The Freewheeler

Issue 12 | In/Finite

2024-25

Department of English
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence

Contents

Faculty Advisor's Note

What is community?

I have been thinking about this question for a while now. It can be very easy to lose oneself in the humdrum reality of everyday life, become atomized by workload, routines and the lure of infinite scroll. The kind of community I am interested in thinking through is one that involved work against the shadow of atomization and alienation. It is gratifying therefore to see one such attempt at building community out in print.

This is the twelfth issue of The Freewheeler, and the second one I am seeing in print as the Staff Advisor. Over the past year, I have been incredibly lucky to see the editorial board work extraordinarily hard to push the boundaries of our community, welcome newcomers and reach out to new readership.

This year The Freewheeler left the confines of the lush green Shiv Nadar University (SNU) campus and appeared in bookstores across the country. We are thankful to the literature lovers at Blossoms bookstore, Atta Galatta, and DYU Art Café in Bengaluru, Leaping Windows in Mumbai, and Dog Ear Bookshop in Goa for their support in stocking copies of our magazine. In another first this year, The Freewheeler opened for submissions to people from outside the University. Two such submissions, from Ahmedabad and Delhi, have made it into print in this issue.

We also conducted the second edition of the Crooked Lines Literature Festival and Short Story Competition. We were honoured to have as our guest speakers and jury members, Prof. Sam North, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Exeter (UK), and currently a Visiting Professor in Creative writing at SNU, the award-winning novelist, Jerry Pinto, and Rashmi Menon, Executive Editor at HarperCollins India. We received over 1500 registrations from students across the country. The three winning stories also appear in this issue. We are also honoured to include, for the first time, a guest feature from a professional author, Prof. Sam North.

This work, building this community of writers, editors and readers, takes hard work. Even more so as the editors and volunteers have to also simultaneously juggle assignments, classes, and a varied assortment of deadlines, especially the chief editors, Hari and Inchara. I am grateful to them and the editorial board of The Freewheeler for the work that they have put into not just putting together this issue, but also in building this community through social media, and through their volunteer work for Crooked Lines. We hope you enjoy this issue.

Happy Reading!

Dr. Chinmay Sharma,
Assistant Professor, English,
Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR

Editors' Note

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the twelfth issue of *The Freewheeler*.

Our experiences of time and space shape the very reality we inhabit. With this issue's theme of *In/Finite*, we invite you to explore the ephemeral nature of those in-between moments that quietly challenge settled understandings of the world and the self. The pieces you find within this issue are brave attempts to put into words the myriad ventures into the deepest crevices of the mind. Curating this collection has been a journey of joy, introspection, and discovery. We hope you feel some part of that as you read.

Every work featured here has been carefully chosen by our editorial team—Kritika Misra, Supratik Sinha, Shraddha Balaji, Shivani Krishna, Saatvik Singh, and Aviral Mishra—to captivate, challenge, and comfort you.

Our designers—Sanskriti Sharma, Aryaa Singh, Jatan Kalra, Sneha Chandran Sinha, Arushi Madan, and Navadharshini K—have given the journal its rhythm and breath, making it come to life. A hearty thanks to Sanskriti Sharma for managing the design work so spectacularly. A special mention goes to Aryaa Singh for her whimsical artwork that adorns our Contents page. The cover was designed by Arushi Madan which stunningly encapsulates the journal's spirit in bursts of feeling and colour.

The constant efforts of our Social Media and PR team—Simar Kaur, S. Tara Dwivedi, Vanalee Sahaaria, Baruni Patil, Tanisha Ilwadi, Gunjan Yadav, and Anyuska Sengupta—have expanded the horizons of our journal and brought it into your very hands.

To our Associate Editors, Ishita Kumar and Isha Kansal, who offered their insight, sharp eyes, and unwavering patience—we could not have done it without you.

We are also deeply grateful to Dr Chinmay Sharma for his extraordinary guidance throughout the making of this issue. His encouragement and belief in our vision gave us the freedom to experiment, expand, and ultimately take *The Freewheeler* beyond the boundaries of our university.

This year marks a milestone in our literary journey. For the first time, we have opened our pages to a broader world of voices and imaginations and included contributions from writers outside our campus community. This year, *The Freewheeler* has also made its way to independent bookshops and libraries in major cities across India.

This issue also features a very special guest contribution from acclaimed writer and screenwriter Sam North, whose novel *The Unnumbered* was longlisted for the Man Booker prize in 2010. We are truly honoured to share his work with you.

Finally, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the efforts of the many editors and team members who came before us. For twelve years, their vision, passion, and commitment have sustained *The Freewheeler*. It is on their foundation that this issue stands, and we are proud to carry their legacy forward. We look forward to *The Freewheeler* finding new hands, new places, and new possibilities.

We are hopeful about where we are headed. The road ahead glimmers softly, and we are following it with open eyes.

Thank you for picking this up. Thank you for reading.

Warmly,

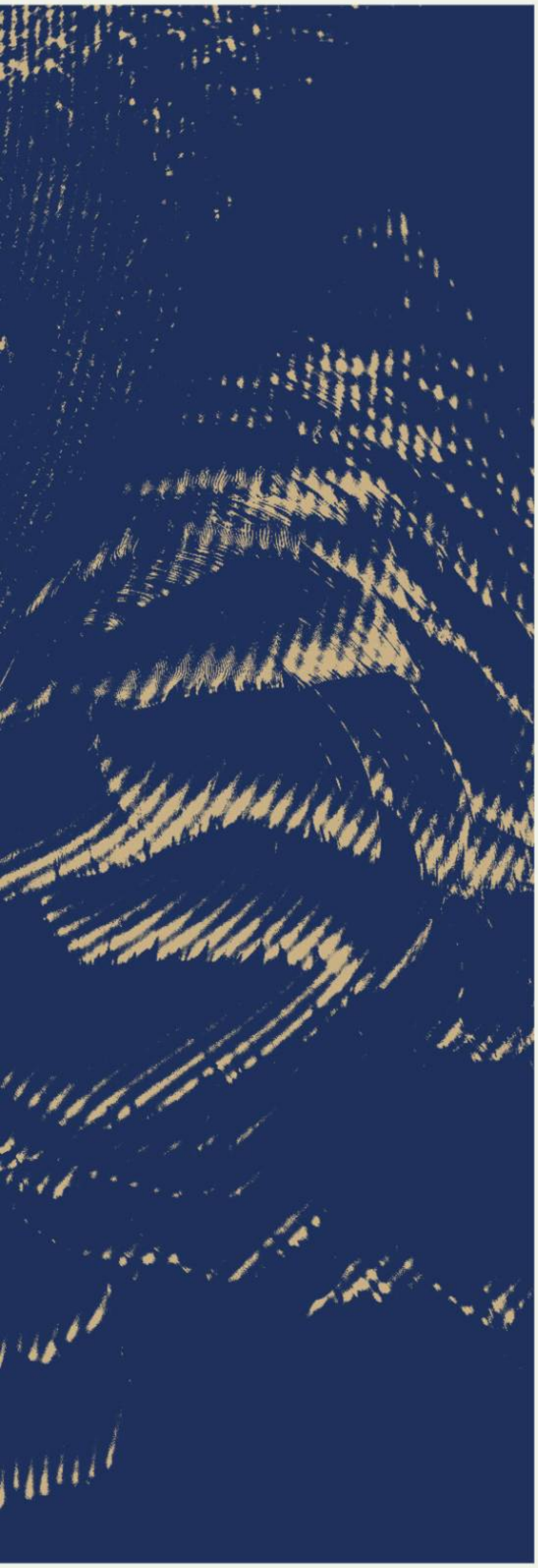
Inchara and Hari

FEGAUTEUSRTE

The Black Swan

Sam North

Visiting Professor, Department of English, SNIoE



It was a boy of fourteen, with black hair, a blue-and-maroon check shirt and black chinos, fingers pegged in his belt, who snagged the flow of people on the pathway; he'd stopped dead still. His parents slowed and stopped also, to look down and see what had caught his attention.

Up until Thursday Jacob had been thought by his parents to be in perfect working order; the flow of his blood had for all his fourteen years made its rounds, red-then-blue, red-then-blue, but unknown to them for the last six weeks or so that one pinprick of fluid had been absent from the system: a silvery, tiny amount, but valuable. The whole family, this weekend, had seen it delivered in a hair-thin needle: insulin.

This Sunday afternoon walk had been their first escape outdoors from Bramble Ward, where they'd learned from the doctors and nurses about the flow of glucose, raw energy, from the bloodstream to the cells, how insulin controls that flow, opens the valve as it were, both to answer the demand for glucose from the body's cells and at the same time keep back enough of it in the blood, but not too much. Jacob had practiced with the smart meters and syringe pens and tried out the pricker: he'd massaged his fingertip to encourage a drop of blood to swell, a miniature bloom. All his family's love had been evoked by that drop of red.

During this walk alongside the river Jacob had been desultory, broken, interrupted, low. His parents wanted to mend him. And they were surprised at what they saw.

The obstruction on the path thickened as one or two

other walkers also paused to look.

Here the concrete path meandered close enough to the river to become almost like a bridge over its marshy northern fringe. Below their feet, close enough to touch if they were to lie on their stomachs and reach down, a black swan lay beautifully on her nest made of mud and blades of stiff marsh grass and twigs. The nest was four inches above the level of the river which sat around her almost as still as a pond because the main flow moved beyond the growths of reeds and grasses that had made for her this little harbour. She had no concern for the people above her; she was busy, her neck worked like the arm of a JCB, extended repeatedly to break off blades of grass, pick up sodden twigs or gobbets of rootled mud, bring back one load after another to add to the embankment that kept her nest safe from the surrounding water.

'A *black* swan,' said Jacob's mother, in wonder.

Jacob knelt down. 'She's hatching her young.'

'Working hard,' came someone else's voice.

And it was true; the black swan didn't stop. The nest looked finished but she was forever mending, making good, building. In the constant hydraulic action of her neck, the chattering of her beak in the water, in her concentration, which meant she had no time for those looking down on her, there was a similarity to all parents' lives: a near-psychotic flow of practical effort.

Here comes the dad.' Jacob pointed to a larger, white swan gliding, three-quarters on, across the river's solid, chocolate flow. 'A white father and a black mother.'

Maybe they don't even see the difference.' Jacob's mother was on her heels next to her son. 'You're doing well, black swan,' she said. 'Don't worry.'

As her mate approached the black swan became more industrious. She moved items from one part of her nest to another, which was unnecessary. She extended her neck further to reach longer-stemmed grasses. She leaned out far enough to reveal three fat, grey eggs. It occurred to Jacob's father that with the approach of her mate she wanted to demonstrate she was doing more than her share of the work.

To the eyes of the human audience the plump eggs were vulgar, in a way. They shouldn't be seen. There was a danger they might cool down with the black swan half-way off her nest.

The white swan navigated the channels between the rushes and arrived, stately as a galleon. He apparently thought his wife shouldn't leave her eggs exposed because his beak snaked out and caught hold of the feathers in the middle of her back, and he tugged.

