Worli Sea Link?"

I replied, "Perhaps I can't put a finger on its name now."

Aastha remarked, "It might be so, but nothing beats Kolkata's charm."

I smiled back with a confused gaze, wondering what "charm" Aastha alluded to.

The sun beamed bright, and under the warm glow of the October heat, we smiled at each other, enjoying the river breeze. We were accompanied by many travelers, none with the same idle gratitude as ours. A group of fishermen carried giant dishes knitted out of hay and fiber, stuffed with fishing nets, reeking of the smell of the sea. They sat on the end of the ferry, opposite the sailor, accompanied by a group of folk singers who strummed their ochre ektaras (a traditional Bengali instrument), accompanying a musical note to the loud cacophony of the sailing crowd. Women sat with their husbands and children, their Shakha-Pola bangles clanking to the beat of their collective laughter. The men, dressed in a range of kurtas and a few in dhuti-pajamas, discussed Mamata Didi, Sourav Dada, and Mohun Bagan. Some young boys, perhaps a few years younger than us, sat with their legs dangling from the boat's edge. We stood in silence, basking in the mirth of this joyride, when suddenly we heard a loud plunge, barraging the river's surface with concentric ripples. We were alarmed by the sound's striking suddenness and immediately grasped by the fear of an unfortunate accident

But almost instantaneously, we saw the boys emerging from the dive. It was common for local boys to jump into the strong currents of the Hooghly; they had grown up in the streets. Our appalled shrieks soon turned into amused chuckles while the other passengers continued their habitual chatter. It dawned upon me that perhaps I had only looked at life through a carefully calculated prism. I had restricted myself to growing without spontaneity, habituated to the expectant monotony of the city.

We debarked at Sovabazar and hailed hand-pulled rickshaws to Kumartuli. The puller of my rickshaw was a dusky old man about fifty with a white scruff and a bald head. He wore an off-white vest which was probably as white as snow when he had bought it new. He had a red flannel cloth wrapped around him like a pair of pants and a red dusting cloth hanging by his shoulders. His bony arms made conspicuous his concerted effort to pull the rickshaw while his now receding muscles barely jutted out from his skinny frame. He struck up a conversation, addressing us as Babu, delighted that young kids like us took an interest in learning about the craft of Kolkata's potters. We met his amusement with affirming smiles. He reminisced about his young days when Durga Pujo started much before Panchami, with the creation of idols at Kumartuli. He remarked how heaps of clay would magically transform into Maa herself, her figure soon colored in the hue of human skin, her arms adorned with maternity, her form emanating the blessings of the divine. Back then, Pujo was not a fancy competition; it was a celebration, an open, honest welcoming of a bride to her father's home. Durga was not a doll; she was a mother herself.

"Babu, promise me you'll visit Maa every year," the old man exhorted us in Bengali.

"We will, Kaku," I replied back in Bengali, leaving Aastha and Tanvi with vacant stares.

"She is Kolkata's joy, even if you don't, keep her in your heart...."

"We will, Kaku...."

"I know you will; come, we've arrived at the

entrance; that'll be 30 rupees."

Turning my back to my friends' inquisitive gazes, I got off the rickshaw with a nervous urgency, wanting to avoid meeting eye-to-eye with the old puller. Looking back, I believe I was embarrassed that despite growing up in the heart of the city, I had no sentimental connection with its culture. Durga Pujo was more of a vacation for me than a celebration. Perhaps I never grew up as religious as the previous generation, but I only thought of Pujo as an opportunity to revel and feast. It was about buying new clothes, planning parties, and pandal hopping. It was never about embracing Maa's Aagamani (Homecoming).

As we proceeded inside, a long narrow lane awaited us. By the opening stood a small crowd of laborers who relished their mid-day meal of aloo-kochuri with a side of green chilies and shredded onions. The smell of the deep-fried indulgence mixed with the pious fragrance of incense sticks that remained affixed on perforated potatoes, reminded me of the Sharma sweet shop that I'd often visit after my early morning tuitions. We moved onto a dusty unconstructed pathway proliferated by a succession of tents that stood contiguous to each other. Several hands poked out into the passageway, many colored in ombres of yellow and beige, others still in a grey hue. Stray cats lurked by the corners, musing in their own world. The tents had huge ceilings, taller than the large idols that towered in the many fancy pandals of Kolkata. They had bulbs hanging from the top, emanating an orange glow that bestowed a sense of divinity upon the still-wet idols. Outside, petals of purple flowers lay trampled on the entryway. Several bamboo poles lay stacked on the farther end, emulating a mini-mountain, which the eager local kids climbed to the top of.

We were welcomed with a familiar geniality as if we were expected. We were offered tea, served in bhaars (earthen tea cups), and given a tour of the idols housed in that tent. Almost all the men of such potter families would take after the craft, but perfecting it was a matter of patience and perseverance. The creation of Maa was an incredibly personal art that required an individual connection. They

described how every idol expressed a different emotion for them, and although they did it to earn a livelihood, birthing the idols was beyond the flux of transactions.

One of the potters remarked, "The sculpture style of the Goras inspires Mahisasura."

Another added, "All the embellishments that you see today were once made out of real silver and gold."

The former continued, "But Maa retains her Bengali roots. On the auspicious day of Mahalaya, we perform Chokkudaan (Painting of eyes) and fulfill our duties."

By the time we were done with Kumartuli, the day had exhausted itself, and dusk was settling in. We had a long journey to make, but I had to go even farther. One by one, several realizations took over me, reforming the chapel of my mind. Kolkata had started making sense; the warmth of its name, the spirit of its being, and its soul had begun to envelop me. I went back home in a pensive state, a little less hostile to the thought of North Kolkata. Kolkata's charm didn't manifest itself in its urban centers, in the posh lanes of Southern Avenue, or the five-star restaurants in Park Street, in the breezy winds of the Sarovar Lake, or the busy shops of South City Mall. Despite times changing, Kolkata could hold on to the little pieces of her childhood. Her joy found a refuge in the reminiscence of the rickshaw puller, the tainted hands of the potter, and the pining heart of Pintu's mother. North Kolkata was no longer North for me; it was Kolkata herself.



The In-Between

HARITIMA SHARMA

The gentle rays of the November sun fell onto me, warming me up that afternoon. It had barely been a week since I had joined the firm, and I had already put in a week-long WFH request for my 22nd birthday. My team head and I stood outside the office in the slim lanes of Champa Gali. The smoke of her cigarette wafted in the air, slowly dissipating as she asked, “*So, where are you going for your birthday?*”

“*I am going home.*”

“*Home? You’re not from Delhi?*” she asked wide-eyed.

This interaction repeated itself in a similar fashion with other co-workers until the entire office knew that the next Tuesday was my birthday and that Delhi was not my hometown. Maybe it was the slight accent or the lack thereof, maybe it was the way I dressed and held myself, or maybe it was the UP stereotypes that I defied. Whatever it was, I had finally succeeded in achieving what the 18-year-old me had so desperately wanted.

As I approached the end of the first year of my bachelor’s, the pandemic hit the world, and I had to spend the next two-and-a-half years of my life caged at Rampur, my hometown. I must admit, going into lockdown wasn’t so different from the first eighteen years of my life—the only difference was that earlier, I *wouldn’t* step

step out, and during lockdown, I *couldn’t*.

Rampur is a small suburban town with roads that get empty by 9 o’clock at night, residential colonies that didn’t exist half a century ago, and a dead socio-cultural life. I have spent eighteen years of my life with little to no exposure to recreational or intellectual spaces—I am talking no fastfood joints, no malls, no multiplexes, no parks, no libraries, no non-academic book shops, no nothing that could be a reason to step out.

Therefore, going to Delhi for college was the glimmering light at the end of the tunnel. It was the only way I could have been free from the grasp of this suffocating town. Much to my dismay, going to Delhi turned out to be less like coming out of a cave and more like diving off a board into a pool but discovering it was a dark, bottomless ocean.

Almost half of my college life was spent wondering if I had made a wrong decision and if all this hard work was worth it. I felt like a crumpled-up receipt tossed in a dark corner of a drawer—irrelevant and unimportant. From being a top-scoring student, I had become a struggling student trying to catch up with everyone else. I could feel my footing lose; I was in the eye of the storm.