'He's trying to make her come back,' said Jacob.

'It's like she's trying to go to work but he wants her to stay at home,' came a voice.

Why doesn't he do anything to help?' asked another.

'Men are lazy bastards, that's why.'

The knot of people had grown large enough to oblige people to step off the path if they wanted to go past. The swollen river, a solid block of chocolate water, flowed steadily. The back-and-forth, the up-and-down, of families was reaching its mid-afternoon peak.

Another person joined the knot and began to speak as if he'd known everyone here for some time. His shoulder bumped against Jacob's father.

His voice was quick, and heavily accented: an Irishman. It was difficult to understand but everyone listened closely; and they could make out some of the words. Jacob asked the Irishman a question or two, but then stopped because it wasn't necessary; the Irishman would carry on by himself.

The group standing there, blocking the flow, came

to understand that the Irishman knew more than they did about the riverbank, the water, about this black swan in particular and swans in general, about the power and glory of nature-in-the-raw.

The knot of people began to untangle and leave. No longer did families moving upstream or downstream have to side-step the path to go round them. Everyone wanted to move on.

'What was he saying?' asked Jacob's mum. The look on her son's face had changed, as if a weather system had passed over it.

'Who?'

'That man.'

'I couldn't understand,' replied his father.

Jacob said, 'He was banging on about swans.'

'What kind of things?'

'General stuff.' He couldn't bring himself to say. He himself had been enough bad news for his family, during the past few days. He had to keep himself away from people.

The family arrived at the footbridge and their anxiety about the time, which had made itself felt ever since they were let out of the hospital, surfaced again. 'Shall we head back?' asked Jacob's mother; and she stopped.

The flow of people was blocked again. They stepped to one side in order not to be in the way. People moved back and forth, out on the footbridge, while the chocolate-coloured water flowed underneath, and on the far bank of the river they could see it was the same: a downstream thread of people mingled with the upstream thread.

Jacob thought about the water, where it all came from: the heavy rain, plus all the water from the drains in this city, down the plastic pipes and the clay pipes and the brick sewers, making its way always downhill, like in his geography lesson, before the water entered the river, which flowed thick with the mud picked up by such heavy rains. The river flowed sluggishly through the city while the flow of people on that Sunday afternoon was in both directions and on either side: buggies holding babies and infants, children on scooters, bikes and trikes, plus their parents, and of their pets only the dogs, and one or two grandparents and even an older, teenage cousin or sibling. They moved like trails of ants, in both directions, whereas the river moved only one way, slowly and persistently.

And Jacob thought about the flow in his own body; it was on a miniature scale. In fact, inside all these walking and talking people were similar flows of electricity and blood that gave them the energy they needed to sidestep one another, run ahead, or grip harder their parents' hands when the teen cyclist, startlingly quick, was there in one swerve and then gone again. Parents poured from the town's doorways to make their way down here and take their Sunday walks, to and fro, in an unconscious sympathy, for an hour, with the river, always in one direction, only, in time.

He thought about what the Irishman had said, and a new fear about the future took hold of him. He would have a girlfriend one day and would have to tell her there was something wrong with him. Her expression would fade and she would turn away, choose someone else. Even his friends, now... he rehearsed telling them what had happened.

Jacob's father checked his watch. 'Ten minutes longer. We've just got time to reach the other side and then head back.'

The hospital had instructed them to return no later than five o' clock in order for Jacob to measure his blood-sugar, look at his food and determine a correct dose of insulin, inject and eat.

The autumn sun was harsher on the other side of the

river and the bikes were quicker. It felt like the children were older.

'What did he say about the swans?' asked Jacob's mother.

'He said they're territorial creatures,' answered Jacob, hoping that would be an end to it.

A few minutes later, Jacob's father glanced at his wife. 'We have to get back, don't we?'

'Another few minutes,' she said.

'Can we sit for a while? I'm tired.' Jacob slumped to the ground. He never thought he'd be this type of person, with a 'condition', something wrong with him. He didn't want to be the black swan, someone to be pitied.

'What else did the man say,' asked his mum, 'apart from that swans are territorial?' She sat down next to her son.

Jacob lay down flat. 'Stuff about migrating, and mating, and so on.'

The father was sure that his wife would be thinking the same as he was: that tiredness, and dizziness, were symptoms of a mild hypoglaecemic attack. They had no dextrose tablets, and no food - if their son's blood-sugar level had dropped they'd be stuck. The phone was a hard oblong in his pocket.

'What actually did he say, though?' asked Jacob's mother.

The father added, 'I didn't understand most of it, his accent was so thick.'

A few minutes passed. Jacob, lying down, squinted sideways and saw a man he knew, not far off. It was unlikely that among this unending flow of people, a fair distance from his home town, he'd recognised someone.

'Time to go back,' said his mother, and she stood up. 'Jay?'

He was inert; didn't answer.

'Jacob?' Her voice was sharp with anxiety. It was ridiculous to think so, but, if the boy's earlier confusion had been a second-stage hypoglaecemic attack, this could be the third stage – unconsciousness, leading to a diabetic coma.

Instinct alerted the father with a shot of adrenalin in his system, even though he knew it couldn't be true. His unreasonable fear turned to anger. It was almost a shout: 'For God's sake.'

The boy jerked upright. 'Christ, what *is* it?'

The father was ashamed to have spoken sharply. He wanted to mend his son, not maul him.

'It's all right,' said the mother. 'You just have to help us not to worry, to begin with, until we get used to it.'

The boy took his father's hand to pull himself to his feet. They stayed joined together for one second longer, which was enough.

'Time to head back,' said the mother. She wanted them all to return to the concrete path and join the flow of people as fast as possible; she wanted to cross back over the bridge, walk upstream on the other side, get back in the car and drive to the hospital. She didn't want to spare even a moment to step sideways, out of the flow, to look at the black swan.

But - Jacob stopped at the same place, and therefore so did his mother and father. All three looked down on the black swan. They discussed how cold would be the flow of blood in the swan's veins, given she spent so much time in the water. She worked busily on her nest.

Jacob was torn between his desire to broadcast what he knew about the swan, even help in some way, and his

wish for it to be a happy Sunday afternoon walk for his parents, whose marriage he suddenly thought of as being fragile; and this tension, as it were arching its back inside him, prompted his decision never to mention to his mum and dad, ever, nor to any of these couples walking up and down this path, what the Irishman had said about the black swan - that she had blown into this river by mistake having become separated from her group, that the white swan was not her mate but one among several males who routinely came to harass her, drive her away, because swans were territorial creatures, that because she had no mate her eggs were sterile, that she had built her nest in the wrong place and it would be washed away within a week, and it was the second time this year she'd built a nest in the wrong place and tried to hatch sterile eggs. Her last nest, also, had been washed away.

Jacob silently wished for a girl, sometime in the future, who would, for God's sake, walk towards him, hook up with him, and then know him, right through.

It seemed like they'd waited for a long time. There was bright sun, and Jacob felt the warmth of it through his clothes. He wanted to warn everyone - himself included - about coming storms and floods, disasters of every type, because he didn't yet know who this girl would be. Get with someone, yes, he advised, but watch out, look what happened to the black swan.

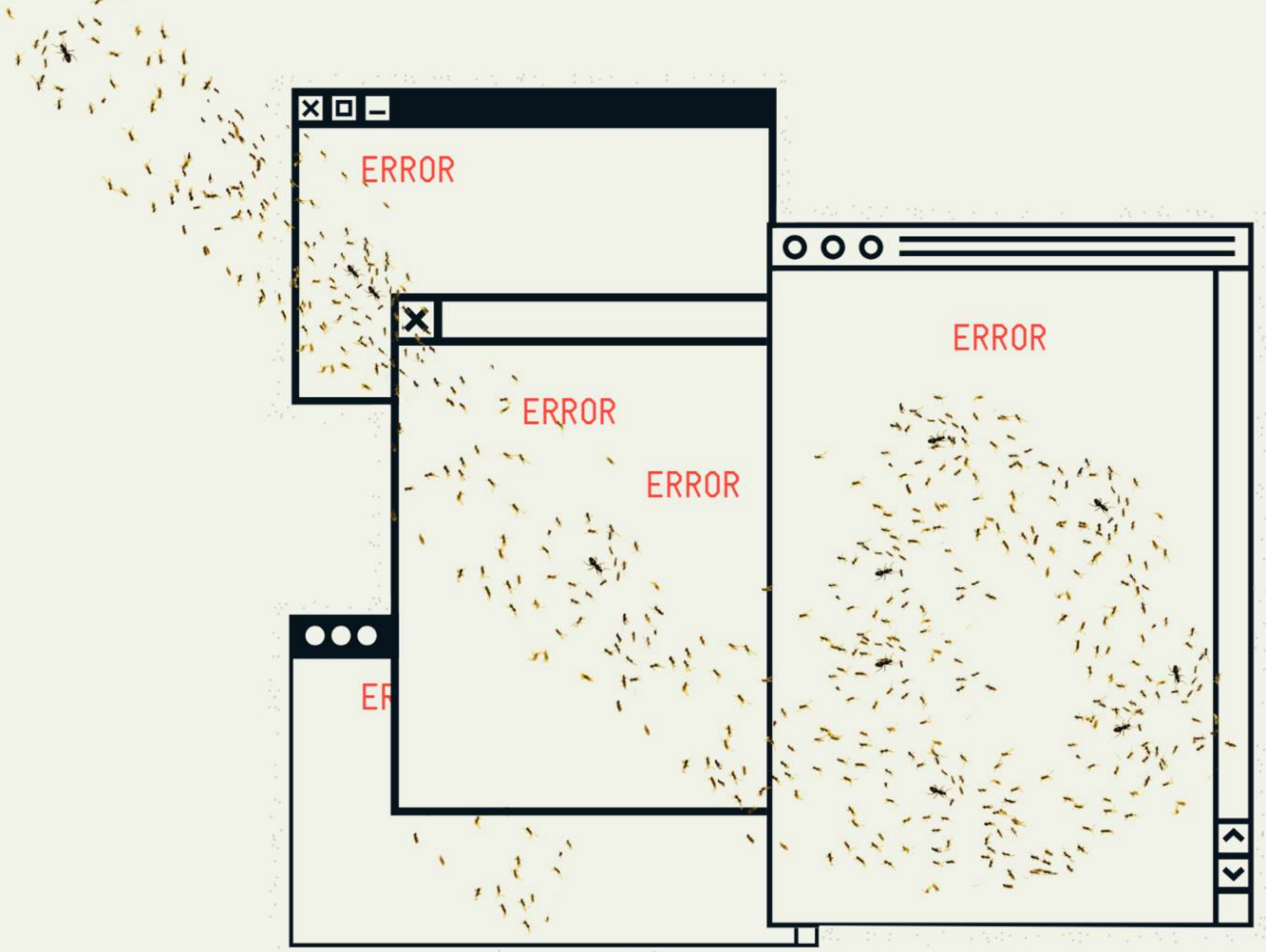
His parents didn't know if he was talking to the black swan or to them or to himself when he said, under his breath, 'Come on, then.'