Over time, an uneasiness and anxiety regarding Delhi made a home inside me. Every time I would be returning to college from my break, I would be edging to a breakdown with

my heart palpitating to burst out of my chest.

The first trip I took to Delhi was in July 2019. I had cleared the list for DU and had to go to secure my seat.

Our journey began at dawn. A rented car was arranged for a six-hour drive to Delhi via Noida-Ghaziabad. I sat in the back with my eyes glued to the windows. I can still recall how the sky gradually rolled over from night to bright sunlight peeking through the clouds. The air was moving across my skin with a cold touch. I could feel the chill inside the car. Mainly, the route consisted of highways, bare-bricked settlements, and dingy shops sprinkled with stretches of lush fields of rice, wheat, and mustard.

Three rivers—Kosi, Ganga, and Yamuna, were my checkpoints. The small muddy river that barely had any water was Kosi; the one with a red clock tower on its shore and an array of vibrant boats and barely clothed people was Ganga; and the one that came after crossing the towering apartment complexes was Yamuna. Crossing Kosi meant we had exited Rampur, crossing Ganga meant we were halfway through, and crossing Yamuna meant we had entered Delhi.

My first foretelling regarding my future college life was also on this journey. Glancing at those apartment complexes for the first time was daunting. Those apartments with myriads of towers with floors stacked on each other, housing countless people with lives of their own. I wondered what it must be like to live in these apartments. I felt uneasy and intimidated at the sight of these buildings. I wondered how different the entire trajectory of my life would be if I had lived in an apartment near Delhi and not a small town that hardly anyone knew about.

The death of the actor Raaj Kumar was covered greatly in the local newspapers in Rampur. “Yeh bacchon ke khelne ki cheez nahi hai,” was the signature dialogue of the actor—This is not for kids to play with, he

would say, referring to the Rampuri Chakku. The single-edged blade rose to fame and made the bladesmiths of the Chakku Bazar (Knife Market) highly praised. The switchblade soon made its way to real life after glorification in movies and was eventually banned by the government in the 1990s. For all my life, Rampur has held its prized possession on my throat, putting me right where it wanted.

Most of my insecurities stemmed from what I like to call ‘the inability of my hometown to provide me with anything substantially helpful.’ As someone who has an interest in liberal arts, Rampur and its most esteemed schools couldn’t provide me with Arts and Humanities as a stream. After all, Arts was considered to be for those who were not ‘bright enough’ to do STEM or Commerce. My own mother, despite having done an MA in English, was disappointed with my decision to choose arts. Therefore, having no other option, I spent two years of my high school grappling with accounts and business.

“You all must have been the top students in your schools, but this is different. The English they teach you in CBSE is not the same as studying Literature.” one of our teachers told us within the first week of classes, *“Take this seriously; you won’t be spoon-fed here.”*

For the rest of the course, she did not leave any opportunity to remind us how lousy we were. *“My 8-year-old nephew has better grammar than you guys,”* she told us after our first class test. While I dismissed most of what our professors said as a group struggle, I could not overcome the gaping abyss between me and my classmates.

The first two years were spent trying to catch up with everyone else. The last got split, half in prayers of college re-opening and half making the most out of the on-campus experience. But all three years were devoured by illness, isolation, academic pressure, and family feuds. I would often make excuses and elaborate lies to come to Delhi and find some respite, sometimes for a handful of days and sometimes for months. Each trip would begin with high hopes and great expectations, which

would gradually die a painful death despite my efforts to create a haven for myself.

Contrary to my usual despondent demeanour, I was confident and hopeful about taking a gap year after graduating in 2022. Although I had been planning to pursue higher studies in literature, I knew I wouldn't be able to take on an intensive master's course. I needed time to prepare for CUET and get a proper rest, one that is away from home. It seemed like a good time to take up a job and build up a basis of knowledge that I had not been able to grasp fully through my computer screen. But, by the time October rolled around, all hopes were smashed onto the floor. I was back home searching for another job, a less taxing but financially stabilising one.

"Iss baar toh tumne karliya yeh, dobara marzi nhi chalegi tumhari," my mother said to me one evening—You have done whatever you wanted this time; you won't be allowed again. She had always accused me of finding ways of going to Delhi, and her claims weren't unfounded. I could have stayed at home and prepped for CUET if I wanted to. But I didn't, I couldn't have. *"Admission mile toh thik, nhi toh ghar pe baithna,"* she added—Either get into a college or stay at home.

My mother has spent her whole life in Rampur; she is used to it all—its snail-pace life, bad-tasting restaurants, and restrictive social circles (to name a few). But more importantly, she doesn't understand why someone would want to leave the comfort of home and live in a far-off city. Perhaps if she could understand my suffocation and dissatisfaction with the city, she would let me be. But I didn't either, not until I moved out.

I was sitting at the famous Lover's Point, or LP, as it was called, with two other classmates whom I had met that day for the first time. I was wearing a teal kurta with vibrant thread embroidery on the neck; my hair was long and pleated in a braid, and perhaps I was carrying my blue backpack from high school. I do not

remember everything clearly. My memories are a bit hazy, but the feeling of my stomach slowly churning, becoming conscious of every movement, every breath, wanting to find a corner to hide myself from everyone else—that I remember well.

This feeling persisted for the next ten months as I tried to lay myself down as a doormat for people to walk over. I was attempting to get close to my seniors and batchmates; I wanted to be included in their circles. But soon, the realisation struck me. My world was very different from theirs. They did things far better than I could. They knew so much more than I did. They had much more to say than I did. Every day, I went about putting on a brave face, yet I could feel myself crack from the inside.

My first visit to Rampur during the mid-term break of the first semester was surprisingly refreshing. The quiet of the town was a relief from the chaos of Delhi. The clear night sky and sightings of sparrows instead of pigeons were delightful. But that only lasted for a handful of days.

Within a span of a couple of months, I felt I had moved beyond the boundaries of this place, where it held me at knifepoint for years. The silence of the city was deafening; the night sky started to collapse onto me, and the birds felt like sirens. I knew at that moment, as I walked the streets with my mother, that I could not be Rampur's resident anymore.

"Chameleon behaviour, that's what I call it," said my fellow copywriter as we stepped outside our office for a smoke break. Even though I did not smoke at the time, I went out with my colleague to bask in the winter sun. "You adapt, change yourself according to the place," he continued, "Even I have done it. It's instinctive."

The next day, I was to leave for my home. It was my birthday. I loaded my luggage on the bus and sat in my seat. Within half an hour,

familiar stretches of land greeted me again—the mustard and wheat fields, the three vast rivers, and the roadside shops. With my headphones in and my gaze stuck to the window, for a brief moment, I felt contentment.

For all these years, I have repeatedly tried (and failed) to find a place of serenity and comfort, a place to rest for a moment, a place to shed the burden off of my shoulders—of expectations, norms, and duties—a place to call home.

I have been running between the two cities—Rampur and Delhi—back and forth, back and forth. When Rampur felt unbearable, I fled to Delhi. When Delhi became overwhelming, I ran to Rampur. The 200-odd kilometres stretched between the two could tell the entire story of my life. This stretch of land contained within itself the beautiful and the scornful, the rough and the refined, the ever-evolving and the forever ruined. These 200-odd kilometres contained the multitudes that I couldn't make peace with, yet they lay there in harmony with each other. This medley, in between the two ends that I tried to make homes out of, lay the land that let me live six hours of my life without any expectations, norms, or duties. My whole life scattered across this in-between.



I Have an Exam Tomorrow

RIYA LOHIA

I started flying alone since I was twelve at the beginnings and ends of academic sessions. To and from the Mohanbadi airport, an hour-long drive from my home. First, to my boarding school in Rajasthan and then to my college in Delhi. Tomorrow, again I had a flight, but unfortunately, there was a strike. Therefore, a curfew. My parents and grandparents were all positioned near the sofa, some standing others sitting, deliberating with serious faces. The theme was ‘A flight was never missed and it wouldn’t be missed tomorrow either’. I was a listener—

Papa: The curfew will start at 5...if we manage to cross Chabua before that—

Baba: Arre, people do it, Mittal’s son went last time.