POETRY

Migrants

Nashrah Tanvir

I open my laptop to find thousands of tiny red ants
Ants who built their homes between keys
Now, I'm the perpetrator of a massacre.
I wriggle for mum's trustworthy lakshman-rekha from the top of the refrigerator
And outline my keyboard with its chalk
With morbid curiosity I watched the ants die one after another
I wonder if they knew they were walking to their own deaths when they tried to cross white lines
After all I couldn't let migrants stay on my plains
Delighted by their pain, I watched them strive and suffer and die
Later, I prayed that no one would ever kill me for trying to build a home somewhere.



[Untitled]

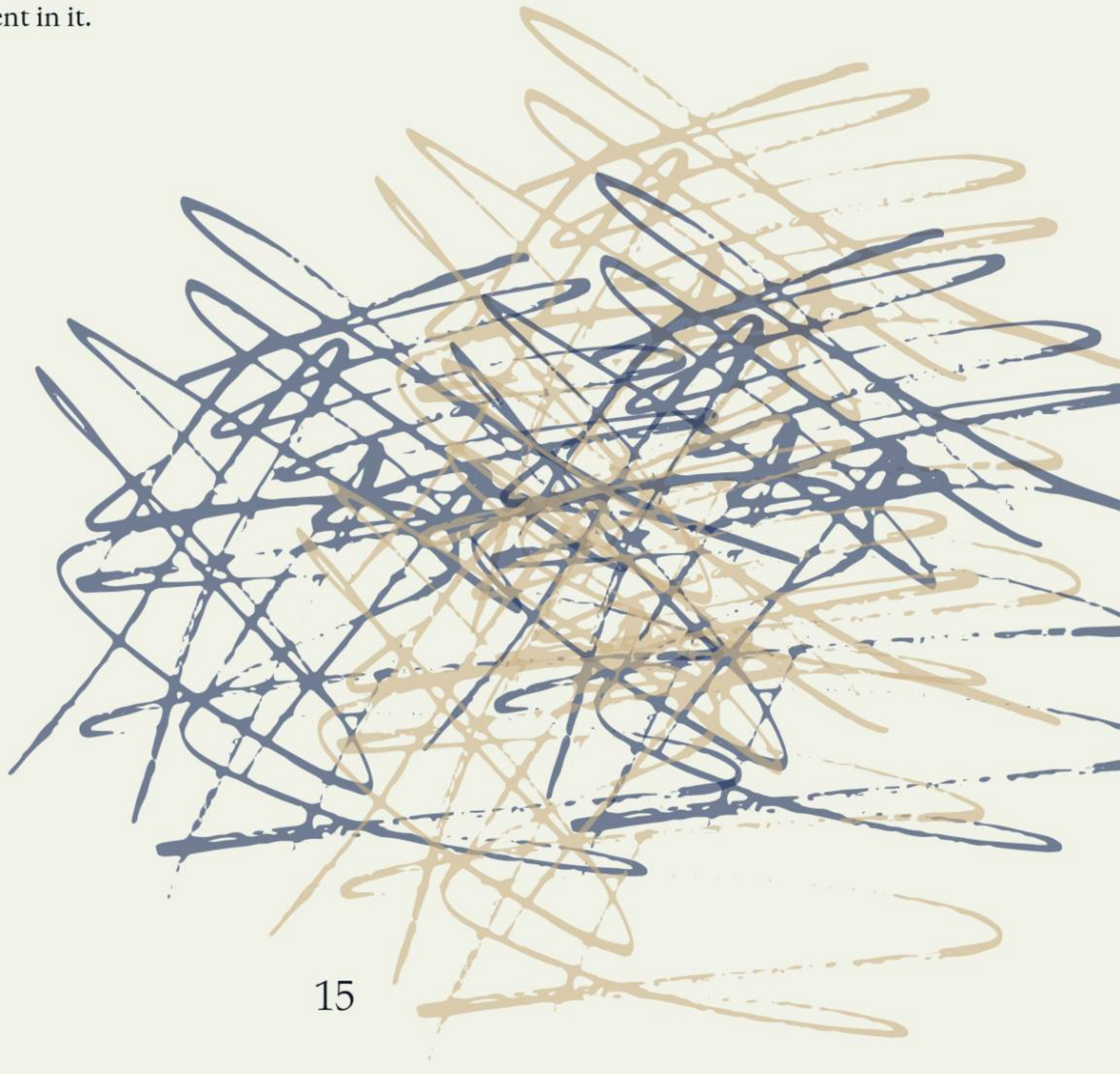
Kritika Misra (aka Ahalya)

my friend and i sat simmering
in the silence of an empty conference hall,
well before any people were in.
we still whispered.

“she ate my childhood for breakfast,”
my friend said.
i felt like a ball of fire was singeing my eyebrows away;
mothers are like that.

it was a language conference that i don’t remember much of.
but on the way back, the wheels rattling against gravel, i thought, ‘a mother’s tongue is a liar’.

i worry i am becoming fluent in it.



"A Fortnight in Calcutta"

Megha Mazumdar

Crows between cobwebs-
Chewing gum and cheese-
Pavements smell of piss-
And peas in my custard-
Adversaries in intimacy-
Demi Moore, brunette-
Ugly looking cats-
Lady tearing a bird apart-
Cigarettes without smoke-
Ghastly grassglow-
Crickets and rats-
Sunsets sentimental-
Tea over territory-
Theatre of the hands-
Cotton balls for hugs-
Wandering wondered minds-
Is a fortnight in Calcutta.

Chew a hole

Nashrah Tanvir

The worm knows better
Than to chew a hole
Through the entire leaf.
She picks and bites,
Sleeps where she eats
Sleeps where she shits.

My parents know better
Than to chew a hole

Through their marriage.
They pick and bite,
Lie down where they fight
Sleepless on opposite sides

Goodnight

Gursimar Khurmi

I make my bed with cashmere fright
tuck myself in, and pray for my life
something sanguine gleams inside my eyes
But it begins to flicker in the quiet of the night

Furtive and feverish
I lull the lullaby
heaven's a little hellish
And I'm afraid to say goodbye

The pandemonium within me and the silence without

Sneha Chandran Sinha

(TW: graphic content, body horror)

My intestines tie knots,
breathing is not easy and
my heart forms stubborn clots.

My legs seem to be fit tightly into a dreadful lock.
But my rattling bones threaten to collapse my bodily home, how could it not
make my intestines tie knots?

Bloodied red climbs up my chest, creating hideous blots,
unruly panic stains my skin, an imagined mark of sin.
My heart forms stubborn clots!

Shoulders high as mountain tops, I might just drop
from terrifying heights made of visceral nightmares.
My intestines tie knots.

The eyes I feel upon me drill angry spots.
Their leering gaze burns an unfurling void and
my heart forms stubborn clots.

The air that mounts around me is a thick black smoke, so fraught
with heavy silence that threatens a merciless suffocation, amidst it all
my intestines tie knots,
my heart forms stubborn clots.

I had a dream

Gursimar Khurmi

Trigger Warning: Graphic content, mentions of death

I had a dream
that I woke up at five

So I scratched my knees,
the scab on my feet, before

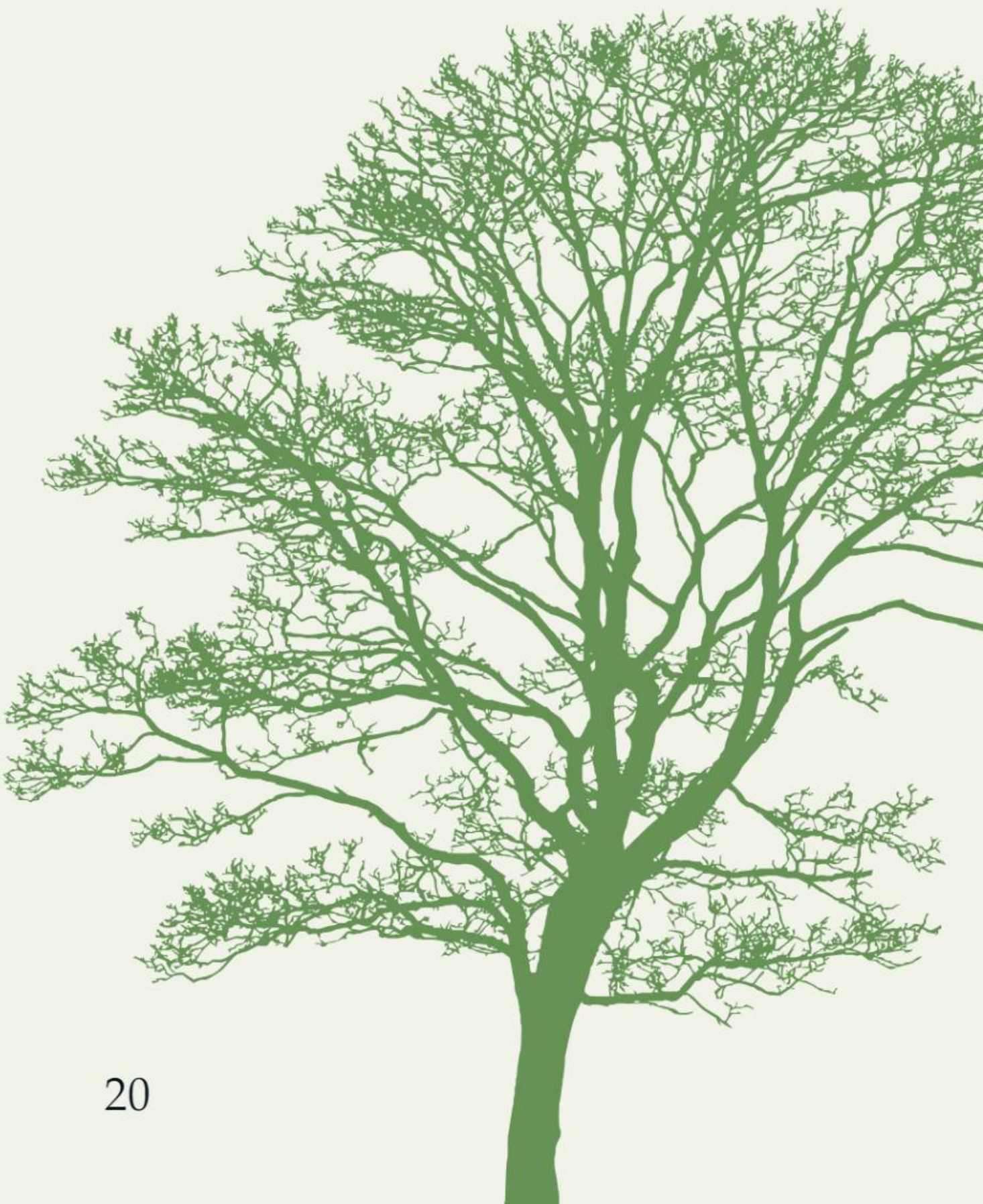
Mama could catch me
twirling on a tree

There's red in my drool
i'd like to understand it too

The little girl wants to be clean
but the water has won.