Dadima: You will have to wake up at 2 in the morning to leave the house at 4. As if you all can.

Ma: It would be best if we aim to leave at 3:30.
Dadima: Flight will depart at 12. What will she do for so long in the airport? She can go sometime else.

Baba: What is the point of missing her flight?!
...

The discussion went on for longer. A plan was charted. Tasks were allotted. I was strictly instructed to wake up at 3, my only task, which they knew I would fail to do.

The night before departing was always when too much happened all of a sudden. We felt time. My Dadima always remarked, as if by custom, “By tomorrow at this time you will be so far. What will you be doing?” I packed my bags with interventions from my mother at every point. So many concerns— everything must fit well, nothing important should be left behind, not too heavy, not too bulky. Packing, unpacking, repacking. Every time the bags were packed; my mother would lift them to assure me that they were within the limits prescribed by the airline. She had a magical power. She measured not just my luggage but flour, dal and veggies, and would guess correctly even till the tenth unit. Her eyebrows knitted and lips curled as she estimated, “13-13.5, not more than that, don’t worry!”. The bags were rolled to the hall: a grey, a blue, and a jute one with a rolled blanket in it. Preparations done. The charger and the sandwiches, it was always sandwiches, would be added in the morning. They would go into my backpack. All packed- even my toothbrush. One travelled with me and the other stayed in Assam. Two toothbrushes, two beds, two rooms, two lives. Two selves split apart by the width of the country.

In the dark haze of the early morning, we performed our assigned duties with a frenetic pace that only deadlines bring out. My mother’s cracked heels strode throughout the house, and I failed to wake up on time. Commotion—Comotimon—Contimomo. We were late, and we knew it. Perhaps, we would

never make it on time; a strange unrest crept into us. Papa and I left the house at 4. He had worn a new track jacket—at my mother's insistence—black with comfortable pockets on the front, and sleeves with three running white stripes that covered his driving arms. He, who could never rush with his driving, tried to drive a little faster than his usual pace. By all means, he was out of his element.

We were worried we would reach Chabua right around 5, when the strikers would begin to gather, and the darkness would dilute into dawn. On looking back, and trying to tie the fragments of the day—the foggy white haze of early January, the barren trees, my three small loaded bags—into a narrative, I couldn't remember what the strike was for. Was it for expressing resentment towards the state, demanding the release of a political prisoner or due to internal strife? I have no memory because there was always a strike about something or the other. They were protests of dissent and, at times, of disturbance. So, why use 'strike'? And, who were these strikers? The people and their causes all merged in the word 'strike'. Despite the remoteness of the bagan (tea garden), where I spent my first twelve years, one could still feel the effects of a strike there. When things got really bad, my school, which was in the military Cantt, and the tea gardens were also shut. Strikes meant no school and staying at home. It meant that no one could go to work. No vehicles. No movement.

In the car time passed by quicker than either of us wanted. I repeatedly looked at my phone screen, which displayed the time in big fonts: 04:32 Home Time. My father, who was never much of a talker anyway, was tightlipped, with all his focus directed towards the road. Time sprinted. We were slow. We moved through an eerily clear road, feeling relieved at the rare sight of another car. *Perhaps, it, too, is going to the airport. We are not alone. What will happen if we can't cross Chabua on time? What will happen if we were caught?* It was this unknowingness that fuelled my fear. 04:44. My anxiety was mounting. I recalled stories of violence: bits of information that I had accessed unauthorized—some school bus conductor who gained attention by telling

forbidden stories had dramatically narrated, "When the military first came to settle here, the natives had not liked it. Everyone feared the local leaders, it was much more back then than it is now. They had even chopped a few heads of some faujis. This was their power. They were unafraid. Now they still recognize the authority of the army people; back then, it was worse." 4:49. I had overheard some people speaking about instances of kidnapping. A man was abducted and left in the forest without water or food for days. His ear was cut and sent to his family to threaten them for ransom. Was it his ear or was it his thumb? I couldn't recall—it was either the case of Vangogh or Eklavya, definitely not Surpanakha. I had heard how Papa was threatened with repeated calls for exhorting money. Maybe if he refused, the same fate would have awaited him. Were these instances unrelated or carried out by the same people? There were different political unions, AASU, ULFA, AJP, yet they became one in the distance I had with the place. I had seen one of the names painted all over the freshly lime-coated walls of my old house. LONG LIVE AASU in deep red. I had stood outside my house, invoking codes of violation at their sight without any understanding of politics, waving to the convoy of army trucks passing by. Some faujis waived, others didn't.

04:58.

My father slowed the car down; the cars ahead of us had stopped too. We formed a queue. The strikers had started gathering. We waited there in silence, saturated with fear. We saw some other people getting out of their cars. Papa got out too. I saw some men burning tyres. Besides the light from the cars, now the fire too shone on their covered faces. These people whom I knew nothing about, I knew this much that while I was packing my bags, someone among them was collecting tyres for burning the next day. If only I had woken up a bit earlier, maybe we could have made it, but everyone was late. 'They' were early. We had reached before 5, yet they stopped us. Smoke filled the foggy air. Papa was still out. As I sat inside waiting, I imagined the worst. I was restless. After a lot of indecision, I got out of the car to look for him, to just get a glance at

him. In less than two minutes, I got back inside, having failed to locate him. Being inside the car felt safer. He returned after moments that were torturous for me. He announced, "Nothing could be done. Let's go," leaving no room for further inquiry, as he occupied his warmed seat. I thought, "Maybe if I go and tell 'them' that I have an exam tomorrow, they might understand. A lie for life. I wanted to ask Papa if it could be done. I wanted him to give me a chance. It was then my father gasped in horror, "I can't find the keys..."

Panic struck us both.

"Did you drop it somewhere? Check your pockets." I looked in the car with hurried hands.

"I did. I can't find it."

"It must be somewhere."

My father's hands were rummaging as he stressed, "It was here only..." I saw the cars before us leave one by one. We were alone now. I imagined the strikers surrounding us and smashing the car. My heart pounded with the intensity of their blows. The glass cracked.

What now?

What now?

What now?

"Found it!" exclaimed Papa. I felt as if my life was saved. "Where did you find them?" "I had kept them in here. I am not used to this," he answered, gesturing towards the pockets on the front of his jacket. We dashed in our unharmed car only stopping after we had covered a safe distance. The strikers were out of sight. Papa called home to consult with Ma. She was convinced that we could at least try explaining our situation to them, "She is a student. She should be allowed." I told my mother about my idea. She agreed. My father was outright reluctant. From a distance, we heard Baba suggesting a route that went from the bagans to the airport which might be safe. His suggestion was not taken into account then. As I continued to insist, it was decided that we would return to the spot from where

we had just escaped. I would be given a chance. I rehearsed my lines again and again. *I am a student. I study in Delhi. I have a flight today and an exam tomorrow... No no no. I am a student. My college is in Delhi. I have a very important exam tomorrow. I cannot miss my flight. Could you please let us go? My father is just dropping me.* Repeat. *I am a student...* We reached the spot. I started walking towards a man standing on the other side of the road. A swirl of emotions guided my steps. My heartbeat punctuated my thoughts. Despite his covered face, his adolescent stature revealed that he was young. I vocalized my rehearsed lines with increased desperation, hoping it would add to my plea. He nodded attentively throughout and then decided, "I need to speak to my senior." I had hopes that it might actually work. Right then, another man rode on his motorbike towards us. "What happened?" Presumably, a senior. After hearing about my fabricated emergency, he asked for my admit card. I had no admit card. I hoped that my face didn't betray me. I responded reassuringly, "I can get it from the car." I returned in a hurry to the car and gave a similar description to my father. He muttered, "What will you do now?"

"I could show some other documents and just make something up," I proposed.

"You did what you wanted. Sit in the car."

Without retorting, I sat in the car, and we left that spot once again to park at a safe distance for another call of consultation.