Sometimes i squint my eyes
and pretend that i'm kind
someone poured sunrise
something burned alive

I had a dream
that I woke up dead
there were things I had to see
and people I wanted to believe
but I can't get out of bed.



Phílos

Saatvik Singh

A soldier and an apparition

Do not defy life, said I,
Your life spelled precious to me.
Your end came soon, no goodbye,
Grief in my blade they now see.

"You were injured and there was none
The morale low, shackles of life
Breaking, losing the strife,
Thus, your armour walked, under the sun"

Had you told me of your plan,
Perhaps my aid would suffice.
Would have fought, I know I can,
Now my folly realize.

"Had I told you my friend
Of my plan to behold,
Your image of valour, give courage to weak
You would not permit, not give them what they seek"

I used to be young, but now,
Reflections say otherwise.
Hope in their heart you did sow,
But I died, with your demise.

"You may be hurting now, dear friend
But I want you to know
I move on with peace
You will find me, wherever light glows"

Bathtub

Gursimar Khurmi

Trigger Warning: Graphic content

Holy ripples in my bath
they preach until both my feet are flushed
lilies on the marble path
and a spare temper in my trunk

I trace the trickles of someone's blood
my towel drops in a crimson thud
until my youth drowns
in brittle bubbles and cruel clouds

Out of My Burrow

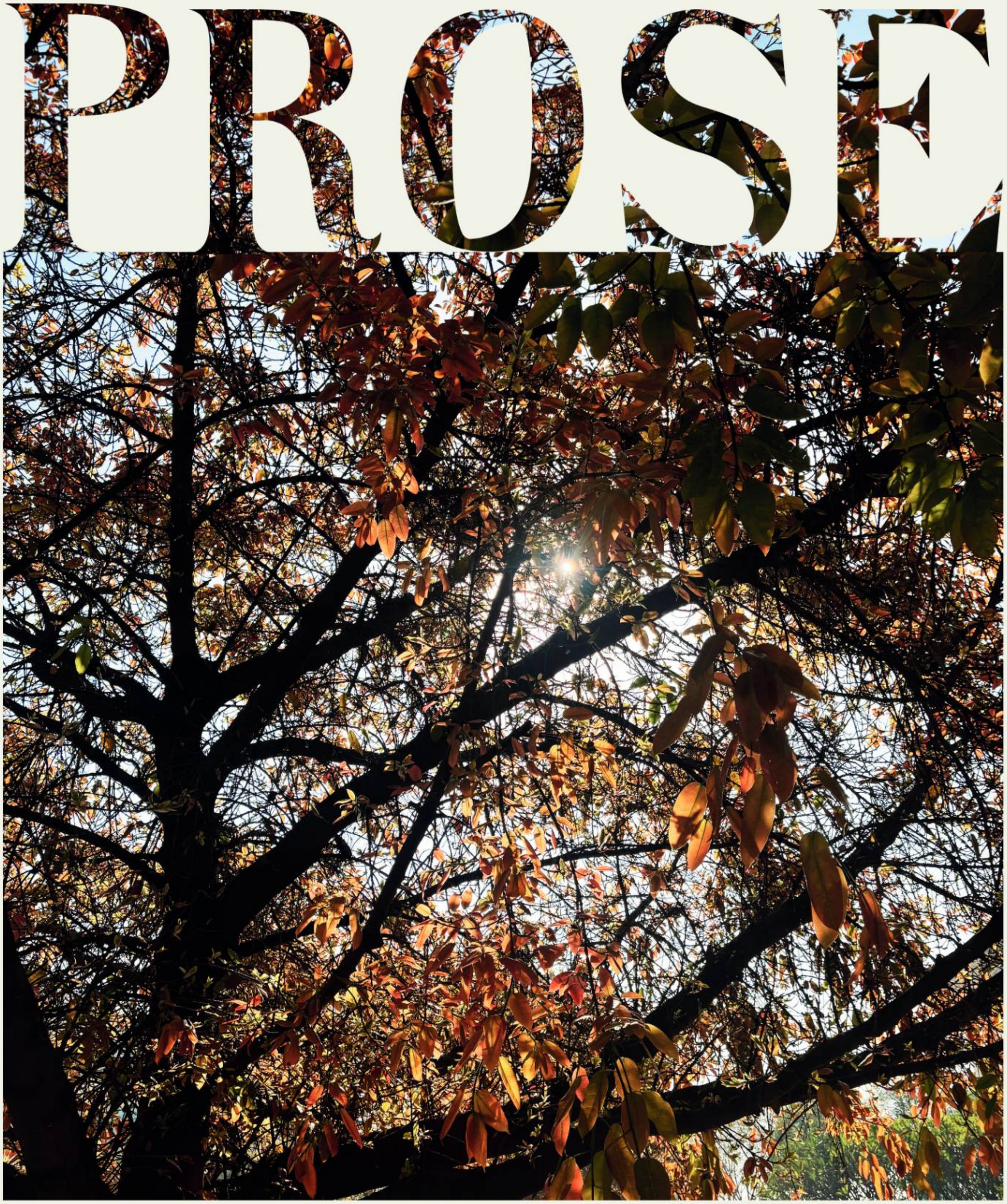
Saatvik Singh

Prancing
In lush dark
Next to me, trees
Enshroud my senses stark

Skipping further down the way
  Through a clearing when I stray
Reached an opening, slipping stream
  Eager for birds, as the boughs sway
Along I waited, as did Earth for night
  Momentary elegance, before I go my way

Bristling sudden Through the leaves
Rustling as i heard Inside
Upon my heart bristling, Giddy
Surely this sound will soon Efface
Hustling past, as i hop home Right ahead

PROSE



My Sister's Language

Kritika Misra (aka Ahalya)

There are words I used to remember.

Like the hushed, short prayers my mother used to whisper to me, on nights my fever refused to break. Creating an ache in my chest — a respect for the hours she spent nursing me out of illness, and for the time she spent thinking, making those prayers.
Or the mutterings of the jokester in all my grandmother's stories, sharp, quick, biting, ready to burst into lyrical cursing, making me shriek with illicit joy. Those words are not words anymore, in my memory. They are sensations, half-remembrances that resurface in odd moments, prompted by unlikely things. In my dreams, I seem to remember. When I am awake, my tongue fumbles with their shapes, forgotten.

The first word I can ever recall saying is akkeejji, sitting in the blinding sun with my little sister. It means ... to us, at least, it meant ... the slant at which sunlight scattered itself across mud. The word was gritty, the impediment to the tongue it caused making us think of clumsiness, of mishaps, of comedy arising from forgetting, in short, of each other. akkeejji, my baby sister, if she put on her slippers wrong. akkeejji, me, if I put salt in our milk.

How do I explain this to the lady in front of me now? She is nice enough, and very learned. Her bright, knowing eyes remind me of my sister in some ways. She would have been some eight decades along now.

This lady, Racquel, she is explaining to me how her apparatus will work. The details of her project are very interesting. I would be able to pay better attention were I not so worked up about what parts of my language she and her student would preserve.

"It is a simple process, really, and takes two hours at the most. We hook you up to this machine," she points to a large and rather intimidating upturned bowl with wires coming out of it, "and you spend the while thinking and talking in your language."

"What does it do differently from the machines you used earlier?" I ask.

"Well, how do I explain this, earlier the Advanced Encephalo-Tomograph and the fMRI took as detailed pictures of your neurons as possible, and this one maps how your neurons fire, and in what clusters. The difference in functionalities essentially helps provide different scales of view for our Language Processor that extracts the ways your brain stores words and grammar, and strictly peaking we don't even need this second step, except for corroboration, because the Processor is able to read the sound information stored in your neurons from the images in the first pass itself, but in any case ..." she launches into a long explanation that makes sense to her and her student. He nods eagerly.

It does not answer what I really want to know, but somehow I don't think they will understand me. I let them fuss around with the wires and put them on my head. And then I start thinking back to the time when my sister was alive, and talk to her, quietly, as if nursing her to health, in place of my mother.

akkeejji, I whisper to her, musta-ki?

My tongue hesitates to say any more, and any louder. It

has been decades since I spoke to someone else in my language, and now the language is all mine, mine alone. The rest of us passed. Quickly, cruelly, in iterations of plague. Only I lived — to remember, but each year my memory fails more.

musta-ki, I ask her, are you well? sakey malano otton chahi uri ki. someone finally wants to listen to us, you know.

The words ... they come out all wrong. Rigid. Stilted. I would never talk to her like that — in my dreams, I never do — and it gnaws at my chest. Do I remember right? How did we use to say ... No, it wasn't this way ... But I can't remember the right way.

I tell my sister, as best I can, about Racquel, and about her student who keeps making mistakes. I tell her about the project to document all the dying languages in the world with machines and computers. I don't know the word for 'project' or 'machine' or 'computer', so I say it in English and hope she understands. Once I finish thinking of the obvious words, like water, and air, and sleep, and dream, I wrack my brain for the intricate ones, the ones my grandmother used to spin around and make us laugh with, the ones my mother used to yell at us when we made a ruckus.

Will Racquel's machines, and later, the world, know? Will they know that poshtajchsi meant more than blossom to me? That it meant the way my playmates' faces would bloom, red from the

exertion of chasing each other around? If I think hard enough, would the slang my sister used materialise in their computer dictionary?

I worry, then worry that my worry will seep into the research and mess it all up, and then worry some more.

When it is all over, Racquel's student starts writing things on the computer, working out the information my brain has provided to it.

Racquel offers me water and starts talking. She must have seen the furrow of my brow, or perhaps I look a little pale. "Thank you so much, ma'am, for letting us document your mother tongue." I smile and nod. "Our technology has improved quite a bit in the last few years, so we won't be needing to conduct any more procedures. In about an hour, our Language Processor should be able to make an accurate dictionary and grammar system by scanning the relevant sections of your brain scans and reading the neural activity we just collected. We'll just need you to glance over it once, to confirm if everything is in order. We won't take too much more of your time.

She is trying to make me feel better. Maybe she worries that remembering my language inconveniences or upsets me. Of course, that could never be the case.

"Well..." I begin, then lapse into silence. She waits. I haven't spoken about my language to anyone in what seems like a lifetime.

The only reason they knew to come to me is probably my immigrant documentation, the region I'm from and the languages I speak listed in it.

"Well," I start again, preparing to say many words to explain myself. "You know how, when the finest weaver you know passes, and the style of their delicate work perishes because no one else knows how to make cloth quite like they do? But even the weaver is soon forgotten, and then everyone thinks the coarser cloth being made nowadays is how it has always been?" I don't know if I am making sense yet. "Will your machine be able to know, and then the people who learn my language from the machine later, will they be able to know? That whatever I am able to give you is a coarser imitation of what my language really sounded like? In my sister's way of speaking, my language would sound like the tinkling of water in a stream, and when our aunt used to teach us, it would sound like muffled marching in the woods, and ... and all of us felt differently about the same words ... No one will ever know now, right? Because I am powerless to explain it

to you ..."

I am worried she will think of me as a sentimental old crazy lady, too rigid, not to be taken seriously. But Racquel's eyes soften. She seems like she understands.

"Ah, hmm, yes, many of the participants in our project have expressed something similar..." her confident voice trails off. "I am — I am just so sorry," she says finally, "Our model is able to read the strongest word-meaning association pairs based on where, in the relevant parts of your brain, the dendritic associations are the densest. So what you remember the strongest and think of the most, that's what we're able to get.

I totally understand you, but the Ministry has put us on a really short timeline ... we don't really have the time, money, or resources to do a subjective study ... if ... if it were in my power ..."

Okay, I can understand that. It is not her fault.

I am beginning to see, now. When our elders' eyes turned wistful speaking of the good old days, they just meant different days, when the world was different, they were different. More than a boast, it was a grief they were expressing, for a time they could never create again, try as they might. I am feeling the way they used to feel, I think.

In a while, Racquel's student brings me the dictionary of my language that their machine has created. I start reading.

It is ... disorienting ... to see our words on a page. Romanised and sorted into sounds English alphabets make. We never wrote any of it down, and we never thought of the words as something to be put in a line. I used to think of them as leaves to pluck off trees in a lush forest, leaves that left behind white, clear sap which kept conversation flowing. When I was better at speaking my language, the leaves would sparkle on the trees, of their own will. I just had to reach my hand out and pluck them. My sister was the better talker. I asked her, once, how speaking felt to her. She said it was like catching the sun glimmer in a flowing stream.

Of course.

The first entry in the dictionary reads: 'Akkeejji (noun): Sunlight; Loved one (humorous).'

It's not wrong, by any means. But it hardly covers the whole of it. I tell Racquel this, but all she can do is flash me an apologetic smile. Her hands are tied.

I keep reading, 'Amni (pronoun): Me.' I am not even thinking about what grammar my words would fall under, or if they could ever be capitalised, or if the computer has read all possible ways these words could ever be used. Instead, I am thinking of the times when I would fall or cut myself, and my sister would rush to our mother, eyes watering, crying boleaer amni mai, i hurt mother, the two of us fused into one.

I shake my head. There is no time, the researchers have to leave soon. I cannot fall into remembering each time I read ahead. My eyes snake their way down the list. It all seems alright, I think. Racquel told me that a fluent speaker holds some 40,000 words in their head. I feel ashamed that my brain scans could provide barely over 700. There are more ... I know there are many, many, many more. But I cannot remember them any longer. I cannot even check if the Romanisations are correct. What my people spoke, I am but a poor messenger of, but I must make my peace with this. There is nothing more I can do. I am too tired to verify the rules of our grammar the machine has made. I tell them I am done.

Racquel and her student wrap up, and I wave them off. On a day like this, the only thing to do is sit in my chair and look at the sunset.

Slowly, my memories come to me. It is the winter of my life, but all I can seem to remember is the sun ... that aching, beautiful sun. We would take a deep breath, my sister and I, around the spot where the flowers

bloomed, and try to name as many of them as we could from the memory of their scent.

Whoever recounted more would win ... win what? Just the glee of having won.

I can't tell when my eyelids droop shut, but I drift into that state between consciousness and sleep when all sounds buzz pleasantly in your ear, and the veil between worlds becomes liquid. zadyyechimati, my mother would say. she is drifting.

As always, my sister stands there, luminous. come play with me, she is saying. As I run over to her, my feet wading through honey, I stumble and make her laugh.

akhejji, she says. silly.

Too late, I have realised my mistake.

I think ... no, I know ... all these years, I have been mixing the two up, the word for the sun scattering in the mud and the word my sister and I made up for each other, akkeejji and akhejji. How couldn't I have, when the memory of her comes filtered down at me like the golden rays of sunlight?

When I wake, I have already decided. I will not call up Racquel to fix the mistake. The researchers ... they knew it themselves. The language I know, the language my sister knew differently from me, that is not the language people will know from now on. So if they never knew what we spoke to begin with ... I can let my sister glimmer on their tongues forever.

The Scratched Coin

Aditya Saini

On the way back from a tailor's shop, I accidentally dropped a two rupee coin onto the concrete floor. It has found its way back to me, 15 years after it was manufactured in some factory deep in the shadows of this country, and months or maybe years after I first lost it — my memory of the time after I lost it is hazy, as if I had been living in some sort of fugue state.

After examining it under the electric light above my table I noticed the two scratches etched onto its once pristine faces, evidence of its long, uncharted life.

One scratch through the left head of Ashoka's three-lions and another through the index finger on the other side. I don't remember if these scratches were on the coin when it was first given to me—at the time just some change from the darji*—or if they have been etched into its faces as a mark of its difficult journey back to me.

I can imagine an infinite number of stories explaining its return to me; some are practically identical with only a stray detail added or removed while others are so remarkably different I begin to wonder whether they even describe the same coin. Maybe the coin falls flat into one of the puddles formed by the rain and remains there until I pick it up weeks later, unmoved by the cumbersome passage of time, vehicles and bullock carts.

Or maybe the coin falls on its edge instead of one of its faces and rolls into a puddle where it remains until I retrieve it. Perhaps the coin falls onto a part of the street where a puddle hasn't formed.

In one story, the coin follows me like a phantom. I see it glimmering in the periphery and in the full moon.

At night, I dream of the coin. It assumes new shapes and colors, twirling like a lone leaf in the wind, surrounded by the darkness at all times. Each night, the coin loses parts of itself in my dreams until there is nothing left to identify it with the two rupee coin that it once was. I begin to dream of lurid rhombs that seem to have nothing in common with the scratched coin. But I know that the dancing rhombs are the same as the coin in the same way that the thousand and oneth story is the same as the first one

These incomprehensible visions slowly kill me. I feel my insides hardening, my movements growing more arduous and mechanical, the growing taste of tin in my mouth and am forced to bear witness to my death. I see myself in my dreams, slowly withering away, unable to escape my own body.

In this story, I recreate the coin from its constituent rhombs and conjure it unknowingly; when I wake up one morning, the visions are gone and the coin sits on my bedside table. In another story I become the coin—I wake up one morning with the visions gone and my torso in flames. Two white-hot scars, one on my chest and one on my back, for the two scratches of the coin. My heart ceases to beat but I do not die; I become a metal man created in the image of the coin.

The coin in its infinite passages through space and time has learnt more about the world than possible for any human, a silent observer of the mechanisms of the world. It travels across hot summer skies, sheet lightning, dust bowl desserts, verdant forests, sterile

*darji- tailor

cities, graveyards and plazas in Ahmedabad until it finds its way back to me.

An infinite number of lines of the same, unquantifiable length intersecting innumerably but all ending and beginning from the same points. Mapping the history of every stone on earth would be an easier task than exploring every permutation of the coin's journey. The stories unfold endlessly, with the coin as the only tether connecting all of them.

The hundredth story is nothing like the first one and the two hundredth story is nothing like the hundredth one. As the stories continue to multiply I forget the facts that I once knew to be true. I no longer remember how I found the coin—it was absent one day and sitting in my palm the next. Maybe it's not even the same coin.

The Clockmaker's Last Repair

Khushi Mohunta

The forgotten town of Willow Creek was where time stood still. Once bustling with activity, its cobblestone streets were now deserted, their echoes swallowed by the encroaching silence. The shops and taverns were now boarded-up shells, their windows akin to vacant eyes staring out at the world. The clockmaker's workshop, sited at the edge of town, was a solitary outpost in the crumbling ruins. Shrouded in a veil of dust, its windows offered a glimpse into a bygone era. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of oil and aged wood, a sharp contrast to the musty decay of the town beyond. Dozens of clocks lined the walls, each a unique testament to the passage of time. Grandfather clocks with ornate pendulums ticked in slow, deliberate rhythms. Smaller pocket watches, their delicate mechanisms exposed, spun their hands with frantic energy. Cuckoo clocks, their wooden birds silent, hung like frozen moments. The clockmaker moved among them, his footsteps echoing on the worn wooden floor, a symphony of ticking, chiming, and the occasional whir of gears filling the space. He paused before a particularly intricate clock, its gears exposed like the inner workings of a living thing. He adjusted a tiny lever with his precise and practised fingers, and the clock's ticking slowed, then aligned with the steady pulse of a grandfather clock nearby.

For years, he had been obsessed with synchronising them, a futile attempt to impose order on the chaos of time. He believed that if he could get them all to tick in unison, he could somehow control the relentless march of moments. But things had begun to change. On his workbench, a small pocket watch lay still ...

At first, it was subtle—clocks slowing when they should not, a pendulum freezing mid-swing. He would fix them, only to find them misaligned in the morning. Then came stranger things. A broken clock he had long abandoned suddenly ticked, showing a time without meaning. A reflection in the polished glass of a clock face shifted slightly as if watching him.

And always, at the centre of it all, was the watch.

He had tried to ignore it. He tried to convince himself that it was only his mind playing tricks on him, that there was nothing unnatural about its presence on his workbench. But the more he looked away, the more it made itself known. Sometimes, he swore he heard a faint ticking from inside, though he had never wound it. Other times, when his back was turned, he would hear a soft click as if unseen hands had undone the latch.

One night, he had been working late, the workshop bathed in the amber glow of lamplight. A pocket watch lay open before him, its tiny gears exposed as he adjusted the tension of its spring. When he looked up, just for a moment, he caught his reflection in the convex glass of a nearby clock—only, it was not his reflection at all. The man staring back at him was younger, his eyes sharp and filled with something like recognition. His breath caught. He turned quickly, expecting—what? An intruder? A trick of the light? But the room was empty. When he looked back at the reflection, it was his once more, lined with age, wearied by years.

The watch had done this.

His grip on it had grown tighter. He had spent years restoring broken things, undoing the damage, and returning timepieces to their proper order. This, he was certain, could be no different. But the air around him shifted when he had finally worked up the courage to pry it open, tools in hand. The workshop felt suddenly heavier, the clocks ticking out of sync as if protesting.

He had hesitated. The metal beneath his fingers was warm—too warm. Then, just as quickly, the pressure in the room had lifted, and when he looked down, he found the watch whole once more, as if it had never been touched.

And yet, it was different.

Once a simple engraving, the spiral on its back seemed deeper now, its grooves almost imperceptibly altered, winding inward, tighter. The hands of the watch, previously motionless, had begun to move, not forward, but backwards, retreating through time in slow, measured ticks.

He had not touched it for months after that.

But the past is never content to remain buried.

One evening, he caught himself staring at it again, the workshop quiet around him. He thought of his sister, the day she had vanished, the years he had spent wondering what if? The watch had taken things from him—had altered the world in ways he did not understand—but it had also shown him glimpses of something more. Possibility. A crack in the fabric of time, just wide enough to slip through.

And so, with careful hands, he reached for it once more.

The clockmaker stepped outside; the wind whispered through the skeletal remains of the old oak trees, carrying with it the cries of distant crows. He wandered through the streets, his footsteps echoing against the cobblestones. He passed the old bakery whose windows were boarded-up and cracked, and they stared at him with hollow eyes and paused in front of the schoolhouse, its playground overgrown with weeds. A chill ran down his spine as he imagined the laughter and the sounds of children playing. He could almost hear the echo of their voices. A sudden gust of wind rattled the loose boards of the schoolhouse. He took a deep breath and stepped forward, the floor creaking beneath his weight. He touched the cold, weathered brick. So much had been left behind here—laughter, lessons, the quiet hum of childhood fading into time. Now, only silence remained.