This time we decided to go with Baba's plans. Papa wasn't aware of any of the roads mentioned by Baba, who was a connoisseur of roads and cars. Yet, now with the imposed urgency of an actual exam scheduled the next day, he decided to give it a try. We drove through unmapped sites amidst the foggy green on the uncemented roads. Since the day had begun, so much had happened. Colours and tones changed around us constantly. Now that we were away from the strike, as the sun glimmered on every dew-covered surface, the winter morning was beautiful. We were deep in the bagaan. No car was visible. Soon people disappeared too. It was a little past six now.

Amidst the beauty, we realized that we were lost. We checked our phones. No network. Our worries hovered again. Papa informed me that our fuel was about to run out. We needed to make a decision quickly. *We could either continue to pursue these uncharted roads in this wilderness, which didn't provide any guarantee of our safe arrival at the airport, or go back home. What if we proceeded but couldn't reach the airport and also found ourselves with no fuel to return? Most of the petrol pumps are also shut. But my flight cannot be missed. I have an important exam tomorrow. We cannot go back.* In this nowhere, we suddenly saw a man riding his cycle passing beside the car. A miracle.

"Let's ask him a way out," I proposed.

Papa rolled his window down allowing the cold air in. Gauging the looks of the seemingly old man, he decided which tongue to speak in. "From here Mohanbadi is which way? Airport's way?" he spoke in bagaani.

He stared in confused silence.

He uttered a few incomprehensible syllables and moved his hands.

We stared in confused silence.

He continued to mumble and pointed towards a road.

My father rolled his window up and reversed the car.

"What is happening?" I asked.

"He can't speak" Papa replied with an admission of our poor luck. My father had decided to go back to our house. It was sad that I would have to miss my exam. I thought to be given hope like that then taking it away was cruel and extremely funny. Even at that moment, we acknowledged it.

"Is there enough fuel?" I asked.

...

No reply.

The car moved through roads which were now

covered with shattered glass at regular distances. We reached Tinsukia again without worrying about our pace. The car was unloaded. My bags moved back to the position where they were kept a day before. My family was expecting us to fill the gaps. Papa narrated what had happened, his eyes enlarged by the incredulity of it all. His tense frame had loosened to give way to his enthused gestures. Ma and Dadima were sad that I had to miss my flight, but there was no exam, so it didn't matter. Fate was declared responsible. A new ticket had to be booked, preferably on a day without a strike. I was instructed to take out the tiffins from my bag and put them on the dining table. My brother and I were to eat it for breakfast. I went to our balcony. The streets were scarily empty. I could see the curvature of the land, which on a regular day would be concealed with the cars packed close together. Tinsukia had more cars than its single-laned roads could accommodate. All shut and silenced seemed agreeable from my ivory tower—

"Riyaa!" My thoughts were interrupted by my mother. In a great rush, without much time for explanations, tiffins were packed again, and bags were taken downstairs. Baba was to drive me to a van with army men who were going to the airport. They were only 20 minutes away from the picking point and we were 35 minutes away. We had to rush. Commotion—Cotionomm—Comtimono. Apparently, during my minutes of musing, my mother had contacted our old neighbour—the one who lived near the house that was often vandalized with words like AASU. Despite being a civilian, he was on good terms with the faujis. *Times have changed. The faujis won't be stopped by the strikers. I had to go. Afterall, I have an exam later today.* Unlike Papa, Baba had no qualms about rash driving. Again, we were in a race with time. *I have never missed a flight before and I won't be missing it today.* I was excited and nervous. This time we were a close second. We reached there before them. They were running a little late. The van arrived with two army trucks on each side. Except for my backpack, all my luggage was tied to the roof. I settled in the van. Baba and the fauji beside me exchanged words of assurance. I would be taken care of. We left at

08:16.