In this orchestra of time, one clock stood silent. A small pocket watch lay untouched, its golden face tarnished and cracked with age. The patina, weathered over years —perhaps centuries—gave it the look of something lost and found again.

The clockmaker's fingers brushed the intricate spiral engraved on its back, an infinity sign twisting into itself. The lines wound and unwound endlessly, pulling his gaze deeper into their pattern. Something about it unsettled him as if the watch was holding a secret just beyond his reach.

He had never dared to open it. It had been a gift from an enigmatic traveller who had wandered into his shop many years ago, speaking of places where time unravelled like thread, where memories could be plucked from the air and replayed like a favourite song.

The traveller arrived one stormy evening, their cloak billowing in the wind. Their eyes, a piercing shade of emerald, seemed to transcend time and space. They entered the workshop, and a strange stillness fell over the room. The clockmaker felt a current of otherness, not from the cold. The traveller spoke softly, "Some things are lost but not forgotten. Time folds in ways most don't notice.

You might."

The traveller handed the watch to the clockmaker; their

fingers brushed against his own. A spark of energy passed between them, leaving the clockmaker intrigued and unsettled. A change settled over him, a feeling he couldn't quite define.

The clockmaker, though hesitant, accepted the gift. He had never met anyone like the traveller. "A world where time is a labyrinth?". He turned the watch over in his calloused hands, the familiar weight of metal now strangely foreign. He'd spent his life mastering the gears and springs, the seconds and minutes. But the traveller's words ... twisted in his mind, a jumble of impossible images. He stared at the watch, the smooth metal suddenly feeling alien against his skin. It was just a watch. Gears, springs, the steady tick-tock he knew so well. Yet, the warmth still lingered where the traveller's fingers had brushed his, a phantom heat that defied the chill of the workshop. And those eyes ... that emerald fire ... it wasn't a trick of the light. It was real, a spark that had ignited something within him, something he couldn't name. Was this "journey" a path outside the familiar rhythm of his life, a place where time itself ... well, where it simply wasn't the same?

The clockmaker's heart ached. He remembered the day his sister had vanished, the last of her laughter through the fields. He blamed himself. If he had been more attentive and more protective, she would still be alive. Years later, as the clockmaker sat in his workshop, the watch remained on his workbench, a constant reminder of the enigmatic traveller and their words. It was a connection to a world beyond his own, like the echo of a language he'd never learned yet somehow understood in the deepest part of himself.

His hands, usually steady, trembled as they hovered over the watch, his breath catching in his throat. He could feel the weight of the years pressing down on him, the silent ticking of the clocks urging him on. With a final, decisive move, he pried open the casing. As the watch lay open before him, the clockmaker felt a strange familiarity, as if he had stood at this precipice before. And in a way, he had. In the years since the traveller had placed it in his hands, the watch had never gathered dust. Once, he had tried to pry it open, just as he would any other timepiece. But the moment his tools touched its casing, something in the air shifted. The clocks on the walls faltered, their ticks misaligning. A headache bloomed behind his eyes. He pulled back, his heart pounding, afraid to try again. More than once, he'd nearly turned the crown, his breath shallow with anticipation, his fingers hovering to pull away at the last moment. But each time, something had stopped him—fear, doubt, or perhaps the quiet certainty that once he crossed that threshold, there would be no turning back.

Yet, tonight was different. The weight of the past bore down on him, heavier than the watch in his palm. He wasn't just toying with possibilities anymore. He saw the lines etched on his hands, each a year lost.

He could turn back. Undo the moment that had unravelled everything. Save his sister. Rewrite the story. Or he could let time stand as it was, unyielding, indifferent. The temptation burned in his chest, twisting and pulling at him like a tide. But what if meddling with the past only deepened the wound? What if altering one thread unravelled the entire tapestry? He had spent his life fixing broken timepieces, but this was not a gear out of place or a mechanism needing oil. This was something greater—wilder. The thought filled him with dread. He had always believed time could be measured, mended, and controlled. But as the silver liquid inside the watch shimmered under the dim light, he wondered if time had only ever been an illusion of order, a river that no hands—no matter how skilled—could truly hold.

To his astonishment, inside, instead of the familiar gears, springs, or mechanisms, he found a small glass vial filled with a silver liquid that swirled and shimmered like mercury. The substance pulsed its own accord, coiling and uncoiling as if alive. It pulsed with an inner light, growing brighter and then dimming in rhythm with the clockmaker's heartbeat. The room seemed to hold its breath as he reached out, his fingers brushing against the vial. And then, as if guided by an unseen force, a single drop of the silver liquid escaped

the vial and landed on his fingertip.

Time shattered.

The walls of the workshop around him dissolved into a field of wildflowers, their petals stretching towards a sky as blue as his memories. The clockmaker stood at the edge of the field, feeling the warm sunlight on his face for the first time in what seemed like centuries. It was the field he had played in during his boyhood, where the grass blades were always green and the day endless. A distant, dreamlike memory, now vivid and real. He looked down to find a small hand grasping his own. His sister stood beside him, her face as clear as if she were still alive, her laughter clinking like the sweetest chimes. She was tugging him forward toward a horizon that shimmered with possibility. But the clockmaker's feet felt rooted to the ground.

"Come on," she called. "Come on!"

He didn't follow. He couldn't.

"I am waiting," "I am waiting ..."

Her voice stretched thin, unravelling into the wind. The world around him rippled; the wildflowers bled together, their colours smearing like wet ink on parchment. The sky darkened, the blue fading—her small hand slipping from his grasp, the echo of bare feet racing through the fields, the warmth of home fading like breath on glass.

And then—nothing.

In an instant, it was gone. The air was thick, choking with the scent of old wood and sweat. The clockmaker gasped, his lungs burning as if he had puffed ten cigarettes in one go. He looked down at his hands, half-expecting to find them covered in the silver liquid, but they were clean. The vial inside the watch was sealed again, its contents still and lifeless. He sat back. He looked around his workshop, and the various clocks that lined the walls, each unique in size and design, began to tick once more. Some with loud chimes, others with soft ticks, each with a different rhythm, filling the space with noise. The once-still room was now alive with sound. They were not synchronised; each clock kept its own time. He looked at the watch, then back to the clocks. His eyes drifted to the small music box on his desk, a gift from his sister. The music box was silent. He picked up the music box and turned the key, and a soft melody began to play. He watched the petite ballerina inside the box spin and remembered his sister's laughter. He closed the music box, and the music stopped. The clockmaker's gaze returned to the watch, then to the clocks. He understood. It was not about fixing time, but about the music box that could play a song long lost or the watch that could bring a feeling back.

The clockmaker stood, unseen possibilities pressing against him. Lives unlived, choices unmade—they pressed against him like whispers in the dark. The past could not be fixed but remembered. The thought clawed at him. His sister's laughter was long silenced. Roads abandoned; moments lost. What if happiness had been waiting somewhere he had never thought to look?

The clockmaker stared at the vial, the silver liquid shimmering as if alive. His grip tightened, then loosened. What was he reaching for? The past pressed against him, heavy with everything lost, yet the present pulsed in his hands—fleeting, fragile. The weight of choice settled in his chest. He could pour, undo, unravel. Or he could let time run its course. The thought steadied him. Slowly, his fingers eased away. The vial remained untouched. And for the first time, so did the past.

Glancing through his window, his eyes caught a peculiar sight. An old, gnarled apple tree stood in the centre of a vacant lot, its branches twisted and gnarled like the hands of an ancient sage. A single, withered apple hung from a branch, its skin shrivelled and brown.

The clockmaker paused, drawn to the tree's peculiar beauty. As he approached, he noticed a small, weathered sign tied to one of the branches. It read, "The Tree of Time." Intrigued, he reached out and touched the rough bark of the tree. A sense of peace washed over him as if he were connecting with something ancient and profound.

A voice, soft and ethereal, whispered in his ear. "Time is a river flowing inexorably forward. You may try to swim against the current but will always be carried downstream." The clockmaker looked around, but there was no one there. The voice had come from within, a whisper from the depths of his own soul.

As he continued his walk, he noticed a figure sitting on a bench at the edge of the town square. It was an older woman, her face etched with the lines of a life well-lived. Her sharp eyes traced his walk, and in her feeble voice, she whispered, "The river of time flows swiftly. Some try to dam it, to control its course. But in the end, the river always wins."

He continued his walk, his gaze settling on the woman, already seated on her usual bench at the edge of the town square. Her face, a familiar landscape of wrinkles, held a knowing look. Her sharp eyes, even from a distance, traced his every movement. As he approached, she shifted slightly, her gnarled hand gesturing faintly towards the cobblestones beneath his feet. A sigh, like the rustle of dry leaves, escaped her lips. "The river flows."

The old woman's smile deepened on a quiet curve to her lips. She gazed out the window, her eyes distant, as if watching something only she could see. A soft sigh escaped her. Lifting a glass of water, she took a sip, then brushed away the droplet clinging to her lip.

"Some things," she murmured, "are simply meant to be."

"Wha—"

The woman's gaze snatched the words from his mouth as she turned to the window. "Peace comes when you stop grasping what cannot be held."

Letting go, she thought, was a lesson learned long ago.

The clockmaker nodded. He watched the steady swing of the pendulum, the rhythm a constant in the workshop's quiet. Time. He'd spent so long trying to control it, to fix what was broken. But looking at the watch, at the traveller's gift, he felt a shift. Not resignation, but ... acceptance. The past was done. The future? He didn't know. But right now, at this moment, with the tools in his hands and the scent of oil in the air, there was work to be done. And that, he realised, was enough.

...

The clockmaker carefully closed the watch with a heavy heart, sealing the vial inside. He placed it gently on the workbench and rose from his seat, feeling the weight of his years and a strange sense of peace. The clocks around him continued their dissonant ticking, each marking a different rhythm and life, but he no longer needed to synchronise them.

CROOKED

LINES

Photographs

Kritika Daga (First Place)

[Untitled]

Pragya Rathore (Second Place)

Aqua and Crimson

Pavni Pandey (Third Place)

Photographs

Kritika Daga

The daily newspaper was not ready for the truth it seemed. All around the streets rolled-up sleeves distributed the morning papers, precious little information exchanging hands, cycled up the hill and carried about in hushed whispers over the family hearth. The people looked from face to face, not quite meeting each other's glances, their very expressions like sheep fearful of an upcoming storm. The elders ushered the children into the houses, some menfolk deemed it better to burn the newspapers altogether and only a rare few people stubbornly clutched the papers against the burning blaze of the bonfires.

The woman watched the uncertainty blooming in the hearts of men from behind the window of her living room. She imagined that at this very moment the Commander of the militia that now ruled the country would open the contents of the newspaper over a cup of coffee, surrounded by his trusted lieutenants in a gleaming oval office. She supposed that it was only a matter of time before the onslaught of militia-employed Enforcers beating against her door, hauling her away.

The woman let out a loose breath.

She had made peace with her actions and was not afraid of the consequences.

She was afraid at first though, and and suspicious when she opened the door of her house over two months ago, revealing a procession of armored Enforcers parting to make way for the Commander. The Commander walked up to her with a fat, genial smile and outstretched arms, expressing that he had a proposal for her. Ten minutes later, the most powerful man in the country was seated at the woman's humble dining table, explaining that he had heard of her former reputation as an upcoming artist and photographer; and that the State had decided that her talents would be better utilized by working for the government instead of the poorly nursemaid she had now become.

The stone-hard edge of his voice brook no room for argument and emphasized in ways his words did not: the compulsion of working with the government. The woman was no fool to understand that her denial at the job offer would not be taken kindly, especially amidst the presence of the Enforcers with guns strapped across their chests standing behind an expectant Commander smiling into his buttered biscuit.

The woman was close to considering her great efforts to conceal her former occupation as a beloved photographer wasted. She had been extremely careful after the Purge, where the militia forces seized control of the country and ordered the execution of all artists, photographers, writers and their works. She had been so young then, weeping as she saw her professors and friends, colleagues and admirers all succumb to the gunfire; their parting advice to protect herself, hide her identity and flee. And amidst the burning houses and futile protests she watched her colorful world of delightful discussion and intellectual debate concede to a single, government-run outlet of information in these terrible times.

So, swallowing her subversion and choosing to survive, the woman said she would be happy to accept the offer.

The intention of her work for the Commander soon became very obvious to the woman. A ploy to enforce the country's power, not through the cold steel of the artillery but by the exploit of human's innate tendency to be influenced by art. Was it not a clever solution, to be able to influence the artist and thus influence the population? Was it not ingenious to limit the boundary of creative expression?

And yet, the awe that comes with the recognition that a camera is not a long-forgotten illusion in the mind but an object of tangibility resting on one's palms was reason enough for the woman to take up her art again, no matter how tightly the ropes were tied around her ankles.

The woman stepped in front of the light and clicked the shutter of the camera. The picture came out.

What happened after that had a dreamlike quality: the woman having lost all sense of space and time and grasp on reality, only dimly registering the places she was dragged into, from the army encampment to the Oval House and slums. The motions of the Enforcers grabbing the crook of her arm seemed blurred, almost as underwater swimmers. She vaguely recollected being introduced to the Captain of the Winged Force, and the Commander's voice came far away and was tiny. She was told to capture the quick movements of the cadets in training.

Snap.

She was led to secured prisons in the south of the capital. A guard in dark blue uniform outside thick metal bars.

Snap.

She ventured into the heart of the thickest slums. The wide-eyed children with matted hair and fearful glances. The whipping post in the centre of the market square and swarms of flies humming over blood-flecked flesh.

Snap.

She gazed up at the pristine white pillars holding the Oval House. The Commander bedecked with medals and heavily starched uniform. Private chambers, lingering ash and an array of weapons.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

The photographs stared at the woman. The woman stared back. Beautiful photos and ugly photos, incredible, incredible material at the tips of her fingertips arranging themselves into a story and finally a truth. Her truth. The vision of an artist who has seen too much and has finally recreated too much only to realize what it all truly meant. Perhaps art is meant to survive even when humans cannot. With the glassy eyes of the subject of her photographs conveying to her this maxim, the woman wavered like she had not quite made up her mind on something, finally deeming the persistence of her work the matter of greatest importance in life.

The woman selected four of her photos to be printed on the newspaper the very next day. Her work, as ordained, would now be available to hordes of the population who unfold the morning paper to grasp the happenings of the nation, however misguided. The woman did not have to strain her eyes to see the front page of the newspaper in the hands of people outside the window, she already knew all the images by heart. There was nothing to do until the inevitable press of the gun on her chest and so she gave in to the darkness behind her eyelids and welcomed the end.

The sight of the photographs on the front page of the newspaper had a cause to make everybody uneasy. There was no mention of supersonic jet planes or the glorification of the enlistment of the country's youth in its military. There were rivulets of sweat gleaming down the escaping thief from the security-intense prison. *The Swift-footed* read the caption. The picture of a mother on the whipping posts in place of her child read *The Brave-hearted*. There was no an inch of the

page covered with pictures exacerbating the humiliation bruised and ill-treated helpers. There was no space allocated for all the sixteen medals pinned on the illustrious leader's chest either. The penultimate photo showed the portrait of the Commander in harsh lighting and sharp shadows. The text beneath the Commander's photograph read The Servant. The final picture showed the little nuggets and a well-used ashtray by the Commander's nightstand, the picture heady enough for the viewer to imagine the intoxicating fumes of opium and heavy-lidded eyes. This picture was entitled as *The master*.

The retaliation was swift and brutal for the lone woman who dared claim that the country was ruled by a mere drug and an attempt was made to shred all evidences of her final work. The Enforcers came down heavily on people whose walls were not charred black with the soot of the newspapers and beat their forced admission of disbelieving the photographs. It was too late. The truth was already out, hiding behind people's eyes, waiting in their thoughts. It was whispered and written on walls in the dead of night. Posters of the woman's broken body lined every street, a decisive endeavor to prove the repercussions of continued disobedience of the law. But, one only had to squint to see the thin scratched words beneath the picture of the dead woman to learn the futility of the repression. In a shaky handwriting, as if written by a child, the photograph of the woman read *The Freedom Fighter*.

[Untitled]

Pragya Rathore

It is the time of night when the silence is not disturbed by whispered words, but by exhaled breaths. You shift in discomfort when loud snores disturb your delicate sleep. You extricate yourself from your husband's loveless embrace and head to the adjacent room. In its musty darkness, you find him in his cradle, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars, as he always is. His open eyes glaze over everything in their sight. You take him in your arms and softly close them.

You whisper forgotten lullabies in his ears, swinging him with the hesitant delight of a new mother. You hold him close to your heart, clutching his tiny body with determination. When you have convinced yourself that he has fallen asleep, you slowly shut the door and head back to your room, where your husband does not see you shedding tears like birds shed feathers.

A mother's heart is never at rest without seeing her child asleep, even if her baby is dead.

When you wake up in the hospital, you see him lying in the bed next to you. He is lovelier than you imagined him to be when you felt him stir in your womb. You ruffle the wisps of curly hair hanging on his forehead, your fingers playing with the tiny toes curled in a peaceful sleep.

When the nurse snatches him away from your arms, you notice his blue skin. You realise that in all the time you have been hugging him, he has never exhaled a breath.

Tears slip out of the doctor's eyes, too, but not because he sees you plunging into a darkness too profound and terrible to come back from. It is the first time he has delivered a stillborn, and he is afraid of it affecting his record. Words come tumbling out of his mouth as he teaches the interns. Suffocation. Fetal death. Intrapartum stillbirth. Uterine haemorrhage. Your child will be nothing but a medical tragedy, a case study for science in the future.

He cannot have died. How can death embrace someone who has never really lived? But even as tears threaten to spill into your heart, you pull your baby closer. If you hold him close enough to your racing, sobbing heart, you can almost pretend that the heartbeat is his.

You are not given any birth or death certificates—just a white sheet declaring stillbirth. Impressions of dead fingers and signatures confirming the news. The space for the name is left blank, but the doctor advises you to fill it in because you will need one for the tombstone. But you will not entrust a baby to the unfeeling nurture of the earth forever. Alive or dead, you will make him stay with you. He will always stay in your arms.

He has been kept in the chilling frost of the mortuary. You rush in and hold him in your arms, rubbing his back to warm up his body. They ask you whether you want to know how he died for closure. But the only thing that you want to know is how you can keep him now, because you do not plan to let him go.

It is difficult to keep him hidden in the beginning. You come to his room only in the dead of night, when the shadows beside the rotating fan feel like the presence of spirits. You curse the screeching wooden door and step outside, always afraid that your husband will follow you. The smell of his flesh disintegrating feels like a

breath of fresh air. Standing still, you wait till the milk he will never drink overflows and soaks your clothes. With a strange deliberation, you wipe his unfeeling frame with your wet dress, certain that he will not hunger for your milk now. Every day, the stench grows, until your husband cannot bear it. He smells flesh deteriorating, decomposing and rotting; even the walls smell of a decaying corpse. He calls the maintenance staff to check the drainage system. The worker, a superstitious, middle-aged woman, steps into the house and looks into your unusually bright eyes. "It's not the drainage," she murmurs over her shoulder. She is pretending to fix the pipes, since your husband refuses to let her go unless all the ducts are fixed.

"The smell is of the dead," she confesses hastily, afraid of offending any lurking spirits.

As if you did not know.

Three days later, his body begins to putrefy. His blood deadens and darkens. You embalm the body and keep it in a coffin. You do not close its lid, because you do not want him to suffocate again.

Five weeks later, the chaplain comes to visit you. He brings along a woman who has "gone through the same loss". But you know now that grief cannot unite people in any way; your husband can attest to that.

You know that, legally, you have done nothing wrong. But when you think about the chaplain looking at your dead child, you feel the panic rising in your throat. Shaking your anxiety away, you begin to plan. All you need is low humidity and a suitable temperature...

When your husband opens the freezer that night to eat ice cream, he gets an unpleasant surprise.

You do not want to attend his burial, but you cannot resist the opportunity to see him again. When they lower him into the coffin, you remind yourself that he cannot feel the jolt. When they start throwing mud into the pit, you bite the inside of your cheek and pinch your arm to stop yourself from screaming. Your husband flinches when the screams build up inside you and escape. His fingers tremble, but he does not say anything. You ask them to stop throwing the dirt for a minute.

"Can I—" You steel yourself for this last goodbye. "Can I hold him in my arms one last time?"

Blue is not your favourite colour anymore. It reminds you of a tiny nose struggling to breathe, lungs collapsing with the effort, skin tinged with blood that is not red. It reminds you of the colour of the sky the day you buried him, beside the thousands of people who have left the people they love behind. It reminds you of his eyes, beautiful but lifeless.

After two months, your husband starts to worry. He tells you that it is unhealthy to stay grieving for such a long time. But he does not know that you go out to the park every evening. That you sometimes look at the pigeons poking at their chicks playfully and feeding them with their mouths, the injustice of being denied the simple joy threatening to break you. That you often walk for hours with his picture in your hands, afraid of forgetting the precise colour of his eyes, or the softness of his delicate body in your arms. That you sometimes visit the park beside the cemetery, certain that you can feel him shifting uncomfortably in his grave. That you are afraid of the worms in the ground decomposing his lovely flesh into the wood of the coffin. That you sometimes sit up in the middle of the night screaming, afraid that your memories of him will gradually slip away like time. That whenever you see a mother walking her baby in her stroller, your throat clogs up with grief beyond words, because you can never do it with yours. That you stare at them wistfully for so long that the mother turns away coldly, shielding her baby from your gaze. That when you try to tell overprotective mothers that you are one too, the words die out as soon as they form in your mouth, erasing their essence and leaving the bitter taste of loss behind.