They talked among themselves deciding the best way to cover my civilian identity. I was to be someone's daughter or niece. I don't remember. After some discussion, they ordered me to remain quiet even if 'they' inquired anything they would take the questions. Around army people, my identity was always that of a civilian. I was always aware that I was an outsider. I called my father to say goodbye to him, he was in the washroom when I left. I realized we were about to reach the check-post, I wanted to show Papa, "Look this is what we have been through together." Right then, I was commanded to keep my phone away and lay low. This was the third time I had arrived at the same spot. One of 'their' members came to ask why the army men were in a civilian van with a civilian driver. A fellow fauji instructed me to get out of the car and stand quietly. I did as I was told. The van was to be emptied and all the faujis had to occupy the army trucks. I was not in question. I stood there with a fauji with a broken leg. Ropes were loosened and our bags were removed one by one. The empty van with its driver was caught in the strife. More negotiations. The driver had to pay for his civilian identity. I was told to climb the truck and duck with the bags towards the back. Even amidst the atmosphere of frenzy and fear. I ensured all my bags were transferred. One... two... three. I hid myself lest someone noticed and questioned. For some reason, no one had until then. I laid low waiting. Again, I could feel time. The hands kept ticking on my wristwatch. In the dark silence, time was my only company. I kept planning what was to happen if the faujis were to abandon me. Where would I go and that too with so many bags? I visualized myself running away, saving myself. Surviving. From a little hole on the tarp, I looked at the number of people that were significantly greater than the morning and their feverish energy. They could easily lynch. *What are they demanding? What have they been demanding? I don't know.* I only knew fear. I was an outsider here too removed from the local politics of the town and its people. I only knew that I had an exam later that day and I must be in Delhi.

I didn't miss my flight. The trucks moved and I reached the airport unhurt. I reached my strange yet familiar room in Delhi. I could finally unwind. Time passed without my notice as I unpacked my bags one by one—blue, grey, jute. I checked my phone. The lock screen flashed:

19:20 Local | 19:20 PM Home
6 January 2019

A redundant feature in my phone that always reminded me of home. Yesterday, around the same time, my Dadima, with emotions clogging her throat, had remarked, "By tomorrow at this time you will be so far. What will you be doing?"



Contributors



ANANYA SHASHIDHAR

B.A. (Research) English

“Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts.”



ANINDYA SINGH

M.Sc. Economics

A mediocre body of water, somedays a writer, somedays a freedom fighter.



GAUTAM KAVALI

BSc. (Research) Physics

“Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself.” - Whitman



HARITIMA SHARMA

M.A. English

almost always rotting in their room and trying to make art out of the horrors of life



JAYASUCHITA JAYAKUMAR

B.Sc. (Research) Economics and Finance

It would always remain a mystery to her, if she was nosy because of her love for stories or if she loved stories because she was nosy.

Contributors



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B.A. (Research) English

hoping I am not just an english major to y'all but an oomf too



KAVYAA KANNAN

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sometimes i forget that stata isn't a text editor



KRITIKA MISRA

M.A. English

Aro-Ace-Agender. Is an entity that is interested in things. Everything reminds them of everything else.



MEGHA MAZUMDAR

Ph.D. English

She has been scribbling since she was four, has been listening to Lana since she was 14, and is now researching death.



NAISHA KHAN

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"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race."

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Quotes give me citation anxiety...so I'll just let it be here.



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RIJUL CHAUHAN

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I don't know if I'm writing with a quill, a fountain pen or a glitter gel pen.



ROSHAN JOHRI

M.A. English



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I just want to make nice things and get enough sleep

Contributors



SHASHWAT SHARMA

B.Tech. ECE

I'm an Optimistic Pessimist, I'm positive all things will go wrong



SUBHASH BHAMBHU

Ph.D. IRGS

Strive hard to escape from the trap of 'interpretation'



SUMANTIKA BHANDARI

B.A. (Research) English

I don't like thinking about my feelings, so I write them



VANYA NAUTIYAL

B.A. (Research) English

being perceived as an independently existing entity by others while trying to ignore the possibility of my individuality being an utter farce ew, people.

Crooked Lines Winners '23



SUMAIYA KHAN

Sharada Mandir Higher Secondary School, Goa

Sometimes I wonder who I am but then I watch a dog sleeping on a summer's day and I think, in some life, that is who I must have been.



TRIPARNA DASGUPTA

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AAROHI SINGH

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“Our vanity, our passions, our spirit of imitation, our abstract intelligence, our habits have long been at work, and it is the task of art to undo this work of theirs, making us travel back in the direction from which we have come to the depths where what has really existed lies unknown within us.”

— Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*

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