Can you call yourself a mother even if your child dies?

You do not tell your husband any of this, not because you think that he won't listen, but because in your mind, he is right beside death in stealing your baby from you.

You often stare at the little children on the swing, wondering which swing your baby would have liked the most. You wonder if you could have recognized his laughter in a crowd of children. You stay on the bench sometimes, the shrieks of laughter and the squeals of joy ringing in your ears like a siren, long after the children have gone home chuckling, clutching their mothers' hands like lifelines. After the silence has descended into the mist above the park, you sit on the swing, its hinges creaking alarmingly with your weight. You blink your tears away and pray to the whistling wind that your baby can hear you from his grave. Then, very slowly, almost as if you have forgotten how to do it, you sing his lullaby for him, so that he can fall asleep.

Even when he is gone, you can hear him. At night, while you find shapes in the shadows, you hear giggles in the crook of your arms. When you are walking on the road, you hear him slip on the sidewalk; a purple bruise that will be kissed away by time. When you immerse yourself in the tub because the tears burn and freeze on your face, you hear the water rippling, and small hands tapping on it playfully. When winter gives way to spring, you do not notice, but he does, his wonder giving way to innocent curiosity. When sadness pierces through the broken shards of your heart, you hear him speak softly to your broken spirit, and you feel his tiny fingers holding onto yours beyond death.

You hear a lot of sounds, but he does not make any of them.

Aqua and Crimson

Pavni Pandey

* * *

Thou takes away my heart, O aquamarine, and leaves me with this carcass.

The carmine matchstick head flickers into an angry baby fire travelling down the waxed stick, the pungence sticking to my palate. I cup my hands around my mouth, reproducing it into its notorious counterpart. Expensive tobacco whiff infuses the moist air with intoxication as Harlow holds his unlit cigarette between his fingers with a borrowed panache, waiting. Fanning off the former, I lend him the flames, the crimson confluence growing around the cigarettes.

We paint a replica of dawn in our bedroom before Eos wakes, the widening rubescence pouring on indigo-painted hand sketches taped on one of the walls and on the fabric scrap strewn all over the mosaic floor. Satisfied, the cigarettes retreat, the flames fanned off, the stubs in our mouths.

I inhale. Smoke rushes in, searching for guilt but advancing unchecked into the lungs in its absence. Teenage pretence makes my thoughts befuddled and my vision hazy in a single drag. Warmth grows inside my bronchi as I rest my head backwards on the oak wood closet.

The grey fumes glisten against the sable void, playing the crystals under the faint blush from the twin sparks and the trespassing streetlamp beam while outside, the town lies in a slumber, blanketed under the wait of dawn and oblivious to the same.

Everything seems poetic, so I pick up my pen and sketchbook, choose Harlow's bandaged hands as my muse and scribble while he slouches against the other wall and tinkers, hand-stitching some fabric piece to another until some of it makes sense. It always does make sense at the end somehow, like the cotton-linen shirt that he sports or the colourful patchwork curtains that catch the streetlamp beam and glow above us or the subtle embroidery on Nurse Lissy's habit veil or the scarlet cotton skirt he made for Georgia, the newest member of St. Clement's Mercy Home—The Labyrinth.

In a place of the broken and the grieving, silence is our rebellion.

Until Harlow looks up, terrified.

Jamie, I think I can hear footsteps, his eyes shout.

Sure enough, three steady knocks pierce through our established renaissance with an assertion that makes Harlow stand on his feet and stride to the latched door, leaving behind all evidence of rebellion unsettled.

With the prolonged creak of the swinging door, Nurse Ella's silhouette appears.

"If it doesn't further discommode
your needle-bled fingers, Harlow, would you bother switching on the light?"

Dead white light pervades the room, exposing half-smoked cigarettes and half-stitched fabrics. Smoke clouds that hover above, like a coward accomplice escape the room from above nurse Ella's ivory bandeau.

Nurse Ella has sternness etched onto the embroidery of her guimpe, discipline tied across the fibrils of her coif. Daunting green eyes glare through bead-chained cat eye spectacles, freezing everyone in its sight, scanning through the room, retaining its stony countenance.

"James, your knowledge about cancer must be quite undeniable. If not so, I pray you please read the warning on that cigarette pack. You'll need it for future remorse."

She turns to Harlow. "And I imagine you must be having generous amounts of blood to yield to needlework and cancer?" she eyes Harlow's bandages, wound around his arms, calf, ankles, toes and fingers like skin itself. There is only a slight difference between Harlow and Haemophilia, that of being tangible and abstract; but considering the rate at which Harlow's bandages have been wrapping up his body, they might soon engulf him enough to declare him more Hemophilia than Harlow.

"Starvation and prison will do," she snaps.

Nurse Ella turns around, her habit swishing sharply against the wind and the wood. We know, like we have known all these years in The Labyrinth, that Nurse Ella means business

* * *

How canst I crave a dream that haunts? A wound that bleeds and yet resolves?

I wake up to the sound of rain, heavy against the cloudy window glass. It leaks from the wooden pane and invades the storeroom, it soaks our clothes, climbs up cardboard boxes and drenches mops and brooms. I wake Harlow up. Cold almost traps his limbs into a freeze from in between the strata of his bandages. He grumbles, "What's crueller than leaving a hemophilic in a rain-flooded room and locking the—oh, it's unlocked." So, like classic prisoners, we escape.

In half-drenched clothes, we wade through the opposing water flow in the corridors in hopes of a dry place or food or anything, really. It seeps into the Labyrinth's skeleton and flows like its marrow, forming waterfalls on the stairs. It sets afloat all belongings, directing them on its whim. The whole of the Annex turns into a déjà vu, each corridor familiar but not recognizable against the dark. Uncertainty had made us place our most prized possessions on our heads. So, Harlow's head carries his half-stitched craft and mine carries my sketchbook. A fin of grey bandages tethered to Harlow's ankles and calf plays the hourglass and dances gracefully behind, gradually coming undone.

Around us, abandoned fragments of existences float—bandages, a pen cap, a melancholic half of a slipper pair, newspapers, a blue-black textbook page painted by chromatography, plastic bags, brown tinted homoeopathic glass bottles and a bulk of dirt and rubbish. We turn corners into acquainted wilderness in search of a citadel.

And indeed it shows itself. The waters run weak against the tiled floor, the reflected light painting the walls a dancing mural of silver aqua as out of all of the nurses' rooms, Nurse Ella's room comes into view. So, like guilty prisoners set free, we take refuge in the first place we see.

Nurse Lissy is already sitting on the moist sofa by the bed, smiling. Smile is her staple, Nurse Lissy's. It almost strains all her facial muscles but she smiles anyway. And she is old, Nurse Lissy is. Her skin is more wrinkled than skin itself. Old age comes with a sense of passiveness but Nurse Lissy takes this passiveness, crumples it up and tosses it into the bin. She is the main character in a room where her presence fills.

"How does smoke and tobacco taste, James? Does it itch down the throat?" she asks.

"It feels like swallowing a warm cloud and sinking into it, Nurse Lissy," I reply.

"Stop romanticising cigarettes, James," Nurse Ella snaps. She scans our drenched clothes and Harlow's muddy bandages. In a hurry we would have fancied to interpret as disgust, she leaves the room without another word.

Nurse Lissy invites us to sit with her on the sofa and gives us some moist peanuts.

Through the window in Nurse Ella's room, I can see the state of the rain. It brims the potholes and drains first, threatening to conquer the town. It pours down through the haphazard branches of the Casia tree against the window, washing down all weak foliage into the room.

"Nurse Ella is too ideal to understand our rebellion, Nurse Lissy," Harlow gripes.

"She is a great writer. Ella. She almost bleeds in her writings and bleeding, Harlow, is never ideal," she takes Harlow's hand, her smiling voice echoing through the citadel. "Art and demeanor are born of the past and she has had enough of it. She still keeps a picture of Julie in her diary. In '89 when the great floods filled her house, it looted her of all wealth including Julie. Infection and haemophilia. Harlow," her wrinkled brow rises a little, exposing the intense hazel of her eyes, "in you, she sees a second chance. A possibility," she squeezes his hand and then lets go.

I look at Nurse Ella's bed, a thespian masterpiece. Each wrinkle clasping in its shadow a story, a fear of repetition, a preventive measure. Everything makes sense. The abhorrence towards Harlow's needlework and towards reckless rebellion. I can imagine Nurse Ella as a frolicsome little girl in the countryside in some faraway land of beetles and fireflies, a hopeful maiden years after and then, a solicitous mother to a haemophilic daughter. I can almost witness the floods seeping into the crevices of Julie's bandages and gnawing at the frailty. Her agony tugs at my sleeves, looks me in the eye, calls out my name and begs for my help. Time directs the show and makes me feel helpless. Time is a bitch.

I snatch my eyes from the bed and look at the rain outside instead.

* * *

Blood and water is a funny mixture, it's all that my life comprises.

The waters, like an experienced felon, hush down the sound of the fall and absorb all evidence within reach. The supply cabinet looks at its grisly self, horrified. The muddy aqua turns scarlet around the corpse and gradually travels towards the Labyrinth's inhabitants like a messenger coming ashore. The diluted crimson in the wide waters, however, turns yellow and thus, innocent. The horror lives dead and undiscovered until a nurse stumbles upon it in the dark.

The morning after Nurse Ella dies, the sun shines shamelessly against the quivering hallway waters in futile attempts to soothe our scars. Scarlet patches on the floor lie motionless and screaming. The dull off-white Labyrinth mourns on the leeward side of the sun. The guilty alluvium is slippery under our soles as we stand camouflaged in the shadows of The Labyrinth. What remains of crimson in her cadaver stands still in the process of oozing out, she lies like a bleeding picture against the blotted concrete. When blue-red sirens drive away the macabre laments and we sit with half-soaked clothes back in our room of fabrics and sketchbooks, a gruesome silence consumes us whole.

In the place of the broken and the grieving, silence is our punishment.

"Jamie, you know what's crueller than leaving a haemophilic in a rain-flooded room?" Pause.

"It's to risk your life to make sure that he is not going to die, to convince an outcast that despite all his vices, he deserves to be taken care of."

He produces from his pocket, amongst an ensanguined crucifix and bead-chained spectacles, a blood-stained packet of clean, dry bandages and keeps them on the table.

On some nights, Julie, I wonder what it feels like to bleed but then on paper, they say I do too.

The Freewheeler
Issue 12, 2024-25

About Us:
The Freewheeler is the annual literary magazine of the Department of English at Shiv Nadar Institute of Eminence, Delhi NCR, India. It began in 2013 as the culmination of the journey of several greenhorn creative writing students from the classroom to publication. Now, we have opened our doors to emerging writers from across India. For many of them, this is their first creative publication and the result of long and hard work that involved producing several drafts of their stories before arriving at the definitive draft that makes it to the pages of The Freewheeler.

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Publisher:
The Department of English
Shiv Nadar Institute of Eminence
NH-91, Tehsil Dadri, Gautam Buddha Nagar
Uttar Pradesh, India - 201314

Language of Publication: English

Frequency of Publication: Annual

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